

THE RELIGIOUS SATIRE IN *THE DECAMERON* AND *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

TERESA GUERRA BOSCH
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

RESUMEN

Sin adentrarnos en la polémica existente con respecto a si Chaucer conocía o no el *Decameron*, en el presente estudio señalamos ciertos paralelismos en los personajes y temas que constituyen la crítica religiosa tal como aparece en *El Decameron* y *The Canterbury Tales*. Boccaccio se nos muestra como más comprensivo con las fragilidades de los religiosos y Chaucer como más bromista.

ABSTRACT

In the present essay certain parallelisms in the religious satire of *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales* are pointed out. In their criticism Boccaccio appears to be more understanding towards the frailties of the religious while Chaucer is more openly a joker.

Religious humour can be directed against a foreign religion or against our own. As an example of the first type we have Jonathan

Swift's *Tale of a Tub* where he defends the Anglican Church, personified by Martin, and attacks the Roman Catholic and some of the Protestant denominations, personified by Peter and Jack respectively. More interesting than this subjective humour, in which you defend your position and attack the contrary, is the kind of religious humour from within. During the Middle Ages this criticism of the Church was often couched in humour. Jokes on the clergy seem to have had the same function as the political jokes in a military dictatorship: to release tension¹. However, Cormac O Cuilleain sees religious humour through a different light,

Before the reformation, a confident Church could tolerate all kinds of humour, but then there came a fatal loss of nerve with the advent of 'nuove perturbazioni di strane, and nociue opinioni... che hanno messo sotto sopra il mondo,' and light literature was wrongly but inevitably, accused of subversion. (p. 18)

Whether the jokes about the clergy were motivated by too much restriction or by tolerant confidence, in most of Boccaccio's and Chaucer's tales the hypocritical behaviour of the religious person is exhibited. Contrary to what they preach or what their habits represent, the religious persons either covet riches or are sexually active. The topics in both works are similar: celibacy, fake relics, sacrilegious interpretations and greediness. There is no specific criticism against a particular head of the church or the dogma but against some of its members². The object of this essay is to outline the basic comparisons that can be detected in the religious satire of *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Decameron*.

Taking the oldest of the two works first we will start with the *Decameron*. With regards to the vote of celibacy and the way certain religious persons do away with it, we find several examples in the *Decameron*. In the third tale on the seventh day, everything concerning Brother Rinaldo is narrated in an ironical way. Even the narrator, Elisa, is not sure why Brother Rinaldo is acting the way he does.

She pretends she would not dare to find any hidden motives in his behaviour. But then she betrays her thinking when she adds: «Ma che dico io di frate Rinaldo nostro di cui parliamo? Quali son quegli che cosi non facciano?» (572) («Why do I go on this way about this Brother Rinaldo of ours? Is there a friar that does not act this way?») (426). All this tale is very comical and Brother Rinaldo is a likable character. He is funny as we can see in the exchange between the married lady he solicited and himself:

«Come, frate Rinaldo, o fanno cosi fatte cose i frati?»

A cui frate Rinaldo rispose: «Madonna, qualora io avro questa cappa fuor di dosso, che me la traggo molto agevolmente, io vi parrò uno uomo fatto come gli altri e non frate»³.

The humour of this passage rests mainly on the fact that the reader does not expect that kind of language (and behaviour) in a priest.

The second story on the ninth day has to do with the hypocritical behaviour of an Abbes. In this tale, a beautiful young nun, Isabetta, is caught with her lover. The Abbes gets up from bed to reprimand her. In her haste, she puts on her head the pants of the priest she is sleeping with, instead of her veil. At first she begins to reprimand the beautiful nun, but having been warned by the latter about what she is wearing on her head:

... la badessa... mutò sermone e in tutta altra guisa che fatto non aveva cominciò a parlare, e conchiudendo venne impossibile essere il potersi dagli stimoli della carne difendere; e per ciò chetamente, come infino a quel dì fatto s'era, disse che ciascuna si desse buon tempo quando potesse... (755)⁴

In all the tales in the *Decameron* an understanding regarding the sins of the flesh can be observed. The narrator seems to imply that the affair between the beautiful nun and her lover is excusable because it is unavoidable. It is just the natural ending when two beautiful people meet. However, the narrator does not sympathize

with the other nuns, who accuse Isabetta out of envy, or the hypocritical Abbes. Thus the Abbes is described in the following terms: «buona e santa donna secondola opinion delle donne monache e di chiunque la conoscea» (753) («a good and holy woman in the opinion of her nuns and all those who knew her» (564), and her behaviour towards Sister Isabetta: «La badessa... incomincio a dirle la maggior villania que mai a femina fosse detta» (754) («The Abbes began to vilify the young nun in terms never before used to a woman» (565). About the other nuns we read: «che si focose e si attente erano a dover far trovare in fallo l'Isabetta» (754) («so anxious and eager to catch Isabetta in the act» (565). The tale ends with Isabetta and the Abbes going back to their lovers while the envious nuns «che senza amante erano, come seppero il meglio, segretamente procacciaron lor ventura» («without lovers, sought their solace secretly in the best way they knew how» (566).

In the *Canterbury Tales* nuns are criticized in a different way. The portrait of the Prioress fits more the description of a vain woman than a great lover. Besides intoning through her nose, «Entuned in hir nose» (p. 25, l. 123)⁵ to show she knew French,

And silkerly she was of greet disport,
 And full plesaunt, and amiable of port;
 And paind hir to countrefete cheere
 Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,
 And to been holden digne of reverence. (l. 136-41)

Much has been written about the motto on the Prioress's brooch, which is *Amor vincit omnia* (l. 162). «Love» («Amor») has always been the greatest commandment in the Christian faith, and it is customary that nuns adopt a motto when they enter the convent or make their vows. However, if the brooch the Prioress is wearing simbolizes carnal love, the Prioress's motto would agree with the Abbes's advice in Boccaccio's tale: «che ciascuna si desse

buon tempo quando potesse» (755) («that everyone there should enjoy herself whenever possible» (566)⁶.

Other humorous topics have to do with fake relics, parishioners' credulity and greedy friars. In the *Decameron* (vi, 10) Brother Cipolla, in order to take up a more generous collection, announces to the parish people that he is going to show them «una delle penne dell'agnol Gabriello, la quale nella camera della Vergine Maria rimase quando egli la venne a anzunziare in Nazarette» (540) («one of the feathers of the Angel Gabriel, precisely the one which was left in the Virgin Mary's bedroom, when he came to perform the Anunciation before her in Nazareth» (404). A fake relic in a sentence full of meaning. In Luke's Gospel we read that the Angel Gabriel came to Nazareth to a virgin, named Mary and told her: «you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son» (i:31). Mary is surprised because she knows no man, but the angel adds: «The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore that holy Offspring will be called the Son of God» (i:35). In Boccaccio's tale and through the mouth of Brother Cipolla we can divine a malicious interpretation of the Christian myth. Brother Cipolla could have said that the Angel Gabriel dropped one of his feathers in Mary's kitchen. However, he chose to say it was in Mary's bedroom, and if we go back to the Christian belief, after the visit Mary became with child⁷. The story does not end with this sacrilego-humorous interpretation. Some local tricksters play a practical joke on Brother Cipolla, and when the latter opens his box, he finds charcoal instead of the feather. Brother Cipolla, who has a quick mind, tells the parishioners that by mistake, he brought the box that contained St. Lorenzo's charcoals instead. He gets even more money as he claims whoever is blessed with the charcoals will be free from fire for a year.

Brother Rinaldo is a more lovable character than Brother Cipolla as if Boccaccio found more excusable sexuality than avarice. But Brother Cipolla is not a hateful character either. Moreover the local youngsters who play a trick on Brother Cipolla do not do it

out of hate for him, but as the narrator says: «ancora che molto fossero suoi amici e di sua brigata, seco proposero di fargli di questa penna alcuna beffa» (541) («[they] decided to play a trick on him and his feather, even though they were old and close friends of his» (404). And Brother Cipolla is able to outsmart his tricksters as we read: «per presto accorgimento fece colore rimanere schernity, che lui, togliendogli la penna, avevan creduto schernire» (547) («by means of his quick wit, tricked those who thought they had tricked him by stealing his feather» (409).

Excepting their physical aspect, there are some similarities between the Pardoner of *the Canterbury Tales* and Brother Cipolla. After the repulsive physical description of the Pardoner «as the Pardoner, apparently an homosexual⁸, is seen through Medieval eyes in a very negative way«the narrator of the «General Prologue» says:

Ne was ther swich another pardoner.
 For in his male he hadde a pilwe-beer,
 Which that he seyde was Oure Lady veyl:
 He seyde he hadde a gobet of the seyl
 That Seint Peter hadde, whan that he wente
 Upon the see, til Jhesu Crist hym hente.
 He hadde a croys of latoun ful of stones,
 And in a glas he hadde pigges bones.
 But with thise relikes, whan that he fond
 A povre person dwellynge upon lond,
 Upon a day he gat hym moore moneye
 Than that the person gat in monthes tweye;
 And thus, with feyned flaterye and japes,
 He made the person and the peple his apes.
 (p. 34, l. 693-706)

Brother Cipolla and the Pardoner use similar types of false relics⁹ to get money from the simple folk. The absurdity of the relics«a feather of Angel Gabriel, St. Laurence's charcoals, Our Lady's veil, St. Peter's sail«together with the real substance of some

of them «pigs' bones, a pillow case» makes these passages particularly comic. The physical and moral portraits of Brother Cipolla and the Pardoner¹⁰ complement this religious humour. The descriptions of the satirical characters in the «General Prologue» lack the understanding the narrator of the *Decameron* infused in his descriptions¹¹. The one who is described most sympathetically perhaps is the Friar, «a wantowne and a merye,... a ful solemne man» (p. 26, l. 208-9). Soon, however, we are shown the uglier side of the coin:

... is noon that kan
 So muchel of daliaunce and fair langage.
 He hadde maad ful many a mariage
 Of yonge wommen at his owene cost.
 Unto his ordre he was a noble post. (l. 210-4)

This passage is characteristic of the way sexual affairs of religious persons are subtly implied in the *Canterbury Tales*. There is no direct or visual presentation of the Friar's relationships with the young ladies in question¹², as was the case of Friar Rinaldo in the *Decameron*. The reader is only told that the Friar has to remedy many situations as best as he can. A casual reading would make the reader miss the symbolism involved in «post», pillar (p. 26, l. 214)¹³. The pilgrim Friar is not too different from the friar that is shown in the «Summoner's Tale» (p. 129-36). In the latter, we see the friar softening his voice in order to get more money (l. 1771)¹⁴, and excessively friendly with the lady of the house (l. 1802-5). But the satire in the *Canterbury Tales* mainly addresses the greediness of religious persons. And so, the hypocritical friar in the «Summoner's Tale», pretending to be «a man of litel sustenance» (l. 1844), orders a superb supper at ailing Thomas's home. And while the lady is busy at preparing and serving the meal, the friar tries to get the ailing husband's money. Likewise, the summoner in the «Friar's Tale» wants to take a frying-pan from a poor widow as a penance for an adultery he has falsely accused her of. The Friar and the Sum-

moner accuse each other of greediness in their tales, a greediness to be punished in the after life. The Friar sends the summoner of his tale to a special place in hell, for summoners only. The Summoner is quick to react. But instead of sending him to hell, he makes a scatological gift to the greedy friar of his story.

In the *Canterbury Tales* there are two kinds of satirical stories about the clergy: Those told by clergymen themselves, and those told by non-clergymen as the «Cannon's Yeoman's Tale» (p. 272-81), for example. The former are the most numerous and interesting. There are two types of these: cynical confessions like the «Pardoner's Prologue» (p. 194-6), and those caused by rivalry among the different branches of the clergy like the «Friar's» and the Summoner's tales (p. 122-36)¹⁵. In these, though there are allusions to fornication, the main criticism is avarice. It is necessary to stress the fact that most of the criticism of the clergy is made by clergymen themselves. There is only one tale narrated by an outsider, while those told by clergymen are several. In the portrait of the Prioress there is no hard attack¹⁶. It is only a kind of veiled gossiping from a tolerant fellow-human, similar to, but less open than the *Decameron's* fresh display of priests and nuns' weakness of the flesh. There is hard criticism in the «General Prologue,» but the most caustic attacks are those made by one religious person against another as in the «Friar's» and «Summoner's» tales. Apparently Chaucer was able to see the great problem inside the Church that was going to culminate in the confrontation between Dominicans and Augustinians that would lead to the Reformation. However, Chaucer did not see it as tragic, but rather comic. All this exhibition of the hypocrisy, lechery and greediness of religious persons together with their rivalries is treated humorously. Boccaccio seems to be more understanding about sex and about frailties of the religious, while Chaucer is more openly a joker. However, all this understanding on Boccaccio's part should be taken cautiously as there is too much irony in that understanding.

We could say that Boccaccio's ironies are perhaps slier than Chaucer's satire.

NOTES

- 1 Cf. FREUD'S, Sigmund *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, pp. 117-31.
- 2 The only attack that seems directed against the head of the Church appears within the surprising ending of one of the tales of the *Decameron* (i, 2). After witnessing the corruption of the High Clergy in Rome the Jew Abraham becomes a Christian for the following reasons:

... mi pare che il vostro pastore e per consequente tutti gli altri si procaccino di ridurre a nulla e di cacciare del mondo la cristiana religione, là dove essi fondamento e sostegno esser dovrebbero di quella. E per ciò che io veggio non quello avvenire che'essi procacciano, ma continuamente la vostra religione aumentarsi e più lucida e più chiara divenire, meritamente mi par discernere lo Spirito santo esser d'essa, sì come di vera e di santa più che alcuna altra, fondamento e sostegno. (51).

... in my opinion, that Shepherd of yours and, as a result, all of the others as well are trying as quickly as possible and with all the talent and skill they have to reduce the Christian religion to nothing and to drive it from the face of the earth when they really should act as its support and foundation. And since I have observed that in spite of all this, they do not succeed but, on the contrary, that your religion continuously grows and becomes brighter and more illustrious, I am justly of the opinion that it has Holy Spirit as its foundation and support, and that it is truer and holier than any other religion... (35).

In Chaucer's description of the «Pardoner» there is also a criticism of the High Clergy. «That streight was comen from the court of Rome. / Ful loude he soong "Com hider, love, to me!"» (671-2).

However, Chaucer's choice of a pardoner instead of a friar as the one carrying the false relics is seen by Allan J. Fletcher as «a strategy of political and literary tact» in the controversial climate of the times. According to Fletcher:

To present a *friar* in such terms would have sounded suspiciously tendentious and open to construction as supportive of anti-establishment. (119).
- 3 «Really, Brother Rinaldo, do friars do this sort of thing?». To this question, Brother Rinaldo replied:

«Madam, the moment I remove this cloak, which I can remove quite easily, you will see me as a man made just like all the others and not as a friar» (427).
- 4 ... the Abbes changed her tone and began to speak in a completely different manner, concluding that it was impossible for people to defend themselves from the desires of the flesh, and she said that everyone there should enjoy herself whenever possible, provided that it be done as discreetly as it had until that day. (566).

- 5 *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton, 1987. All subsequent references to the *Canterbury Tales* are to this edition.
- 6 The Abbess's words, quoted above, seem to exemplify Boccaccio's thinking about transgressions against the vow of celibacy.
- 7 In the «Miller's Tale» the triangle formed by the Carpenter, Alyson and Nicholas could be interpreted as having a sacrilegious tone similar to the above mentioned allusions in the *Decameron*. According to Russell A. Peck:
 ... we find allusions to Noah's flood, Mary, and Joseph. Yet «hende Nicholas,» despite his descent from above to bed his «Virgin»,... is no Christ-type. Nor is the cuckolded Carpenter a Joseph-type ... The allusions ... establish a play area for the audience and encourage the reader to respond as he chooses ... (463).
- 8 As E. McALPINE, Monica says:
 ... Chaucer's portrait of the Pardoner in the General Prologue emerges as a pastiche of allusions to the three distinct sexual phenomena with which homosexuality was often confused —effeminacy, hermaphroditism, and eunuchry— and thus very probably to homosexuality itself. (13) (For a study of the controversy surrounding the Pardoner's homosexuality see McAlpine fn. 2, p. 19).
 McAlpine, however, sees the Pardoner's description as rather ambiguous:
 The Pardoner may be seen as a frustrated heterosexual who associates himself with the lecherous Summoner in order to deny his own impotence and to acquire symbolically the Summoner's virility; or he may be seen as a homosexual, ambivalent about disclosing his status, who nonetheless becomes suspect through the public display of this ambiguous friendship (13).
- 9 STORM, Melvin, sees the Pardoner «as the pivotal figure in the pilgrimage, the meretricious surrogate for what the other pilgrims seek at Becket's shrine» (810).
- 10 «Kissing the Pardoner» by Glenn Burger begins:
 For many, the readily apparent perversity of the Pardoner's body as described in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* provides convincing proof of his true identity. (1143).
- 11 In «The Topical Hypocrisy of Chaucer's Pardoner» Alan J. Fletcher comments:
 ... in the decade Chaucer wrote, religious hypocrisy ... had been reinvigorated by its use in a bitter debate that had blown up in the 1380s and that may have left palpable marks upon the writing of the *Pardoner's Prologue and Tale* (111).
- 12 Cf: the Wife of Bath's words about friars, «Ther is noon oother incubus but he, / And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour» (p. 117, l. 880-1).
- 13 Cf. CHAUCER, fn. 214 p. 26.
- 14 Cf. FLETCHER'S «The Topical Hypocrisy of Chaucer's Pardoner» (110).
- 15 It is easy to guess the competition that could exist between the Friar and the Summoner. In the «General Prologue» it is said that the Friar «hadde power of confessioun, /.../ For of his ordre he was licenciat» (l. 221-3) and later on. «He was an esy man to yeve penaunce / Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce» (l. 223-4). The Summoner, on the other hand, is described in the following terms: «He wolde suffre for a quart of

wyn / A good felawe to have his concubyn / A twelf month, and excuse hym atte fulle;» (l. 649-51), and in the case he found some rascal with a maid «in his purs he sholde ypunysshed be» (l. 657). As we see, both characters forgave everything for money, and they had to be competing for it.

- 16 Cf. A. DANE'S, Joseph «The Prioress and Her *Romanzen* in which Dane qualifies as «critical myth» the Prioress's view of herself as a heroine of romance.

REFERENCES

- BOCCACCIO, Giovanni. *Decameron*. Milano: Mondadori, 1985.
 ——. *The Decameron*. Trans. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella. New York: New American Library, 1982.
- BURGER, Glenn. «Kissing the Pardoner». *PMLA* 107, 5 (October, 1992): 1143-1156.
- CUILLEANAIN, Cormac O. *Religion and the Clergy in Boccaccio's Decameron*. Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1984.
- DANE, Joseph A. «The Prioress and Her *Romanzen*». *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 24, 3 (1990): 219-223.
- FLETCHER, Alan J. «The Topical Hypocrisy of Chaucer's Pardoner». *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 25, 2 (1990): 110-126.
- FREUD, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1960.
- McALPINE, Monica E. «The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters». *PMLA* 95, 1 (January 1980): 8-22.
- PECK, Russell A. «Public Dreams and Private Myths: Perspective in Middle English Literature». *PMLA* 90, 3 (May 1975): 461-68.
- ROBINSON, F. N., ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- STORM, Melvin. «The Pardoner's Invitation: Quaestor's Bag or Becket's Shrine?» *PMLA* 97, 5 (October 1982): 810-818.
- SWIFT, Jonathan. *A Tale of a Tub*. Ed. A. C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.