



History and Literature in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*: The Return of the Repressed



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Abstract

Geoffrey Chaucer's only direct reference to the consequential Peasants' Revolt of 1381 is housed in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* as a passing, yet important, allusion to the daunting figure of Jack Straw and his men. The beast-fable's extratemporal chronotope is indeed traversed by a brief but significantly intrusive fragment of repressed historicity. The paper argues that the discarded historical event of the revolt against the establishment surfaces in the text, not to record the cracks and crevices in the dwindling feudal system, but to participate in the bestialization and grotesquing of the 1381 insurgents and the trivialization of their rising and their cause.

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1 Introduction

The present paper sets out to study the inquisitive emergence of Jack Straw, a leading figure in the Peasants' Revolt, in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, a tale that is mainly characterized by its rhetorical excess, its philosophizing on predestination, and the validity of dreams, along with its pronounced chronotopic departure from the world of the here and now. The reference to the revolt is textually inconsiderable as it comes as a five-line simile whereby the narrator likens the clamor of the farmers in the fox-chase scene to the rasping noises of the 1381 rebels. And yet because it is so patently inappreciable it is, as shall be argued, eminently social and political in its implication (Pearsall, 1992; 2007).

What artistic and political purposes does this singular reference to the Revolt serve? What does it disclose about Chaucer and his relation to the people in power and his response to the peasants' uprising against the establishment? Is it only accidental that Chaucer's solitary explicit mention of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 occurs in the one tale among the *Canterbury Tales* that is most populated by animal characters? Why should such a significant allusion be situated in a farcical tale? What does this piece of historical noise signify? Out of these questions looms a more imposing problem: How does Chaucer deal with history in his work?

2 Literature Review

Many context-oriented Chaucer critics have already sought to answer some of the abovementioned questions in their readings of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Stephen Knight (1986) reads the text in light of the New Historicist subversion-containment model. He suggests that "a set of multiple containments operate against this fragment of the reality of 1381" (144). He adds that "it is now in so rigidly restrained a context, politically, socially, even intellectually, that the technique does not dramatize social conflict, but merely presents a vignette of peasant simplicity and unthreatening normality" (144). Knight finds that the tale is premised on the expression and containment of the tensions that erupted in the Peasants' Revolt.

In a similar vein, Paul Strohm (1989) argues that this subversive fragment of reality is neutralized by the tale's "literary supersaturation" (165). The tale's aestheticized construct allows for the expression of such a "historically charged reference" but only to encompass it within a discourse of justification and recuperation (165). "Chaucer's reference [to Jack Straw] is assimilated to the literary register of allusion and imagery in which the tale is arrayed," Strohm comments (165). The allusion is only one of the tale's many figures of speech serving to erase the voice of the underclass. It is "stripped of blood and terror" and is made to evoke "the rising reassuringly, in a way that lessens its risk" (165). The 1381 uprising with its disconcerting effects on the Londoners of Chaucer's day is dehistoricized and considerably defused.

Richard W. Fehrenbacher (1994) explains that in the *Canterbury Tales* there is a pattern of flight from and return to history and that Chaucer retreats into a literary realm that constantly tries to efface social conflict. He does this whenever the disquieting curves of history threaten to enter the text (139). Chaucer, Fehrenbacher argues, creates a "vertiginous world of intertextual play" (141), edging history but not completely engaging the historical. The social potential of subversive forces is always doubled with an ahistorical aloofness that shores up a conservative *status quo* (136). Fehrenbacher points out that the disruptive mention of the rioting Jack Straw is promptly contained and demobilized.

The present paper tries to push beyond the insights offered by the aforementioned critics and bring home the point that despite Chaucer's meticulous effort to patrol the perimeters of the literary and the historical, the two discursive spaces converge and intersect, making room for the representation of competing and clashing ideologies (Dalton et al., 2014; Staub, 2007; McNair & Attwood, 2009). Though bodied forth in the narrow space of a few lines, the compelling reference to Jack Straw asserts the inseparability of literature and history, on the one hand, and shows Chaucer a timid and discreet observer, on the other. The Peasants' Revolt, an event that posed a grievous threat to the hierarchical ideology of late medieval England, is evoked only to be gently disarmed and effaced. The traumatic memory of the uprising is peacefully written off.

3 Theoretical Approach

In his *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Stephen Greenblatt (1988) expresses the need to put aside the dividing wall between literature and history and critiques the apolitical “close-grained formalism” which has sought to read aesthetic representation as autonomous and self-sufficient (3). For Greenblatt, text, and history are not different orders of being and therefore should not be explained in terms of ontological dualism. History does not furnish a key with which to unfasten the meaning of the literary text, nor does the latter serve simply as a particular avenue in the study of history conceived as a set of realities outside its boundaries (Bennett, 1990). Both discursive fields intersect and speak to each other’s spaces in what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls “the linguistically of being.”

Greenblatt talks about literary texts as linguistic sites of encoded political tension and as “fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests, occasions for the jostling of orthodoxies and subversive interests” (15). Literature is no longer a speculum that reflects historical reality; it is rather a site where history, ideology, and cultural forms are constantly refigured, consolidated, or interrogated and subverted.

Texts, as David Aers (1986) argues, are “immersed in history, are social acts” (*Chaucer 2*). He adds that “any attempt to understand literature must include the attempt to replace it in the web of discourses, social relations and practices where it was produced” (*Chaucer 2*). In his *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Frederic Jameson (1983) takes this idea even further by pointing out that any analysis of the text cannot avert the political construal and that literary texts are encoded to be political *in perpetuum*. “Everything is in the last analysis’ political.” (5). The literary work, Jameson posits, entertains an active relationship with what he terms the “subtext” and allows it, i.e. the subtext, an aestheticized presence in its own texture (67). The text “articulates its situation and textualizes it” (67). The text, acting as a hyperlinked network with countless extra-textual referents, might repress certain signifieds in the process of communicating with others.

Reading the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, in this sense, is in some ways akin to reading the Revolt of 1381 even if the tale refuses to admit the reality of the revolt. Chaucer might be saying that just as there is no degree-zero of rhetoricity (language is inherently rhetorical and figurative), there is also no degree-zero of dehistoricity (a literature is of necessity historical and social). Literature is axiomatically anchored in history which it refashions or reproduces for particular artistic and/or political effects. The text always carries within its texture a complex web of social and political referents. Traces of history are inscribed in mediating reality with different degrees of visibility and to different ends. The literary artifact is historicized as it textualizes history.¹

As shall be explained in the forthcoming section, Chaucer recreates history and historical events by carving the material realities of his day in his literary works and representing them to the readers only in the way he and the overclass wish them to be. He “deliberately minimizes contemporary topical reference” (Strohm 164) and calibrates the presence of history in his work, particularly those fragments of history that are felt to be subversive of the orthodox structures of power. The tale, to use Knight’s terms, “sports with, realizes and then discards the ultimate complexities of fourteenth-century thought” (141). It plays with history but promotes the elimination of dissonance and props up the acceptance of the *status quo*.

4 Chaucer and Historical Allusion

There has been a great deal of scholarly speculation as to Chaucer’s ideological orientation and socio-political allegiances. Some critics contend that the poet’s dismissal of specific references to late medieval social tensions shows him to be a partisan of the royal establishment and therefore a political quietist, if not a propagandist. Others find him to be on the side of or at least a sympathizer with the anti-hierarchical ideology. It is quite inaccurate to think that Chaucer was unmoved by the social and political cataclysm of his day. It is similarly inaccurate to believe that such events as the Peasants’ Revolt would not “colonize the literary space and proliferate within it,” to use Strohm’s terms (166). Lillian Bisson (1998) explains this critical division:

For recent scholars have detected sympathetic allegiance to both his royalist patrons and to the rebels in his work. Alcuin Blamires (2000), for instance, sees him as identifying with the establishment he served throughout his professional career. Lee Patterson (2007), on the other hand, argues that Chaucer makes “a conscious and deliberate decision” to distance himself from “the forms and values of aristocratic culture.” Paul Olsen balances between the two positions, saying that while Chaucer

satirizes the peasants' destructive bent, "he does not ignore the problems that have led to the demise of internal order in England." (158)

Chaucer's evasive writing style may not give indications as to his particular ideological thought processes, but it nonetheless serves to furnish a picture of the poet as an artist who was deeply aware of the social conflicts in the 1380s. Chaucer's typical tendency is to efface any topical associations between current political issues and the meaning of his work. He does not give names nor does he give poetic rationalization and/or denunciation of specific people and specific events. Such vagueness does not, however, dehistoricize Chaucer's work or drain it of its socio-political import; it only makes its bearing not immediately discernible. In his reading of Chaucer and his stance on the Peasants' Revolt, [Richard West \(2000\)](#) comments:

Chaucer's attitude toward the Peasants' Revolt - as to Wycliffe, the war, the Jews, and the women's question - has to be surmised from his writings and his position in society. As a civil servant, a Member of Parliament, and justice of the peace for Kent, one of the most affected counties, Chaucer must have deprecated the loss of life and property. Chaucer's long-time friend and patron John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, had suffered personally from the burning of the Savoy Palace and the murder of his physician in the Tower of London. Even if Chaucer had been a secret democrat and socialist, hundreds of years before such ideas were entertained, he would have been prudent enough to keep his thoughts to himself at a time of insurrection. (200)

Chaucer's complex position as a civil servant, diplomat, and as someone close to the courtly establishment "does not suggest that he would sympathize with revolution, and frequently there are signs that the forces of conflict are realized under strain and arouse inevitable constraint," to use Knight's terms (69). His position as a *negotiator*, in particular, enabled him to "[survive] the cross-winds of political fortune" ([Du Boulay, 1974](#)). As a writer in a much disturbed socio-political atmosphere, he learned not to displease his "predominantly *gentil* public" (Strohm 157). He "insulates his audience against the most startling aspects of those references he does include" (Strohm 165). While he brings into his text voices from the margin, he always makes sure that subversion is elegantly displaced and tends to quickly reinstate peace and reinforce the *status quo*. Chaucer's works artistically and subtly represent late fourteenth-century English society without being overly critical or condemnatory of individuals or specific incidents. [Nigel Saul \(1992\)](#) succinctly comments:

Chaucer is a difficult poet for the historian to interpret. He rarely lays bare his conscience in the way that, for example, his contemporary Langland does. Nor does he ever make his poetry a medium for the expression of the complaint. His manner is quiet and reflective, ironic and amused. He is, in a sense, a poet's poet. He is not one to don the mantle of prophet or legislator. (41)

Chaucer is "emphatically general" (Saul 42) and therefore insistently evasive and hard to pin down. Evasiveness is precisely what makes a prudent attitude to his own culture. The poet does not oppress or exhaust his text with explicit historical allusion, and he does not write socially/politically-charged texts capable of provoking havoc or ultimate disruption, but he does create work that has substantial historical import and that bears an ineluctable degree of historicity. He evokes history but does not state it.

5 The Peasants' Revolt

Of all the things that sent shock waves through the establishment and unsettled Chaucer's London, none could have been as disquieting and alarming as the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.² In June of that year, several local commotions exploded throughout England, chiefly in the southeast. These included a week-long blockade of London, where thousands of common people from different places joined the rebels. They assailed prisons, damaged legal and manorial documents, burned down many palaces including one owned by John of Gaunt (the King's regent and Chaucer's royal patron), and executed such prominent figures as the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chancellor of England (Travis 259).

[Richard Dobson \(1970\)](#) cogently comments that the revolt was a traumatic historical experience which many medieval literary and nonliterary texts sought either to vilify and trivialize or silence and efface. Everything written

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about the rebels, he says, was exclusively done by their “enemies” (3). The chroniclers of the revolt, “unmitigatedly hostile to the rebels” (Aers (2008), “Vox Populi” 435), were almost like-minded in their representation of the dissenters as being an uncultured, confused, and aggressive mob of peasants determined to depose the King and erratically tear down the realm.³

Thomas Walsingham speaks of the rebels as devilish, insane and irrational: “words could not be heard among their horrible shrieks; but rather, their throats sounded with the bleating of sheep, or, to be more accurate, with the devilish voices of peacocks” (173). According to Henry Knighton (1970), the insurgents were “servants of the devil” (183), a crowd of perfidious rustics unsettling the peace of the country. Jean Froissart (1970) describes them as “ungracious people, gluttons who demeaned themselves like people enraged and mad and did much sorrow in London” (189).

John Gower (1962), a friend and fellow poet of Chaucer, talks about the dissenters as a villainous class destroying the high estate and the nation at large. In *Vox Clamantis* (literally meaning the voice of one crying out), Gower describes how the peasants revolted against the nobles of the realm. He reports that in a dream he saw different throngs of the rabble transformed into beasts. He refers to a Jackdaw instigating the rebels to get their rights. The crow is a potent metaphor for one of the leading rioters, Jack Straw:

When this great multitude of monsters like wild beasts stood united, a multitude like the sands of the sea, there appeared a Jackdaw, well instructed in the art of speaking, which no cage could keep at home. While all were looking on, this bird spread his wings and claimed to have top rank, although he was unworthy. Just as the Devil was placed in command over the army of the lower world, so this scoundrel was in charge of the wicked mob. A harsh voice, a fierce expression, a very faithful likeness to a death’s head—these things gave token of his appearance. He checked the murmuring and all kept silent so that the sound from his mouth might be better heard, He ascended to the top of a tree, and with the voice from his open mouth he uttered such words as these to his compeers: “O you low sort of wretches, which the world has subjugated for a long time by its law, look, now the day has come when the peasantry will triumph and will force the freemen to get off their lands.” (65)

The rebels, just like their leader, are wild beasts whose main intent is to spread confusion and disorder:

Some bray in the wild manner of asses, some sound the bellow of cattle, some let out the horrid grunts of pigs, at which the earth trembles, the boar froths and makes great tumult and the wild pigs cry out, increasing their noise; wild barking pressed on the air of the city, and the discordant voices of dogs, furious, filled the city. The hungry fox howls and the wily wolf cries out on high and calls together his partners. No less did the cackling gander strike the ear with its sound, and even the graves tremble with sudden anguish. Wasps buzz and their sound is fearful, and no one can count the swarm of them. Together they make a roar like a bristling lion, and everything that was previously bad becomes worse. (67-8)

The animals roared, grumbled, screeched, yelled, cried, howled, buzzed, hooted, and growled, producing earth-shaking noises and threatening to turn the world upside down. No intelligible language or meaning could be found in this cacophony of savage noises. The rebels have grotesquely renounced their nature and turned into wild vociferous beasts. Modern scholars, on the other hand, see the rebels differently. Saul, for instance, argues that the representation of the rebels as a crowd of aberrant peasants brutally revolting against the ruling class is inaccurate, to say the least:

Clearly, the Revolt of 1381 was not a movement of the poor and downtrodden; it was a movement of the more ambitious and assertive in society. What infuriated these proprietors were the impediments that were being placed in their way by the lords. The anger that they felt was exacerbated when the government unwisely insisted on levying the third poll tax. (61)

The rebels aspired to be liberated from the oppressive yoke of servitude and bondage.⁴ They wanted to undermine the tripartite medieval social theory (those who pray, those who rule and fight, and those who work), a theory which failed to accommodate the reasons for the “profound social tensions and intensifying class conflict” that swept late medieval England” (Rigby 5). The feudal social structure, with its entrenched barricades separating the three estates,

disarmed acts of dissent and reduced the possibility of movement from one social ground to another to a practical impossibility. To trespass on these grounds was a political fault and a religious crime. To serve one's degree, however, was to obey God's will and work for the common profit of the community. It was against this deep-rooted grid that Jack Straw and his men revolted.

6 History Returns: Repressed

The initial framework of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is a peasant woman's small barnyard that is described with needle-like, almost naturalistic, precision:

A povre wydwe, somdeel stape in age,
Was whilom dwellyng in a narwe cotage,
Beside a grove, stondynge in a dale.
This wydwe, of which I telle yow my tale,
Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf
In patience ladde a ful symple lyf,
For litel was hir catel and hir rente.
By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente
She foond hirself and eek hir doghtren two.
(NPT 2821-829)

The virtuously frugal widow is both "povre" and "stape in age." She lives in a "narwe" cottage, possessing "litel" to live on and only a few assets. Nonetheless, the old widow in some way handles her dearth and sustains herself and her two daughters in a "sooty" cottage, subsisting on "sklendre" meals and "broun bred" (NPT 2844).⁵ The narrator goes on enumerating the virtues of the widow:

Thre large sowes hadde she, and namo,
Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle.
Ful sooty was hire bour and eek hir halle,
In which she eet ful many a sklendre meel.
Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel.
No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte;
Hir diete was accordant to hir cote.
Repleccioun ne made hire nevere sik;
Attempree diete was al hir phisik,
And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce.
The goute lette hire nothyng for to daunce,
N'apoplexie shente nat hir heed.
No wyn ne drank she, neither whit ne reed;
(NPT 2830-842)

Such a portrait idolizes the candid and happy poverty of a peasantry that stoically accepts its God-ordained degree. The old widow typifies peasant stoicism and unquestioning compliance with the dominant feudal order. She exemplifies the virtues of Christian fortitude, modesty, and satisfaction with the simple life. The happy poverty of the widow and her idyllic pastoral life is markedly juxtaposed with the strenuous lives of the peasants who took to the streets of London asking for better wages and the end of serfdom.

The old widow's romanticized portrait is an attempt to re-enact the ideology of acquiescent manorial labor, an ideology that has profoundly been unsettled by (1) the erratic eruptions of the Black Death, (2) the post-Black Death labor shortages, (3) the mobility of the underclass in a somewhat capitalized market, and (4) the social strife between classes of which the Peasants' Revolt is the most immaculate expression. The feudal land-based mode of production, a mode that has made the wealth of the nobles for centuries, is now diluted and finds itself on the edge of vanishing. The idealization of the widow effaces the social injustices and the memory of the revolt. Steven Justice (1986) cogently comments that "the story of how the rising was remembered is the story of how it was forgotten, of the

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cultural and psychic machinery that engaged to keep it in the preterite” (193). The ruling class, riveted to the past and driven by an idealizing impulse, refuses to deal with the rapidly changing socio-economic structure and struggles to rub away the reality of the revolt.

Following the opening backdrop of the tale in the idealized rural world of medieval England, the narrative drifts to the chronotope of beasts and fables, dwelling on the bookish speechifying of Chauntecleer and his conquests. The hypersexual and prideful rooster has a premonitory nightmare that he will be seized and killed by a hound-like reddish beast. He tells his favorite wife Pertelote about his nightmare, and both indulge in a long mock-scholarly lecture on the causes and veracity of dreams and on the question of free will and predestination. The fair Pertelote, unimpressed, tells him that his bad dream is nothing but a physical reaction and that he should take a “laxatyve” to set his humors right (NPT 2962). Chauntecleer abandons his philosophizing. He is “namoore aferd” and “fethers” his beloved hen “twenty tyme” (NPT 3177).

Transported from the tranquil *rêve féodal* of the happy poor widow to the parabolic chickenland, the audience is twice removed from the actual world of the 1380s with its tensions and rifts. The actuality or circumstantiality of the late medieval England is dehistoricized and purged of its social and political potentiality, wiping out the traces of the uprising and dumping it in the ashes of history. The chronotopic progression from the widow-peasant’s idyllic farm to the chicken’s “yeerd.. enclosed al aboute” (NPT 2847) is meant to transfer the narrative to a spatio-temporal fabular frame that is far detached from the tumultuous and hectic real world of Chaucer’s London. “The tale abandons not only the vicinity of England but the world of humankind entirely” (Fehrenbacher 140). The tale plunges into fabulism and ahistoricity.

In the tale’s last segment, the narrative gets back to the farmyard. The conceited cock Chanticleer patriarchally refutes the reality of his premonition and rashly gets off the porch only to chance upon the reddish fox he dreamt of. Displaying his celebrated wit, the fox asks the rooster to sing and as the latter starts crowing, he is clutched by the fox and carried off:

This Chauntecleer stood hye upon his toos,
 Strecchyng his nekke, and heeld his eyen cloos,
 And gan to crowe loude for the nones.
 And daun Russell the fox stirte up atones,
 And by the gargat hente Chauntecleer,
 And on his bak toward the wode hym beer,
 (NPT 3331-336)

The tale concludes with what is possibly one of the most gripping and most riotous chase scenes in all medieval literature. The poor widow and her daughters, the cock’s seven wives, and other animals hurry to save him. This fast-moving and an almost graphic sequel, fully quoted here, eventually compares the frenzied animals and the farmers to the notorious gang of rebels in the Revolt of 1381. It is precisely at this climactic moment of confusion and turmoil that the historical real-world pops up. The ahistorical world of the beast-fable is penetrated by the fabulous intrusion of Jack Straw:

This sely wydwe and eek hir doghtres two
 Herden thise hennes crie and maken wo,
 And out at dores stirten they anon,
 And syen the fox toward the grove gon,
 And bar upon his bak the cok away,
 And cryden, “Out! Harrow and weylaway!
 Ha, ha! The fox!” and after hym they ran,
 And eek with staves many another man.
 Ran Colleoure dogge, and Talbot and Gerland,
 And Malkyn, with a dystaf in hir hand;
 Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,
 So fered for the berkyng of the dogges
 And shoutyng of the men and wommen eeke
 They ronne so hem thoughte hir herte breeke.
 They yolliden as feendes doon in helle;

The dokes cryden as men wolde hem quelle;
 The gees for feere flowen over the trees;
 Out of the hyve cam the swarm of bees.
 So hydous was the noyse -- a, benedicitee! --
 Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee
 Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille
 Whan that they wolden any Flemynge kille,
 As thilke day was maad upon the fox.
 Of bras they broghten bemes, and of box,
 Of horn, of boon, in whiche they blewe and powped,
 And therwithal they skrieked and they howped.
 It semed as that hevene sholde falle.
 (NPT 3375-402)

Peter Travis (2009) has described this scene as “a sonic *tour de force*” (239). The polyphonic cock-catching scene (with the chaotic sounds of the barnyard animals and the widow and her daughters’ shouting) is evocative of the often-termed “bestial noises” of the 1381 rebels apocalyptically wreaking havoc in the streets of London. The barking, screaming, yelling, grunting, and hooping are nothing compared to the “hydous noys” of “Jakke Straw and his meinee” (NPT 3394). The protesting roar of these rioters was so deafening that it seemed as though “hevene shold falle” (NPT 3401). Is such a confusion of angry animal noises indicative of the inarticulacy of the rebels? In a literal and figurative sense, the noise is that counter-dominant vigor that sought to dislocate and disrupt the adamant and deep-rooted feudal structures. Silencing the noise of history means the conservation and perpetuation of the current hierarchy: the peasant is born to serve quietly, to be a nice taxpayer, and to never oppose his masters. A good peasant is a silent one, dutifully tilling the land from birth to death. Textually bracketing that historical fragment is one way of denying the rebels the possibility to speak, thus securing the repressive mainstream ideology.

The non-discursive character of the uprising is perhaps meant to vilify the underclass and to signify it as basically languageless and incapable of formulating any meaningful action, thus erasing any trace of cogent vocalization on the part of the insurgents. The peasant has never been able to speak or to voice out his concerns. The only thing he can do is make bestial noises. The point of such a Manichean discourse is to construe the peasants as villainous on the basis of their social standing in order to justify and vindicate their subjugation. Far from being recognized as symptoms of social dysfunction, these rough, dissonant and scary sounds are associated with the “other” that threatened the *status quo*.

The slaying of the Flemish people (a community of Dutch merchants and traders in London) is as intriguing as the reference to Jack Straw. Rodney Hilton (2004) points out in *Bond Men Made Free* that “the murder of the Flemings is commented on by most chroniclers who deal with the London events, and is the only episode of the 1381 uprising mentioned by Geoffrey Chaucer, who was probably living in London at the time” (196). Is Chaucer implying that only the Flemish were killed in the Revolt? He might very possibly be referring to the xenophobic slaughter of the alien Flemings because it is somehow offensive to summon up to his courtly audience the equally cruel attacks on members of the ruling class. Knight aptly observes that the execution of Flemings is, of all the episodes associated with the rebels’ riots in London, the one event “which was least related to the political meaning and anti-aristocratic tendency of the revolt” (144). A horrific event is brought on stage to hide yet more horrific happenings.

Besides, the reference to Jack Straw and his men censors the vocalization of the abject socio-economic reality of a substantial underclass uprising against a repressive feudal order. Censorship is part of what Alcuin Blamires (2000) calls “displacement of oppression” (529). The abuse of the peasantry and the final cause of the 1381 peasant unrest are disarticulated. The allusion to Straw drops off this momentous event from the collective memory and presents it as just *un mauvais souvenir* to be utterly forgotten. This textual erasure parallels and duplicates the martial containment of the insurgents. The revolt was suppressed in the harshest way and “those who have taken up the sword of rebellion died of the avenging sword of retributive justice” (Dobson 302). The “disturbers of the peace of the realm,” as Walsingham calls them (309) were persecuted, tortured, beheaded and some even quartered after execution (Knighton 314).⁶ The revolt should be remembered only to retrospect peasant fury and madness and to rationalize the unending aristocratic repression of the underclass.

Chaucer’s courtly medieval audience would never forget how thousands of peasants “subverted authority, issued ultimatums, possessed private property, burnt down buildings, rampaged through city streets, slaughtered citizens

and noblemen alike,” as Travis puts it (215). Yet while the terror of the class strife and subsequent peasant slaughter were yet effervescent memories, Chaucer shuns overt reference to the revolt, profoundly dismisses its gory chapters and only slots in a brief insinuation in a comical tale about an arrogant cock and a ravenous fox.

It is no surprise that Chaucer’s one overt comment on the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 occurs in a beast-fable about a cock and a fox. The fable-frame serves two intertwined purposes. First, it insulates the text from the pressure of tumultuous history. It cuts it off from contemporaneity or circumstantiality. Second, the beast-fable adds to the exorcizing or dehumanization of the rebels. As already noted, the official discourse often depicted the peasantry as animalistic, as fundamentally sub-human and sub-rational. The overclass ideology worked to repress the peasant population by denying its essential humanity and constructing it as second-rate and terrifying. The rebels were sub-humans who needed to be accommodated (like animals) and who ostensibly existed to serve the interests of the overclass. The bestialization of the peasants is motivated out of fear of the prospect of pervasive and far-reaching revolution.

Signifying the peasantry as inarticulate and intrinsically animalistic, and murderous is a way of containing its activism and forcing the rebels to keep to their “right” place in the social system. The ruling class represents its cultural other as essentially deviant and different, as untamed barnyard animals. Chaucer might be participating in this prevalent paradigm of equating the peasantry with rowdy and wild beasts. Fehrenbacher aptly observes that “the repressed returns; and when it does it is monstrous: an animalistic, incoherent mob of murderers” (145). Repressed history haunts the literary space and manifests itself in a ghostly and bestial demeanor. The fragment of history in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is in tune with the dominant discourse on the revolt discussed earlier. The tale represses the historical world by stamping out the peasants’ calls for change and by drenching them in invisibility and silence. History, in a sense, gets in the narrative but, being displeasing and somehow Frankensteinish is ultimately aborted and muted.

The happy ending of the comic fable curtails any tragicality that might eventually seal up the story and further bolsters the containment of the rebels’ insurgence and the demobilization of their subversive otherness. The tale’s “comedy vivifies and so legitimizes its final conservatism,” says Knight (141). The clever cock tricks the fox and finally saves his skin:

This cok, that lay upon the foxes bak,
 In al his drede unto the fox he spak,
 And seyde, “Sire, if that I were as ye,
 Yet sholde I seyn, as wys God helpe me,
 Turneth agayn, ye proude cherles alle!
 A verray pestilence upon yow falle!
 Now I am come unto the wodes syde;
 Maugree youre heed, the cok shal heere abyde.
 I wol hym ete, in feith, and that anon!”
 The fox answerde, “In feith, it shal be don.”
 And as he spak that word, al sodeynly
 This cok brak from his mouth delyverly,
 And heighe upon a tree he fleigh anon.
 (NPT 3405-17)

The trickster is tricked. Chauntecleer slyly asks the fox to call back to those chasing him, but as soon as the duped fox starts speaking the clever cock deftly leaps from his mouth and flies up into a tree. Ann Astell (1993) fittingly comments that “the fall and rise of Chauntecleer represent the survival of the nobility” (57). The upward motion of the cock (NPT 3417), emblematically signaling the reestablishment of courtly authority/hierarchy, counters the apocalyptically downward fall of heaven caused by the grating noises of the rebels (NPT 3401) and summons up the actual containment of the 1381 riot. The scene is a restoration of order and reinstatement of authority.

The tale concludes with an unyielding affirmation of order and an assertion of doctrinal allegations. The Nun’s Priest seals up his narrative with sermonizing rhetoric, which, again, encourages his audience to forget his terse recollection of the 1381 insurrection:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
 As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,

Taketh the moralite, goode men.
 For seint paul seith that al that writen is,
 To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
 Taketh the **fruyt**, and lat the **chaf** be stille.
 Now, goode god, if that it be thy wille,
 As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,
 And brynge us to his heighe blisse! amen.
 (NPT 3438-46, emphasis added)

Larry Scanlon (1989) states that such a closure “simply invites the reader to submit the tale to the procedures of Christian exegesis” (49). “Al that writen is, / To oure doctrine it is ywrite” is a quote from Romans 15:4 whereby the narrator authorizes a metaphysical mode of interpreting both literature and history, a mode that denies the very materiality and actuality of being and places literature within a metaphysical axis of reference. Chaucer, to quote Scanlon again, is “profoundly conservative... and deferential to the *status quo*” (64), and as such he would not allow such a subversive fragment to unsettle orthodox structures. The revolt is to be textually bracketed or euphemized and forgotten in order to preserve the existing power grid.

Knight points out that “the stage that remains is the Christian conclusion” (145). The orthodox voice of Christianity locates the “fruyt” of the tale in the old widow’s stoic endurance and acceptance of her station within the social system. Her “pacience” and “hertes suffisaunce” (NPT 2827; 2839) are the way to the “goode god” and to the common good of society. As noted earlier, the old widow is offered as a model of quietism that revokes subversive potentialities. The disruptive force of the peasants, here the “chaf” of the tale, is steadily demobilized and contained. What is in essence social and political is subsumed and eclipsed by an eventually potent moralistic and metaphysical ontology.

7 Conclusion

The reference to Jack Straw in the farmyard rescue of the cock is significant, precisely because it [part]icipates in the discursive construction of the rebels as beasts and in the general pattern of class repression. The prospect of rebellious peasantry is euphemized and exorcized by minimizing its textual presence to a plain simile in a 626-line tale. The repressed, in a sense, comes back only to be cloaked and obscured within the tangled folds of smug moralism. The phantom of Jack Straw elbows its way into the ahistorical world of the beast-fable, but this recondite eruption is quickly disarmed and encompassed within a discourse of justification of the *status quo*. The political unconscious resurfaces in the text but with no dismal or bleak consequences. The underclass remains silent, inarticulate and un/misrepresented.

Notes

- 1) It might be useful to bring to mind Hayden White’s discussion of the history-literature debate. White (2014) explains that the academic antipathy to literature as a mere fictional construct is misplaced. Generations of historiographers, allergic to the rhetoricity of literary discourse, wanted to make of history an objective and truly scientific discipline over against the arts and to use an anti-rhetorical plain style in their historical records (3-25). For White, historical writing is not opposed to literary writing but is rather related to it. The historical narrative is as literary as literature. And since the past is “neither reproducible experimentally nor directly perceivable,” (xi) it can only be reconstructed textually with language’s tools. Literature for White is also a textual fabric that summons up the real world, represents it, suppresses it, interrogates it and actively reproduces that real world.
- 2) It is to be noted that Chaucer was living in London during the tempestuous days of June 1381, “possibly in the apartment over the gate of Aldgate which he leased from the city corporation between 1374 and 1386” (Dobson 386).
- 3) The *Anonimalle Chronicle* (anonymous author), *Historia Anglicana* (often referred to as the *Walsingham Chronicle*, by Thomas Walsingham), Henry Knighton’s and Jean Froissart’s accounts, among many other

chronicles and records of the Revolt, are collected in Dobson's comprehensive anthology *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (1970).

- 4) When King Richard II met Wat Tyler and his followers at Mile End and asked them what they wanted, they answered, “We will that ye make us free for ever, ourselves, our heirs and our lands, and that we be called no more bond [serf] nor so reputed” (qtd. in Dobson 192). The 1381 Peasants' Revolt “anticipated the French Revolution [1789-1799] by four hundred years” (Barker, 2014).
- 5) Gail Ashton (1998) comments that the widow's portrait is pervaded by the use of negatives which serve to imply a life of self-denial and modest acceptance of poverty: “Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel,” / “No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte” / “No wyn ne drank she”. (94-95). These carefully compiled details create a vivid picture of the ideal medieval peasant duly doing his work and unreservedly observing his status in the social hierarchy.
- 6) Over 7000 insurgents were executed after the 1381. In a famous speech addressed to the rebels, King Richard II expresses his determination to suppress the insurrection and restore peace: “Rustics you were and rustics you are still; you will remain in bondage, not as before but incomparably harsher. For as long as we live and, by God's grace, rule over the realm, we will strive with mind, strength and goods to suppress you so that the rigour of your servitude will be an example to posterity” (Walsingham 311).

Conflict of interest statement

The author declared that (s)he has no competing interests.

Statement of authorship

The author has a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author has approved the final article.

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