

Review Article

## The Problem with Morality: A Comparison between Chaucer's Tales and Shakespeare's Plays

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**Abstract:** Morality is generally considered as a set of norms and principles that determine the difference between good and bad behaviour as well as concerning the rightness or wrongness of a human act. In literature, moral issues are frequently represented in prose and poetry with the aim to highlight a specific problem, like adultery or blasphemy, and eventually to convey a message to the reader or audience concerning the importance of good conduct. Morality plays, such as the Canterbury tales, written in the late Middle Ages influenced the representation of virtues and conscience of the theatrical performances of the later Elizabethan era. For the purpose of this investigation, a comparison is made between Chaucer's representations of morality in the Pardoner's and in the Miller's tales, and how the same topic is depicted in two Shakespeare's plays, *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure*.

**Keywords:** Morality, virtue, vice, Chaucer, Shakespeare.

### INTRODUCTION

In the Middle Ages, morality plays were an example of moral guidance since they served [1] an important role in underlining the distinction between virtues and vices, by representing the interior conflict of the human soul and the problem of achieving God's mercy in a historical period in which there was a main concern for the Christian doctrine and the seven deadly sins (pride, lust, greed, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth). The Canterbury Tales consist of stories in which Chaucer assembled characters from different social classes with the aim to represent moral issues [8]. Greed, dishonesty, self-interest, indecency and sexual desires are among the shameful behaviour represented in the Pardoner's and Miller's tales which are discussed further. These type of plays are consistently considered as precursors or forerunners of the Elizabethan drama [2]. As a matter of fact, Shakespeare was also concerned with the problem of morality and, for the purpose of this study; two of his plays will be discussed: *Macbeth* with its representation of evil forces, ambition and crisis of conscience and *Measure for Measure* which is concerned mainly with sexuality, personal responsibility and feelings of guilt.

#### Chaucer's tales

##### **The Pardoner's tale**

The Pardoner's Prologue, for instance, begins in line 334 by introducing the problem of greed, a capital vice, as an example of dissolute behaviour: "Radix malorum est Cupiditas". It is the character himself who explicitly tells that he is a deceiver and a liar as shown in lines 389-390: "By this gaude [...] pardoner" and similarly in lines 394 and 403 in which he admits to tell falsities to people and to preach only for his personal advantage. His inclination to greed is repeated twice in lines 424 and 433: "I preche of no thyng but for coveityse", likely a device used by Chaucer, in a comical way [3] to underline the main fact that the Pardoner's true nature is discordant with his social and official role of seller of indulgences. The account of the rioters concerns not only greed but also other immoral acts such as homicide, deceit and selfishness. As a matter of fact, the three men are depicted as sinners since they are committed to gambling as in line 834: "And pleye at dees" and to drinking as in line 663: "Were set hem in a taverne to drynke". Their behaviour deteriorates when they all decide to defy death and to keep the treasure for themselves as described in lines 777-786: "Bretheren [...] this gold is oures". The situation becomes even worse when an intention to kill for personal profit

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emerges in lines 845-846: "...poyson beye, [...] his felawes tweye", and in lines 828-831: "And I shal ryve [...] al this gold departed be". In line 854, the use of the word *rattes* likely refers to the deterioration of human's behavior since men are compared to a repugnant, evil-looking, scaring creature. The tree, under which the treasure is found, lines 765-770, is an *ook*, typically a symbol of life, which is in opposition to the rioters' intention to defy death, thus creating a contrast between life and death, or good and bad. In addition, personification is used here to give to death a human attribute as shown in line 763: "...there he wole abyde". Another important aspect is the difference between old and young men. The old man could represent God or be an example of moral rectitude and wisdom since he is depicted as humble and pacific in lines 713-715: "An oold man [...] God yow see!" who is unjustly despised by the three men who call him a churl and wish him misfortune, as in line 717: "...What, carl, with sory grace!"

### **The Miller's tale**

The Miller's tale, instead, is about adultery and lust. The story is told by a character, the Miller, who occupies a lower social position when compared to the Pardoner who is a member of the clerics. This tale is generally associated to the genre of the fabliau [4], a type of story of Medieval France that dealt with sexuality and romance, typically expressed in a comical way. In the Prologue, the Miller is immediately depicted as drunk in lines 3121-3122: "... for drunken [...] his hors he sat", not an honourable habit that of drinking but condition of which he is aware as in line 3138: "That I am dronke; I knowe it by my soun". His attitude towards the other pilgrims is of disrespect and unkindness, as in lines 3122-3123, "He nolde [...] for his curteisie" and, moreover, he is quarrelsome as shown in line 3133, frequently swears as in line 3125: "By armes.." and 3132 : "By Goodes soule...". The tale of the Miller is so vulgar and immoral that the audience is warned about these aspects likely in respect of people's sensitivity as shown in lines 3169-3185: "But tolde his cherles tale in his manere". It is interesting to discuss the first description of Nicholas, the clerk, who in lines 3199-3220, appears as a good person, introverted and humble since "...he was sleigh and ful privee,[...]meke for to see". A man of culture for his interest in astronomy, "His astrelabic", and music, "a gay sautrie", and was also a good singer. The musical instrument can be a metaphor for the male sexual organ and, moreover, the choice of the song "Angelus ad virginem" is likely made to create a contrast with the themes of the play, adultery and cunning. Likewise, the initial description of the carpenter's wife, Alisoun (lines 3233-3270) is that of an immaculate person since she is compared to a *wezele*, an animal that is small and tender but also sly and tricky. She is dressed in bright colours and is "whit as morne milk", likely to symbolize freshness and purity. In addition, she is compared to a *popelote*, to the sweetnees of *meeth*, to flowers (a *prymerole* and a *piggesnye*) and could sing like a *swalwe*, an ability she shares with Nicholas. The immorality of the two lovers consists in their secret plan to do something dissolute as shown in line 3297: "Ye moste been ful deerne, as in this cas". They both decide to engage in their conspiracy against the good carpenter as in line 3301: "And thus they been accorded..." and, moreover, make a fool of another man, Absolon, who differently from Nicholas represents romantic love and is just asking for a kiss as shown in lines 3716-3717: "Thanne kysse me [...] for the love of me". In the end, John, the poor husband is bluffed twice since he is publicly labelled as mad in line 3846: "That he was holde wood in al the toun"; fooled and disdained for being too good and ingenuous, a rather comical and unfair ending.

### **Shakespearean plays**

#### **Macbeth**

The opening scene of Macbeth [5] introduces the dichotomy between good and evil, right and wrong in the words of the three witches (1.1.10): "Fair is foul, and foul is fair". This expression, in association with the use of natural elements such as thunder, lightning and rain and the presence of supernatural, magical creatures, all contribute to create an initial atmosphere of mystery, darkness and turmoil that will characterize the entire play. In 1.3.126-41, Macbeth starts doubting about his own ideas and intentions. He is reflecting on what has been predicted by the witches: "Two truths are told", and on what is right or wrong to do: "Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill [...] if good". In addition to this rumination, there are physical complaints that likely express a sense of apprehension as shown with "... doth unfix my hair", "...heart knock at my ribs" and "...shakes so my single state of man". In contrast to the depiction of the character's turmoil, the soliloquy continues in 1.4.51-53 where doubts apparently decline and the intention to act wickedly emerges: "Let not light see [...] when it is done, to see". The use of terms like *black* and *fears* emphasize the evil wishes along with the use of *eye*, which is repeated twice, likely to highlight the participation of the spirit since it is commonly known that the eyes are the window to the soul. Lady Macbeth is similarly affected by ambitious desires as shown in 1.5.13-28. Her intentions are more evil than those of her husband whom she considers as too good-hearted: "too full o' th' milk of human kindness", an aspect which can be associated with the initial description of Macbeth as a hero, in the words of King Duncan (1.2.24). Differently from the future king, Lady Macbeth is represented as an instigator: "Thus thou must do", as diabolical: "my spirits in thine ear" and an expert of black magic as in 1.5.38-41: "Come you spirits [...] of direst cruelty". The representation of tormented souls and troubled consciences is also given by the description of psychological symptoms that affect the couple, such as hallucinations and sleepwalking. In Macbeth's soliloquy (2.1.33-49) the dagger can be considered as the production of a guilty conscience as in the words "from the heat-oppressed brain?". Moreover, "the bloody business" likely refers to the idea that an immoral deed will be soon accomplished. A similar situation occurs later in the play, in 3.4.88-91, in which feelings of guilt continue to trouble Macbeth's soul at the sight of his friend's ghost: "...our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss". Somnambulism is what Lady Macbeth suffers

from as shown in 5.1.27-70. She is evidently in an altered state of mind and the sleep disorder reflects her tormented conscience. She displays a compulsion to remove imaginary blood stains from her hands with water, an element symbolizing purity, differently from 2.2.65 where she estimates that “a little water..” is sufficient to clean the deed. Interestingly, her condition is considered as incurable by a physician since “infected minds” should be eventually treated by a priest with some divine intervention, probably a connection to the practice of confession of sins.

### Measure for Measure

Differently from Macbeth, Measure for Measure [5] has a main concern with sinful behaviour and God’s mercy and is not characterized by a tragic ending rather by a final reconciliation among the characters. The title of the play alludes to Christ’s sermon “With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” [6] and thus it deals with moral judgment and personal responsibility as well as corruption and sexual immorality. Interesting is the representation of the interior conflict that affects one of the main protagonists of the play, Angelo, who represents justice and moral rectitude. In 2.2. 167-191, Angelo’s soliloquy depicts a conscience that is tormented by the illicit proposal made to Isabella, an aspiring nun: “What’s this [...] her fault or mine?”. The repetition of the first question twice gives emphasis to the thoughtful experience of the character. Feelings of culpability are illustrated by the use of similes: “Do as the carrion does” since a carrion is lifeless and empty inside in contrast to “the flower” which symbolizes innocence, and likely women’s virginity. In line 174, the “waste ground” is probably a metaphor that confirms the idea of Angelo as perishable and rotten. In addition, during the soliloquy, responsibility moves from Angelo: “What dost thou..” to some external entity: “o cunning enemy” that is inducing him into temptation, apparently in an attempt to externalize his guilty feelings. Finally, the deputy is represented in his true nature, that of a man made of flesh and instincts which strongly contrasts with his social role of officer of the law. Among the characters of the play, Angelo is not the only one to blame for his misbehavior. According to a scholar [7], Isabella’s decision to preserve her chastity and reputation, rather than save Claudio’s life, can be seen as selfish and insensitive. This aspect is evident in 2.4.184-187 in which she says to herself that: “Isabel live chaste, and brother die: [...] for his soul’s rest”, likely in an effort to save her brother’s spiritual integrity and, at the same time, her virginity regardless of their fraternal relationship. Isabella’s decision is poorly accepted by Claudio who, during their meeting in the prison scene (3.1.134-153), remarks that it would be praiseworthy to reject her ethical beliefs: “What sin you do [...] it becomes a virtue”. Then, Isabella receives a second controversial proposal by a man and is forced to defend her principles by underlining her moral superiority: “Thy sin’s not accidental, but a trade”. In this scene, her reaction is very strong and represents her deep anger towards Claudio: “O fie, fie, fie!” which is in contrast to the “Sweet sister” as she is called previously. Remarkable is also the use of terms to describe Claudio’s indecent conduct: “beast”, “wretch” and “warped slip of wilderness”. In the end, two different points of view about ethics emerge in the scene: a rigid moral code expressed by Isabella, who is interested in protecting her future and a rather flexible approach to morality in Claudio who, on the other side, is only trying to avoid an unfair sentence.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Chaucer and Shakespeare should not be considered as two strict moralists but it is evident that they were both concerned with moral problems. The former represented morality in a comical way by writing stories that were paradoxical and hilarious and, clearly, with no intention to minimize or underestimate ethical issues but to entertain an audience. The contradictions and ambiguities shown in the case of the Pardoner, and in the tale told by the Miller [9, 10], eventually reflect the moral decline and the social disparities that occurred in Medieval England. In the Shakespearean plays discussed here, the description of the complexity of immoral behavior and of its psychological consequences is remarkable. The use of monologues in both plays is a useful device that represents the introspection into the human mind and the examination of thoughts and feelings concerning moral rectitude and individual culpability, as in Macbeth’s and Angelo’s soliloquies. Moreover, the use of figurative language by both authors is helpful to highlight the characters’ inconsistencies and incoherence as shown by the frequent analogies made with animals and other natural elements. In the end, the nature of men and women is that of taking wrong decisions or judgments and of committing sins whether there is or not a complete awareness of what is right or wrong to do in life.

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