Chaucer's Inferno:
Dantean Burlesques in *The Canterbury Tales*

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After telling the story of Count Ugolino, the unfortunate lord who, along with his young sons, was locked in a tower to starve to death, Chaucer's monk cites his sources. For those who would like to know more about Ugolino, the monk has a recommendation:

> Whoso wol here it in a lenger wise,
> Redeth the grete poete of Ytaille
> That highte Dant, for he kan al devyse
> Fro point to point, nat o word wol he faille.
> (VII.2459-62)

> Those who wish more, and on a nobler scale,
> Should turn and read the great Italian poet
> Dante by name; they will not find him fail
> In any point or syllable, I know it.
> (203)[1]

The monk is speaking for Chaucer himself, who knew Dante's *Commedia* well enough to appropriate it here and elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales*. The Monk's Tale, for example, draws quite explicitly from Canto XXXIII of the *Inferno*, while the prologues to both The Prioress's Tale and The Second Nun's Tale are adaptations of a prayer in the *Paradiso* (Fisher 242, 311). While these may be two of the more obvious of Chaucer's adaptations of Dante, the English poet is indebted to his Italian counterpart in several other and more subtle respects. Like Dante, Chaucer composed in the vernacular rather than in Latin, organized his work by means of the frame story of a guided pilgrimage, and included himself as a character in the journey that he describes. Yet Chaucer gives each of these elements a carnivalesque turn, so that the serious matter of Dante's *Commedia* becomes, in *The Canterbury Tales*, the stuff of comedy. In particular, the two poets' contrasting depictions of Satan illustrate the difference between their solemn and comic sensibilities, and may also write large two modes of medieval thought and imagination.

As a courtier, a bureaucrat, and a diplomat, Chaucer knew several European languages and bodies of literature. He spoke the English of the street and the French of the court, read and wrote Latin, which was the language of record keeping and the Church, and read Italian. He traveled to France as a young man and to Italy in middle age, and therefore would have been exposed

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to European vernacular verse. In his earlier work he was heavily influenced by French literature; the *Romaunt of the Rose* is the best example of Chaucer recasting a French work into English. By the 1370s, however, Chaucer's primary influences seem to have been the Italian poets and writers. He began to compose *The Canterbury Tales* under the sway of Boccaccio and Dante, close contemporaries who were creating a new vernacular literature in Italy. Like these two, Chaucer eschewed Latin in favor of composing verse in the language he actually spoke. Much as Boccaccio and Dante would establish the dialect of Tuscany as the standard Italian language, so Chaucer would establish the London dialect as the standard for written English. The Italian poets also served as a font of stories, myths, and characters on which Chaucer drew. The Knight's Tale, for example, is an adaptation of Boccaccio's *Il Teseida* (Fisher 8).

As Boccaccio had in *The Decameron*, Chaucer used a frame story to allow for many speakers to trade tales in a range of voices, genres, and forms. The frame story of *The Decameron*, however, is a static one in which a group of young aristocrats trade tales after they have fled from a plague-ridden Florence to a country villa. In choosing the motif of the pilgrimage, and in making himself one of the pilgrims, Chaucer echoes the overall framework not of Boccaccio's *Decameron* but of Dante's *Commedia*. Dante's work begins, of course, with the narrator discovering that he is lost in a dark wood:

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
> mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
> chè la dirrita via era smarrita.
> (I.1-3)

> Midway along the journey of our life
> I woke to find myself in some dark woods
> for I had wandered off from the straight path.[2]

The shade of the poet Virgil comes to Dante's aid, offering to lead him through Hell so that he may eventually ascend the Mount of Purgatory to Paradise. Virgil is a wholly dependable guide; commissioned by the angelic Beatrice, he has only Dante's best interests in mind. Moreover, as the author of the *Aeneid*, which Dante considered the greatest poem of antiquity, Virgil is a uniquely appropriate guide for a poet. Dante says,

> Tu sé lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore;
> tu sé solo colui da cu' io tolsi
> lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore.
> (I.87-89)

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You are my teacher, the first of all my authors
  and you alone the one from whom I took
  the beautiful style that was to bring me honor.

Later he refers to Virgil as "tu duca, tu segnore, tu maestro" (II.140) ["You are my guide, you are my lord and teacher"]. Virgil describes his own role this way: "tu mi segue, e io sarò tua guida" (I.113) ["you follow me . . ./ and I shall be your guide"]. Dante will refer to Virgil as his guide ["guida"], teacher or master ["maestro"], and leader ["duca"] throughout the *Inferno*.

Whereas Dante is led by the shade of the poet Virgil, Chaucer's guide has a far less noble character and motives. At the start of *The Canterbury Tales*, a group of pilgrims have gathered to eat at the Tabard Inn in Southwark. Harry Bailey, the inn's owner, proposes that the pilgrims travel together and engage in a story contest. Bailey outlines the rules for the contest, as well as the reward for the winner:

And which of yow that bereth hym best of alle,
That is to seyn, that telleth in this caas
Tales of best sentence and moost solaas,
Shall have a soper at oure aller cost
Heere in this place, sittynge by this post,
Whan that we come agayn fro Caunterbury.
And for to make yow the moore mury,
I wol myselven goodly with yow ryde,
Right at myn owene cost, and youre gyde.
And whoso wole my juggement withseye
Shal paye al that we spenden by the weye.
(I.796-806)

And then the man whose story is best told
That is to say who gives the fullest measure
Of good morality and general pleasure,
He shall be given a supper, paid by all,
Here in this tavern, in this very hall,
When we come back from Canterbury.
And in the hope to keep you bright and merry
I'll go along with you myself and ride
All at my own expense and serve as guide.
I'll be the judge, and those who won't obey
Shall pay for what we spend along the way.
(24)

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Harry Bailey has a clear ulterior motive for proposing to be the party's "gyde." By keeping the twenty-nine pilgrims together, he can assure that they will all be repeat customers at the Tabard Inn. Note that the feast that will honor the winner is to be paid for not by Bailey himself but rather "at aller cost." The group of pilgrims will return to the inn and will again pay for a meal and lodgings. Moreover, while Bailey says he will travel "at myn owene cost," he intimates a moment later that he will have a say over which pilgrims pay the group's expenses during the journey, for "whoso wole my juggement withseye/ Shal paye al that we spenden by the weye." Bailey has a pecuniary interest in the pilgrimage, and he accompanies Chaucer and his fellow travelers because he hopes to profit from the experience. He might sympathize with Shakespeare's Iago, who says, "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse" (1.3.383). Virgil and Harry Bailey therefore represent two ends of a spectrum, with one guide appointed by divine mandate and the other self-appointed in the hope of turning a profit.

It is not only the guides but also the pilgrims themselves who make the *Inferno* and *The Canterbury Tales* a study in contrasts. One of the most fascinating dynamics in the *Inferno* (and in the *Commedia* as a whole) lies in the dual role that Dante himself plays in the work. He is both pilgrim and poet: one Dante traverses Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, while another, later incarnation of the poet writes about the journey. Putting himself into his narrative is an audacious act, for as humble as Dante the pilgrim may be on his journey, Dante the poet has elected himself worthy to be shown all the mysteries of the cosmos. At the beginning of the poem, Dante the pilgrim is an unworthy figure, wandering in the *selva oscura* of sin and despair. But as Virgil leads him onward, Dante's nobility and worthiness are gradually revealed. When Dante meets the great poets of the classical world in Limbo, for example, he is welcomed among them not merely as a guest but as a coequal:

> Da ch'ebber ragionato insieme alquanto,
> volsersi a me con salutevol cenno;
> e 'l mio maestro sorrise di tanto:
> e più d'onore ancora assai mi fenno,
> ch'e' sì mi fecer de la loro schiera,
> sì ch'io fui sesto tra cotanto senno.
> (IV.97-102)

> After they talked awhile together,
> they turned and with a gesture welcomed me,
> and at that sign I saw my master smile.

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Greater honor still they deigned to grant me:
they welcomed me as one of their own group,
so that I numbered sixth among such minds.

Dante the pilgrim seems appropriately humbled by his reception. But, of course, the *Commedia* is not a memoir, and Dante the poet has invented out of his own imagination and his own sense of self-worth a scenario in which Homer, Virgil, and the other poets of antiquity acknowledge him as one of their own.

Whereas Dante aggrandizes his own status as a poet, Chaucer casts himself in a very different light. When Harry Bailey asks him to tell a tale, Chaucer the pilgrim launches into The Tale of Sir Thopas, a story that gives such attention to its hero's armor, dress, horse, and manners, and in which after some two hundred lines nothing has yet happened. Harry Bailey interrupts Chaucer:

"Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee,"
Quod oure Hooste, "for thou makest me
So wery of thy verray lewednesse
That, also wisly God my soule blesse,
Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche.
Now swich a rym the devel I biteche!
This may wel be rym doggerel," quod he.
(VII.919-25)

"No more of this for God's dear dignity!"
Our Host said suddenly. "You're wearying me
To death, I say, with your illiterate stuff.
God bless my soul! I've had about enough.
My ears are aching from your frowsty story!
The devil take such rhymes! They're purgatory!
That must be what's called doggerel-rhyme," said he.
(183)

According to Harry Bailey, Chaucer's speech is "drasty," or full of dregs (Fisher 252). The innkeeper has passed judgment on the poet using a term drawn from his own tapster profession: Chaucer's words are the worthless remains of the language.

The hapless Chaucer protests, arguing that he is doing the best he can, at which Bailey again firmly passes judgment:

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> “Why so,” quod I, “why wiltow lette me
> Moore of my tale than another man,
> Syn that it is the beste rym I kan?”
> “By God,” quod he, “for pleynly, at o word,
> Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!
> Thou doost noght ells but despendest tyme.
> Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme.”
> (VII.926-32)

> “Why so,” said I, “Why should you hinder me
> In telling of my tale more than another man,
> Since I am giving it the best I can?”
> “By God,” he said, “put plainly in a word
> Your dreary rhyming isn’t worth a turd!
> You’re doing nothing else but wasting time.
> Sir, in a word, you shall no longer rhyme.”
> (183-84)

Harry Bailey wins the argument, and Chaucer the pilgrim tells a new tale in prose rather than in poetry. Ironically, the man who composed *The Canterbury Tales* itself is forced to speak in prose, for his “rymyng is nat worth a toord!” Chaucer’s self-deprecating portrayal of himself is tremendously effective and funny. He ascribes to himself none of the wit or insight that he clearly possesses, lending it instead to the innkeeper and other characters. In doing so, Chaucer grants his characters authenticity and autonomy, for they overshadow the author himself.

While Dante and Chaucer both include themselves in their stories, they do so to opposite ends. If Dante elevates himself to the status of the poets of antiquity, assuming the mantle of his guide and master Virgil, Chaucer makes himself the butt of his other characters’ jokes. An innkeeper passes judgment on Chaucer’s verse and deigns him the only pilgrim unfit to speak in rhyme. In their self-representations, Dante and Chaucer illustrate the range of the medieval sensibility and imagination. Dante presents himself as a poet worthy not only to stand among Homer, Virgil, and the other great classical poets but also to ascend to Heaven itself and look upon the face of God. Chaucer’s pilgrim, on the other hand, moves toward the base and the scatological; indeed, Bailey compares his rhyming to “a toord” and forbids him to speak in verse. Midway through his own poem, Chaucer finds that his rhyming is no longer welcome.

A pair of scenes in the *Inferno* and *The Canterbury Tales* illustrate clearly the two different modes in which Dante and Chaucer composed: the two po-

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ets' depictions of Satan. At the climax of the *Inferno*, Virgil and Dante come to the dead center of Hell, where they find Satan frozen in a lake of his own tears. It is good to read Dante in the original here, since Chaucer himself did so and may well have had this scene in mind when he wrote the Summoner's prologue.

> Lo 'mperador del doloroso regno
> da mezzo il petto uscia fuor de la ghiaccia;
> e più con un gigante io mi convegno,
>
> che giganti no fan le sue braccia
> (XXXIV.28-31)

> The king of the vast kingdom of all grief
> stuck out with half his chest above the ice;
> my height is closer to the height of giants
>
> Than theirs is to the length of his great arms

The fallen angel is built on an entirely different scale than a man, for his ruined wings are larger than sails:

> Sotto ciascuna uscivan due grand'ali,
> quanto si convenia a tanto Uccello:
> vele di mar non vid'io mai cotali
> (XXXIV.46-48)

> Beneath each face two mighty wings stretched out,
> the size you might expect of this huge bird
> (I never saw a ship with larger sails)

Satan has three heads, each a different color, and in each mouth he gnaws at a man:

> Da ogne bocca dirompea co' denti
> un peccatore, a guise di maciulla,
> sì che tre ne facea così dolente.
> (XXXIV.55-57)

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> In each of his three mouths he crunched a sinner
> with teeth like those that rake the hemp and flax,
> keeping three sinners constantly in pain.

This is the punishment reserved for the three great betrayers of the classical and biblical worlds: Satan holds in his three sets of jaws Brutus and Cassius, who betrayed Julius Caesar, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus Christ. Dante's image of Satan is a powerful and terrifying one, as is the eternal punishment he reserves for these three arch-sinners.

Chaucer, too, describes Satan, in the words exchanged between the Summoner and the Friar. These two pilgrims are at odds with each other, and each man tells a tale that denigrates the other's profession or religious order. The Friar speaks first, telling the story of a summoner who falls into the company of a devil. The summoner goes about his regular practice of threatening to summon a peasant to appear in ecclesiastical court if she does not offer him a bribe. The peasant woman damns the summoner to Hell, and the devil gladly follows through on the woman's threat. On hearing the Friar's tale, the actual Summoner is incensed. In revenge, he launches into the story of a friar who dreams of visiting Hell. After touring the infernal kingdom, the friar is surprised and pleased to find that there are no friars to be found there. He asks his guide whether it is the case that the friars are all in heaven. By way of an answer, the angel who is leading the friar through Hell takes him to see Satan:

> "And now hath Sathanas," seith he, "a tayl
> Brodder than of a carryk is the sayl.
> Hold up thy tayl, thou Sathanas" quod he,
> "Shewe forth thyn ers, a lat the frere se
> Where is the nest of freres in this place!"
> And er that half a furlong wey of space
> Right so as bees out swarmen from an hyve,
> Out of the develes ers ther gonne dryne
> Out of the develes ers ther gonne dryve
> Twenty thousand freres in a route,
> And thurghout helle swarmeden aboute,
> And comen agayn, as faste as they may gon,
> And in his ers they crepten everychon.
> He clapte his tayl again and lay ful stille.
> (III.1686-99)

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“Satan,” the angel said, “has got a tail
As broad or broader than a barge’s sail.
Hold up thy tail, thou Satan!” then said he,
“Show forth thine arse and let the friar see
The nest ordained for friars in this place!”
Ere the tail rose a furlong into space
From underneath it there began to drive,
Much as if bees were swarming from a hive,
Some twenty thousand friars in a rout
And swarmed all over Hell and round about,
And then came back as fast as they could run
And crept into his arse again, each one.
He clapped his tail on them and they lay still.
(304)

Chaucer’s Satan is on the same scale as Dante’s Satan; the former has “a tayl/ Brodder than of a carryk is the sayl,” while Dante says of the latter “I never saw a ship with larger sails.” And both use their massive bodies to punish the tiny bodies of sinning men. But Chaucer inverts Dante’s image in a grotesque and comic way: whereas the Satan of the *Inferno* holds sinners in his mouth, his counterpart in *The Canterbury Tales* holds them in his “ers.”

This inversion of bodily orifices is a reductio ad absurdum illustration of two different mind-sets in medieval thought. Critic Mikhail Bakhtin describes these two modes this way:

> It could be said (with certain reservations, of course) that a person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, two lives: one that was the official life, monolithically serious and gloomy. . . . the other was the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred. (*Problems* 129-30)

In his portrayal of Satan, Chaucer transports the “serious” matter of Dante’s poem into the “free and unrestricted” space of the carnival. Whereas the devil gnashing his teeth on the bodies of sinners is a frightful image, the image of friars nesting in the devil’s anus is a ridiculous one. The Summoner’s description makes not only the friars but also Hell and Satan objects of laughter and ridicule. In shifting his attention from the devil’s head to his tail—to say nothing of the “unmentionable” body parts that the tail hides—Chaucer produces a comic and carnivalesque parody of the *Inferno*.

In fact, this process of substitution and inversion is at work throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. The Miller’s Tale, for example, functions according to

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much the same logic. The "joly" and "amorous" Absolon (I.3371, 3657), who subscribes to a courtly vision of love and romance, pines for the married Alison. One night, he asks Alison to lean out her window and kiss him. The trick Alison plays on Absolon is one of the tale's punch lines:

> Dirk 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.
> (I.3731-35)

> Dark was the night as pitch, and black as cole,
> And at the window out she put her hole,
> And Absalon, so fortune framed the farce,
> Put up his mouth and kissed her naked arse
> Most savourly before he knew of this.
> (103)

In a maneuver that is reminiscent of Chaucer's parody of Dante, Alison presents Absolon not with her face but with her backside. In so doing, she effectively upends his whole conception of romance. Absolon is a Petrarchan lover who earlier in the story was struck physically ill by his lovesick devotion to Alison; in this respect, he might be read as belonging to the same tradition as the lovesick gentlemen Palamon and Arcite in The Knight's Tale. This sort of courtly devotion is predicated on distance and separation. In kissing Alison's backside, Absolon comes into contact with a physical and bodily reality that banishes forever his romantic conceptions:

> His hoote love was coold and al yqueynt
> For fro that tyme that he hadde kist hir ers
> Of paramours he sette nat a kers,
> For he was heeled of his malaide
> Ful ofte paramours he gan deffie
> (I.3754-58)

> The fiery heat of love by now had cooled,
> For from the time he kissed her hinder parts
> He didn't give a tinker's curse for tarts;
> His malady was cured by this endeavor
> And he defied all paramours whatever.
> (103)

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Absolon's worldview is not broad enough to allow for both the courtly and the corporeal, and after falling victim to Alison's trick he swears off the amorous pursuits that had once been his obsession.

Bakhtin's work on medieval notions of the body and of laughter can help shed light on both The Miller's Tale and the Summoner's prologue. According to Bakhtin, the spirit of the medieval carnival or marketplace feast involved bringing the ideal and unchanging order back down to the level of the earthly and the bodily. He writes, "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (*Rabelais* 19-20). The grotesque involves the body's assertion of itself; it is the revelation and predominance of those parts of the anatomy that are normally clothed and concealed: "To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth" (21). Alison's treatment of Absolon enacts this process of degradation, for she foists upon him the lower strata of her body. The Summoner—and, by extension, Chaucer himself—engages in a similar process of degradation by describing not Satan's face and mouth but his lower strata. The Satan of the Summoner's prologue cannot be fearsome, for the ridiculous portrayal of his "ers" brings him out of the realm of the infernal or the cosmic and back to that of the earthly.

In the *Inferno*, Dante and Virgil actually must climb the length of Satan's body to escape from Hell, and it is fascinating to note what parts of the devil's anatomy Dante omits from his narrative. Satan is positioned at the very center of Hell, and, with Dante clinging to his neck, Virgil uses the devil as a ladder to pass through the realm's center:

> appigliò sé a le vellute coste;
> di vello in vello giù discese poscia
> tra 'l folto pelo e le gelate croste.
>
> Quando noi fummo là dove la coscia
> si volge, a punto in sul grosso de l'anche,
> lo duca, con fatica e con angoscia,
>
> volse la testa ov'elli avea le zanche,
> e aggrappossi al pel com'om che sale,
> sì che 'n inferno i' credea tornar anche.
> (XXXIV.73-81)

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he grabbed on to the shaggy sides of Satan;
then downward, tuft by tuft, he made his way
between the tangled hair and frozen crust.

When we had reached the point exactly where
the thigh begins, right at the haunch's curve,
my guide with strain and force of every muscle,

turned his head toward the shaggy shanks of Dis
and grabbed the hair as if about to climb—
I thought that we were heading back to Hell.

Virgil has inverted himself, so that where a moment before he was climbing down Satan's torso, he will now climb up his legs and into the world's other hemisphere. He will later explain to Dante that in climbing down and then up Satan, the two men passed through the center of the world and the center of gravity: "quand'io mi volsi, tu passasti 'l punto/ al qual si traggon d'ogni parte I pesi" (XXXIV.109-10) ["When I turned myself, you passed the point/ to which all weight from every part is drawn"]. Hell and earth alike are centered on Satan's nether regions. Elsewhere in the *Inferno*, Dante is quite explicit about the sufferings and torments visited on the bodies of the shades in Hell. Yet here, in describing Satan, he becomes suddenly euphemistic, alluding to Satan's genitals and buttocks as "the point at which the thigh begins" ["là dove la coscia/ si volge, a punto in sul grosso de l'anche"]. Does Satan lack genitals and the buttocks that figure so prominently in the Summoner's prologue, or does Dante assume that he possesses them but shy away from describing them? The question, of course, is a semantic one: in either case, Satan's lower stratum cannot be represented in the text of the *Inferno* without moving Dante's vision of the cosmos into the realm of the medieval carnival.

In fact, Dante comes perilously close to this carnivalesque mode in describing what he saw on looking back down at Satan. Because Virgil and Dante have crossed through the center of the world and begun to climb up into the Southern Hemisphere, their perspective on Satan is now reversed:

Io levai li occhi, e credetti vedere
Lucifero com'io l'avea lasciato;
e vidili le gambe in sù tenere;
(XXXIV.88-90)

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> I raised my eyes expecting I would see
> the half of Lucifer I saw before.
> Instead I saw his two legs stretching upward.
> (245)

The image is hard to take seriously. After the terror and drama of Satan's head and torso, the sight of his legs sticking up in the air is rather silly (from this vantage point, incidentally, Dante could say whether there were indeed any friars in "the develes ers"). But the devil's nether regions are concealed; the text clothes them with silence and omission as readily as would a garment. In fact, this kind of silence about the body's lower half is a commonplace in many bodies of literature, particularly those dealing with other worlds. Consider works of science fiction such as the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* films and television series, where spaceships the size of cities hurtle across the galaxy without seeming to possess any bathrooms. J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is another example of a meticulously detailed fantasy world that is rich in myths and songs but entirely devoid of sex, money, and other commonplace concerns. To create a setting that is not of the earth, science-fiction and fantasy writers tend to ignore the earthly. Dante, too, ignores or elides those elements of human nature and the human body that tend toward the comic. The pilgrim's last view of Satan's legs sticking up in the air might be read as one of the few instances in which Dante fails to contain the subversive nature of the body's lower half. For a moment, his portrayal of the terrors of Hell is compromised by Satan's body reasserting itself in the most earthly of ways.

It is valuable to identify the ways in which Chaucer parodies Dante, because doing so illustrates the range of medieval modes of thought and representation. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that Dante's work is wholly serious and Chaucer's wholly comic. In point of fact, both *The Canterbury Tales* and the *Inferno* are animated by a tension between the serious and the comic and the high and the low. Because their work draws on a great many genres and traditions, both Dante and Chaucer should be seen as representing the full spectrum of medieval life and sensibilities that Bakhtin describes. The remarkable architectonics and deep structure of Dante's *Commedia* can keep the reader from seeing how disparate and wide-ranging is the poet's source material. In the three books of the *Commedia*, Dante fuses classical literature, the Bible, folktales, and local politics into a single, manifold text. Chaucer's work likewise involves the synthesis and interplay of a great many genres and traditions. As characters from different social strata tell their tales, each new episode challenges and illuminates the tales that have preceded it. The Knight's Tale and The Miller's Tale are the first of many such contrasts; the

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courtly sentiments of the one and the ribald bawdiness of the other do not exist on the same plane of reality, and yet neither invalidates the other. Chaucer's accomplishment in *The Canterbury Tales* lies not merely in his having synthesized so many literary and popular traditions and forms but also in his having put into dialogue the opposing sensibilities of these traditions. One should therefore see in Dante and Chaucer two poles of this medieval range of thought, but having established this range, one should look for it within the work of each poet.

Notes

1. Quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* appear first from the edition of Chaucer's works edited by John H. Fisher and then in Nevill Coghill's translation.

2. Quotations from the *Inferno* appear first in the original Italian and then in Mark Musa's translation.

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