

The uncanny darker subtexts lurking between two narratives.

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***“I see your rainbow and will
raise you some incest”:
Teaching Chaucer and Genesis in
Berkeley***

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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,

Just then, Nicholas let fly a fart
As loud as if it had been a thunder-clap,
And nearly blinded Absalon;
But he was ready with his hot iron
And struck Nicholas in his ass.

-- From Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*
(modernized text of the tale available [here](#))

This fall, I am teaching English poetry to Berkeley undergraduates, and my class often resembles a parody of Sunday school. I have to teach the Christian Bible, because, while God's word imaginatively fed the poets we read, it is a food my students have neither tasted nor seen. Even the evangelicals, who wear gold crosses and Christian-sorority sweatshirts to class, seem not to have read the scripture in which they believe. So I devote as much time to Genesis and Matthew as to Chaucer and Milton. But

I teach the bible of the poets, not of theologians or clergy, and true poets are not infrequently of the Devil's party. My naive, fresh-faced Californians encounter a Good Book in which doctrine, homiletic, and myth mingle with subversive irony, dirty jokes, and aesthetic pleasure.

My teaching thus forces me to read the Bible differently than I typically do as a religious Jew. For instance, take the above lines, which immediately precede the climax of *The Miller's Tale*, one of the many stories in Geoffrey Chaucer's long, medieval poem, *The Canterbury Tales* (~1380). In the tale thus far, Nicholas, a cunning, educated clerk, seduces Alisoun, the wife of John, a simple carpenter. To secure time alone with Alisoun, Nicholas convinces John that God is going to destroy the world with a flood. Like Noah, John has been appointed to save the world, so he is

told to hang from his ceiling three kneading tubs, in which John, Nicholas, and Alison will survive the coming deluge. When the water arrives, John will cut the ropes, and they will float to safety. The credulous John hangs the buckets, and that night, while he waits for the rain, Alison and Nicholas slip out of their buckets to fornicate. Meanwhile, the dainty, golden-locked Absalon, also smitten with Alisoun, knocks on the window to solicit a kiss from her. When, exploiting the darkness, she instead farts in his face, the humiliated Absolon decides to enact vengeance. He borrows a poker from the nearby smith, returns to the carpenter's house, and asks for a second kiss. This time, Nicholas, who has got up to urinate, leans his rear end out the window. As he farts, Absolon strikes him in the butt with the hot poker. The burnt Nicholas cries out, "Water!" John, thinking the flood has come, cuts his bucket's rope, sending himself crashing to the floor.

The Miller's Tale is not exactly reverent. In the tale, literate clerks like Nicholas manipulate biblical stories to exploit and humiliate common folk like John. Indeed, when John denounces Nicholas to the townspeople, the clerks join Nicholas in class solidarity and call John crazy. The elite uses the bible as oppressive ideology; this sounds as anti-religious as Marx. Moreover, the Miller's vulgar, embodied comedy punctures Genesis's mythology. The Ark, a sanctuary finally resting atop a sacred mountain, becomes a kneading tub hanging from a carpenter's rafters. God's terrifying thunder echoes in Nicholas's fart.

But Noah actually lurks behind the Miller's tale in a second way, less explicitly but more painfully. When Absalon wounds Nicholas, the tale alludes to the flood's disturbing sequel:

Genesis 9:18-25

And the sons of Noah, who went out of the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth; and Ham is the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah, and of these was the whole earth overspread. And Noah the husbandman began, and planted a

בראשית ט:יח-כח

וַיְהִיו בְּנֵי-נֹחַ, הַיֹּצְאִים מִן-הַתֵּבָה שֵׁם, וְחָם וְיָפֶת; וְחָם, הוּא אָבִי כְנַעַן. שְׁלֹשָׁה אֱלֹהִים, בְּנֵי-נֹחַ; וּמֵאֵלֶּה, נִפְצָה כָּל-הָאָרֶץ. וַיַּחַל נֹחַ, אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה; וַיִּטַּע, כָּרֶם. וַיִּשְׁתַּ מִן-הַיַּיִן, וַיִּשְׁכַּר; וַיִּתְגַּל, בְּתוֹךְ אֶהְלֵה. וַיֵּרָא, חָם אָבִי כְנַעַן, אֶת, עֶרְוַת אָבִיו; וַיַּגֵּד לְשְׁנֵי-אֶחָיו,

vineyard. And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren outside. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his youngest son had done to him. And he said: Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers...

בְּחֹץ. וַיִּקַּח שָׁם וַיִּפֹּת אֶת-הַשְּׂמֵלָה, וַיִּשְׁיֵמוּ
עַל-שִׁכְמָם שְׁנֵיהֶם, וַיִּלְכוּ אַחֲרָיִת, וַיִּכְסּוּ אֶת
עֲרוֹת אֲבִיהֶם; וּפְנֵיהֶם, אַחֲרָיִת, וַעֲרוֹת
אֲבִיהֶם, לֹא רָאוּ. וַיִּיקֶץ נֹחַ, מִיַּיְנוֹ; וַיֵּדַע, אֶת
אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לוֹ בְּנוֹ הַקָּטָן. וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲרוּר
קַנְעָן: עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים, יִהְיֶה לְאֶחָיו...

Rashi quotes a midrashic debate over whether Ham sexually penetrated or castrated his father, and while neither is the *p'shat* (plain sense), the alternatives highlight how Ham's transgression blurs the line between sexuality and violence. That same danger haunts the Miller's tale. Alisoun's humiliation of Absalon transmutes his eros into a punitive desire for revenge, symbolized by his violent, penetrative, and unnaturally phallic poker. Ham's taboo-violating seeing, which surely has incestuous overtones (see [Lev. 18:7 et seq.](#)) resurfaces as Absolon's near-blindness (think of Oedipus). And the Miller's class critique also finds its source here. Genesis, with Leviticus 18 and 25, etiologically justifies Canaanite slavery as a result of its sexual deviance. The Miller, inverting this class hierarchy, attacks clerks by playing on age-old associations between literary elites and homosexuality. Nicholas is violated through his class's stereotypical sexual pleasure. This irony underscores the importance of this buried, second allusion to the Noah story. The clerk thinks he can master the Bible for his own selfish purposes, but in the end, its uncanny, darker subtexts bite him in the ass.

Identifying how Genesis lurks unexpectedly beneath Chaucer does not generate a neat homiletic. I find myself critically distant from the homophobia of Chaucer and J, the probable source of the Ham vignette, as well as, for lack of a better

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term, the latter's racism. Actually, I take a certain pleasure in the texts' ugliness, inducting my students into the guild of clerks who have seen the Bible in its crude nakedness. "You think this is a children's book about salvation and love," I am implicitly telling them, "but this cynical Jew will teach you to relish its horrid, atavistic myths. I see your rainbow and will raise you some incest."

But of course what is powerful in Chaucer's tale is exactly that it exposes the frailty of the clerk. Nicholas thinks the Noah story is a cynical lie, so he expects John to remain swinging in his bucket and his illusion. But the story has a life of its own. Not only do Nicholas's sexual tricks weirdly summon Ham's violation, they ironically trigger a flood, at least in John's mind. [Like Browning's actor who, playing death, is caught unawares by the real thing](#), Nicholas finds his illusions coming uncannily to life. The early stories of Genesis 1-11, our mythic heritage, overwhelm our most knowing attempts to make them do work, whether we interpret cynically or piously. The primeval narratives arise from the deeps, and like rushing waters, they undo whatever frail hermeneutic structures we have imposed. When we become too skilled in reading and manipulating texts to produce the meanings and ideas we need, we lose the interpretive stance of children before a fairytale, entranced and horrified by the story's mystery, power, and danger. Teaching the poets' bible has not inspired confidence in our sacred texts' moral utility, but paradoxically, it has undone some of my pretensions of interpretive maturity. It is worth setting aside theology, ethics, even interpretation itself, if that is what is needed to be overpowered anew by an ancient mystery.

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