

Imagination in The Miller's Tale

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Público: Alumnos de Literatura Inglesa. **Materia:** Inglés. **Idioma:** Inglés.

Title: Imagination in The Miller's Tale.

Abstract

It deals with the constant presence of imagination in The Miller's Tale, the story told by one of the pilgrims in Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. The author chooses a real scenario, uses a colloquial language and tells a story which could be real. Nonetheless, within that realism (which is shown with great accuracy and naturalness due to his prose) imagination plays an important role in the development of this funny fabliau.

Keywords: Literature, Medieval Literature, English Literature, Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales

Título: La imaginación en El Cuento del Molinero.

Resumen

Trata sobre la presencia directa e indirecta de la imaginación en el cuento de el molinero de Los Cuentos de Canterbury escritos por Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer elige un escenario real, utiliza el lenguaje de la calle y nos cuenta una historia que bien podría ser verdad. Sin embargo, dentro de ese realismo (el cual muestra con gran eficacia y delicadeza) la imaginación juega un papel fundamental en el desarrollo de esta fábula.

Palabras clave: Literatura, Literatura Medieval, Literatura Inglesa, Geoffrey Chaucer, Los Cuentos de Canterbury.

Recibido 2017-12-26; Aceptado 2018-01-05; Publicado 2018-01-25; Código PD: 091079

The Canterbury Tales was written by Geoffrey Chaucer 1380s and 1400s. It was meant to be a collection of stories and the original idea was to write more than hundred tales but it is an unfinished work. In the book there are twenty-nine pilgrims travelling from London to Canterbury; each pilgrim was supposed to tell a tale and that is what most of the pilgrims do. *The Miller's Tale* is the second one and the first of the five fabliaux. This tale is told by a drunken miller in order to revenge The Knight's Tale; it is a vulgar, satirical and ribald story to contrast with the one told by the knight.

The literature of the bourgeois tradition is full of exaggeration, of caricature and grotesque imagination. Charles Muscatine uses the terms of 'realistic' and 'naturalistic' to indicate that the literature of the Middle Ages, and particularly in contrast to the courtly tradition, has a notable preoccupation with the animal facts of life (in the Miller's Tale Alison's description is full of comparisons with animals). In an ordinary sense, it takes a realistic view of the things; it is easier to find subjects in the low life (like in this tale) and often vulgar and obscene. The fabliau is the most protean genre of the bourgeois tradition. A fabliau has always been considered "a tale to laugh in verse", though traditionally it was just a little story, but nowadays it is considered a short comic tale written in verse, often in octosyllabic couplets, involving sexual deception and outwitting (in spite of that in medieval times other words were sometimes used to describe these kinds of tales). It is a short comic tale which deals with middle class or lower class characters in a realistic way and offers a story which includes a ribald and the obscene. The characters normally are students, merchants, stupid husbands or clerics and its setting is non-courtly. The setting is often realism (the cat's hole in *The Miller's Tale*), in an everyday street or small house, but the plot is far from realistic (like in this that tale). "One of the pleasures of fabliaux is of entering temporarily into a world where normal morals, normal sanctions and normal consequences are removed"¹¹⁶. It usually offers a love triangle between two men a woman (though in *The Miller's Tale* there are three men) and at the end everybody is punished. Usually it has no didactic intention and it illustrates no moral principle.

The origin of the fabliau can be found in France in the XIIth century. The French fabliau deals with stereotyped characters and expectations (the marriage of an old man with a young woman). Characters usually do not have names; they are just called 'the clerk', 'the miller'. Punishment and intelligence are valuable qualities, as well as comic parts.

116 Helen Phillips, *An introduction to the Canterbury Tales* (p.55)

“Chaucer’s fabliau tales are richer and more complex than the general form of the genre and it is helpful before considering how he used a fabliau pot in *The Miller’s Tale* to look at the genre as it existed before the *Canterbury Tales*.”¹¹⁷ Because of its ingeniously elaborated plot and the development of the story different from other fabliaux, it is considered one of the best, if not the best. “What distinguishes *The Miller’s Tale* from other examples the genre is the sheer detailed brilliance of its handling-of style, character, narrative structure. It is in no way typical of the form; as befits its place in a story-competition, it is the best”.¹¹⁸

Imagery is not as important and complex as in Shakespeare, but it has an important part in Chaucer’s poetry too. In earlier usage the word “image” was attributed to the pictures, figures and sculptures created by painters, sculptors...Religious images had a special power; people used to touch and kiss them. ‘Mental image’ can be another meaning of the word. “Images have symbolic and intellectual overtones of meaning. They are a means of knowing. The created world was though to be filled with meaningful signs”¹¹⁹. The sense of sight is the most powerful one, and writers try to make the readers ‘see’ what there is not. Just with words, they have the ability to create images in our minds that do not exist. This quality of vividness is recognized in Chaucer’s writing. Vivid images are used to get grotesque and satirical effects (Miller’s mouth ‘as greet...as a greet forneys’). Readers are often struck because of the vividness and the sharply visual quality of Chaucer’s writing. Maybe when a student begins to read *The Canterbury Tales* the first inclination he/she has is to ignore, or at least to avoid, the ‘ideal’ or the ‘paradigmatic’ in each of the pilgrims, and he/she will focus on the ‘real’. This could be truth in the case of the pilgrims who present a vivid personality, but in general terms pilgrims seem other to us, we look for more realistic characters. It is not really easy to read Chaucer because in some ways he was realistic, but far from the realistic literary tradition. In Robert Myles opinion “Chaucer is a realist in many senses: Chaucer’s works reveal a foundational realist, an epistemological realist, an ethical realist, a semiotic and linguistic realist, an intentionalist realist and an author capable of creating psychologically real characters. Together these realisms compose ‘Chaucerian realism’”¹²⁰. Chaucer’s “descriptive imagery of the tradition is characterized even more sharply by its quality than by its utility”¹²¹

In his age visual image was of great importance, so we have to become familiar with the common images he uses and the symbolic language. He draws the images of his own experience and puts them to a variety of uses. We can find his interest for images from the natural world in Alison’s description; she is in a way described like a ‘sexual attractive farm girl’, because she is attractive in the countryside and farm world (she wore a cross-striped sash, all made of silk; | An apron also, white as morning milk | She wore about her loins, gored to flare. | White was her smock; its collar, front and back, | Embroidered with black silk inside and out. The ribbons of the white cap that she wore | were also coal-black silk, to match the collar; | She’d a broad silken headband set back high ... And from her girdle hung a purse of leather | Tasselled with silk, spangled with beads of brass) but not for the people of the city. Though it is even carefully counterpointed with some images from art, such as the description of her elegance. In the description of Absolon, however, images of art are the ones predominating and natural images (his dancing is compared to the images of the cat and the mouse) are less used.

The images of Chaucer also have a larger structural function. They do not create iterative imagery as the ones of Shakespeare but they sometimes form clear patterns running through a work. In the *Canterbury Tales* each tale has a certain kind of dominant images. “Images referred to a world of things, but they also referred to a world of ideas”¹²². In *The Miller’s Tale*, sexual images are the ones constantly appearing, with Alison as main character. In *The Franklin’s Tale*, for example, the images of desire are quite often while in *The Knight’s Tale* we have several images of the two men fighting.

In the technical sense, ymagynacioun is used as ‘the faculty of imagination’, the ability to imagine, but it can also mean ‘idea, fancy’. Imagination in medieval times has no the same concept of ‘creative imagination’ than romantics, who thought that the highest creative faculty of the mind was poetic. Poetry is the literary form that can achieve the greatest imagination. According to Hawes Chaucer’s creative poetic (‘upon hys ymaginacyon | He made also the tale of Canterbury’)

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- 117 Helen Phillips, *An introduction to the Canterbury Tales* (p.54)
 - 118 Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (p.95)
 - 119 Douglas Gray, *The Oxford Companion to Chaucer* (p.243)
 - 120 Robert Myles, *Chaucerian Realism* (p.1)
 - 121 Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (p.60)
 - 122 Douglas Gray, *The Oxford Companion to Chaucer* (p.284)

gives shape to unknown things. When he translates a passage of Boece he says that man in sensible, imaginable and reasonable. Man perceives the five outer senses by his wits, and he is also endowed with imagination and the power of reason (not like other animals). With imagination he is able to bring an image seen in the past or even create a new one combining different memories. According to Chaucer even the blind sees with the 'eyes of the mind', because imagination is inside us and it is possible to give shape to something does not exist. Imagination is free; you can see whatever you want. This power is higher than the ones of wits. Imagination has always been associated with the creation of images. This power is illustrated in a passage in *The Miller's Tale* ('men may dyen of ymaginacioun | So depe may impressioun be take). "In the higher faculty of reason the image can be related to all other associated images, and, ultimately, reason is freed from both matter and images."¹²³ Imagination is the highest one human beings quality, which is something that will always be attached to the human being's mind. A person can lose the sight and the hearing, or any other sense, but imagination is something will never disappear.

For Chaucer the imagination was creative, involving the active construction of meanings. His texts are not the mirror of given forms nor of in his ideological and social environment. He just makes up stories, with characters that he does not know and do not exist, telling events and actions invented by him...he takes nothing about the external world, he does not represents the real life. According to David Aers "ne outstanding characteristic of Chaucer's imagination in relation to knowledge and authority is his reflexivity"¹²⁴. This reflexive imagination holds the way in which human beings constitute the world, they creates ideologies, dogmas and all that is known, not just impersonal truths and passive recipients of reality. David Aers says that "reflexive imagination returns reified texts and authorities to their human speakers, disclosed to their inevitable limitations and partial interests"¹²⁵

As it is mention before, fabliaux's characters are usually male clerks, millers, students...so the social group is limited, which is depicted with sexual repression and comically unself-conscious fantasy with female sexuality whose origin is in the male's own sexual existence. In David Aers opinion's Chaucer's imagination is engaged with his own world, and including its hermeneutics gives the authoritative text to a grasping ecclesiastic. Sometimes his imagination is joined to religious, social, economic and psychological dimensions and problems. But it is always his own imagination; he never takes something from outside his mind.

Chaucer confines his imagination in order to adapt himself to some simple and absolutist rules attributed to the medieval mind and ideology by some people who write on his poetry. In David Aers' impression Chaucer's imagination had big sympathy with the growing criticism of war among other late medieval writers. In Chaucer's poetry "the poet's imagination suggest that certain traditional distinctions concerning modes of violence are the product of the highly partial official ideology sponsored by militaristic conquerors and their followers, and his own poetry undermines them".¹²⁶

Nicholas, the scholar, is the main character and he is full of fancy, so fantasy is present all over the tale. He is a very intelligent, clever and witty student and his imagination is almost unlimited. In fact, according to some experts imagination is the only unlimited thing that has ever existed and sometimes we can reach things that we considered unattainable. Nicholas is a clear example. Alison is the wife of the carpenter, she is quite pretty ("young, comely was this wife; a lovely girl") and sexually attractive (And certainly she'd a come-hither eye | Plucked to a slender line were her eyebrows, | And they were arched, and black as any sloes.); she could be the sexual fantasy of any man. The carpenter knows this perfectly, and being aware that he has a clever and witty teenage scholar living in his house, he keeps her near him in order not to allow any man to be with her. But the scholar is very witty and he manages very well to make up a story thanks to it he makes the carpenter go away and allow them (Alison and Nicholas) to be alone in his house for one day. Nicholas tells John that the world is going to be destroyed in less than an hour because of a rain greater than Noah's Flood but that if he trusts him he is going to save his life and he will manage to save his own and Alison's too. This is a fake story invented by Nicholas but the carpenter believes it and does what the scholar asks him to do. This way, though the carpenter is punished in a way, the young student came out on top. Because of his imagination he is able to get what he wanted and at the beginning seemed to be impossible to reach. But while this fake story has a positive ending for the scholar is not the same for the carpenter. Looking from the point of view of John, fantasy played a dirty trick on him. That is why

123 Douglas Gray, *The Oxford Companion to Chaucer* (p.244)

124 David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland the Creative Imagination* (p.80)

125 David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland the Creative Imagination* (p.83)

126 David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland the Creative Imagination* (p.178)

imagination has a great power; the same fake can cause something positive in somebody and something negative in other person. The mere imagination drives the carpenter to a tragic ending.

There is once that the miller says that “people die of mere imagination” (pag.92, line 4 –Oxford World’s Classics), that is, that imagination, fantasy can carry someone to death. Sometimes you can not control your mind, you can not avoid certain images being inside of you, and that can drives you mad. If you have bad images in your mind that you do not like, that they make you suffer, it can even led you to the suicide because you can not stand such suffering. What the miller wants to express with that sentence is that imagination has such power that you can not control –because you are afraid, because you are suffering, it does not care the reason- that it can drives you to death.

However, there is another kind of fantasy that shows its presence all over the story: sexual fantasy, with Alison as the main object. In this story we can observe that the sexual fantasy is not eternal but temporal when, Absolon instead of kissing Alison’s mouth kisses her ash, he immediately loses all the sexual desire he had towards her (“This Absolon gan wpe his mouth ful drie. Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole, And at the window out she putte hir hole, And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers, But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers Ful savourly, er he were war of this. Abak he stirte, and thoughte it was amys, For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd. He felte a thyng al rough and long yherd, And seyde, "Fy! allas! what have I do?"). This is a sign that it is just sexual fantasy, but not love at all.

Imagination and fantasy have the capacity of making you imagine and see want you want, good things, what you desire and enjoy them. But, on the other hand, it can make you see bad and ugly things you do not like, that they frighten you and even your are terrible afraid of; that things you do not want to happen even in your mind, but sometimes is really difficult, or even impossible, to control your mind and close it to imagination. Fantasy is free and imagination flies freely in our minds; it is not easy at all to control the mind and sometimes it can drives you mad.

Chaucer did not use imagination for his own, but to write and make all of us enjoy it. And imagination plays an important role in *The Miller’s Tale*. It shows us that imagination can have both good and positive endings as well as negative ones.

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