WISDOM AND "THE MANCIPLE'S TALE": A CHAUCERIAN COMIC INTERLUDE

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The Manciple's Tale has aroused very diverse reactions among Chaucerians, some of whom have not regarded it with deep respect. Considered in isolation as a "literary" work pure and simple it has few fervent admirers. But if we place it in its immediate cultural and historical context, it may yet be rescued and appreciated, at least in imagination, as it might have been appreciated at the time of its first public delivery. We shall find, I believe, that here as elsewhere Chaucer is being witty and amusing but at the same time serious beneath his witty exterior. His wit is often neglected.

This endeavor will require a rather lengthy discussion. I shall begin with an examination of the Tale's source in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in so far as possible with reference to its context there, but with some reference to Medieval reactions to it, a procedure necessary to determine what the Manciple, who is not Chaucer, has done with it. Since Ovid was concerned in the context of the story with the wisdom of "telling truth" and the often unfortunate consequences of doing so, some reference to conventional fourteenth–century ideas about this subject will prove useful. Against this background the Manciple's own opinions concerning wisdom and truth can be evaluated. Finally, certain historical considerations suggest a likely date for the Tale's delivery and the nature of the audience being addressed.

I
The Wisdom of Ovid

Most members of Chaucer's audience were probably familiar with Ovid, whose work was often taught in schools. In particular, *The Metamorphoses* offered not only useful moral instruction, at least by Medieval standards, but also a great deal of information about the pagan gods, used since Carolingian times in Medieval Latin verse for figurative purposes and increasingly to adorn the works of poets in the vernaculars as their audiences became more literate and appreciative of subtleties that demanded some thought and were also amusing when they were understood.[1] Ovid's wit was widely appreciated down through the early eighteenth century, although more recently it has tended to disappear in favor of more feeling and sentiment.

In fact, in more modern times Ovid has been read in a variety of ways, depending on assumptions about his work. For this reason it is only fair to state some of the assumptions upon which the present discussion is based. The gods themselves are often ambivalent, appearing in both "celestial" and "terrestrial" roles, so that they may represent either virtues or vices. However, in *The Metamorphoses* deities who usually represent virtues sometimes relapse, so to speak, as a result of either habitual weaknesses or conflicts with other deities who may avenge themselves upon them. When this happens the result is not merely ludicrous, however devastating it may be; it demonstrates in a vivid and forceful way the manner in which a virtue may be corrupted. For the gods are personages of high estate and superior powers, so that irrational or irresponsible behavior is especially noteworthy in them, just as such behavior is noteworthy in humans of high estate who have an obligation to set an example for those who are dependent upon them.

Again, the stories Ovid tells should not be read as isolated units. First, it is important where possible to consider the character of the speaker when that speaker is not Ovid himself, just as in reading Chaucer we should pay attention to the character and status of the person speaking. Moreover, a book of *The Metamorphoses* usually elaborates a theme, sometimes with a transition to a new theme in the final story of the book. Thus Book 2 describes the ill consequences of telling truth, sometimes as a result of rash promises or oaths, and sometimes because of the risk of offending others who would like to have the truth concealed. The world of the deities seems to be not very different from the world of men, and indeed Medieval commentators were probably right in thinking that Ovid was actually talking about people under the guise of mythology. Life in the Empire was not characterized by much respect for that *pietas* celebrated by Vergil, just as life in late Medieval England was not characterized by the kind of Christian *pietas* admired by Chaucer and the prominent Chamber Knights who befriended him and insured his patronage. Vanity, greed, and the uncontrolled appetites of the flesh are perennial enemies of family and community life, whether in pagan or Christian contexts. They also stifle truth.

The story of Apollo and Coronis appears in the second book of *The Metamorphoses* which opens with a description of the splendid Palace of the Sun, some of whose features found their way into the decorative motifs of Gothic cathedrals and churches. A statement Ovid makes about it is echoed in Abbot Suger's description of the decor of his new church at St. Denis, *materiam superbat opus*, "the workmanship was more beautiful than the material."[2] Its portals were decorated with the signs of the Zodiac, six on one side and six on the other, like the portals of Amiens or Notre Dame de Paris. Beyond the portals of the cathedrals were an immutable Truth and an immutable Wisdom, but within Ovid's portals amid representations of the cycles of Time and the Horae—Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter—equally spaced, sat Phoebus on his throne with his radiant crown almost too splendid for his son, Phaethon, who was approaching, to look upon. Meanwhile, Phoebus looked out with those unclouded eyes *quibus adspicit omnia*, "with which he beheld all things." Phaethon

made his ill-fated request to drive the winged horses of the Chariot of the Sun for a day in fulfillment of an oath Phoebus had made to grant any request made by a true son. The father acknowledged that he had made a rash promise, sought in vain to explain the extreme dangers the boy would face, and wished that he would choose a wiser gift.

But Phaethon persisted and Apollo very unwisely heeded his own rash promise with disastrous results. For the boy's headlong journey upset the Signs, disturbed the stars, and burned the earth. Cities and nations burned, the Ethiopians turned black, and Libya became a desert. Even the rivers burned, and the Nile hid its head, which had not been discovered, Ovid says, at the time he was writing. The Earth cracked, and even the Lower World was terrorized. Earth prayed for relief to Jove, who released a thunderbolt, destroying the Chariot of the Sun and killing the foolish Phaethon. In grief Phoebus abandoned his journey for a day; the unfortunate Clymene found the remnants of her son Phaethon and mourned with her daughters, the Heliades, who became poplars; and Cycnus, grieving for his relative, Phaethon, became a swan. The foolishness of Phoebus disrupted the cycles of Time and the Earth almost returned to Chaos.

But the ill consequences of his folly persisted. For, having seen that the walls of Heaven were still firm, Jupiter came down to Earth, especially concerned about Arcadia, whose rivers and flora he restored. And there, justifying Chaucer's epithet "the likerous" (*Form. Age*, 56), encountered a nymph with bow and arrows resting on the ground. Thinking that Juno would not discover what he was about to do, or that the falsehood to her would be worth it even if she did, he garbed himself as Diana. When the poor nymph, deceived, embraced him, calling him a goddess greater than Jove, he ravished her. When Diana later discovered that the poor girl was pregnant, she dismissed her from her service. After the birth of her son, Arcas, the nymph was turned into a bear. When Arcas was fifteen he encountered his mother, who recognized him and sought to approach him. Terrified by the bear, the boy raised his spear, but Jove intervened, turning both mother and son into neighboring constellations. The act increased the wrath of Juno, who was as usual aware of what her husband had done. She persuaded Tethys and ancient Ocean to deny those polar constellations any refuge. As she returned upwards in her chariot drawn by peacocks whose feathers were adorned with the eyes of Argus, the raven (*corvus*) who had been white was turned black. *Lingua*, Ovid tells us, *fuit damno*, "his tongue was his undoing."

Thus the poet introduces the story of Phoebus and Coronis. In Thessaly Phoebus discovered an extremely beautiful maiden, Coronis of Larissa, whom he favored *dum vel casta fuit vel inobservata*, "so long as she was chaste or unobserved," by her divine lover. He, we infer, no longer saw all things after he saw her, but remained for a time blinded by her beauty, just as he was later to be blinded by the beauty of Leucothoe (*Met.* 4.). As the speaker, one of the daughters of Mingas who refused to join the Theban Bacchanalia, observes (196–197). "Thou, who shouldst behold all things, dost gaze on Leucothoe, and on one maiden dost fix those eyes which belong to the whole world." The

relevance of this unseemly blindness to the story of Coronis, incidentally, is clearly apparent to the Manciple, as his crow reveals in his remarks to his master. But, to return to Ovid, Apollo's raven observed Coronis bedded with a youth and set out on a journey to find his master and tell him about it. On the way he encountered the gossiping crow (*cornix*) who asked the news. When she had heard it she reminded the raven of her own fate, for when she reported to Minerva how Aglauros had revealed her secret the great goddess deposed her. She had once been a beautiful maiden but had been transformed into a bird by Diana to save her from the unwelcome advances of Neptune. Then she became Minerva's bird until she talked too much and was replaced by the owl. But the raven, bent upon speaking truth, disregarded the warning of the crow and told Phoebus how he had seen Coronis bedded with the Thessalian youth.

When Phoebus heard the story, he wrenched his head aside, losing the laurel crown he had dedicated to Daphne (*Met.* 1.559: "My hair, my lyre, my quiver shall always be entwined with thee, O laurel.") Taking up his weapons, he transfixed the bosom of Coronis. As he withdrew the arrow, Coronis said, "Twas right, O Phoebus, that I should suffer thus from you, but first I should have borne my child. But now two of us shall die as one." Phoebus repented his cruelty nevertheless, embraced the corpse, and hated both himself and his white raven, which he blackened and cast out. As Coronis lay on her funeral pyre, he rescued the babe Aesculapius, who was to inherit his powers of healing, from her womb.

The above summary is much abbreviated, but it touches on the main points. It is clear that Phoebus was blinded by the beauty of Coronis, which led him to violate his promise to Daphne and to be untrue to her memory. His desire for Coronis was frustrated by the truth told him by the raven, which led to an outburst of wrath. His music was destroyed, his harmony replaced by discord. Traditionally, wisdom was thought to control the concupiscible and irascible passions, but Phoebus, who had shown a lack of it in allowing Phaethon to drive his chariot, abandoned it once more when he allowed himself to be overcome by the superficial attractiveness of Coronis, and once more in his fit of jealous rage, directed first at Coronis and then at himself for the wrong reasons, and finally at the raven who had usurped his function as a revealer of truth.

During the Middle Ages music was regarded as fundamental to all of the disciplines. Human music specifically was thought to entail a harmony between the spirit and the flesh, maintained when the flesh obeyed the spirit under the guidance of wisdom. That the music of Apollo was thought of in a somewhat analogous way in Antiquity is well illustrated in the story of Midas, so amusingly mishandled by Chaucer's Wife of Bath. For Midas succumbed to the seductive pipes of Pan and judged Pan's music to be superior to that produced by Apollo's lyre. In the story of Coronis Phoebus shows himself to be sometimes worthy of those long hairy ears he bestowed on Midas. As for the raven, we may notice with some amusement that when the gods sought to escape from the wrath of Typhoeus, Apollo disguised himself as a raven (*Met.* 5.329), almost a kind of confession that the raven had once usurped his function and that he had,

at one time, in effect, blackened himself. Meanwhile, Book 2 continues with accounts of other persons punished for speaking truth, one involving Apollo who, when he was a young shepherd playing his pipes and thinking of love at Elis, failed to discern truth.

II
Wisdom and Truth

Before turning to the Manciple's treatment of Ovid, perhaps we should consider certain ideas concerning Wisdom and Truth current at the time Chaucer was writing. Christians were obliged to speak truth, regardless of the consequences, which at times might be severe, as they are in Ovid's second book. The most important authority on the subject was St. Augustine's *De mendacio*, which supplied what became the standard definition of a lie (1. 3.3.): to have one thing in the heart (or mind) while indicating another either verbally or otherwise. This, in fact, is the origin of later injunctions like those of Sidney or Shakespeare to the effect that a man should "look into his heart and write" or that we should "speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." That this ideal was current in the fourteenth century is well illustrated in two poems in the Vernon series which I shall summarize briefly. Parenthetically, St. Augustine did not regard poetic fables that are false on the surface as being lies when they conveyed useful truths.[3]

The first of these poems ironically condemns the attitude taken by the Manciple, taking its title from the refrain, "Who says the Sooth. He shall be shent."[4] The poet begins by saying that anyone who wishes to live at ease or to attain any respect should seek to please the "wicked world"; he must flatter and pretend in order to avoid difficulty. In short, he should lie (9–10):

> Herte & mouth loke thei ben tweyne;
> Thei mowe not ben of on assent.

A man should restrain his tongue, for "hos seith the sothe, he shal be schent." Thus the truth is hidden, and everyone abandons the text for the gloss and colors his words.[5] Every lord has his flatterers who lie to him and blind him for fear of losing their offices. Thus we lack a physician to heal our maladies. Unless they are revealed we cannot heal them. And anyone who speaks the truth about them will be disgraced. If a friar tells us about our actual misdeeds he will get small thanks, risking disgrace at council and parliament. The world, the poet laments, has never been so untrue since the birth of Christ. But those who conceal the truth will rue that concealment on the Day of Judgment. Even children, who should be innocent, are brought up to heed the ways of deception. Indeed, the world is so corrupt that people cannot see their own faults; the father cannot trust the son, nor any man another. Falsehood is called "subtlety," so that, in fact, "Ho seith the sothe, he schal be schent."

In view of the widespread corruption in all ranks of society that seemed to grow steadily worse as the fourteenth century progressed, this sort of complaint is understandable.[6] The author of the second of our poems, "Truth is Best,"[7] makes use of the common epithet *Truth* or in Latin *Veritas* for Christ. He begins by asserting that the man who thinks about it will despise the falsehoods of this wretched world, for when the final Judgment comes, we shall find that "treuthe is best." He assures us that truth should be loved by kings, knights, and merchants, for if they do not love it they shall not enter Heaven. Truth [Christ] will do no mercy when He judges us, and we shall see that we have contradicted Him too long. Lords and those who "meddle with the law" should not destroy truth for the sake of greed. We should all rule ourselves with truth, rising from sin and sloth, and of "Chivalrye bere the flour."[8] Truth endures most in war and is strongest in the long run. For God's love we should succor and maintain Him. Once Truth was lord here and with Him all virtues. Spain, Brittany, and other lands will bear witness that we once endowed them properly and gave them lords to live in peace. They then loved Truth. Falsehood may rule for a time through the "maintenance" of Covetousness.[9] But his ground (i.e., the basis for his claim) will beguile him in in spite of his wisdom. When Truth prospers we shall hunt Falsehood as a cat does a mouse.

The "wisdom" of Falsehood is the wisdom of both the Host and the Manciple. Although the two poems above were clearly addressed to men of high estate, as was Chaucer's much better poem, "Truth," Chaucer discerned the same sort of falsehood among persons of lower rank. Thus for example his Reeve, a manorial servant, has made of himself a petty tyrant because he knows all of the "falsehoods" of the tenants of the manor that he should report to the manorial court but keeps concealed in return for their silence about his own deceits, and even has the bailiff, a servant of the lord, under his thumb, so to speak, in the same way.[10]

III
The Wisdom of the Manciple

But exactly what has the Manciple done with Ovid's story, which is not actually about the crow, although he serves as a further illustration of the dangers of telling truth, but about Phoebus?[11] The question, I should emphasize, is not what Chaucer has done with Ovid but what he has made the Manciple do with him in order to further something Chaucer wished to say. The Manciple does not use the name "Coronis" but refers instead to the "wife" of Phoebus, and he does not mention Aesculapius. It has often been pointed out that he called Ovid's raven a crow, but this fact is not very significant, for he omitted the meeting between the raven and the crow, which could not have happened in his version because he put the crow in a cage. Moreover, *chough, crow, raven,* and *rook* are still used loosely in modern English. Further, they are all now classed as *corvidae,* so that the raven seems to have prevailed, but in English *corvidae* are "members of the crow family." Miller renders Apollo's disguise as a raven (*Met.* 5.329), *Delius in corvo,* "Apollo hid in crow's shape." However, like the Wife of Bath,[12] the Manciple distorts Ovid in other ways.

He begins by introducing Apollo, belittling him at once by calling him "the mooste lusty bachiler / In al this world" (107–108). It is true that Phoebus had a number of diversions with nymphs, almost always ill-fortuned, but these were diversions, not his most important characteristics.[13] Belittling him further, the Manciple says that he slew the Python as he was "slepyng agayn the sonne," hardly an accurate description of the slaying of that monster, an event memorialized in the Pythian games. Parenthetically, Cupid, proud of his own skill as an archer and irritated by this singular triumph with mere arrows, shot his own arrow at Apollo, provoking him to the fruitless pursuit of Daphne, a bit of unsuccessful "bachelerye." But the Manciple persists, this time producing a laughable self-contradiction, saying (125–129):

> This Phebus that was flour of bachelerye
> As wel in fredom as in chivalrye,
> For his desport, in signe eek of victorie
> Of Phyton, so as telleth us the storie,
> Was wont to beren in his hand a bowe.

He has just said that he was very handsome and filled with "gentillesse," "honour," and "parfit worthinesse," hardly consistent with his sleeping Python story. But even worse, "bachelerye" and "chivalrye" were by traditional standards inconsistent,[14] while "gentilesse," as readers of Chaucer's poem on the subject are aware, implies nobility of character. Moreover, John of Salisbury, who supplied many of the basic ideals for English chivalry insisted that knights addicted to lechery and splendid equipage are merely a temptation to enemy attack (*Policraticus,* 6.18). By this time the Manciple was already invoking laughter from Chaucer's audience, and we should laugh too. Meanwhile, his Phebus is beginning to resemble the "lusty bachiler" of the *Wife of Bath's Tale.*

Rationalizing and embroidering Ovid's account somewhat, the Manciple tells us that Phebus had a caged crow, white as a swan, and had taught it to speak and sing, so that no nightingale could sing "so wonder myrily and weel." Ovid's bird is not caged, and nothing is said about his musical abilities. Phebus, the Manciple says, also had a "wyf," who is not a wife in Ovid; in fact, what a person so devoted to "bachelerye" would want with one is a little difficult to see. In any event, like old John in *The Miller's Tale,* he loved her "moore than his lyf," and "kept hire fayne," but not like the crow "narwe in cage." But as the Manciple explains, echoing Theophrastus in Jerome's epistle against Jovinian,[15] all in vain, for a good wife needs no keeping and a bad one cannot be controlled, a principle he illustrates with the familiar examples of the caged bird, the cat, and the she-wolf, concluding humorously that these examples apply only to men, not to women, which of course makes them literally irrelevant and his conclusion an obvious example of *antiphrasis,* as one marginal gloss indicates.[16] On the other hand, if we take the remarkable "bachelerye" seriously, there are three uncaged

birds that have returned to their natures in this story. But I shall return to this point later. Meanwhile, the Manciple continues, the wife had a lover, in Ovid simply "a youth of Thessaly," but now "a man of litel reputacioun," so that when Phebus was absent she sent for this unworthy "lemman" of hers. He then apologizes for the word *lemman*, not actually very shocking, and justifying it by citing Plato before going on, perhaps forgetful of the moral to his own tale to speak truth for a change. The Manciple is amusingly dense.

But to understand this we must first understand what Chaucer himself meant by citing Plato to justify his own use of profane language (I (A) 739–742):

> Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ,
> And wel ye wot no vilenye is it,
> Eek Plato seith, whoso that kan him rede,
> The wordes moote ben cosyn to the dede.

For Christ's "broad" language, see, for example, the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5.28–32). Similarly, the Manciple justifies the use of the word *lemman* and introduces the observations to follow by saying (207–208):

> The wise Plato seith, as ye may rede.
> The word moot nede acorde with the dede.

The impression that this refers to some metaphysical principle seems to me to be mistaken, for it is a logical principle. It may be found, for example, in the Latin translation of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* attributed to Boethius where we are told (1.7) that the demonstrative principles used in one discipline cannot be used in another discipline unless the two disciplines are based on the same axioms or unless one is a corollary of the other.[17]

Whether Boethius was in fact responsible for the Latin translation of Aristotle's treatise is not important; it is important that Lady Philosophy in the context of a carefully reasoned argument asserts that she has not violated the logical principle involved and attributes it to Plato (3. pr. 12. Robinson, p. 357):

> But natheles, yif I have styred resouns that be nat taken from withouten the compas of the thing of which we treten, but resouns that been bestowed withinne that compas, ther nys nat why that thou shoudest merveillen, sith thou hast lernyd by the sentence of Plato that nedes the wordis moot be cosynes to the thinges of which thei speken.

Chaucer knew this principle not only from this passage but also from Raison's defense of downright language in the *Roman de la Rose*.[18] Logical absurdities were regarded as being laughable in the Middle Ages, and when Medieval writers of reasonable literacy mingled religious themes with themes

expressing venereal desires in lyrics or in the speeches of characters in narratives it is probable that they were not advocating a "religion of love" but were being jocular, making fun of the speakers, although there have been various kinds of modern efforts to form a doctrine of an idolatrous desire for self–satisfaction "reconciled" with charity. Be that as it may, Ovid's Apollo had no chivalric obligations, was not a knight, and could not be accused of "bachelerye" in its chivalric sense. Hence the Manciple is using words that are not "cosynes to the things of whiche thei speken," unless, that is, he is using them in a figurative sense to apply to an actual situation, as Chaucer often does. Apparently he is not, but Chaucer apparently was in this tale, as we shall see.

Further disregarding the lesson of his tale as he sees it, the Manciple goes on to tell us that there is no difference between a wife of high degree who is physically unfaithful and a poor wench who is unfaithful in the same way, for "Men layn that oon as lowe as lyth that oother." In fact, it was conventionally held that those in high estate have a greater obligation to be virtuous than do the lowly, since their misdeeds affect more people. Even the Manciple knows this, for he reinforces his argument by proceeding to inform us that there is no difference between a tyrant, called a "captain," and a mere outlaw, but (231–234) because

> the outlawe hath but smal meynee,
> And may nat doon so gret an harm as he,
> Ne bryng a contree to so gret meschief,
> Men clepen hym an outlawe or a theef.

By these standards our learned speaker was quite justified in his observations about the Cook in the prologue to his tale. But they also serve to further demean the characters of Phebus and his "wyf." For the behavior of Phebus is indeed tyrannical, although it does not involve robbery.

But the Manciple distorts Ovid's narrative in such a way as to show that words must for the most part be suppressed, whether they are "cosyn to the dede" or not. In fact, they should be mostly suppressed. His "white crowe" in his "cage" witnessed the adultery of the "wyf" of Phebus but remained quiet until Phebus came home. Then the crow sang "Cokkow! Cokkow! Cokkow!" understandably provoking his master's curiosity. Perhaps the Wife of Bath should have been there to tell him that "the cow is wood" (III (D) 252). Lacking any such reassurance, he was forced to hear the assertion "bleryd is thyn eye," and a circumstantial account of what the crow saw in very plain terms—"in thy bed thy wif I sey hym swyve." Poor Phebus was heartbroken. He killed his "wyf" at once and in sorrow "brak his mynstralcye," which, surprisingly, included no lyre but instead "harp and lute, and gyterne and sawtrye." He then broke his arrows and his bow.

Lacking the confession of Coronis, Phebus proceeds to call the poor crow a traitor and his wife "sad and eek so trewe," without guilt. After some bitter comments on the evil of reckless wrath, he concludes that he will kill himself.

Instead, however, proceeding to indulge in reckless wrath once more, he deprives the crow of his speech and song, pulls out his white plumage, condemns him and all crows after him to be black, and throws him out to "crye agayn tempest and rayn," as crows since, presumably, do naturally. The Manciple adduces a moral from this (309–13):

> Lordyngs, by this ensample I yow preye.
> Beth war, and taketh kepe what I seye:
> Ne telleth nevere no man in youre lyf
> Howe that another man hath dight his wyf;
> He wol yow haten mortally certain.

The same lesson was also appended to the story by Thomas Walsingham, probably a few years after the Manciple spoke.[19] Not content with this, however, our Manciple proceeds to deliver a little "sermon" taught him by his "Dame," the wisdom of the world, to the effect that a man should restrain his tongue, for no man is "shent" for speaking little and dissimulating, whether his news is true or false. The worldly will punish those who reveal truth or falsehood by in turn revealing the falsehood of those who speak against them. Remembering our lyrics, or even the real lesson of Ovid's second book, there is not much to be said for either the Manciple or his noble Phebus. Indeed, there is every reason to think that Chaucer's audience laughed at them. But perhaps they were laughing at someone else too.

IV
The Wisdom of Gaston Febus

The idea that Chaucer (as distinct from the Manciple) was actually making fun of Gaston Febus, Count of Foix, has recently been argued cogently in a very thoroughly researched article by William Askins, "The Historical Setting of the Manciple's Tale."[20] That is, he was using the amusing distortions of his Manciple figuratively to refer to an actual situation, thus making his own words, through the agency of his fictional Manciple, "cosyns to the thinges of which thei speken." The resemblances Askins indicates between the Count and the Manciple's Phebus are striking, as is also his account of the relations between the Count and the English. He had made himself a considerable nuisance both to Prince Edward (the Black Prince) and to John of Gaunt. Gaston vainly styled himself "Febus" as though he were a kind of reincarnation of Ovid's Phoebus and wore a blond wig to emphasize the resemblance, although this hair was hardly dedicated to Daphne. He was a famous hunter, a well-known cultivator of music, known for the splendor of his court, his exploits in warfare, but also for his "bachelerye," for he was the father of numerous bastards. Although he did not murder his wife, he did cast her off, installing four mistresses in his castle to replace her. And like the Manciple's Phebus he was subject to fits of uncontrolled wrath. He murdered his legitimate son, Gaston, having accused

him of conspiring with his exiled mother to murder him. Then he tortured and murdered young Gaston's entire retinue, known for its splendor, in an effort to extract confessions from them as to his son's guilt. Again, he murdered a relative who was a guest at his castle when the unfortunate man tried to explain his allegiance to the English. Indeed, he was famous for his cruelty. It is true that some of the French, who liked courtly splendor, admired Gaston, and even John of Gaunt sometimes spoke of him in favorable terms, although his motives for doing so were probably diplomatic, for the castle at Foix commanded one of the most strategic and easily defended passes across the Pyrenees.

Ovid's Phoebus was not a knight and under no chivalric obligations, but Gaston was a knight, not to mention the fact that he bore the additional obligations of a count. The assertion of the Manciple to the effect that men rather than women are likely to "do what comes naturally," like the lover in Macabru's famous "L'autrier jost' una subissa," for example, makes no sense in the Manciple's story but does make sense with reference to Gaston. And at times Gaston did behave like an outlaw and a thief. Finally, the instruments of his highly prized minstrels probably resembled those discarded by Phebus. The splendid lyre of Phoebus wreathed in laurel would hardly have been appropriate for them. These hints, I believe, were sufficient to provoke Chaucer's audience to laughter at Gaston Febus.

It may be possible to suggest a tentative date and occasion for Chaucer's presentation of the Tale, and I shall seek to do so even though I am aware of the fact that many Chaucerians dislike thinking of Chaucer's tales as being "occasional." To do this a little excursion into history will be necessary, and again I am aware of the fact that many Chaucerians regard history irrelevant to Chaucer's literary productions.[21] But Chaucer was a royal squire associated with the Chamber, a number of whose knights were sympathetic to Lancastrian causes, a not unreasonable situation in view of the fact that the duke of Lancaster was the most powerful man in the realm beneath the king. Again, fairly regular entertainments were arranged for the Household and its guests, among whom were undoubtedly prominent lords, especially during sessions of Parliament. The likelihood that Chaucer's friends among the Chamber Knights arranged for him to recite his tales before the Household as a part of these entertainments seems to me to be very great.[22] Naturally, the tales were concerned with matters of current interest, frequently with issues of interest in Parliament. Chaucer's eloquence and his capacity for "speaking truth" probably were in part responsible for his ambassadorial appointments. He undoubtedly had also a reputation for "speaking truth" amusingly under the guise of poetic fiction.

With reference to the date, it is unlikely that a time after 1391, when Gaston died, would have been appropriate. He was no longer a problem, although his successor was, and there would have been little reason to make fun of him. After John of Gaunt's venture in Spain, which had distracted the French from their planned invasion of England, he tarried for a time in Aquitaine seeking to establish harmony in that troubled realm. He also granted Chaucer's son Thomas an annuity for his service in the campaign. He was called home by King

Richard who needed more harmony at home among the great men of the realm. After landing at Plymouth in November, 1389, he met the king on the road to a meeting of the Council at Reading. Richard welcomed him warmly, and the Duke gave the king and the members of his retinue the kiss of peace. The factions among the members of the Council quieted in Gaunt's presence. When he went to Westminster the Duke was welcomed by the citizens and by the Abbot, and at London he was again welcomed at St. Paul's. Parliament met in January, 1390. On February 16 the Palatinate of Lancaster, which he had held as a tenant for life, was regranted to him in tail male. Finally, on March 2, with the full approval of Lords and Commons, Gaunt was made Duke of Aquitaine for life.

These events must have pleased Chaucer. The new Duke of Aquitaine did not visit his duchy at once, but sent Sir William Scrope to be his seneschal there. Parliament wished Gaunt to lead new peace negotiations with the French. A three-year truce was agreed upon at Leulinghen. To celebrate it Marshal Boucicault of France held a great tournament at St. Ingelvert, where Gaunt's son, the earl of Derby distinguished himself. Chaucer, who had been named Clerk of the Works in 1389, supervised the lists and pageantry for a return tournament at Smithfield in May. In July his duties were extended to include the refurbishing of the Garter Chapel at Windsor Castle, said to be badly in need of repair. His friend Sir Peter Courtenay was named Keeper of the Castle in this year. As Given-Wilson points out, the St. George's Day festival was held at Windsor every year between March 15–31 and April 22–28. It was regularly attended by the king and his Household ordinarily travelled with him. With the renewed confidence resulting from the truce it is likely that the king and many of the magnates thought that the Garter Chapel should be more resplendent.

As Knighton informs us, Gaunt, whose relations with some of his fellow-magnates had sometimes been strained,[23] held a great hunting festival at Leicester around the feast of Petrus ad Vincula (Aug. 1). His guests included the king and queen, who arrived on a Sunday (either July 31 or Aug. 7) probably accompanied by his Household. Other guests were the archbishop of York (Thomas Arundel), the duke of York (Edmund Langley), the duke of Gloucester (Thomas of Woodstock), the earl of Arundel (Richard fitz Alan), the earl of Huntingdon (John Holand), and many other bishops, lords, and ladies. The king and his retinue departed on Thursday to spend the night with Lord Beaumont at Beaumanoir.[24] This festival would have afforded an excellent occasion for the delivery of Chaucer's little comic interlude about the Manciple, for it would have amused and delighted the audience when they became aware of its relevance to a current situation. Of course, that interlude might have served equally well during the Parliamentary session when Gaunt was the center of so much attention.

Finally, as for uncaged birds, if they are birds who escape and return to their baser natures, both Phebus and his "wife" are such birds, not to mention the Manciple himself. But so also was poor Gaston, a vain and self-willed man, who abandoned his wife and luxuriated in the satisfaction of his senses, in those days an indication of "effeminacy" rather than of knightly virtue. Certainly, Gaunt

wanted his guests to "speak truth," to be loyal to their sworn obligations, and to "bear the flower of chivalry." Whether Chaucer's Tale is a literary success is a question I leave to the critics. But even they may grant that in view of the implications it sought to convey it is very carefully crafted.

Addendum

The Gascons met on Sept. 14, 1390, and refused to recognize Scrope as seneschal of Aquitaine. Although they praised the duke of Lancaster, they asserted that they wished to be subject to the king directly. Gaston Febus feared that his territories would be diminished by the new arrangement. Gaunt was probably aware that this reaction would be forthcoming. See J. J. N. Palmer, *England, France and Christendom*, (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1972), 153–55. Although Richard later sought to remedy the objections of the Gascons and Gaunt ceased to style himself "Duke of Aquitaine," the essential problem remained unresolved as Palmer explains.

Notes

[1] On the medieval taste for the enigmatic, see D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), 52–64.

[2] See Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1946) 61–62.

[3] See *A Preface to Chaucer*, 59–60, 337–338.

[4] For the text see Carleton Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), no. 103, 152–154. For convenience I have substituted *th* for Brown's Middle English symbol.

[5] For example, by using euphemisms or "polite" terms for reprehensible things to make them seem harmless. The word *glose* in Middle English, which had both Classical and Germanic origins with different connotations could mean either to supply an explanation or to "gloss over." Hence the humor in the observation of the Summoner's Friar, "Glosynge is a glorious thyng, certayn." When he pretends to "glose" in one way, this flatterer is "glosyng" in another.

[6] For some indications derived from a variety of primary sources, see Robertson, "Chaucer and the Economic and Social Consequences of the Plague," in Francis X, Newman, ed., *Social Unrest in the Late Middle Ages* (*Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 39, Binghamton, NY, 1986), 49–74. For Chaucer's own view, see his "Lak of Stedfastnesse."

[7] Brown, no. 108, 168–70.

[8] Truth was the first obligation of a knight. Thus Chaucer's Knight loved Truth first among the chivalric virtues. This fact and some of its implications are discussed in Robertson, "The Probable Date and Purpose of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*," *SP*, 84 (1987), 429–30.

[9] This is a legal term used for legal officials who "maintained" the causes of lords, whether true or false in return for fees and robes like those granted to Chaucer's Sergeant. It could also be used for lords who "maintained" the causes of their tenants, or for "covins" of individuals of whatever rank who swore to "maintain" their

companions in right or wrong. Here may be included, for example, bands of marauders, although even guilds and fraternities came under suspicion in the Cambridge Parliament of 1388.

[10] Cf. the discussion of the Reeve in Robertson, *Essays in Medieval Culture* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), 295–96.

[11] Quotations from *ManT* and line numbers are from Donald C. Baker, *The Manciple's Tale*, in *A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2, 11 (Norman, Oklahoma: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1984). Quotations from and references to the works of Chaucer elsewhere refer to the second edition by F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

[12] Cf. Robertson, "The Wife of Bath and Midas," SAC, 6 (1984), 1–20.

[13] He was the god of truth and wisdom, although he was occasionally "diverted" from his proper course of action. The Latin verb *diverto* meant basically "to turn out of the way." Basic Latin meanings were still strong during the Middle Ages. Thus when a traveller stopped at an inn for the night, this was a "diversion" although his experience there might not be very "diverting" in the modern sense.

[14] On the connotations of "bachelerye," see "The Wife of Bath and Midas," page 3 and note 6, where the quotation probably reflects John of Salisbury's condemnation of braggart soldiers devoted to luxuries. A young squire or knight bachelor might be valiant, but if he devoted himself too wholeheartedly to "diversions" and became a *miles amoris* like the Manciple's Phebus or Chaucer's Squire, he lost his worth. For the *miles amoris* see *A Preface to Chaucer*, pages. 408–410. For OF *bachelerie* in this sense, see the illustrative quotation from the *Roman de la rose* in the Larousse *Dictionnaire d'Ancien Français* (1947) under that heading, where it is associated with song and dance. Phebus and the Wife's knight are *lusty* bachelors. Cf. Boethius, *De Cons.*, 3. m. 5. I am aware of the fact that the Middle English Dictionary defines "bachelerye" as a chivalric quality, but also very much aware that dictionaries, with few exceptions, offer only preliminary definitions, subject to revision by more detailed study of relevant texts.

[15] The echo is indicated in a marginal gloss and supported in Baker's note, p. 101.

[16] Baker, p. 108. For the figure, see Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* , 1, 28, 24.

[17] See *Essays in Medieval Culture*, page 142.

[18] Cf. the discussion by John V. Fleming, *Reason and the Lover*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), 97–115.

[19] *Archana Deorum*, ed. Robert van Kluyve (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1968), 2. 3. 37–38. page 53: "Fabula Phebi respicit sponsos ignaros qui maxime odiunt eos qui eis adulteria conjugum suarum nuntiant vel ennarant." The editor, page x, suggests a date for this work later than 1396. However, it is possible that Walsingham was here as elsewhere drawing on another source.

[20] *SAC*, 7 (1985), 87–105. I do not agree with everything the article says, including its equation of "bachelery" and chivalry.

[21] For an interesting and provocative discussion of this attitude, see Paul A. Olson, *"The Canterbury Tales" and the Good Society*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 3–18. The remainder of the book demonstrated the usefulness of historical knowledge in the interpretation of Chaucer's Tales.

[22] For the suggestion that Chaucer participated in entertainments for the Household, or, more specifically, for the "upstairs" of the Household or "Chamber," see Chris Given-Wilson, *The Royal Household and the King's Affinity*. (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), 60–61.

[23] Gaunt had been forced to defend himself against false charges of treason in the October Parliament of 1377. The royal favorite Robert de Vere had twice plotted to have him condemned falsely for treason, but he was no longer at court after the triumph of the Appellants.

[24] Henry Knighton's chronicle was edited by J. R. Lumby in two volumes (Rolls Series, 1889–1895). For the hunting festival, see 2. 313–314. For Richard's retinue on his travels and an earlier visit to Beaumanoir, see Given-Wilson, pages. 34–37. For a discussion of hunting parties and their use by magnates for considerations of policy, see Nigel Saul, *Scenes from Provincial Life: Knightly Families in Sussex, 1280–1400*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 187–192.

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(Drawing by Ed Carlos)

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