

Competing Spaces: Dialectology and the Place of Dialect in Chaucer's 'Reve's Tale'

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John hight that oon, and Aleyn hight that other;
Of o toun were they born, that highte Strother,
Fer in the north, I can nat telle where.

('The Reve's Tale', lines 92-4)¹

While we may agree that it is necessary to stand against the dominant ideology of the time, it is the immense difficulty of doing so that must be acknowledged . . . if you do not have an explicit politics – an ideology – then one will certainly have you. (Patterson 1987, 70)

I. Dialect and narrative

The two northern students in Chaucer's 'Reve's Tale' have the distinction of being the only figures in the whole of *The Canterbury Tales* to be characterized by the use of a recognizable regional dialect. They have attracted attention because of this single attribute, received wisdom for many years being that the use of the dialect is part of the tale's general mockery, intended to draw attention to the clerks' gullibility and lack of sophistication. Understood in this way by literary critics and dialectologists alike, the tale has been cited as 'evidence' of the emergence of a recognized 'Standard English' during the late fourteenth century. Martyn Wakelin explains the reasoning that leads to this view in his bald statement that 'Chaucer's imitation dialect suggests that one type of English is best, while other varieties are inferior. Chaucer's

Cambridge students from Strother . . . are the first characters in English literature who are comic because they speak a regional, non-Standard, dialect' (1977, 34-5). But there are serious problems with this evaluation. It assesses a literary text as if it reflected usage in and attitudes to spoken language directly, as if the question of meaning was unrelated to structure and style. A brief glance at the narrative within which this imitation dialect occurs demonstrates the difficulty of translating it as a mark of provincial foolishness. Though the students are undoubtedly outsiders in the miller's world, they are successful at every level in the plot: defeating a stupid, scheming peasant by resourcefully switching to an alternative goal when the first seems lost (applying the mercantile principles of equivalence and exchange), and achieving dominance in a masculine world through the sexual humiliation of their lower-class rival. Rather than providing dismissive comedy, the use of dialect seems to distinguish two alien figures who enter the miller's limited world and reorder it to their own advantage. The students' characterization by dialect (that is, voice) can no more be divorced from the events and strategies of the tale as a whole than can the tale itself be detached from the interwoven voices that form *The Canterbury Tales*.²

This is not a reading that accords with Wakelin's view. Wakelin's comment omits any literary considerations as he invokes the historical narrative of the development of 'Standard English', a narrative quite divorced from the fierce turbulence of medieval social relations. This reductive understanding of the historical and literary contexts involved in the perception of a literary incident as a source of 'information', creates further difficulties when the particular interpenetration of literature and history in *The Canterbury Tales* is taken into account. Patterson (1991, 26) contends that the text is centrally preoccupied with the emergence of different speaking subjects out of the social and ideological disruptions of its contemporary world.³ He argues for a world in flux, with new social formations and new ideologies emerging out of the fragmentation of older patterns. Any projection backwards of present-day notions onto this period, without at least acknowledging these contexts, must therefore omit a major determinant of meaning. In Wakelin's case, such a projection begins to raise questions about the assumptions involved in dialectology itself.

'The Reve's Tale' presents us with a struggle between two groups: a family defined by their relation to the land and two literate figures

defined by their career and their language. The hostility between the two groups is a traditional class conflict. The clerical victory thus implies the victory of a certain class at the expense of another, and the metaphoric victory of speech over the physical world. As a discipline which claims to study language in isolation from ideology, and which understands *place* to be a neutral ground without ideological signification, dialectology expresses the values of a mobile and literate class – those descendants of the secular clergy who achieve victory within the tale. If we look outward from the tale, it seems that dialectology's silences about political and literary elements within its subject eloquently express its covert investment in the ideology and narratives of the dominant class. Conventional readings of 'The Reve's Tale' seem to illustrate Patterson's point that 'if you do not have an explicit politics – an ideology – then one will certainly have you'.

In this essay, I want to focus on the representation of space and place within the tale: elements which the tale degrades by humiliating the figures associated with them – the miller and his two women – and by promoting the attributes of the mobile and literate clerks. This kind of reading of the tale leads outwards to an assessment of the relation of dialectology to the dominant values of our own, present-day society.

The clerks' markedly different discourse proves a resonant metaphor for a class driven by a creed of individual competition and personal advancement.⁴ The tale dramatizes the victory of a group defined by their speech as having moved away from their birthplace, a victory dramatized as the virile penetration of and withdrawal from a socially defined space belonging to a restive peasant class. In order to assert the independence and activity of the clerks the peasantry must be demeaned. Told by a figure who, like the clerks, seeks individual advancement within an existing system, and who therefore is hostile to any change in the established order,⁵ the narrative is not disinterested but reflects the kind of history known as 'neo-Smithian Marxism', which claims 'the agency of economic and social transformation as the town-based market economy – and . . . stigmatises the country as a regressive brake upon the productive forces' (Patterson 1991, 248).⁶ Hindsight reveals the ideological frame of such a history. As Patterson points out, in the context of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Britain, it is 'the rural sector of the economy that is dynamic, and the solvent of feudal relations is

neither merchant capital nor the trading activity it finances but a vigorous peasant economy' (Patterson 1991, 252). The long-term effects of such a degradation of space and place to the advantage of a mobile group involved in trade are quite evident today: businessmen are seen as working on neutral territory, providing for the common good, operators who are independent of the existing systems of privilege and superior to those communities into which they are free to move, or which they may leave. These are central tenets of the free market, an ideology constructed through the deliberate silencing of those elements within it which indicate the human cost of 'free' enterprise.

Recognizing the class interest expressed through 'The Reve's Tale' allows the four linked texts that open *The Canterbury Tales* their function as a debate between voices.⁷ H. Marshall Leicester considers that 'the tales . . . concentrate not on the way pre-existing people create language but on the way language creates people' (1980, 217),⁸ a comment that can be expanded to include *class*. Consideration of the connections between the tales, their reconfigurations of the same scenario (the guardian, the two lovers, the beloved) in a generic shift from romance to *fabliau*, reveals examples of language being grounded in a hierarchal – and unstable – social system. Each voice asserts, attempts to 'naturalize' its own ground and seeks to silence that of its competitors, the struggle being conducted over the issue of the value accorded to the 'natural' world, that is, the space of ground from which the particularized subject speaks. In the first tale, that of the Knight, the natural/sensual world is feared and, placed at the boundary of a civilized community, subjected to rigid controls. The significant boundary in 'The Knight's Tale' lies between a rational, ordered civilization and the chaotic bestiality of the uncontrolled natural world. Love might turn the young knights into beasts – 'wood leoun', 'cruel tygre' ('The Knight's Tale', lines 798, 799) – so social institutions are created to control it: tournament lists formalize rivalry in the human world; marriage rites formalize and license sexual attraction and intercourse, and incorporate them into law. In the second, 'The Miller's Tale', sensual and natural pleasures are celebrated and placed within a concrete human world. This includes the city with its streets, the many-chambered house of the carpenter, and the role of Alison as a figure with legitimate desires. But in the third – which I take to be the deciding tale – the sense of community within which

the previous tales have operated is negated and the sensual, physical world is translated into a commodity within a system of exchange. Divisions lie within the human community, which is fractured along class lines: the boundary is discernible through linguistic differentiation rather than through divisions of space. In 'The Reve's Tale', the beloved figure, so significant in the two previous tales, has no meaning apart from that of a counter: value here is accorded to activity, to circulation, not to the object. Despite the seeming lightness of its comedy, the values of this tale lead to that of the Cook, a narrative in which money determines value, and where the individual speaker and the physical world lose significance, both swallowed up in a system of ceaseless exchange. In 'The Cook's Tale', the desired figure is debased and becomes a prostitute, and the pleasurable voice of the tale itself falters into oblivion.

A scholar such as Wakelin might protest that his interest lies in *language* rather than *literature*, but the fact that he chooses to omit ideological debates taking place around and through the tale indicates that he fails to distinguish the text from 'reality', and that, in some way, he has accepted its ideological claim to centrality, its version of the natural. It indicates that he (unwittingly) accepts the Reeve's ideology. Wakelin is not the only one to assume that the tale's realism is value-free, 'natural' or 'transparent'; but realism, in this case, is a literary quality associated with the aristocratic genre of the *fabliau*.⁹ No narrative – no voice – can escape its particular grounding, and, in the Russian-doll construction of 'The Reve's Tale', the northern voices of the two clerks, like all the other voices in *The Canterbury Tales*, articulate the desire for power, and a concern with place and with displacement. In terms of the interconnection of the first four tales of *The Canterbury Tales*, the place of dialect within 'The Reve's Tale' functions as part of a narrative displacement, just as the displacement of the miller within the tale is part of a narrative attempt to negate and displace the tale told by the pilgrim Miller – which in turn was itself an attempt to displace his predecessor. David Aers, treating Volosinov as a pseudonym for Bakhtin, notes Volosinov/Bakhtin's comment that 'Each and every word expresses the "one" in relation to the "other". I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately from the point of view of the community to which I belong.' Aers adapts this to medieval practice: 'If linguistic, social and subjective processes are isolated at moments in the analysis of cultural practices, this model

demands that they are ultimately understood as bound together in the structures and history of particular communities' (Aers 1988, 3, including quotation from Volosinov 1986, 86).

II. *Dialect, literature and the problem of social history*

Wakelin's concern with dialect leads him to view Chaucer's use of dialect from a particular perspective: he sees it as *evidence* of the lower status of those from outside a favoured south-east. Focusing on those aspects he finds interesting, and suppressing potential contradiction, he assesses the 'imitation' of speech from this one perspective. Yet imitated speech is not limited to the representation of regional dialect but, according to H. Marshall Leicester, occurs less dramatically at every level of the complex interplay of voices that makes up *The Canterbury Tales*: '[T]he *Canterbury Tales* is not written to be spoken as if it were a play. It is written to be read, but reads as if it were to be spoken. The poem is a literary imitation of oral performance' (Leicester 1980, 221). Where Wakelin considers that the students' linguistic difference marks them out as butts of social ridicule, Leicester focuses on language as a *self-defining* act, a marker of identity. From Leicester's perspective, the depiction of language within 'The Reve's Tale' locks the text into an ongoing literary debate about language and identity. Certainly readings which see John and Aleyn as foolish provincial students become difficult to sustain when faced by what they exclude. Uneasy with the conventional reading, N. F. Blake (1981) questions whether it is possible to see the use of dialect as part of a satire on the provinces. He considers this to be an anachronistic move, a case of reading modern attitudes into literature of the past. Yet he makes a similar mistake. Assuming the transhistorical relevance of current social norms, he sees the students as 'higher up the social and educational ladder' and thus assesses 'the miller [as] perhaps more provincial and certainly more boorish than the undergraduates' (1981, 29). This approach throws up as many problems as it appears to solve.

The implication of Wakelin's reading of the relation of the clerks to the miller is that the tale exemplifies the emergence of modern attitudes and class differences. In rejecting this view, Blake seems to imply a stable social hierarchy. His response is not to question class but to seek an ideologically free arena: that of 'literature'. Wakelin

divorces the use of dialect from its literary context within the tale in order to transform it into historical, dialectological evidence; Blake, wishing to avoid the grand narrative of dialectology, focuses instead on the literary aspects of the tale, and similarly removes it from the social instability of its immediate historical context.¹⁰ He suggests that the depiction of dialect within the tale is only significant as a literary device adopted from the French *fabliau*: 'it is customary to use dialect or linguistic quirks as a source of humour and Chaucer may have imitated this French tradition in his use of the northern dialect' (1981, 29). To Blake, the *fabliau* is a 'short, humorous and frequently bawdy story' (1981, 29), one that appears value-free, operating in a realm outside society and social change. Yet this is far from the case, most particularly among the symbolic characters to whom Chaucer gives three interconnected *fabliaux*: the Miller, the Reeve and the Cook.¹¹

To expand: the thirteenth-century *fabliau* which provided the basis for these tales is widely recognized as an aristocratic medium, one which depends very much on the satirization of groups perceived as inferior. The stark realism which is employed within the tales is equally ideological, for it magnifies the gross physicality by which the lower orders are stigmatized. By constructing an unrefined world inhabited by figures dominated by various – though primarily sexual – lusts and wholly lacking in the 'spiritual' qualities through which the aristocracy idealized and justified their status, the *fabliau* degrades its characters, who are the butts of a bawdy and usually scatological humour. In the *fabliau*, frequent adulterous adventures demonstrate the inability of the lower-class figures to restrain their desire and therefore also their inability to adhere to a 'civilized' order and law.¹² Thus the comedy of the *fabliau* is aware of class division and actively promotes it. A glance at the romance, the arena in which the aristocracy presented idealized images of themselves as noble, ethical beings, indicates the extent to which the *fabliau* is rooted in the cultural politics of class. J. T. Jackson Lears's deliberation (1985) on Gramsci is particularly relevant to what I mean by the 'cultural politics of class':

Gramsci realised that a class interpretation of history does not entail a fixation on the struggle between oppressors and oppressed; rather, as Eugene Genovese has observed, 'it may reveal a process by which a ruling class successfully avoided such confrontation', and the source of that success may well be in the realm of culture. (Lears 1985, 572)

Not only as a genre, but also as a representative style (realism), the thirteenth-century French *fabliaux* serve the interests of the aristocratic class. Yet that need not mean that Chaucer's use of the same genre does likewise. The place from which the *fabliaux* in *The Canterbury Tales* are spoken is clearly demonstrated within the wider frame of that text; and changing the domain in this way effects changes within the genre. Robert Hodge's fascinating discussion of the interaction of 'genre and domain' points out that 'crossing genres or domains is always an intervention at a certain point in the system, which reveals something of the system itself . . . Genres are fluid, untidy products of negotiation and struggle whose outcome is not always certain or predictable' (Hodge 1990, 35–6). And one striking characteristic of Chaucer's use of the *fabliau* is that he places it in the mouths of the very figures whom the aristocratic form was designed to humiliate and ridicule. As Derek Pearsall (1987, 42) points out, this change has 'wonderfully complicated our response' to the *fabliau*. At a stroke, aristocratic patronization is transformed into a self-reflection: a strategy perfectly in keeping with the sophisticated exploration of the relation of language to identity that Leicester sees as the preoccupation of the *Tales* as a whole.

By assessing the *fabliau* as merely a short humorous story, Blake appears to echo Wakelin's view that the literary text is both value-free and essentially unproblematic, and similarly he makes no distinction between the use of language within the text and that of everyday life. Though disagreeing with the traditional assessment of the use of dialect in 'The Reve's Tale' as a fourteenth-century attempt to mock the 'inferior' dialect of the north, Blake seems less aware of history as a determining factor in literature than is Wakelin: he accepts that dialect is comic but is unsure whether it is satiric. He turns to 'literary' questions as a way of avoiding the political, a move that denies the space of the literary as what Patterson calls 'a space of ideological opposition' (1987, 74). For Blake, literature is certainly not to be interrogated for elements that might modify predetermined assumptions about the relation of language and identity.

III. Place and displacement

'The Miller's Tale' constructs 'a space of ideological opposition' to the dominant order through its central concern with place and

displacement. (This is why the Reeve is so concerned to negate its values in his tale, to emasculate its vitality through the agency of his northern students.) The Miller seeks to displace the fear and anxiety that the Knight associates with the physical and sensuous world and to replace it with celebration. One of the ways in which this is effected is through the loving detail accorded to the physical world, to the physical being of the central protagonists, and to the recurrent desire to enter (simultaneously) the inner spaces of both Alison and the house; a desire shared by the narrative and the clerks, Nicholas and Absolon. The central metaphor of 'The Miller's Tale' is that of *space*. As a carpenter, Alison's husband is a creator of spaces, who is replaced by Nicholas and *displaced* into the eaves of the house; Absolon wishes to enter Alison's interior space from the exterior space of the street. In this tale, inner spaces are sweet (Nicholas's chamber; Alison's mouth), bad things are pushed outside (Alison threatening to throw stones from inside the house at Absolon on the street; Nicholas farting out of the window).

Patterson insists that the celebration of a rich physical world in 'The Miller's Tale' has a deliberate political end, that of 'subverting and mocking the very terms with which the reigning ideology sought to stigmatize and oppress peasants . . . Far from being fallen and degraded, nature here serves as a beneficent and supportive principle' (1991, 264–5). If the Miller's attempt to reclaim the value of the physical world is part of a political agenda, then the Reeve's rewriting is equally political. 'The Reve's Tale' rewrites not only its paradigm's celebration of sensuality but also its dominant metaphor. Whereas 'The Miller's Tale' sketched a varied and complex urban world (Oxford), with a focus on the physical spaces of the carpenter's house, the world of 'The Reve's Tale' is denuded of such complexity. It consists of one building (both work and living space) isolated from the town (Cambridge), and surrounded by fields and wild mares which run off, distracting the clerks' (male) workhorse.

The Reeve's rewriting is particularly evident in the new – and heightened – role accorded to *language*. Within the Miller's narrative, communication can take place without words: Alison's shuddering response when Nicholas touches her makes her verbal rejection redundant; the non-verbal 'Tehee' as she shuts the window on the shocked Absolon wonderfully conveys mischievous delight; the fart that eloquently echoes out over Absolon's face is as expressive as any words. In 'The Miller's Tale', the two clerks are

divided through their relation to physicality and language: Absolon is 'sommel squaymous / Of farting' (lines 151–2) and sings in an affected manner to improve his own appearance; Nicholas is the one who farts on Absolon, and who works with Alison, exploiting biblical texts for their mutual advantage. The extended physical description of Nicholas (and the lack of such description of the carpenter) demonstrates his alliance with the equally physical Alison. The contrast with Absolon emphasizes further this alliance with the physical world. As a lodger, Nicholas's home already lies within the house, while the wandering Absolon is an outsider whose *words* may enter the house but who has no physical presence there.

'The Miller's Tale' not only reclaims nature, it reclaims the spaces of the physical world: not just the vernal imagery that associates Alison with the countryside, but the physical structure of the town itself, with its streets and its miracle plays and churchgoing; not just the town either, but the house itself, with its individual rooms, the scented musical interior associated with Nicholas, and the transformation of Alison's bedroom into a place of melody and laughter through sexual play.

In 'The Miller's Tale', the human world encompasses *unlicensed* sexual desire; its significant boundary lies within the town – specifically at Alison's shot-window – indicating the physical division of the private/erotic space of the bedchamber from the public space of the street. When Absolon sings – attempting to penetrate this boundary with his 'unnatural' voice – Alison states her own (ambiguous) desire and threatens him with a physical object – the stone:

I love another, and elles I were to blame,
Wel bet than thee, by Jesu, Absolon!
Go forth thy wey, or I wol caste a ston.

(lines 524–6)

Alison's colloquial speech seems at some distance from a study of dialect in 'The Reve's Tale', but it indicates the grounds on which she is characterized, grounds which 'The Reve's Tale' deliberately rewrites. The most important of these is the rewriting – and degrading – not only of nature and the pleasure of sex, but also of the human division of physical space: that which provides the ordering principle within 'The Miller's Tale'. This context clarifies

why the divisions within 'The Reve's Tale' are defined through language and the opposition of movement and stasis; why the students are outsiders, uttering an alien *speech*, a dialect that reveals that they are not inhabitants of the miller's world. In the former tale, Alison has her own space and the tale circulates around that space. Nicholas manipulates biblical texts in order to achieve union with Alison in her bedroom; the clerks in the Reeve's narrative grab what they can get, manipulating the *space* of the bedroom itself.

Far from indicating the inferiority of the 'provincial' students, John and Aleyn's dialect is part of an ideological attack on those elements given value and respect within the earlier tale (which itself expresses the values of a restive peasant class). It is an attack which Blake inadvertently supports in his description of the miller as 'grasping' (1981, 29). Blake himself draws attention to the association of the clerks with the manipulation of space, though he does not think it is important. He notes that the miller seems uninterested in and unaffected by the students' dialect: '[W]e are not led to believe that because of their speech he treated them differently from the way that he would have treated other undergraduates who spoke London English' (Blake 1981, 29). He cites the miller's jibe at the students:

ye that han lerned art;
Ye conne by argumentes make a place
A myle brood of twenty foot of space.

(lines 202-4)

Blake considers this only as a form of excuse, an apology for the lack of room. Because he assumes that 'such comments serve only to emphasize the undergraduates' learning and to play down any northern unsophisticated ways they may have' (1981, 29), he finds this issue puzzling. Yet the passage to which he refers does not denote shame on the miller's part but rather a sense of having beaten the students, brought them down to his level: to the level of the physical world, a world which cannot be altered. But, of course, as the tale demonstrates, this is not the case: where the miller exploits existing space, the two students transform it.

It is a space ordered very crudely around the placing of sleeping areas, and therefore of erotic potential. The crucial distinction between public and private drawn in the previous tale is missing: the

mill is both workplace and home, and there is no street to accommodate the boundary between two kinds of human activity. The only space outside the mill is the fen where wild horses rampage with inarticulate cries of sexual pleasure: 'wehee', as Patterson points out (1991, 275), rewrites the 'Tehee' of the coltish Alison, her exclamation now shorn of its human, humorous aspect. Where 'The Miller's Tale' celebrated the physical world through a depiction of rich and varied spaces and non-verbal communication, in 'The Reve's Tale' everything is subordinated to the language of trickery. The tale presents us with a degraded, oppressive sense of space in the cramped, smelly, noisy room (the miller's fart remains within the room; the only harmony is that of the three family members snoring in unison). The physical world of 'The Reve's Tale' is constricted and degraded, and language offers an escape from such entrapment: a perfect analogy for the students from the north, to whom the drunken family's inarticulate snoring acts as a trigger for revenge:

Aleyn the clerk, that herd this melodye,
He poked John, and seyde, 'slepestow?
Herdestow ever slyk a sang er now?

(lines 249-51)

Significantly, the physical delight of sex, by being rewritten in terms of an economic exchange, is brought within the remit of human law and justice. The clerks' revenge is both verbalized and understood in terms of written law: 'Som esement has lawe y-shapen us' (line 259).

Wakelin's and Blake's interpretations of the use of dialect in 'The Reve's Tale' bear out Patterson's contention that the absence of an explicit ideology leads to an 'unintended conservatism' (1987, 70). On the one hand, Wakelin's failure to recognize the literary dimension of the text reveals his blindness to the narrative construction of his own discipline; on the other hand, Blake's avoidance of the 'political' masks the hidden politics of his own approach. My own agenda is clear: to focus on the entwined relation of class and cultural meaning and, as part of that, to demonstrate the different reading that emerges when an element taken to be neutral by other approaches is recognized as a class signifier.

The ground upon which the tales are constructed is that of the physical world, the birthplace of all speaking subjects, the context within which they move, the very material of their bodies. The

physical world is thus intimately caught up in the production of meaning, for no language/dialect is disembodied and universal – though the ruling class might assert that this is possible, and that it is their own speech that is universal. Patterson's claim that 'each *Tale* is . . . grounded in a speaking subject' (1991, 26) looks forward to the construction of subjectivity, but, equally, the grounding itself is important, being the particular place or class position which governs both speech and the significance of that speech. Judged in this way, the students' alien dialect not only displays their difference from the miller and his family, but also their negative relation to the place depicted in the text. Even before they speak they are characterized as having left their 'ground' behind: 'Strother / Fer in the north, I can nat telle where'. When they do speak, this forgotten space echoes through their language, defining them as mobile figures – a factor of far greater importance than either physical description or a habitation at Cambridge.

The omission of physical description or natural home is not recognized in Patterson's assessment of the narrative strategies of the *Tales*. He comments that 'Chaucer persistently filters into the narratorial description of each pilgrim an individualizing voice' (1991, 27). But there are figures who lack 'an individualizing voice'. The most individualizing element in the description of the Cook is a reference to his ulcerated shin amongst the list of his professional abilities. As he is the merchants' servant, catering to their appetites, this reference implies not only physical decay but a restricted personal mobility. The merchants are on the move; the Cook merely accompanies them, for money. The description of the Cook makes no mention of speech, his 'tale' never gets anywhere. The example of the Reeve's clerks provides the other extremity, that of speech without physical description. Speech thus does not merely individuate the speaking subject, it signifies status and power.

In the case of the Reeve's miller and his family, speech functions more elaborately, for their speech mimics that of the Knight: simultaneously expressing a desire for increased status and undercutting it through parody. This is true for both the miller (with his pride in his 'estaat of yomanrye', line 29) and his daughter (whose words parody those of a courtly lady). Within the context of *The Canterbury Tales*, there is an implicit contrast with the pilgrim Yeoman, who is given neither voice nor tale, and whose description

reinforces his class position: 'Wel coude he dresse his takel yemanly' ('General Prologue', line 106).

The description of the Reeve's miller carries two entwined messages: social aspiration and unpredictable violence. His preoccupations echo those of the warrior Knight: a concern for respect and honour, a willingness to fight, a desire to protect his women. But these symbolic values are rendered ridiculous in the physical realm of the miller. The phallic symbolism of the lordly sword is fractured into the three knives that hang suggestively around his groin (one is secreted in his hose). The description both invokes the abstract knightly ideal and explodes it through the miller's (physical) particularity, 'proving' through excess that the miller cannot be the 'real' thing and that he is unfit for the knightly power he desires.

In terms of the wider patterns of *The Canterbury Tales*, the Knight is the figure whose courtly romance the pilgrim Miller had aggressively attempted to 'quite' with the physicality of his *fabliau*: an attempt that implies a challenge to the Knight's authority (Patterson 1991, 244). In his reconfigurations of 'The Miller's Tale', the Reeve translates sensuous vitality into blustering overcompensation. Having an interest in keeping the system as it is, he turns signs of class defiance into marks of petty aggression, and signs of social power into marks of personal impotence.¹³ Both narratives ('The Miller's Tale' and 'The Reve's Tale') register the role of millers in contemporary peasant risings; the first giving the miller a voice, the second denying the individuality of that voice by presenting it as hollow mimicry.

Demanding the term of address accorded to the dominant class, the Reeve's miller's language is perfectly in line with his portrayal as 'theef' (line 19). He desires a wife 'To saven his estaat of yomanrye' (line 29), and requires that she be addressed as 'dame' (line 36). Yet the miller cannot be dismissed out of hand as a posturing idiot (cf. Absolon in 'The Miller's Tale'). His pride in his 'estaat of yomanrye' points towards a *class* demand for increased social status, rather than an individual bid to gain admittance into the more prestigious levels of a fixed and accepted hierarchy. His horrified response to Aleyne's having sex with his daughter is rooted in an inflated awareness of position, a parody of aristocratic privilege: 'Who dorste be so bold to disparage / My doghter, that is come of swich linage?' (lines 351–2). In order to ensure the status quo it is essential that the threat posed by the miller be neutralized. For all his

fabled violence, Simpkin is thoroughly beaten by both students (line 388), while his phallic paraphernalia fails to protect him from sexual humiliation: not only does John have sex with his wife, he is more virile than her husband – 'So mery a fit ne hadde she nat ful yore' (line 310).

Social aspiration and physicality find a representation also in the miller's two women: the wife's social aspiration is expressed through the red clothes that defy the sumptuary laws, the daughter is defined by a physical description that, like that of her father, both invokes and parodies the aristocratic ideal:

This wenche thikke and wel y-grown was,
With camuse nose and yēn greye as glas;
With buttokes brode and brestes rounde and hye,
But right fair was hir heer, I wol nat lye.

(lines 53–6)

As the next, and fertile, generation, the (apparently naked) daughter serves to focus the transgressive desires of both Church and peasantry. If her peasant-father looks to her for the future fulfilment of his dreams of increased social status, and the establishment of new lines of inheritance, so too does her priest-grandfather:

His purpose was for to bistowe hir hie
In-to som worthy blood of auncetrye;
For holy chirches good moot been despended
For holy chirches blood, that is descended.

(lines 61–4)

If the priest and the miller of 'The Reve's Tale' aspire to greater status, the coming of the clerks and Aleyn's penetration of Malin ensures that this cannot happen. Aleyn's jumping into bed with Malin puts her and her family back in their subordinate places, quashing the possibility that a peasant girl might marry above her station and ally herself with a noble house. The clerks' mobility and activity expresses their masculine potency: John 'prikeþ harde and depe as he were mad' (line 311), while Aleyn claims to have 'thryes, in this short night, / Swyved the milleres doghter bolt-upright' (lines 345–6). And, in so doing, they crush their class rival.

The clerks' mobility is crucial to 'The Reve's Tale' on every interwoven level: their movements define the narrative structure of

the tale – they move from Strother to Cambridge, from Cambridge to the mill, from the mill to the fens and back, eventually returning to Cambridge (and beyond); in terms of the social patterning of the tale, they are adept at taking others' places – the college manciple, the hoped-for aristocrat in Malin's bed, and Simpkin in bed with his (unnamed) wife;¹⁴ finally, throughout the story itself they are continuously active – even when cursing and running after their stallion. No assessment of the students' dialect is viable without taking this vicious class comedy into account. The clerks' identity is as rooted in this mobility, this movement through and mastery over space, as it is created through their language. As Blake points out, it is the clerks' argumentational prowess, their verbal dexterity, that attracts the miller's comment, not their alien speech. Dialect thus appears to be a structural marker for the reader, a means of separating out the different selves of the two groups.

Dialect in 'The Reve's Tale' is significant because of its relation to the physical element of space: it both gestures towards and denies space. It is not a humorous incident occurring between equal individuals, who are consequently qualified by variations in speech. The degradation of the value attached to the physical world is intimately entwined with the verbal dexterity of a group out to pursue their own interests in a mobile and back-stabbing society. From a modern perspective, this devaluation of space marks the reductive fixing of the peasant class into a backwater: the provincial arena where nothing can happen.

IV. Final notes

If the traditional 'comic' reading can be used to support the notion of a medieval recognition of 'Standard English', deviations from which are to be sneered at as amusing provincialism, then the alternative reading that I propose cannot help but undermine that argument and, along with it, the practice of studying language as 'dialect'. The routine accumulation of 'information' about dialect implies the acceptance of a fixed ground from which this 'value-free' activity can take place – and that ground, this reading of 'The Reve's Tale' suggests, is the ground of class subjection, an unstable ground caught up with silences and with the silencing of alternatives.

'The Reeve's Tale' articulates the subjectivity of a figure defined through his economic activity, a Reeve,¹⁵ and, in the process, expresses the ideology of a group that seeks to keep the peasants in their place, retaining the established order as long as it is able to move upwards within it. Murray (1978, 237) points out that the intellectual élite characterized by argument and rationality 'fought for itself . . . [It] fought persons below it in the social hierarchy, to rise above them. And it fought those above, to replace them.' Picking up on Murray's discussion of the *literati*, Moore (1990, 139) writes of the 'hostility of the *clericus* to the *illiteratus*, *idiotus*, *rusticus*'. Though his subject is heresy it is significant that the terms of abuse were adapted from those referring to class. One of the measures of this ideology's long-term success must be the way its particular perspective is confused with 'reality', both by traditional literary critics who seek to divorce text from context, to look only at 'the words on the page', and by dialectologists who divorce the issue of language from that of literature, thus denying literature the ambiguity which enables it to become a 'space of ideological opposition' (Patterson 1987, 74): an opposition which this discussion on the politics of space has attempted to open out.¹⁶

Notes

- 1 Text from *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by W. W. Skeat (1912).
- 2 The interrelated structure of *The Canterbury Tales* is generally accepted: Donald R. Howard (1976) and Helen Cooper (1983) provide pertinent examples. H. Marshall Leicester (1990) and Lee Patterson (1991) in particular emphasize the spoken quality of the tales and the role of that speech in constructing identity.
- 3 'History impelled Chaucer towards the modern and he accepted the challenge by investigating not just the idea of history, as in *Anelida and Arcite* and the *Troilus*, but, in *The Canterbury Tales*, the historical world itself' (Patterson 1991, 26).
- 4 The clerks inhabit a world of backbiting: 'men wil us foles calle, / Bathe the wardeyn and our felawes alle, / And namely the miller' (lines 191-3); in this world the individual must take risks or fail: 'Yet has my felawe som-what for his harm; / . . . He aunted him . . . when this jape is told another day, / I sal be halde a daf, a cokenay! / I wil aryse, and aunte it' (lines 283-9).

- 5 The Reeve manipulates the system to his own advantage: 'Ther was noon auditor coude on him winne' (line 594 of 'General Prologue'); 'Ther coude no man bringe him in arrerage' (line 602); 'He coude better than his lord purchase' (line 610).
- 6 Patterson (1991, 248), discussing Robert Brenner, 'The origins of capitalist development: a critique of neo-Smithian Marxism' (1977). See also S. H. Rigby (1995, 61-6), who addresses the relation of Marx to Adam Smith in his examination of various interpretations of a changing medieval economy.
- 7 Patterson's comment that 'every courtly poem is in effect a debate' (1992, 28) represents an approach which can be applied to Chaucer's text, which was produced in the shadow of the court, as well as to that of his friend, the Lollard knight, Sir John Clanvowe.
- 8 'Some texts actively engage the phenomenon of voice, exploit it, make it the centre of their discourse . . . A text of this sort can be said to be about its speaker' (Leicester 1980, 217).
- 9 'The *fabliau* is as courtly a genre as the romance - is indeed the comic and realistic side of the coin of serious and idealising romance . . . [*Fabliaux*] are aristocratic burlesques, contemptuously holding up to amusement the coarse buffooneries of lower classes and some clergy' (Brewer 1979, 298-9). (Brewer notes a history of critical discussion about the class origin of the *fabliaux* - see also note 15 below.)
- 10 Alexander Murray's brilliant study of social change in the Middle Ages links the bitter resentment that clerical mobility created, especially among the peasantry, to a greater social instability. He devotes a whole chapter, 'The university ladder', specifically to clerical careerism, and two others to the relation of this emergent intellectual élite to peasants and aristocrats respectively (see Murray 1978).
- 11 Though I do not agree wholly with his reading of the Reeve's and the Cook's tales, Patterson's discussion ('"The Miller's Tale" and the politics of laughter', chapter 5 of 1991) of the significance of these three figures is extremely pertinent: millers were often associated with the peasants' revolts (pp.254-8); the Reeve's work gives him the status of 'an agent of seigneurial control [with] social ambitions' (p.274); as one of the 'journeymen wage labourers', the Cook is associated with 'lower-class criminality' (p.278).
- 12 I do not quarrel with Peter Dronke's scholarly investigation of 'The rise of the medieval *fabliau*' (in *The Medieval Poet and his World*, 1984; see especially pp.145-7), which claims that Latin evidence challenges the assumption that the aristocracy were instrumental in creating the genre. What can be seen - and this is in line with Robert Moore's analysis

- (1990) of the growth of persecution during the early twelfth century – is an appropriation of that form for class purposes, purposes that come to dominate its reception and comprehension.
- 13 Mary Douglas's investigation of the relation between ritual pollution, taboo and the notion of sexual purity, in her *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), has been widely adapted to other circumstances. Robert Moore (1990, 100) focuses on her revelation of the way in which groups essential to the workings of society, but accorded little status, are sexualized so that the need for social containment can be justified as a policy of sexual containment. Though Douglas discusses tribal women in the Congo, Moore applies her principle to race and class. Seen from this perspective the Reeve's ridiculing of his miller's sexual prowess is a part of a class-based put-down.
 - 14 The students appropriate the seigneurial privilege of sleeping with peasant women.
 - 15 Rigby (1995, 74) points out that the fourteenth-century practice of replacing farmers with reeves or bailiffs 'to organise production' demonstrates the landlords' increasing interest in managing their estates for the market.
 - 16 The work of social theorists like Edward Soja and Henri Lefebvre productively investigates the sociology of space. The analysis of another social theorist, Kevin Hetherington (1997), complements my reading of the interplay of voice and space in 'The Reeve's Tale'. Where I argue that the clerks' manipulation of space through language introduces an instability to the meanings attached to the space of a restive peasantry, Hetherington notes that such ambiguity reflects the unstable conditions of modernity. Both analyses thus suggest that the clerks' introduction of alien voices can be linked to the modern dominance of the bourgeoisie.

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