

Getting Modern on Alisoun’s Ass: The BBC and Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*

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Abstract This paper examines the way the BBC adapted Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale* for their 2003 telefilm series of six selected Canterbury Tales. Focusing in particular on the two “bottom scenes”, it will be demonstrated how the BBC translate and adapt these scenes to suit the tastes of the early evening TV spectators by eliminating the most explicit passages found in the medieval source.

Keywords Chaucer · *Miller’s Tale* · BBC · Film · Obscene

Aired in 2003, the BBC’s adaptation of six selected *Canterbury Tales*¹ has received relatively little response from the scholarly community, despite the fact that Chaucer’s popular appeal in the twenty-first century has been discussed at large.² The few critics who have focused on the modernised tales do not go to any length to examine the relationship between the literary model and the film version. Harty’s article (2007) offers mainly a summary of the tales on screen, followed by a brief and rather casual

¹ The six tales were aired on BBC1 in the following order: *The Miller’s Tale* (11 September 2003), *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* (18 September 2003), *The Knight’s Tale* (25 September 2003), *The Sea Captain’s Tale* (2 October 2003), *The Pardoner’s Tale* (9 October 2003), *The Man of Law’s Tale* (16 October 2003), ed. MacKay et al. (2004). The complete series is available on DVD, released in 2004.

² My wording is borrowed from Ellis (2000), who discusses Chaucer “at large”. See also Harty (2005) for a discussion of Chaucer’s impact in the twenty-first century.

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comparison with the textual source.³ In her article, Forni (2008) summarises each of the six BBC tales and goes on to sketch the main differences between the medieval and the modern versions, but she does not go into any detail either.

In his review of the films Coren implies that a comparison with the textual models is difficult, if not impossible, when he states with disappointment that “it’s all in modern dress. Not just modern dress but modern language, new names, new locations, new plots, everything changed except the titles [...] it was a bit of a ratings risk to leave anything of Chaucer in at all” (2003, online).⁴ Coren’s concluding remark is supported by the fact that Chaucer’s name is mentioned only briefly at the beginning of the series. This marginal acknowledgment of the medieval poet is further underlined on the DVD case where “BBC” rather than “Chaucer” figures right next to the title, thus making a clear statement as to the authorship (and copyright) of this particular *Canterbury Tales*.⁵

Nevertheless, as Forni points out, the Chaucerian subtext is present, and “For those familiar with Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, the episodes provide a degree of intertextuality missed by those not conversant with the original texts” (2008, 187). In this paper I propose to analyse such intertextuality specifically for *The Miller’s Tale*.⁶ In particular, I want to discuss how the exposed private body parts, which are central to the medieval fabliau,⁷ are adapted for the screen. Bloch defines the medieval fabliau in terms of its focus on the body, which “is linked to the theme of fragmentation—to detached members, both male and female” (1986, 101). By “detached” Bloch essentially means “the body’s reduction to, or transformation into, its sexual member” (1986, 65). It is this prominent focus on genitalia which renders the tale of the Miller problematic to translate for early evening TV spectators. According to Paton, Chaucer’s tale contains “two of the rudest scenes in literature” and is therefore probably “the trickiest update of all” (2003, online) in the BBC production. Interestingly, Paton does not specify which scenes she is actually referring to, but it is clear that she means Absolon’s kissing of Alisoun’s buttocks and subsequent branding of Nicholas’ ass. Before focusing on the way these two “bottom scenes” are modernised, let me summarise the film version:

When Nick Zakian (James Nesbitt) runs out of petrol for his flashy (and stolen) sports car, he is forced to stop in a village nearby. Stepping into the local karaoke bar, he is instantly fascinated by the publican’s young wife

³ An example of the casual nature of Harty’s discussion is his assessment of the telefilm version of the Miller’s tale. Based on a mistranslation of the Middle English “nyce” as “funny” (2007, 15) rather than foolish [in the phrase describing the pilgrims’ reaction to the tale of the Miller: “Whan folk hadde laughen at this nyce cas” (3855)], he concludes that “the BBC version of the Miller’s tale has no such moral niceties” (Harty 2007: 15).

⁴ For other reviews of the six telefilms see Myerson (2003) and Paton (2003).

⁵ The BBC’s selection of the tales is random and so is the sequence in which they were aired. Of course the order of the tales in the medieval manuscripts is not fixed either. See Benson (1981) for a discussion. The BBC started the mini series with the Miller’s tale (see also footnote 1).

⁶ All quotes from *The Miller’s Tale* are taken from Chaucer (1987); subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

⁷ *The Miller’s Tale* is not called a fabliau, which is a modern generic term, but a “cherles tale” (3169) and “harlotrye” (3145) by the Reeve and again by Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator (3185).

Alison (Billie Piper),⁸ who is about to sing a duet with her secret admirer, the village barber Danny Absolon (Kenny Doughty). Pretending to be high in the music business, Nick quickly manages to convince Alison's much older and jealous husband John (Dennis Waterman) that, given the proper kind of promotion, his wife has the potential to become a famous pop singer. Nick is invited to stay in a room above the pub and soon becomes popular with the villagers, in particular the elderly Joan, whom he promises to make a musical success of one of her grand-daughters, and Malcolm, whose shop he defends against some local ne'er-do-well youths. He also convinces Danny that Alison really fancies him. When Nick invites John to assist his wife's recording in an improvised studio, he makes him hallucinate thanks to some drugs baked into biscuits. With John thus knocked out, Nick and Alison have sex over and over again, until Danny arrives at the window to finally get a sound proof of Alison's love. Alison asks Danny to close his eyes and offers her bottom through the window for a kiss. Disgusted, Danny returns with a gas burner and iron rod to punish her. However, this time it is Nick who sticks out his butt. He lets flee a fart and gets burnt with the heated poker as a result. Lying on the table, Nick has his buttocks nursed by Alison when John, still dizzy, arrives to witness this scene, only to be told that he is in a dream.⁹ Confused, he falls down some stairs and breaks his arm. In his pub, John tells everyone about this odd dream with delight, but is shocked when he discovers that Nick has been spending thousands of pounds with the faked signature of his credit card. His wife has also left him to wait in vain for Nick to pick her up at a highway junction. Meanwhile, Nick has boarded a bus coming from Canterbury where he sits next to a couple who have just become engaged. Nick easily convinces them to participate in a reality show about the newly-engaged that he claims he is responsible of running...

Obviously, the telefilm is radically modern in the way Coren has pointed out. Moreover, Chaucer's parodies of the biblical Flood, the Song of Songs and of courtly love, which fundamentally contribute to the medieval tale's fun, have been dropped.¹⁰ Chaucer's intratextual and contextual perversion of courtly love becomes a simple modern love triangle.¹¹ In a clever move, John's religious blindness as he builds the little arks to survive the alleged arrival of the second Flood is replaced by his drug-induced delirium in the film—quite funny too, albeit

⁸ In order to make the distinction between the medieval and modern Alison, I keep the medieval spelling Alisoun when referring to Chaucer's text.

⁹ This scene is reminiscent of the scene in *The Merchant's Tale* when May tells January that what he saw her do up in the tree with Damian was in fact not what he thought it was.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the parody of the Flood see Kolve (1984). For an analysis of the intratextual parody of courtly love and the intertextual parodic dialogue between *The Knight's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale*, see Knapp (1990) and Patterson (1991).

¹¹ Courtly love is parodied in *The Miller's Tale* itself (with Alisoun replacing the courtly lady) as well as when read in the context of the preceding tale of the Knight with its traditional representation of courtly love. The telefilm series does include a modernised *Knight's Tale*, but there is no intertextual link, and like in *The Miller's Tale* its protagonists are modernised, with the knights turned secular prisoners and the courtly lady their teacher.

in a completely different way. The garbled lines from the Song of Songs in Chaucer's tale (3698–3707) are reduced to one line from Danny's mouth when he woos Alison through the open window ("My sweet, sweet Cinnamon"). And Alison's reply ("You make me sound like a Danish pastry") is funny for its simile rather than any parodic reference to the bible.

Dropping the biblical and chivalric subtexts accommodates a modern audience that can no longer be expected to understand allusions to such concepts in a secularised world deprived of knights. Conversely, the film essentially keeps the "rudest scenes," which might suggest that a modern audience still knows how to read the lower parts of the body. But does it really? When asked before the film's release how these scenes would be updated, series producer Kate Bartlett responded: "We're faithful to bottoms out of windows and farting and red-hot pokers in a modern way, but we're not making a porn film here" (quoted in Paton 2003, online). Bartlett makes it clear that an unmediated translation of these scenes in Chaucer's text would be unacceptable for the audience she has in mind.

The medieval audience of *The Miller's Tale*, however, appears to have been less squeamish since it was confronted with the tale's bottoms in a very direct way. After grooming himself with utmost care, Absolon arrives at Alisoun's house in the middle of the night where he begins to woo her with song as he did without success earlier on. This time he hopes that he can at least manage to kiss her, since he has been told that her husband John is out of town (but who is, of course, sleeping in the kneading tub). Inside the house Alisoun has been having fun in bed with her lover Nicholas. Hearing Absolon's cooing words, she now intends to add to her glee by teaching her would-be lover a lesson. She goes to the window and promises her suitor the desired kiss if he moves closer to make sure the neighbours will not see them. And now the text gets very explicit:

This Absolon gan wye his mouth ful drie.
 Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole,
 And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,
 And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,
 But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers
 Ful savourly, er he were war of this.
 Abak he stirte, and thoughte it was amys,
 For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.
 He felte a thyng al rough and long yherd,
 And seyde, "Fy! allas! what have I do?"
 (3730–3739)

As it begins to dawn on him what exactly he has kissed, Absolon wipes his mouth again, this time not with lecherous anticipation, but with desperate disgust. Indeed, "His hoothe love was coold and al yqueynt [quenched]" (3754). Not only is he cured of love-sickness, but he also swears that he will be requited. To that end he picks up the hot coulter from the local blacksmith and goes back to Alisoun's place. Enticing Alisoun with a ring, he begs her for another kiss. And again follows an extremely graphic description:

This Nicholas was risen for to pisse,
 And thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape;
 He sholde kisse his ers er that he scape.
 And up the wyndowe dide he hastily,
 And out his ers he putteth pryvely
 Over the buttok, to the haunche-bon;
 And therwith spak this clerk, this Absolon,
 “Spek, sweete bryd, I noot nat where thou art.”
 This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart
 As greet as it had been a thonder-dent,
 That with the strook he was almoost yblent;
 And he was redy with his iren hoot,
 And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot.
 Of gooth the skyn an hande-brede aboute,
 The hote kultour brende so his toute,
 And for the smert he wende for to dye.
 (3798–3713)

In both scenes, we do not only get a range of terms referring to the behind (*ers*, *buttok*, *toute*), but also a vivid description of its anatomy (*hole, a thyng al rough and long yherd*) as well as of its various functions (pissing, farting and possibly sodomitic penetration¹² symbolised by the hot coultter).¹³ Thanks to such details, the audience can clearly picture, despite the darkness, Alisoun's and Nicholas' exposed intimate body parts, or “privetee” as the genitalia or excretory organs are called in the tale.¹⁴

As the eminent thirteenth-century scholar Bartholomaeus Anglicus notes, the private parts should normally be covered for shame:

Also for schame pise parties hatte *pudenda* ‘the schameliche parties’. And þefore þey bene ikeuered, ihelid [wrapped], and ihid so that þey haue not þe same manere of fairenes as oþir membres hauen þat ben opunliche iseye, and þefore þey bene acountid vn honest”. (1975, vol. 1, 261)

The term *vn honest* translates as offensive or immoral¹⁵ and corresponds to the Latin *obscenum*, the term that has found its way into modern usage. Medieval attitudes toward the private parts ultimately derive from St. Augustine, for whom the *pudenda* became shameful (Latin *pudor* = shame), or rather, *obscenum* as a result

¹² The *Middle English Dictionary* (henceforth *MED*, ed. Kurath (1954–2001) glosses *ers* as 1 (a) The anus, the rectum, excretory organ; 1 (b) buttocks, posteriors, rump; 1 (c) hemorrhoids. It lists line 3734 (“But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers”) as an example for 1 (a) and line 3810 (“And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot”) as an example for 1 (b). It is, however, easily possible to translate *ers* in line 3810 as anus or rectum as well, especially when considering that the coultter smites *amydde*, in the middle, of the arse. For a thorough discussion of the potentially sodomitic scene here see Williams (1981).

¹³ For a detailed discussion of these terms see Morgan (2010).

¹⁴ For a discussion of “privetee” in all shades of meaning—secret, privacy, genitalia and excretory organs—see, for example, Farrell (1989) and Hanning (1992).

¹⁵ See *MED*, “un honest(e),” (a) “Dishonorable, disreputable, not worthy of respect; (b) morally objectionable, offensive, immoral, lewd.”

of the Fall (Augustinus 1993, Book XIV, chapter 23). Revealing “privetee” is therefore a mark of the obscene or of what McDonald calls its “sister vice” (2006, 1) the pornographic.¹⁶ McDonald points out that “the medieval obscene—or so it seems—simply cannot be countenanced” (2006, 9). Nor can, we might add, the modern obscene. Even though Camille claims that the naked medieval arse is “not obscene but seen” (2006, 37) for pre-modern thinkers like St. Augustine and Bartholomaeus, the bottom scenes in *The Miller’s Tale* are *obscenum* or *vnhonest*, and the appropriate reaction on seeing or even just mentioning private parts is shame.¹⁷

However, the implied audiences of *The Miller’s Tale* do not show any feelings of shame. The most immediate audience, the town people within the Miller’s story itself, are said to be laughing at the carpenter’s “fantasye” (3840) and “this stryf” (3849). Of the pilgrims listening to the story Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator emphasises that “for the moore part they loughe and pleyde / Ne at this tale I saugh no man hym greve” (3858–3859). Only the Reeve is angry because he, like the gullible and cuckolded John, is a carpenter and therefore (rightly) takes the story to be a joke at his expense. The other pilgrims’ laughter is merry, provoked by “this nyce [foolish] cas / Of Absolon and hende [gallant] Nicholas” (3855–3856). Significantly, potential obscenity is not deflected into laughter—a possibility that Caviness discusses in her article (1998)—since the laughter does not appear to originate with the exposed body parts. There is a tinge of *schadenfreude*, but no embarrassment or indignation that might result from a confrontation with the obscene, which is in fact recalled to the pilgrims’ mind quite vividly at the very end of the tale: “Thus swyved was [got laid] this carpenteris wyf, / For al his keypyng and his jalousye, / Absolon hath kist hir nether ye [eye], / And Nicholas is scalded in the towte [buttocks]” (3850–3853).

We cannot be certain how Chaucer’s intended audience reacted to this tale of the Miller. Bédier claims that “les fabliaux sont originairement l’œuvre des bourgeois” (1925, 371), but he admits that the implied audience is “un public de seigneurs” (1925, 376). Contrary to Bédier, Nykrog postulates that the fabliau can be considered as “absolument identique à celui de la littérature courtoise” (1973, 139). It is probably safe to assume that the fabliau catered not just for bourgeois, but for aristocratic tastes as well. Indeed, the sheer poetic skills that Chaucer displays in all his fabliaux raises them “to the level of the surrounding texts and makes them true competitors for the literary prize destined for the best tale to be told by the pilgrims on the road to Canterbury” (Morgan 2010, 501).

According to Ross, modern audiences share the laughter with the medieval town people and pilgrims (and probably that of the listeners to the tale): “Chaucer uses

¹⁶ As Caviness puts it, “Pornography and obscenity may currently be perceived to overlap insofar as both are contested sites in a wider censorship debate” (Caviness 1998, 156). For more information on the medieval obscene, see Ziolkowski (1998) and McDonald (2006). For the history of pornography, inevitably linked with the post-medieval period, see Moulton (2000) and Hunt (1993).

¹⁷ According to St. Augustine, not only the *prudenda* themselves, but the very words referring to them can be obscene (1993, Book XIV, chapter 23). For a discussion of the complex connection between obscene words and obscene things in Chaucer and Jean de Meun see Minnis (2006). For a similar discussion see also Mazo Karras (1998).

risqué words for one major purpose: to delineate comic characters and thus to make *us* laugh” (1972, 1, emphasis added).¹⁸ We have seen that laughter moreover derives from men's religious and sexual foolishness as well as the parodic juxtaposition with *The Knight's Tale*. These elements are absent from the BBC version, but risqué words and sexual puns are employed to a similar effect as in the tale. For example, when trying to divert John's jealousy of Danny, Nick says: “Danny looks like he'd need a splint to get it up.”

Like Chaucer's audiences, we also laugh because of people's gullibility in the movie, including Alison's,¹⁹ although it is rather hard to muster a smile when we see the elderly Joan realise that her dreams have been shattered. Of course we also chuckle when Alison and Nick get physical right in front of John's (closed) eyes. The sex scene is introduced with a close-up of a bedside lamp vigorously clattering as a result of what is happening on the sofa. This shift from the place of action (which we do get to see at least partially) to the bedside table humorously translates the equally funny scene of Alison and Nicholas in the bed “Ther as the carpenter is wont to lye” (3651).

Finally, we laugh at the bottom scenes because Alison's idea to stick out her butt is sly and Nick's profession that he has to fart because of the lager is something any beer drinker will understand. In a more subtle way, we may also laugh at the—probably unintentional—allusion to the parodic confusion of the upper and lower mouth (or “nether ye”) in *The Miller's Tale*²⁰ when Nick goes down on Alison after sticking her buttocks out of the window.²¹ What we see is, of course, not Nick's tongue, but that of Alison licking her upper lips with pleasure and thus mimicking what is going on further down. Moreover, Nick's kissing of Alison's lower lips suggests that he is putting straight the nether eye which she offered to Danny, a man Nick clearly considers incapable of satisfying Alison properly and in the proper place.

While the medieval and modern version of *The Miller's Tale* share the laughter they provoke, the BBC film does not show anything below the belt as this would mark the end of any innocent fun. Where Chaucer's listeners appear to simply gloss over the bottom scenes, series producer Bartlett anticipates outrage rather than laughter in her twenty-first century audience if she were to get too graphic. Of course, seeing the (w)hole anatomy on screen is more immediate than being invited with words to picture it, and this may account for Bartlett's decision to interpret the bottom scenes in such a way as to make them palatable to an early evening TV audience.²² As she promised, they are there “in a modern way,” but modern in this

¹⁸ This is probably true for most Chaucerians, but when reading *The Miller's Tale* for the first time and yet unprepared for Chaucer's bawdy, this may be different. In my experience, students reading the tale for the first time tend to be puzzled rather than amused.

¹⁹ In Chaucer, Alison is the one who suffers the least consequences, for even if it is true that she is “not loved, but fucked” (Morgan 2010, 516), she does not become the object of ridicule. In the BBC version Alison's desperate waiting in vain for Nick at a highway junction with a road sign in the background pointing to Tatling End does evoke smiles as her tattling tale has come to an end.

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the parody of the upper and lower mouth see Rupp (2009).

²¹ I am grateful to Luca Brunoni for discussing the parodic potential of this particular scene with me.

²² As James Nesbitt said in an interview, the director of the cinematic Miller's tale, John MacKay, also wanted the sex scenes “to be quite erotic and quite charged as opposed to just crude and rude” (*BBC Press Package* 2003, 19).

instance appears to equal cautious if not prudish. Of Alison's bottom we peep a small part only, shot from the right side. We see Nick fumble open his trousers and sit on the window ledge, we hear the fart, but we only see his bottom, very briefly and not in a close-up, when Alison nurses it after the burning. James Nesbitt (aka Nick), who had jokingly said that he would not star if his arse did not show, admits that "it's not a crude, obvious shot" (*BBC Press Package 2003*, 19). So no holes, no hair—except on Nick's chest when the camera zooms in on him after he has slept with Alisoun. Besides, Alison's bare skin is not the real thing; as Billie Piper said in an interview, she was wearing "the ugliest tanned thong" (*BBC Press Package 2003*, 21) when the nudity scenes were filmed. In short, the BBC shows the bottoms from a safe distance and not from any compromising vantage point.

Interestingly, even Pasolini (1972), whose *I Racconti di Canterbury* has been considered obscene,²³ shows restraint in his adaptation of the bottom scenes. We do see Alisoun and Nicholas stark naked,²⁴ but like in the BBC version, the holes remain concealed. For Blandeau, the "undressed or ridiculed bodies in grotesque postures [...] parody the spiritual ascension" (Blandeau 2006, 135) and are therefore a source of laughter. According to Blandeau the parodic effect is underlined by the inclusion in Pasolini's *Racconti* of *The Pardoner's Tale*, a theological exemplum.²⁵ Religion is also parodied in the *Racconti's Miller's Tale* itself as the allusion to Noah's Flood is not deleted. Pasolini makes an even more immediate connection between religion and sexuality when he zooms in on Nicholas' trousers where his erect penis shows as a result of his first embrace with Alisoun. This shot is then followed by Nicholas' garbled reciting of an extract from the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* of the Mass of Pentecost: "flecte quod est rigidum, da perenne gaudium, amen" [bend what is rigid, give eternal joy, amen]. Not only does Nicholas put the lines together at will, but his Latin of the first three words is incorrect, something like *flete quor es*, suggesting that he does not want what is stiff to become soft. On the contrary, he wants it *rigidum*, which he pronounces perfectly clearly as he does indeed the remainder of the lines.

So we do see (male) sexual organs in trousers and without them, but we do not see any holes. We briefly glimpse Alison's and Nicholas' bottoms from the side when they are stuck out of the window and we hear what comes out of the hole, but we do not get to see it. Indeed, Alisoun also lets flee a fart, and it is this focus on the "foul emissions of Alisoun" (2006, 41) which Blandeau qualifies as obscene in its

²³ For an overview on the negative responses after the film release (not just for its pornographic nature), see, for example, Green (1976).

²⁴ There is an emphasis on the gaze when Alisoun and Nicholas compete to undress to see each other naked: Nicholas: "Vieni qui e lasciati spogliare" [Come here and let me undress you]. Alison: "No, faccio prima io. Voglio vederti, voglio vederti" [No, I do it first, I want to see you, I want to see you]. Nicholas: "Voglio spogliarti prima io. Voglio vederti, voglio vederti" [I want to do it first. I want to see you, I want to see you]. Alison: "Dai, fammelo vedere. Fammelo vedere dai" [Come on, let me see it. Let me see it, come on]. As Alison's desire to see Nicholas' body boils down to her desire to see his penis, so the camera zooms in on her lover's genitals. My thanks to Luca Brunoni for helping me with the transcription and translation of the Italian.

²⁵ The BBC production also includes the Pardoner's tale, but we have seen that the tales work independently here. Moreover, like in the Miller's tale, the theological message in this version is again absent.

“worst shape” (2006, 41).²⁶ If a focus on the *functions* of the (female) arse is the most obscene, what would a close-up of the anatomical sources of these functions be? To extend on Dinshaw's queer analysis of the bottom scene in *Pulp Fiction* (1999),²⁷ the medieval ass belongs to the abject not only if it is about to be sodomised, but also if it is to be depicted with its dark holes and hairs and must therefore be eliminated if it is to be modern.

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²⁶ Blandeau points out that Alisoun's fart “worsens Absolons's humiliation and disgust” (2006, 39) as it is not only tactile but also olfactory. She does not mention Nicholas's farting, but she does consider the focus on excreta as being part of the obscene in Pasolini's adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* (2006, 41). So this would include Nicholas's pissing, where we hear the pee hit the pot's bottom but do not see the penis that Pasolini is not reluctant to show in sex scenes.

²⁷ See particularly pages 183–186. Dinshaw's analysis hinges on Butch Coolidge's phrase “I'm gonna git Medieval on your ass,” a phrase to which the title of my essay alludes.

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