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But What *Does* the Fleming Say?: The Two Flemish Proverbs and their Contexts in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

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The Cook and the Manciple, two traditional rivals clearly at loggerheads in the *Canterbury Tales*, each quotes a Flemish proverb. The positions of the sayings are conspicuously complementary. The Cook shows his knowledge of Flemish popular wisdom in the Prologue to his tale, whilst the Manciple uses a Flemish proverb to conclude the argument of his story. Both proverbs were dealt with in 1934 by the Flemish scholars Jan Grauls and J.F. Vanderheijden in the *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*.¹ This contribution reconsiders the linguistic contents of each of them, and tries to interpret them in the larger literary context of their respective prologues or tales, and of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. Rather than attributing a fixed or specific meaning to them, as Grauls and Vanderheijden do, I shall argue that the Flemish sayings trigger a whole series of contradictions and reversals of meaning that mirror the complexity of Chaucer's comedy.

'*Sooth pley, quaad pley, as the Flemyng seith*'

The second popular saying Grauls and Vanderheijden discuss is chronologically the first in Chaucer's narrative. It occurs in the Prologue to the Cook's Tale, and is spoken by the Cook, Roger of Ware:

But 'sooth pley, quaad pley,' as the Flemyng seith.

(l. 4357)²

It is usually translated in the manner suggested by the footnote in the *Riverside Chaucer*: 'A true jest is a bad jest', i.e. when what is said jokingly also hits home, the jest may be too bitter and therefore not really funny or successful. In his joking

manner the Host, Herry Bailly, may have said true things indeed, Roger suggests, but can we really appreciate his jokes?

If this is the meaning we attribute to the saying, we can read it as the Cook's reaction to the words of the Host two lines earlier on: 'A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley' (l. 4355). When one reads this line without paying too much attention to it, it appears to form part of a straightforward continuation of the Host's reconciliatory message to 'gentil Roger' that his (Herry Bailly's) words need not be interpreted as an insult. At the beginning of this Prologue, the Host may have incited Roger of Ware's indignation by speaking disparagingly about the taste and hygiene of the Cook's products and insisting that his tale be better quality:

Now tell on, Roger, looke that it [your tale] be good,
For many a pastee hastow laten blood,
And many a Jakke of Dovere hastow soold
That hath been twies hoot and twies coold.
Of many a pilgrym hastow Cristes curs,
For of thy percely yet they fare the wors,
That they han eten with thy stubbel goos,
For in thy shoppe is many a flye loos.
Now telle on, gentil Roger by thy name.
But yet I pray thee, be nat wroth for game;
A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley.

(ll. 4345-55)

When one looks at the context leading up to this last line, one would expect the Host to say that a man may in fact be joking or telling a fiction when he appears to be speaking in earnest. That would genuinely take the sting out of the hurtful remarks about Roger's professional qualities. What the reader or careful listener gets instead, and what no doubt did not escape the Cook's attention either, is a further rubbing of salt into the wound: 'my playful words may well be hiding a hard truth about your lousy meals and pastry'. What one expected to be an apology, or an attempt to make harmless what may have done harm, is in fact a further attack, and, on the reading of 'sooth pley, quaad pley' as 'a true jest is a bad jest', the Cook's quotation of the Flemish proverb is an appropriate response indeed.

But instead of heeding his own advice and avoiding jokes that may cause pain, the Cook then promptly announces a comic tale that will have a 'hostileer' as the butt of the joke. Playfully and/or ironically he echoes Herry's 'be nat wroth':

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'And therefore, Herry Bailly, by thy feith,
Be thou nat wrooth, er we departen heer,
Though that my tale be of an hostileer.
But nathelees I wol nat telle it yit;
But er we parte, ywis, thou shalt be quit.'
And therwithal he lough and made cheere,
And seyde his tale, as ye shul after heere.

(ll. 4358-64)

The Cook's laughter and merry-making are very much part of his nature (he has just had a laughing-fit after hearing the conclusion of the Reeve's Tale; cf. ll. 4325-29), but more importantly, they are part of the roadside drama in which the Reeve, who is also a carpenter, has already told his tale by way of revenge against the Miller, whose earlier tale ridiculed a carpenter. Similarly the Cook will now tell a tale that will make him quits with the Host or 'hostileer'.

Thus our first Flemish proverb forms part of a subtle game of reversals of meanings and intentions. Jokes have 'quaad' effects, even when an argument at first seems to lead to the conclusion that the jest need not or should not be understood in a negative manner; the giver of reproachful advice proceeds smoothly to action directly contradicting his own advice. Even at the outset of the Cook's Prologue we find that comforting arguments seem to lead to 'sharp conclusions', although they pretend they do not:

'Ha! ha!' quod he [the Cook], 'For Cristes passion,
This millere had a sharp conclusion
Upon his argument of herbergage!'

(ll. 4327-29)

Where you think you give others safe lodging, you may suddenly lose your own security in your home and feel as attacked, exposed and unprotected as the miller does in the Reeve's Tale, when he finds both his wife and his daughter 'used' by a Cambridge student. Scholastically solid arguments contain uncomfortable conclusions, in the same way as seemingly secure lodgings may harbour discomfoting lodgers.

There is subtle humour in this reference to 'argument' and 'conclusion', and it works on more than one level. The Reeve's miller had already referred to the ability of the Cambridge students 'by argumentes [to] make a place/ A myle brood of twenty

foot of space' (ll. 4123-4124). Moreover, the reference to the schools of philosophy and their syllogisms ('arguments') is comically incongruous with the speaker, an ordinary cook – as incongruous, in fact, as his wrapping of another popular saying in a biblical context, giving his words the authority of no less a person than Solomon:

Wel seyde Salomon in his langage,
'Ne bryng nat every man into thyn hous.'

(ll. 4330-31)³

Words and the arguments that combine them may turn tiny rooms into spacious lodgings, ordinary cooks into sophisticated scholars and exegetes, and ordinary speech into philosophical reflections.

We now begin to see on a slightly larger scale the textual game of which the Flemish proverb 'sooth pley, quaad pley' forms part. 'Herbergage' will announce itself as a dominant motif in the unfinished Cook's Tale. In a literal sense, as, for instance, in the Miller's or Reeve's Tale, 'herbergage' is, of course, a safe lodging, which turns out to be insecure. In a metaphoric sense, and as used before the Cook's Tale begins, it refers to words leading to a conclusion or containing a meaning. In the Cook's Prologue, it is *language* that no longer offers a safe haven or 'herbergage'. What seems to lead to the reassuring conclusion that no harm was meant – 'be nat wroth for game' – ultimately prepares the way for the reassertion that what has just been said may have been at least as acerbic as one's worst fears may have led one to believe – 'A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley'. And although the Cook says of his tale 'I wol nat telle it yet', this 'argument' takes a sharp turn in the opposite direction when a couple of lines later he starts telling his tale about 'hostileers' and 'herbergage' after all, clearly with the intention of hurting the feelings of the Host. Language, like lodgings, can be made unsafe by trickery and usurpation – as the Flemyng seith.

In this context, the Cook's repeated and extravagant laughter is far from innocent. So laughter, too, is turned into its opposite here. It may be meant to harm even if the speaker emphatically asserts it is not. The words of the Miller (as narrator), the Reeve, the Host and the Cook may all have been successful by hitting as hard or indeed much harder than they pretend they do. For some, the joke that makes us laugh and at the same time hits home may, therefore, not be an unsuccessful but a successful one. For such people, we might guess, the interpretation of the phrase 'quaad pley', in isolation, would be positive rather than negative. That aspect of the meaning of 'quaad' as 'harmful', 'vicious', would for them equate with 'successful'. It should be emphasised that this sense of 'quaad' (Modern Dutch 'kwaad') – 'vicious'

'evil', etc. – is prominent in both Middle and Modern Dutch. In short, jests can be harmful and the Cook enjoys seeing this potential exploited by others and exploits it himself.

Curiously enough, this may have been exactly what Chaucer, though not necessarily his entire audience, would have understood 'quaad pley' to mean in the context of 'sooth pley, quaad pley'. That is, rather than, or perhaps in addition to, 'bad, unsuccessful joke', Chaucer might have intended 'vicious joke'. There are simple linguistic grounds for this supposition. The Riverside Chaucer's reading of 'quaad pley' as 'bad jest' is based, as the explanatory note to line 4357 makes clear, on the above-mentioned article published by Grauls and Vanderheijden in 1934. These authors refer to what they believe to be the oldest text of a Flemish proverb approaching Chaucer's version, viz. 'Waer spot, quaet spot'. They found this saying in the Deventer edition of the *Proverbia Communia*, a collection of more than 800 Flemish proverbs and their Latin translations printed by Richard Paffraet (1480). They further argue for the probable existence of another Middle Dutch form of this proverb as 'Waar spel, kwaad spel'.⁴

'Kwaad spel' or (in an older spelling) 'quaad spel', would have been the logical basis for Chaucer's phrase 'quaad pley' (or in some variant Chaucer manuscripts 'quaad spel')⁵ with Chaucer leaving the first Flemish word untranslated, and, according to most manuscripts, translating the second, 'spel', by 'pley'. The problem Grauls and Vanderheijden had was that nowhere did they find the combination 'quaad spel'. Nevertheless, the phrase 'quaad spel' (also with the spelling 'quaet', or in Modern Dutch 'kwaad') does occur in Proverb 668 in the Delft edition of the *Proverbia Communia* by Christian Snellaert (ca. 1495): 'tes quaet spel daer deene lacht ende dander screyt' ('it is a bad or vicious joke where one person laughs and the the other cries'). The edition also gives a Latin translation ('Est ludus dum flet malus otto platoque ridet'), and a Low German equivalent ('It is quit spijl dat der eyn schreit vnd der ander lacht').⁶ We are much nearer here to Chaucer's 'quaad spel'. Moreover, it is easy to infer that it is particularly a *truth* spoken in jest that makes the speaker laugh and the listener cry. We are therefore also somewhat nearer to a proverb much more familiar in Flemish than 'waer spot, quaet spot', viz. 'In speele ende spotte seytmen dicke waer' (Delft edition of the *Proverbia Communia*, no. 432). This saying corresponds to some extent with the equally familiar modern English 'Many a true word is spoken in jest', but through the use of the word 'spotte' (sneering), it puts more emphasis on the hurt that is caused or the harmful ('quaet') effect.

One can occasionally still hear a corresponding expression among the older generations in some corners of West-Flanders: 'zot spel, kwae [i.e. quaad] spel'.⁷

meaning 'what is said in jest, or what appear to be crazy fantasies, may be meant to harm'. If we can assume a Middle Dutch ancestor, it must have been 'sot spel, quaet spel'. This expression comes tantalizingly close to the Cook's 'sooth pley, quaad pley', in the form of each of the first words of the two-word phrases, 'sot' and 'quaet', in the meaning of 'spel', and in the syntax of the whole saying. The only problem is that the meaning of the adjective 'zot' ('crazy', 'foolish'), which would have been spelt 'sot' in Middle Dutch, does not remotely resemble that of the Middle English adjective 'sooth' (true). But who says (apart from Grauls and Vanderheijden, and all the Chaucer editions that follow them) that 'quaad' should be the only word in the Flemish proverb that Chaucer would have associated with its Flemish meaning?⁸ In 'sooth pley, quaad pley', the word 'sooth' might also be Chaucer's untranslated rendering, in a parallel position to the other similarly untranslated adjective in the proverb, of the Middle Dutch 'sot'. This Middle Dutch adjective would then be used in the meaning Verwijs and Verdam's Middle Dutch dictionary refer to under 'sot II. Van zaken: Dwaas, dom' (of objects, not persons: foolish, stupid). Among the examples given by Verwijs and Verdam one finds a phrase still very common especially in southern Low Countries dialects: 'sotte klap', for which they give the French and Latin equivalents 'folle parole' and 'stultiloquium' respectively.⁹

The combination of 'sot' with 'spel' as defined in the same dictionary (columns 1671-85) fits perfectly within this alternative interpretation of the proverb as quoted by Chaucer. 'Spel' in its fifth meaning according to Verwijs and Verdam, column 1677, refers to 'Gekheid, jok, jokkerij, scherts' (jest, lies, lying, sneers). Examples abound, and in West-Flanders, the phrase 'zot spel' (without its corollary 'quaad/ kwae spel') referring to a crazy game, joke or situation is still used very frequently by all generations.

We can now conclude our reading of the first Flemish proverb in the *Canterbury Tales* by applying two alternative interpretations to its immediate context. The Host concludes his insults addressed to the Cook with a 'but':

'But yet I pray thee, be nat wroth for game;
A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley.'
(ll. 4354-55)

To which the Cook immediately answers:

'Thou seist ful sooth,' quod Roger, 'by my fey!
But 'sooth pley, quaad pley,' as the Flemyng seith.' (ll. 4356-57)

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In three successive lines, we find the words 'sooth'; in the third, it forms part of the Flemish proverb. The impetus of the text leads us to believe that the third 'sooth' means what it did in the previous lines. This implies that we read 'sooth pley' as an entirely Middle English phrase with the word 'sooth' meaning 'true'. The proverb then means: 'a joke that hits the truth is a bad joke'. However, the syntactic parallelism in line 4357, and the survival of an almost identical Flemish proverb 'zot spel, kwa[ad] spel', leads one to read 'sooth' as the Flemish 'zot'/'sot', in which case the proverb means: 'crazy fantasies spoken in jest may be meant to be vicious'.

Paradoxically, a completely Middle English reading of 'sooth pley' (true jest) yields the very opposite meaning of a half Middle Dutch, half Middle English reading (crazy fantasies). This first Flemish proverb either amounts to saying that to make a joke of what is too obviously true is to make a bad, unsuccessful joke, or that foolish fantasies may successfully mask vicious attacks. In the end, both readings are acceptable, and both may have been intended at the same time so that they can interact with each other. The contradictory interpretations only add to the verbal game based on constant reversals of meanings that Chaucer would have relished generally in the *Canterbury Tales*, and in particular in the context of the Cook's Prologue, which seems to reverse meanings and intentions all the time.

The possibility of reconciling the two contradictory readings of the proverb, 'true jest' and 'crazy fantasies', in a single, constantly shifting interpretation, does not mean that craziness and truth are happily reconciled once and for all in the Cook's Prologue and Tale, or in *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole. In the Cook's Tale itself, the narrator observes that in a man of low moral calibre, 'revel' and truth remain angry with each other all the time:

Revel and trouthe, as in lowe degree,
They been ful wrothe al day, as men may see.
(ll. 4397-98)

'Sot spel' will remain 'quaad pley', unless one finds a way of redeeming the corruption in language in the same way as one might redeem a wicked servant like Perkyn Revelour in the Cook's Tale. This might prove as difficult a task as conveying moral truths via a fabliau, as the Cook's Tale, larded as it is with moral admonitions, rather ineffectually tries to do. If your manner is the mocking fantasy of a fabliau and its revellers, it is hard to make eternal truths your substance.

'Litel janglyng causeth muchel reste'

Later on in *The Canterbury Tales*, both the Host and the Cook repeat the tricks they played just before the latter embarked upon his narrative. In the Prologue to the Monk's Tale, the Host speaks mockingly about the Monk's wasteful celibacy and unspiritual appearance, then seems to apologise ('But be nat wrooth, my lord, though that I pleye'), but immediately adds: 'Ful ofte in game a sooth I have herd seye!' (ll. 1964-65). In other words, he plays again a by now familiar game of mock-apologies. Here, as in the Prologue to the Cook's Tale, his jests preserve a certain degree of innocence. In the meantime, however, he has already shown real anger towards the Pardoner, the ultimate corrupter of meaning, thus reminding us that the constant turns one takes in the labyrinth of reversible meanings, although often fascinating, can also be frightening.

The 'jape of malice in the derk', which, as the Cook says in his Prologue (l. 4338), has been played upon the miller in the Reeve's Tale, is a phrase that can be appropriately applied metaphorically to the use of language, and very much describes the mechanism the Cook himself exploits. His verbal aggression almost becomes physical later on, in the Prologue to the Manciple's Tale 'by cause drynke hath dominacioun/ Upon this man' (Prologue to MancT, ll. 57-58). In this Prologue, the Host again addresses the Cook, this time as if the latter has not yet told a tale, and because Roger of Ware is drunk, the Manciple volunteers to do the story-telling in his stead. The emphasis in the Manciple's Prologue is again on tales and speech, and on the organ of speech, the mouth. The Manciple points at the Cook's evil breath and the potential destructiveness of his language and attitude in a series of terms that are used highly ambiguously:

And, wel I woot, thy breeth ful soure stynketh:
That sheweth wel thou art nat wel disposed.
Of me, certeyn, thou shalt nat been yglosed.
See how he ganeth, lo, this dronken wight,
As though he wolde swolwe us anonright.
Hooold cloos thy mouth, man, by thy fader kyn!
The devel of helle sette his foot therin!
Thy cursed breeth infecte wole us alle.
Fy, stynkyng swyn! Fy, foule moote thee falle!
A, taketh heede, sires, of this lusty man.

(ll. 32-41)

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'Nat wel disposed' means, in this context, 'indisposed, unwell' because drunk, as *The Riverside Chaucer* edition explains, but the lines that follow in this quotation also imply an evil disposition in a more spiritual sense. The Cook is a dangerous man, his mouth is hell-mouth and his yawning is threatening. On the literal level, he infects others when he exhales, and seems to devour them when he inhales. On a more figurative level, it is his language that is infectious or drags you into evil beyond redemption. The Manciple's words 'Of me, certeyn, thou shalt nat been yglosed' therefore acquire the double meaning of (1) 'I shall not flatter ('glose') you at all' and (2) 'Do not expect me to comment ('glose') in the margin of *your* text!'

The Cook, says the Manciple, has reached a stage of drunkenness that puts his behaviour on a par with that of monkeys ('I trowe that ye dronken han wyn ape! – l. 44). Apes are known for their mimetic behaviour, and the way the Cook is now swaying on his horse reminds the Manciple of a preposterous imitation of 'justen atte fan' (l. 42 – an exercise designed to improve jousting skills by striking a board and avoiding a bag). The Cook could not do the real thing, neither in horse-riding or jousting, nor in speaking, nor in telling tales. The Manciple's insults ultimately lead the Cook to a state of speechless wrath – precisely the kind of rage which the 'be nat wroth' of his own Prologue told us to avoid. In the Cook's Prologue, anger came out fuming in a controlled manner via sneering remarks; in the Prologue to the Manciple's Tale, the Cook is dumbfounded with rage:

And with this speche the Cook wax wrooth and wraw,
And on the Manciple he gan nodde faste
For lakke of speche, and doun the hors hym caste,
Where as he lay, til that men hym up took.
This was a fair chyvachee of a cook!

(ll. 46-50)

In a subtle blend of the images of horsemanship and control of speech, the Cook has lost the reins over his speech and is made speech-less. The Host fears that he might recover sufficiently so that he 'lewedly wolde telle his tale' (l. 59). He invites the Manciple to take over the Cook's role as narrator, but also fears that the game of verbal, and perhaps physical, revenge will go on: he will 'brynge thee to the lure' (l. 72 – recall you as a hawk is recalled, with a lure, i.e. with false seeming or mock-attractions), he suggests to the Manciple, and 'pynchen at thy rekenynges' (find fault with your accounts). In a by now familiar pattern, it is the Manciple's turn to guarantee to his audience and to the Cook that all was meant in jest and nothing in

earnest: 'That that I spak, I seyde it in my bourde' (in jest – l. 81). Ultimately, it is a 'gourde' or flask of ripe wine offered by the Manciple that settles the quarrel. The Cook's mouth is stopped with yet more wine, and the Host mockingly praises sweet Bacchus for being the ultimate peacemaker on the pilgrimage to Canterbury when words have soured the atmosphere.

Subsequently, the Manciple tells his story. It is a tale of a crow that belongs to Bacchus' rational counterpart, viz. Ph(o)ebus Apollo. Its mimetic abilities lead to a revelation of the truth. That truth happens to be a sad one, viz. the unfaithfulness of Phebus' wife. Unfortunately, the uncovering of the secret truth leads to the killing of Phebus' wife and to the crow's downfall. 'Phebus' Apollo, the pagan god of poetry, cannot sort out through reason and culture what his unruly rival Bacchus was happy to quench in alcohol and leave in peace. Phebus, it appears, has made the terrible mistake of giving the crow the Promethean gift of human language:

Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a crowe
Which in a cage he fostred many a day,
And taughte it speken, as men teche a jay.
Whit was this crowe as is a snow-whit swan,
And countrefete the speche of every man
He koude, whan he sholde telle a tale.

(ll. 130-35)

Unsurprisingly, one of the main emphases of the text is on speech, on the mimetic and deceptive use of language ('countrefete'), which can, if necessary, make a crow look like a swan.

The crow does not put language to good moral use. It is speechless when it could and perhaps should speak in protest against the act of unfaithfulness. Its speech would perhaps slightly annoy but not deeply harm Phebus' wife and her lover during their act of fornication. It cries out fatally, however, when Phebus comes home after the scene of adultery:

The white crowe, that heeng ay in the cage,
Biheeld hire werk [their adultery], and seyde never a word.
And whan that hoom was come Phebus, the lord,
This crowe sang 'Cokkow! Cokkow! Cokkow!'

(ll. 240-43)

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After a possibly guilty silence follows decidedly guilty speech. Language is, apparently, the rude and cold forest we prefer to the comfort of the golden cage and comfort of speechlessness. There is no way in which speech can ever be contained, as the tale has warned us already through its subtle metaphoric implications, equating the crow's cage to the mechanisms that control language:

Taak any bryd, and put it in a cage,
And do al thyn entente and thy corage
To fostre it tendrely with mete and drynke
Of alle deyntees that thou kanst bithynke,
And keep it al so clenly as thou may,
Although his cage of gold be never so gay,
Yet hath this brid, by twenty thousand foold,
Levere in a forest that is rude and coold
Goon ete wormes and swich wrecchednesse.
For evere this brid wol doon his bisynesse
To escape out of his cage, yif he may.

(ll. 163-73)

Speech demands a 'libertee' (l. 174) to which we are all enslaved. Worms and wretchedness – 'quaad' things of alle kinds – is what it feeds on. As V.J. Scattergood has demonstrated in an excellent discussion of this tale and its prologue, the Manciple himself expresses things in such a manner that he constantly denies what is being said.¹⁰ In this tale, the theme of language gradually takes over from the theme of unfaithful women. In her Oxford Guide to *The Canterbury Tales*, Helen Cooper demonstrates how in connection with this theme, the manner and substance of speech contradict each other all the time, and how the 'word' that 'moot cosyn be to the werkyng' (l. 210) fails to do so, and how if it did, 'it would be impossible to enjoin silence at all'.¹¹

The disparity between the manner of speech and its substance or purpose, leads us back again to our Flemish proverbs. In its context in the Cook's Prologue and Tale, 'sooth pley, quaad pley', pointed at the dangers of a speech that reveals a hard truth through mockery, either because the manner of speaking might be bad or unsuccessful (a bad joke), or because the substance might be vicious, or both. In what might be considered an epilogue to the Manciple's Tale, Phebus yields the floor to his mother, who, making use of a second Flemish proverb, warns against the 'muchel harm' (l. 337) done by speaking itself:

The Flemyng seith, and lerne it if thee leste,
That litel janglyng causeth muchel reste.

(ll. 349-50)

The crow has mocked the god of poetry through speaking the truth, and silence, in this case, would have been advisable. Grauls and Vanderheijden point out that there is a 'slight difference' between the Flemish source of the proverb ('Luttel onderwinds maakt groote rust')¹² and Chaucer's translation:

. . . 'janglyng' being usually understood as a purely verbal meddling with somebody else's affairs, 'onderwind' apparently conveying in most cases the idea of a more active interference, as the different Latin translations of the proverb seem to suggest. It should however be borne in mind that in more than one example, quoted in the *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek* [Verwijs and Verdam], 'onderwinden' can simply be taken as an equivalent expression of 'to jangle'.¹³

Although the form of the crow's revelatory speech to Phebus seems, on the surface at least, to be honest and straightforward (no 'sot pley' here!), there is wrapped in it the kind of viciousness that the Flemish word 'onderwinden' suggests. The words of the crow to cuckolded Phebus, unlike those of the Host to the Cook in the Prologue to the Cook's Tale, or those of the Manciple to the Cook in the Prologue to the Manciple's own tale, *seem* to speak the truth in earnest rather than in mockery, but ultimately even in the form, there is hidden malice and mockery, as one can infer from Helen Cooper's comment:

The crow's account of the adultery has the same summary pointedness as the brisk narrative that recounts it in the first place:

Anon they wroghten al hire lust volage. (239)

'On thy bed thy wyf I saugh hym swyve.' (255)

There is still a touch of French euphemism in the first of these lines [in fact a quotation of the Manciple's words]; the second [spoken by the crow] is as brutal as it could be. The Manciple's

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Tale equates such brutality with realism, to claim it to be a faithful representation of reality.¹⁴

In fact, the crow invites Phebus to reduce truth to a brutal 'reality', for which too absolute a claim is made. A seemingly straightforward communication of the truth may be the biggest mockery of them all. The formal simplicity of the crow's communication is a rhetorical stratagem.

On the surface, the two Flemish proverbs seem to point in opposite directions. The Cook's warns against making a truth of mockery, the other against making a mockery of truth through gossip. But was not the critical comment made by the Host on the Cook's recipes and kitchen hygiene a basic 'realistic' truth as well? And could not the same be said about the comments made by the Manciple on the Cook's drunkenness and foul mouth? And would it not have been better also for the Host, as for the Manciple, to keep his mouth shut about the Cook's shortcomings? Ultimately, there does not need to be a fundamental difference between the contexts in which both proverbs are placed. They are interchangeable and reversible, like so many of the words we utter.

The proverbs are similar also in other ways. Both appear as radical drops in style because each is placed by the speaker in the context of Solomon's wisdom (Salomon in his langage' – l. 4330 in the Prologue to the Cook's Tale; 'Reed Salomon, so wys and honourable' – l. 344 in the Manciple's Tale). Especially in a context in which we are reminded of biblical wisdom, both popular sayings come across as truths too trivial to reveal anything fundamental about speech or rhetoric, or the manner in which we should speak, or the value of silence. The Manciple says and repeats that he is 'a man noight textueel' (l. 235 and l. 315), but subtly exploits the mechanisms of a language that always says too little and too much. The Cook, with his exploitation of sudden reversals of meaning, appeared to be not much different in this. It is time for the Parson to take over and speak the word that is no longer based on 'fables and swich wrecchedness' (ParsTPro, l. 34), but on God's truth.

Erik Hertog (like J.F. Vanderheijden, an eminent Flemish Chaucerian) wrote the following conclusion to his study of *Chaucer's Fabliaux as Analogues*:

No tale (or 'solution') is allowed to dominate the scene for long, and even the cleverest of verbal manipulators can be brought down. Perhaps the most telling and striking sign of this ceaseless ambivalence, is the recurrent harping on the theme of 'earnest in game'. In whatever context it occurs, it is clearly never meant

anymore as an irreducible opposition, but as an 'and... and' relation, in which one term is often even indistinguishable from the other, or has *become* the other.¹⁵

Erik Hertog's words seem like a direct comment on the way Chaucer juggles with his Flemish proverbs, their meanings and their contexts.

Should it come as a surprise, then, that the worst of verbal manipulators in the *Canterbury Tales*, the Pardoner, should tell his tale about *Flemish* revellers, who by swearing and blaspheming join the crowd of those who tell ungodly (and therefore, un-parsonlike) tales? The Flemings themselves may be archetypal 'manipulators and subverters of established meaning'.¹⁶ They are described as 'yonge folk that haunteden folye' (PardT, l. 464), and are, in the Flemish sense of the word, well and truly 'sot'. It will take more than the Squire's abortive 'crusade' against 'Flaundes, Artoys, and Pycardie' (GP, l. 86) to teach those Flemings a lesson (in a comic reversal, the lack of success of the military campaigns against Flemish towns in 1383 should also teach the Squire a lesson). Should one wonder at the Flemish-sounding name of the 'clerk' or 'textual' scholar the Wife of Bath marries for the sake of his lovely legs? Jankin or Janekin, he is called. His name is a Flemish diminutive for the very common Flemish name 'Jan', (i.e. 'John'), and he manipulates texts for the destruction of women's reputation. The Wife of Bath has a hard task to get rid of his 'quaad pley'. She may be a match to him, though, as she believes she is to the Flemish cloth-makers of 'Ypres and of Gaunt' (l. 448). She certainly is a match to the Flemings in the creation of illusions: are there 'truly' important weavers and cloth-traders in the town (Bath) of this 'verray jangleresse' (WBTPro, l. 638)? 'Much jangling' rather than 'litel janglyng' will be this Wife's motto. Sir Thopas, who is from the Flemish town of 'Poperyng' (Thop, l. 720; modern spelling Poperinge) and has bought 'hosen broun' in 'Brugges' (Thop, l. 733), is a very innocent manipulator by comparison, trying hard as he does to make us believe he is a genuine Flemish knight rather than a fake, provincial *nouveau riche*. On the whole, his 'sot pley' has no malice in it but is exceedingly boring.

Only some, it would seem, preserve the integrity of the merchant in the Shipman's Tale and manage to remain interesting, when they travel to 'Brugges' or other Flemish towns to acquire Flemish merchandise or bonds. The Shipman's merchant shows himself in debt openly when he is, and his deeds are in accordance with his words.¹⁷ Of the Merchant of the General Prologue, by contrast, 'Ther wiste no wight that he was in dette' (GP, l. 280). This tradesman masks his real financial situation by showing off with 'a Flaundryssh bever hat' (GP, l. 272), one of the most

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expensive commodities he could possibly get to adorn his head and create an illusion of wealth. In the case of the Merchant in the General Prologue, Flanders is again associated, as usual, with signs or messages that do not cover what they mean – if anything.

Meaninglessness may indeed be the ultimate threat. It is significant that in spite of the appearances, the crow is not reduced to silence, as is the Cook before the Manciple's Tale, but to raw noise. When its white 'swan-like' feathers have been pulled out and replaced by a coat as black as grim 'reality', it will continue to make noise – not the sweet sounds it used to make, but ghastly cries:

Ne nevere sweete noyse shul ye make,
But evere crie agayn tempest and rayn.

(ll. 300-01)

This reference is a cruel and no doubt, on Chaucer's part, deliberate corruption of its source. The closest analogue is the *Integumenta Ovidii*, which describes the raven as a sacred animal capable of foretelling tempests, as Phoebus does.¹⁸ What used to be a divine feature of human language, becomes in Chaucer trivial jangling against the elements. The image of the mouth being hell-mouth (used earlier in the Prologue to the Manciple's Tale, and applied to the Cook) has by no means been dispelled: 'A wikked tonge is worse than a feend' (l. 320), says Phebus' mother. There is a great deal of noise around us in the

litel toun

Which that ycleped is Bobbe-up-and-down

(ll. 1-2)

where the Manciple quarrels with the Cook and then tells his tale explaining how the crow's harmonious song has been turned into harsh notes. Language itself wickedly bobs up and down.

Flemings, of all people, make most noise. The conclusion of the Nun's Priest's Tale makes this clear when it describes the cries of despair among Chauntecleer's 'woful hennes' when their hero is carried away by the fox. Trojan wives may have produced noble and woeful sounds when their town fell; the wives of senators may have made lamentable but still noble noise when Nero burnt their city, but one wonders whether one would designate the cries of Flemish prostitutes that became victims of 'Jakke Straw and his meynee'¹⁹ (NPT, l. 3394) as equally noble.

Guido Latré

Flemings come, as usual, as a rhetorical anticlimax where we expect a rhetorical climax. They seem to make noble language take a turn in the opposite direction.

NOTES

¹ Jan Grauls and Jan Frans Vanderheijden, 'Two Flemish Proverbs in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 13:2 (1934), 745-49.

² All references to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are based on Larry D. Benson (gen. ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³ See explanatory note, Fragment I, l. 4331 in *The Riverside Chaucer*: 'Ecclus. 11.29 "Bring not every man into thine house; for many are the plots of the deceitful man",' with further references for the attribution of Ecclesiasticus to Salomon.

⁴ Grauls and Vanderheijden, 749: 'The fact that in several Middle Dutch locutions both "spel" and "spot" are used synonymously in the sense of "jest", may lend some plausible basis to the assumption of the probable existence of another Middle Dutch form of this proverb "Waar spel, kwaad spel", which in some way might account for the variant reading (Sooth play, quaat spel) of two of the manuscripts.' Whilst Grauls and Vanderheijden do not make reference to the connotations of sneering and viciousness that 'spotte' inevitably has, it is not possible that they could have meant the word to be equated with 'jest' in any neutral way, but only negatively as, say, a jest at someone's expense.

⁵ See Grauls and Vanderheijden, 749, n. 3; and *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 853, explanatory note on l. 4357 of Fragment I.

⁶ *Proverbia Communia: A Fifteenth Century Collection of Dutch Proverbs together with the Low German Version*, ed. by Richard Jente, Folklore Series 4 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1947). Given this date of publication it was less easy for Grauls and Vanderheijden to get hold of the Delft edition than it was for me. This might explain why they did not find the combination 'quaad/ quaat spel' in the *Proverbia Communia*. P.J. Harrebomée mentions the combination 'kwaad [i.e. quaad] spel' also in 'Dat zal kwaad spel maken' and 'Dat zou kwaad spel in het gasthuis gemaakt hebben', but 'kwaad spel maken' here means 'to cause problems, to create havoc', which makes the expression more remote from its Chaucerian use. See P.J. Harrebomée, *Spreekwoordenboek der Nederlandscher Taal, of verzameling van Nederlandscher spreekwoorden en spreekwoordelijke uitdrukkingen van vroegeren en lateren tijd*. Part 2 (Utrecht: Kemink en Zoon, 1861), p. 286. It is more useful to note that on the basis of various sources, Harrebomée does confirm the existence of the expression 'Het is kwaad spel, daar de een lacht en de ander schreit' (cf. Harrebomée, p. 286).

⁷ The author of this article heard the expression used repeatedly by rural Flemish speakers born before World War I in the areas just to the east and south of Bruges or 'Brugges', the Flemish town Chaucer refers to more often than any other in *The Canterbury Tales* (see esp. the Shipman's Tale).

⁸ Explanatory note to I, 4357 in *The Riverside Chaucer* suggests that the 'use of the Flemish adjective *quaad* (bad) may suggest that Chaucer knew the proverb in Flemish form (although *quade* appears in ProPrT VII.438)'. Canon Camille Looten suggests a lot more words which in his view Chaucer borrowed directly from Middle Dutch: 'il est certain que de loin en loin, il cueille un épi dans le champ étranger où il s'attarde et qu'il en garnit son propre idiome'. See Camille Looten, *Chaucer, ses modèles, ses sources, sa religion, Mémoires et travaux publiés par des professeurs des facultés catholiques de Lille*, 38 (Lille: Economat des facultés catholiques, 1931), p. 214. It is not certain, however, that Chaucer even visited Flanders. Moreover, Looten's list of words borrowed by Chaucer personally is unreliable. Words like 'wanhope' (for despair) and 'ey' (for egg) were in common use in coastal and other areas on both sides of the North Sea. On the whole, Looten's chapter on 'Chaucer et la Flandre' (pp. 190-214) should be treated with care.

⁹ E. Verwijs and J. Verdam, *Middelnederlandsch woordenboek*, Part 7 ('s Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1912) column 1598: 'sot, bnw'.

¹⁰ V.J. Scattergood, 'The Manciple's Manner of Speaking', *Essays in Criticism* 24 (1974), 124-146.

¹¹ Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 394.

¹² Grauls and Vanderheijden, 746.

¹³ Grauls and Vanderheijden, 747-748.

¹⁴ Cooper, p. 394.

¹⁵ Erik Hertog, *Chaucer's Fabliaux as Analogues*, *Mediaevalia Lovaniensia, Series 1, Studia* 19 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1991), p. 238.

¹⁶ Hertog, p. 233.

¹⁷ On the honesty of the merchant in the Shipman's Tale and the straightforwardness of his speech, see V.J. Scattergood, 'The Originality of the Shipman's Tale', *Chaucer Review* 11 (1976-77), 210-31.

¹⁸ Cf. *The Riverside Chaucer* edition, p. 954, explanatory note on l. 301.

¹⁹ In connection with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, *The Anonimale Chronicle* says: 'Mesme le iour de Corpore Christi en le matyne, les ditz comunes de Kent abaterount une measone destwes [a brothel] pres le pount de Loundres qe fuist en mayns del frows [women] de Flaundes et avoient a ferme [were renting] la dite measone del meare de Loundres'. See *The Anonimale Chronicle 1333 to 1381*. From a Ms. written at St. Mary's Abbey, York, ed. by V.H. Galbraith (Manchester: Manchester University Press; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970, repr. from 1927 with minor corrections), p. 140. It is noteworthy that the Flemish word 'frow' (with a Flemish plural in -s) is used here in a French text as a marker of the Flemishness of London prostitutes. I am grateful to Dr Paul Arblaster for drawing my

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attention to this reference. For her help in doing the research on references to Flemings and Flanders in general, I should like to thank Delphine Piraprez.