Arthurising the Wife of Bath: Two Chaucer Adaptations

Paul Hardwick
Leeds Trinity University

> Experience, though noon auctoritee
> Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
> To speke of wo that is in…

… viewing film and television that references Geoffrey Chaucer. Why 'the father of English poetry' should be so poorly served by the moving image is a vexing question. It's a question that is at times foregrounded, whist at others remaining in the background, throughout Kathleen Coyne Perry and Tison Pugh's recent, and very welcome, *Chaucer on Screen*,[1] and it is one that inevitably hangs above the present essay, which will focus upon two television representations of the Wife of Bath and her Arthurian *Tale*: Jonathan Myerson's Oscar-nominated *Canterbury Tales* (1999) and the BBC's high profile *Canterbury Tales* (2004), two shows in which, as Kathleen Forni has noted, 'the interpretation of Chaucer's text [is] dictated in large part by the genre to which it is adapted.'[2] In order to provide a foundation for this, however, it will first be useful to address some of the ways in which Chaucer has been invoked in the moving image in the past.

The most famous incursion of Chaucer into popular cinema is undoubtedly to be found in the magnificent opening of Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), at the beginning of which a printed page of *The General Prologue* gives way, via a formulaically antiquated map, to Chaucer's 'merry company' making their way through the Kent countryside. As this occurs, Esmond Knight recites the first eighteen lines of the *Prologue* in classic wartime Received Pronunciation. The voiceover is modernised in places – 'soote' for

---

[1] Kathleen Coyne Perry and Tison Pugh (ed.), *Chaucer on Screen: Absence, Presence, and Adapting the Canterbury Tales* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2016).

[2] Kathleen Forni, *Chaucer's Afterlife: Adaptations in Recent Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland), p. 24.

example becomes 'sweet' – whilst retaining easily-understood medieval forms – 'engendred' is unchanged – and introducing curious half-modernisations – 'holpen' becomes 'helpen' – in order to simulate the archaic whilst being easily accessible to the mid-twentieth-century cinemagoer. The scene of the pilgrimage unfolds over Allan Ray's buoyant pseudo-medieval score, all pipes and rattling tambourines, which evocatively contributes to the Merrie England topos before the celebrated cut at which the Squire's falcon, soaring into the clouds, is replaced by an approaching Spitfire. On returning the focus earthwards, the Squire has become a contemporary soldier, helmeted and looking skywards, presumably at the either departing or returning aircraft. 'Six hundred years have passed,' we are told: 'What would they see, Dan Chaucer and his goodly company, today?' The voice-over goes on to offer points of comparison but, as Nickolas Haydock has observed, what the viewer understands by this is that 'what first appears old-fashioned or strange possesses a vital continuity with the present' which is also, with its incursion of mechanised warfare – we see an armoured convoy upon the road previously occupied by the pilgrims – 'a ruptured continuity, out of touch with the spiritual resources inherent in England's landscape and architecture.'[3] Bearing in mind that *The General Prologue* directly addresses the reader/listener in the voice of 'Chaucer the Pilgrim', what we have is a conflated voice that is, in its strange semi-modernisations, atemporal, deliberately voicing, as Steve Ellis puts it, 'the affable English temperament,'[4] which has survived wars in the past and will no doubt, it suggests, do so again. That the ensuing shaggy dog story has nothing more to do with Chaucer or his works is immaterial: combining with the lovingly-filmed landscape and uplifting soundtrack, for Powell and Pressburger, Chaucer is very much a benign, unflappable synecdoche for Englishness itself.

Perhaps it is simply for reasons of an understandable lack of concern for Englishness that Pasolini's *I racconti di Canterbury* (1972. English tile: *Canterbury Tales*), a film that offers an idiosyncratic riff on a number of Chaucer's *Tales*, portrays a rather different take on Chaucer and his work. The second part of Pasolini's *Trilogia della vita* (*Trilogy of Life*) sequence, like its predecessor, *Il Decamerone* (1971), *I racconti*'s unashamed depiction of all forms of human sexuality sparked controversy upon release, the aftershocks of which still underlie critical responses to the film.[5] This is not the place for a full discussion of the film, which remains the only extended cinematic adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales*, but two points are pertinent to the present discussion. First, the vivid 'corporeality' of the tales depicted was seized upon by less ambitious filmmakers keen to exploit the film's notoriety in order to peddle medievalised soft-core pornography,[6] picking up and amplifying the 'bawdy Chaucer' trope

---

[3] Nickolas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism: The Imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), p. 21.

[4] Steve Ellis, *Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 65.

[5] On critical reception, see Agnès Blandeau, *Pasolini, Chaucer and Boccaccio: Two Medieval Texts and their Translation into Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), pp. 89-92.

[6] Pasolini's focus on corporeality is noted in Blandeau, *Chaucer and Boccaccio*, p.6, whilst the subject of the film's soft-core imitators is discussed on pp. 93-4. See also, Kevin J. Harty, *The Reel Middle Ages: Films about Medieval Europe* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), pp. 6-7, 19, 171 and 198-9.

which can be traced back to the nineteenth century. Secondly, in casting himself as Chaucer – at times reading Boccaccio, at others writing, and at one point dozing on the job – Pasolini foregrounds the performative aspect of the *Tales*. Whilst an altogether different concoction of postmodern ironic fluff, and some would say all the more entertaining for it, it is tempting to see an echo of *I racconti* in the naked arrival of Paul Bettany's fast-talker in Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* (2001), perhaps the most successful pop-cultural Chaucer to date. As Haydock has observed, here 'Chaucer is no distanced observer of the carnival world he represents: instead, he is both its hapless victim and the recipient of its levelling graces,'[7] an assessment that may emphatically be levelled at the coarse actants in Pasolini's film.

It is with these constructions of 'popular' Chaucer in mind – the paragon of 'bawdy affability'[8] who both epitomises the Middle Ages whilst at the same time collapsing its alterity – that I would like to consider the most recent television manifestations of Chaucer's Arthurian enthusiast, the Wife of Bath. Stories of Arthur play little part in Chaucer's *oeuvre*, and on the very few occasions they are mentioned, it is with ironic commendation: as Helen Cooper notes, 'Chaucer seems to have had a low opinion of Arthurian material.'[9] It is, after all, the 'gentil' Chauntecleer whose tale is 'also trewe …/ As is the book of Launcelot de Lake, / That women holde in ful greet reverence,'[10] Chaucer satirising both Arthurian romance and its readers with one neat observation. One such woman, of course, is his Wife of Bath who, following her audience-baiting prologue, eventually sets the Arthurian scene for her *Tale*:

> In th' olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
> Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
> Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
> The elf-queene, with her joly compaignye,
> Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.
> This was the olde opinion, as I rede;
> I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.[11]

Thus she asserts the alterity of the romance world of Arthur and his court, in which a different order pertains to the threatening ecclesiastical corruption which she goes on to lament. As her tale progresses, though, both her pilgrim audience and Chaucer's audience are of course implicitly encouraged to recognise connections and draw conclusions between imagined past and present.

---

[7] Haydock, *Movie Medievalism*, p. 108.
[8] Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, p. 163.
[9] Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 157.
[10] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), VII 2865 and 3211-3.
[11] Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, III (D) 857-63.

Whilst Ellis takes issue with its 'Chaucer made easy' approach,[12] I would argue that the adaptation which is most faithful to the spirit of Chaucer and his works is Myerson's *Canterbury Tales*, which presents ten *Tales* through various animation media. Because of the time constraints of a three episode television series, the *Tales* are of necessity edited: individual *Tales* are told economically, yet retain some hints of their narrative depth. Additionally, lines from *The General Prologue* are distributed throughout the pilgrimage and act as links and introductions to the reordered *Tales*, which are here spread over the journey to Canterbury, a sojourn in Canterbury itself, and a return trip to London. In spite of these editorial exigencies, the *Tales* nonetheless capture many of the subtleties of Chaucer's texts by virtue of the use of voice and distinct styles of animation for each pilgrim's narrative. Indeed, elements such as the relocation of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* to first place – thereby opening the sequence with this virtuoso narrative tour de force – could even be seen as a gloss on the text as much as an adaptation, responding to the critical position that identifies the Nun's Priest as Chaucer the poet,[13] thereby setting out his narrative stall, as it were, and displaying his tale-telling credentials. Indeed, in view of the Middle English option on the VHS release (curiously not available on the DVD), which reconfigures the text as a sequence of quoted lines and phrases which gives precedence to direct narrative rather than poetic concerns, it would not, I believe, be too far-fetched to consider it in terms of a wilfully corrupted manuscript which reflects the interests of its producer.[14]

As the Wife of Bath, voiced with a suitable Somerset lilt by Billie Whitelaw, embarks upon her tale of 'Back in the good old days of King Arthur,' Olga Panokina and Fasil Gasanov's substantial 3D stop-motion claymation of the pilgrimage gives way to Joanna Quinn's hand-drawn 2D animation. With its muted, washed-out colour palette and its edges shimmering disconcertingly, 'King Arthur's Days' are rendered both ephemeral and uncomfortable in a manner not employed elsewhere in the series. In consequence, it is the *Tale* in which the viewer is most continually reminded that they are watching an animation, the medium being employed to foreground the Otherness of 'th'olde dayes of Kyng Arthour,' when 'Al was this land fulfild of fayerye,'[15] in which the magical can occur just as readily as the natural. Furthermore, in view of the adult theme of rape, it is appropriate that the style of animation is the most unlike 'traditional' forms which are generally associated with child audiences.[16] The fluidity of form and outline is maintained throughout the *Tale*, rendering the dizzying

---

[12] Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, p. 140.

[13] On the notion that the Nun's Priest reveals Chaucer the poet in *propria persona*, see Benson's notes in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 936.

[14] I am thinking here of the likes of Jean d'Angoulême's 'bad' copy, which has been edited by Meredith Clermont-Ferrand, *Jean d'Angoulême's Copy of The Canterbury Tales: An Annotated Edition of Bibliothèque Nationale's Fonds Anglais 39 (Paris)* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

[15] Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, III (D), 857 and 859.

[16] On the tension between Chaucer's adult subject matter and a medium still popularly associated with a child audience, see Kathleen Forni, 'Profit, Politics, and Prurience; or, Why Chaucer is Bad Box Office,' in *Chaucer on Screen*, ed. Kelly and Pugh, pp. 61-2.

transformation of the 'ladyes foure and twenty' into the solitary 'wyf' particularly effective,[17] and reaching its apogee in the 'reverse transformation' at the *Tale*'s close, in which the knight's 'fair and good' bride returns once more to the form of the loathly lady, her shrill laugh suggesting that she will be no more 'good' than 'fair.'[18] This transformation makes explicit a satisfying ambiguity in the *Tale*'s conclusion: as Kathleen Forni observes, 'it is perhaps only the knight's perception of the hag that has changed (an interpretation that mirrors critical readings),'[19] and the scene's echo of the *Tale*'s initial rape as the knight is deceived offers an editorial gloss on the true nature of the bargain as the hag takes advantage of the knight. As the hag cackles, the sequence ends and we return once more to the visual stability of the 3D world of the pilgrims, in no doubt that, in spite of the possibilities of the medium of animation, we have returned to the 'real' world, in which such transformations of the fantastic Arthurian realm cannot occur.

In marked contrast to Myerson's magical Arthurian world, the matter of transformation is given a contemporary, naturalistic twist in the episode of the BBC's *Canterbury Tales* devoted to the Wife of Bath. To be fair to the series' free appropriation of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's name appears only as a scrawled apparent afterthought on the opening credits, and nowhere on the DVD packaging of this 'Modern Re-Telling Of 6 Timeless Stories.' Amongst these stories, it is noteworthy that *The Wife of Bath* is the only episode which does not include the word 'Tale' in its title,[20] the programme conflating a superficial reading of the Wife of Bath as revealed in her *Prologue* with occasional references to her *Tale*. Late in this episode, Beth, the serially monogamous actress played by Julie Walters, has cosmetic surgery in order to transform herself for her husband Jerome. In writing of modern writers' allusions to *The Canterbury Tales*, Steve Ellis has noted that in works with titles such as *The Barmaid's Tale* or *The Magistrate's Tale*, these tales 'are likely to be those of the eponymous protagonists' lives, rather than tales told by the protagonists out of a collective and impersonal tradition of story.'[21] With the BBC *Canterbury Tales*, the writers may be seen as turning this process back upon Chaucer himself. In common with other episodes in the series, which loosely recast the plots of Chaucer's *Tales* as modern social melodrama, Sally Wainwright's script presents a rather two-dimensional story of a self-absorbed actress refusing to grow old gracefully which, due to the excision of any of the source material's subtlety, is palpably stretched to fill its allotted hour of air time. Beth's opening monologue begins with 'Experience' and stays there; the conflicting 'auctoritee' which informs the dynamic of Chaucer's work is tellingly absent, replaced by an insubstantial engagement with ideas of celebrity and public opinion which, at best, may be considered thought-provoking on middle-aged female sexuality.[22]

---

[17] Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, III (D), 992 and 998.

[18] Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, III (D), 1241.

[19] Forni, *Chaucer's Afterlife*, p. 102.

[20] *The Wife of Bath* was the second episode broadcast, the others being: *The Miller's Tale*; *The Knight's Tale*; *The Sea Captain's Tale*; *The Pardoner's Tale*; *The Man of Law's Tale*.

[21] Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, p. 154.

[22] This thread is perceptively discussed by Sarah Stanbury, 'Midlife Sex and the BBC "Wife of Bath,"' in *Chaucer on Screen*, ed. Kelly and Pugh, pp. 196-207.

What is also absent is the framed Arthurian narrative; whilst a cast discussion refers to a rape in the soap opera in which Beth is a leading character, it is distanced from the action purely by its nature as contemporary fiction, rather than being located in the specific, culturally resonant time of Arthur, as constructed by Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

As may be seen from these very brief synopses, though only a few years apart, these televisual responses to the Wife of Bath are very different. Myerson's animation, whilst at least in part aimed at a young audience – the project was part funded by BBC Education – does not shy away from the sexual violence which is one of Chaucer's most significant additions to the 'loathly lady' *Tale*.[23] Indeed, the US critic Laura Fries, reviewing the series for *Variety* on 26 May 1999, acknowledged that it was 'a masterpiece of filmmaking and storytelling,' but commented that it was 'a strange and ill-fitting addition to HBO's list of children's programming,' being 'quite graphic even in animated form,' concluding that it 'may still be too bawdy for the uninitiated.'[24] Whilst the figure of Chaucer himself, voiced by a droll Geoffrey Palmer, may embody the 'genial proverbial morality' to which Kathleen Forni refers,[25] *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, along with the darkly grotesque *Pardoner's Tale*, may well be moral but are far from genial. In sharp contrast, the sex in Wainwright's drama is more of the 'seaside postcard' variety often found in BBC depictions of the sexualised older woman[26] – repeated motifs include a farcically vulgar anecdote by Beth, and her chauffeur waiting, resignedly bored, outside her rocking caravan – and, whilst addressing some contemporary social mores in very broad strokes, it offers no moral.

Forni has argued that the BBC *Canterbury Tales* offers 'insight into those aspects of Chaucer's texts that continue to engage modern audiences,'[27] whilst Kevin Harty has noted that:

> If the intent of the series is indeed to 'hold a mirror up to [contemporary] society and produce … [stories] with strong characters and an even stronger moral code', the world of the BBC *Canterbury Tales* offers precious few examples of those who uphold that code.[28]

This rather pessimistic contemporaneity, I would argue, is achieved throughout the series by the excision of Chaucer and all things medieval, including *The Wife of Bath's Tale*'s Arthurian

---

[23] On the differences between Chaucer's version and that of his contemporary, Gower, see Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 86-91.

[24] http://variety.com/1999/tv/reviews/animated-epics-the-canterbury-tales-1117499827/ (accessed 2 July 2017).

[25] Kathleen Forni, 'Popular Chaucer: The BBC's *Canterbury Tales*,' *Parergon* 25.i (2008), 171-89.

[26] Stanbury, 'Midlife Sex,' p. 203, makes specific reference to the character of Dorien Green in the sitcom *Birds of a Feather*, who has a series of affairs with younger men, but the trope of the sexualised older woman has a long tradition in BBC comedy.

[27] Forni, 'Popular Chaucer,' 187.

[28] Kevin J. Harty, 'Chaucer for a New Millennium,' in *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, ed. David W. Marshall (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), p. 25, quoting James Hamilton, 'Chaucer on the Road Again,' *Televisual* (June 2003), 20-2.

setting. Forni has suggested that, 'examining the changes made can … produce constructive discussions about Chaucer's familiarity and alterity',[29] yet I would argue that it is a denial of Chaucer and the *Tales'* alterity which is the defining feature of the series. The opposite pertains to Myerson's animation, in which the figure of Chaucer is present throughout. When, in apologising for the ribaldry of some of his pilgrims' *Tales*, he makes the disingenuous apology that 'people are like that,' the viewer is acutely aware both that this is a statement pertaining to the late fourteenth century and, by dint of the present tense address, the here and now. This aspect of temporal play is particularly compounded in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* through its retention of the framing device of the Arthurian world. As Ellis notes, 'a cartoon format by definition might seem the acme of a post-war concern with entertainment pure and simple,'[30] an observation that arguably renders the rape in the hand-drawn *Wife of Bath's Tale* all the more shocking. This is not the usual Arthurian world of children's animation,[31] but rather the more adult, post-Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) Arthurian world of 'misty gloom,' with bleached colours, shimmering, ill-defined edges, and morally resonant quests, as the unnamed knight travels through a series of barely connected encounters as if in a dream.[32] By the time the Wife of Bath's knight's impossible choice upon wedding the 'loathly lady' figure physically manifests itself and drives him to despair, the animators are able to employ techniques which exploit their medium – Myerson has noted that live-action film is 'horribly realistic,'[33] and such palpable articulation of the alternatives as the opposing scenarios playing themselves out on the knight's shoulder would jar in live action – and also the Arthurian setting, in which we have been told magic can occur. Thus, whilst Wainwright's Beth, through self-conscious employment of the faux contemporary realism of the soap opera, can offer a linear narrative of a life, with which the viewer can either sympathise or not, Myerson is able to exploit the compounded alterity of both Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the Arthurian setting – along with animation – in order to address moral issues which, paradoxically, have profound contemporary relevance.

Jonathan Myerson has said in interview that he 'was deliberately modernising [Chaucer's work] and the language the characters speak,' hoping thereby to open up the text to a wider audience.[34] One of the reasons he manages this so successfully in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is that he follows Chaucer's lead of offering a complex mirror of the present in the imagined Arthurian world. In Wainwright's *Wife of Bath*, however, it appears that, when aiming squarely at a mainstream viewing audience, this was one aspect that was not deemed suitable for the 'Modern Re-Telling.' That such decisions to excise complexity proved unwise in the

---

[29] Forni, 'Popular Chaucer,' 187.

[30] Ellis, *Chaucer at Large*, p.139.

[31] On Arthurian animation, see Michael N. Salda, '"What's Up, Duke?" A Brief History of Arthurian Animation,' in *King Arthur on Film: New Essays on Arthurian Cinema*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), pp. 203-32.

[32] On the influence of John Boorman's *Excalibur*, see Haydock, *Movie Medievalism*, pp. 68-73.

[33] Quoted in the Introduction to *Chaucer on Screen*, ed. Kelly and Pugh, p. 11.

[34] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/297262.stm

series is perhaps suggested by the decline in viewing figures for successive episodes.[35] This gives rise, I think, to two questions to which there can be, inevitably, no definitive answer: what do we want from our Chaucer?; and what do we want from our Arthur?

Regardless of our own personal responses to these questions, these two contrasting programmes attest, as Forni notes, to the 'continuing currency of Chaucer's cultural capital'.[36] However, the BBC *Canterbury Tales* do little beyond cashing in on this capital, citing *The Canterbury Tales*, as is often the case, merely to attach nebulous cultural kudos to a sequence of unrelated stories. Such a lack of engagement with the complexities of Chaucer's works accounts for the largely disappointing nature, not only of the BBC production, but of film and television Chaucers in general. Myerson, in contrast, in recognising both the value of Chaucer's works and the value of their literary frames of reference – in this case the magical world of Arthurian romance – has demonstrated how vital these figures can remain for a modern audience. As Kevin Harty has noted in relation to Arthurian cinema, 'Any imaginative response to return to Arthur is a reimagining of the medieval.'[37] For Chaucer, 'th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,' however tongue-in-cheek, already invokes a golden Middle Ages in an imagined past, their invocation deepening our understanding of his Wife of Bath. Myerson's animated retelling of the Wife of Bath's Arthurian *Tale* develops this and imaginatively invokes a medieval past which is inhabited by the robust presence of Chaucer the poet, the master of multi-layered narrative who, through the *Tale*, brings its teller, the Wife of Bath, to life in a way that, ironically, the BBC live-action drama fails to achieve.

---

[35] After viewing figures of 7-8 million for the first two episodes, there was a dramatic decline to 5.1 million for the third, with none of the remaining episodes attracting more than 4.5 million viewers. See Forni, *Chaucer's Afterlife*, p. 96 and n. 39.

[36] Forni, 'Popular Chaucer,' p. 172.

[37] Kevin Harty (ed.), Introduction to *Cinema Arthuriana*, revised edn. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), p. 29.