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MALKYN IN THE MAN OF LAW'S HEADLINK

By MARTIN STEVENS

In the Headlink to the Man of Law's Tale, the Host observes:

Wel kan Senec and many a philosopre
Biwaillen tyme moore than gold in cofre;
For 'los of catel may recovered be,
But los of tyme shendeth us,' quod he.
It wol nat come agayn, withouten drede,
Namoore than wole Malkynes maydenhede,
Whan she hath lost it in hir wantownesse. (II.25-31)¹

The allusion to *Malkyn* in this passage is customarily explained by editors as being proverbial, referring to a "wanton woman."² I believe that this annotation is questionable and that the Host's reference recalls the story which had just been told by the Reeve. The point is of some importance textually, as I shall show, since it would indicate that Chaucer meant to disregard the Cook's Prologue and fragmentary Tale which appear immediately after the Reeve's Tale and that he meant to continue his narrative directly with the Man of Law's Tale. It would further serve to refute the argument, recently renewed, that Chaucer meant originally to use the Man of Law's Tale as the first story in the *Canterbury Tales*.³

It is likely that instead of alluding to the "proverbial wanton," the host has in mind the Miller's daughter in the Reeve's Tale. We recall that the clerk Aleyn, after his night's sport, departs from his mistress with these words:

... Fare weel, Malyne, sweete wight!
The day is come, I may no lenger byde. (I.4236-37)

Malyne here is a familiar variant of *Malkyn*, both being pet names for *Matilda*.⁴ Thus, when the Host refers to *Malkyn* in the Man of Law's Introduction, he quite possibly recollects, with characteristic relish, the outcome of the Reeve's Tale. In his long-winded remarks he insists, ironically, that time is wasting away. He reminds the pilgrims with a Senecan aphorism that "los of catel may recovered be" (as, indeed, the bag of meal in the Reeve's Tale was) but that "los of tyme shendeth us." And just as time past is lost without hope of recovery, so is "Malkynes maidenhede . . . in hir wantownesse." It is thus that the Host dismisses the frivolity of the Reeve's Tale — with a typical last reminder of its salty dénouement — and that, consequently, he provides a bridge leading to the more solemn tale of the Man of Law about virtuous Custance.

The interpretation of *Malkyn* as a popular name for a wanton, moreover, finds no firm support in extant works of Middle English literature. This

identification is made by Skeat⁵ solely on the basis of the occurrence of *Malkyn* in *Piers Plowman*.⁶ In the latter instance, Skeat conjectures wantonness where apparently only rusticity and homeliness are implied:

Thauh 3e be trewe of 3oure tonge and trowelich wynne,
 And be as chast as a chyld þat noþer chit ne fyghteþ,
 Bote yf [3e] loue leelliche and lene þe poure
 Of such good as god sent goodliche parte,
 3e haue no more meryt in masse ne in houres
 Than malkyn of hure maidenhod wham no man desireþ.
 (II.176-81)⁷

Skeat annotates *malkyn* here as "a wanton, but ugly slattern" and circularly lists the occurrence of the name in the Man of Law's Headlink as the basis for his gloss.⁸ But the context of this allusion to *Malkyn* in *Piers Plowman* hardly justifies the terms "wanton" and "slattern," for the whole point of the passage is that this *Malkyn*, unlike the one referred to in the Man of Law's Headlink, remains chaste.

The *Malkyn* of *Piers Plowman*, instead of being a prostitute, seems to be an undesirable wench, a household drudge—one whose name has so many associations with kitchen life that it came to be "transferred from the maid to the mop."⁹ Chaucer, in fact, uses the name precisely with its proverbial domestic associations when, in the Nun's Priest's Tale, he includes among the excited pursuers of the col-fox one "*Malkyn*, with a dystaf in hir hand" (VII.3384). Significantly, the *OED* gives only the general sense of kitchen wench for its Middle English citations (s.v. *Malkin*, *Mawkin* 1); it is not until the late sixteenth century that the meaning "lewd woman" is recorded (s.v. *Malkin*, *Mawkin* 2). The phrase "*Malkyn*'s maidenhead," because the words alliterate, is, of course, the right kind to pass into the realm of the proverbial.¹⁰ But that it had already entered this realm when Chaucer used it seems doubtful, especially since no other contemporary citations are extant in which *Malkyn* denotes a "wanton." Hence, it may well be possible that instead of reflecting popular usage, as is generally thought, Chaucer in fact influenced the sixteenth-century meaning of "lewd woman" for *Malkyn*.¹¹

I have already mentioned that the Host's reference to *Malkyn* is of some importance textually. It serves, first of all, to establish a hitherto unrecognized connection between the Man of Law's Tale and the Reeve's Tale. No doubt this connection has been overlooked because commentators have sought a link between the fragmentary Cook's Tale and that of the Man of Law. If, however, Chaucer meant to delete the Cook's fragment at the time when he began the Man of Law's Introduction, the immediately preceding story and the one to which he would then have connected the Man of Law's Tale would have been that of the Reeve. Albert C. Baugh, for one, in his recent edition fails to recognize this possibility, observing that "there is nothing at the end of the Cook's unfinished narrative to indicate what was to follow, and no reference in the Prologue to the Man of Law's Tale to a preceding narrator."¹² The same oversight, I believe, led Carleton Brown, and recently Charles A. Owen, to the hypothesis that the Man of Law's Tale was once intended to be the opening story of the *Canterbury Tales*. The

strongest support for the latter theory has been the contention that the beginning of the Man of Law's Introduction is a conventional opening for a long work—an opening which is characteristically marked by highly formal language and a specific allusion to time. But the mention of Malkyn occurs very quickly after this opening and is thematically linked to it. If, therefore, it refers back to Malyne of the Reeve's Tale, as I believe it does, it stands to invalidate the Brown hypothesis.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale echoes the Cook's Prologue in at least one passage. The Cook, responding directly to the outcome of the Reeve's Tale, is led in quick succession, first to repeat an aphorism ascribed to Solomon, then to recollect the *jape* played on the miller, finally to remind himself not to tarry and to go on with his story:

Wel seyde Salomon in his langage,
 'Ne bryng nat every man into thyn hous';
 For herberwyng by nyghte is perilous.
 Wel oghte a man avysed for to be
 Whom that he broghte into his pryvetee.
 I pray to God, so yeve me sorwe and care
 If evere, sitthe I highte Hogge of Ware,
 Herde I a millere bettre yset a-werk.
 He hadde a jape of malice in the derk.
 But God forbede that we stynte heere;
 And therefore, if ye vouche-sauf to heere
 A tale of me, that am a povre man,
 I wol yow telle, as wel as evere I kan,
 A little jape that fil in oure citee. (I.4330-4343)

One wonders, in fact, whether the "jape of malice" in 4338 is not a playful pun on the name *Malyne* and, thus, an earlier attempt to recall it. The context re-enforces the possibility, since *privetee*, which occurs four lines earlier, is used elsewhere by Chaucer unmistakably as an obscene pun (see I.3163).¹³ But even without the pun, there is a striking similarity in the sequence of details between the foregoing passage and the one under consideration from the Man of Law's Introduction. Perhaps another glance at it will facilitate the comparison:

Wel kan Senec and many a philosopre
 Biwailen tyme moore than gold in cofre;
 For 'los of catel may recovered be,
 But los of tyme shendeth us,' quod he.
 It wol nat come agayn, withouten drede,
 Namooore than wole Malkynes maydenhede,
 Whan she hath lost it in hir wantownesse.
 Lat us nat mowlen thus in ydelnesse.
 "Sire Man of Lawe," quod he, "so have ye blis,
 Telle us a tale anon, as forward is." (II.25-34)

Here again, there is an aphorism, this time from Seneca, again there is a recollection of Malyn of the Reeve's Tale, and again there is a reminder to get on with the story-telling. In keeping with the more solemn tone of the

forthcoming Man of Law's Tale, the passage removes specific references to the *jape* (the Cook, after all, was about to tell another *jape*), and it makes use of the reference to Malkyn in order to moralize about the passage of time. However, in its rhetorical structure, the passage clearly recalls its antecedent in the Cook's Prologue. The likelihood is that Chaucer, having decided not to follow the Reeve's Tale with the Cook's (probably because the latter would then have been a third successive fabliau), wrote the Man of Law's Introduction and consciously reworked the passage in question from the Cook's Prologue. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the Cook is "introduced" much later in the Manciple's Prologue, where the Host asks him to tell a story without once acknowledging that the Cook had already been introduced to the reader.¹⁴

It seems likely that *Malkyn* in the Man of Law's Introduction has long been misinterpreted. Based on Skeat's doubtful explanation of *Malkyn* in *Piers Plowman*, the standard note on Chaucer's use of the name needs to be revised. It appears that, instead of speaking about a proverbial prostitute, the Host referred directly to the preceding Reeve's Tale where a palpable *Malkyn* lost her "maydenhede . . . in hir wantownesse."

NOTES

- ¹ Citations are from F. N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).
- ² See, for example, Albert C. Baugh, *Chaucer's Major Poetry* (New York, 1963), p. 313, and F. N. Robinson, p. 690.
- ³ See Carleton Brown, "The Man of Law's Headlink and the Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Studies in Philology*, XXXIV (1937), 8-35; and Charles A. Owen, Jr. "The Earliest Plan of the 'Canterbury Tales,'" *Mediaeval Studies*, XXI (1959), 202-210.
- ⁴ See W. W. Skeat, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1900), V, 135. Skeat indicates that the *Catholicon Anglicum* glosses *Malyn* as *tersorium*, a sense synonymous with that listed for *Malkyn* by the *Promptorium Parvulorum* (ed. A. L. Mayhew, EETS E.S. 102, p. 280), which glosses it by "ovyn swepyr." See also E. J. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*, s.v. Mary, where *Malkyn* is listed as a derivative of *Mary*.
- ⁵ Skeat, loc. cit.
- ⁶ *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman: Notes to Texts A, B, and C*, ed. W. W. Skeat, EETS O.S. 67, p. 39.
- ⁷ *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman: C Text*, ed. W. W. Skeat, EETS O.S. 54, p. 25.
- ⁸ *Piers Plowman*, Notes, p. 39.
- ⁹ Ernest Weekley, *Romance of Words* (London, 1949), p. 36.
- ¹⁰ *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, lists "Malkin's maidenhood" as a proverb, but the proof of its existence consists entirely of the two instances, by Langland and Chaucer, here recorded.

- ¹¹ It should be noted that Henryson uses the name *Makyne* in his *Robene and Makyne*. It is generally thought that the maiden *Makyne* "seems to have been his own creation" (see Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*, Edinburgh, 1958, p. 36). Since Henryson was strongly influenced by Chaucer, he might well have been inspired by the Reeve's Tale for the naming of *Makyne*. But one should bear in mind that this *Makyne*, while offering her "madinheid" (l.36) to her true love Robene, retains her virtue. Moreover, Henryson does not make a phrasal combination of the words *Makyne* and *madinheid*.
- ¹² *Chaucer's Major Poetry*, p. 313.
- ¹³ See the discussion of the word by Paul F. Baum, "Chaucer's Puns," *PMLA*, LXXI (1956), 242.
- ¹⁴ F. N. Robinson, p. 688, observes that Chaucer probably "meant to cancel the existing Cook's fragment and not to introduce the Cook until near the end of the series."