The Cook's Tale

Jokes, Jests, Pranks, and Play in the *Cook's Tale*

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Introduction

While everyone loves a good joke, knowing when and how to tell one is the challenge of comedy. If someone plays a joke on someone else, the stakes are so much higher because the object of the joke could be hurt physically or emotionally by it. For instance, the trick Alisoun and Nicholas play on John in the *Miller's Tale* to convince him that another Noah's Flood is coming earns John a fall from his roof, resulting in him breaking his arm and having his neighbors laugh at him while he lies in the street injured.Chaucer's Cook in his prologue and tale shows how jokes or pranks can hurt.

The innkeeper, Harry Bailly, goads his professional rival, Hogge (Roger) the Cook of Ware, with criticism of the food he prepares. Hogge responds in Flemish, "'sooth pley, quaad pley" (CkT 4357), often glossed as a "true jest is a bad jest." He then begins a tale that he suggests is a "jape" that occurred in "oure citee" (4343). The city is London, and the term "jape" (4343) can be defined as a trick or fraud. "Jape" could also be a joke or even a word that covers "play." As a descriptive term for his tale, the Cook's word is well chosen. While he apparently never finishes his tale (it breaks off in early manuscripts after 82 lines), the Cook shows in what exists of it how jokes, pranks, even disruptive play (as opposed to work), while possibly entertaining in tales, are decidedly not so in the serious world of shopkeeping where they can hurt people and their livelihoods. Shopkeepers need a stable world of predictable events. Disruptions scare away buyers. In medieval London, the court of the mayor and aldermen prosecuted individuals for dicing, disturbing the peace, or meeting in groups because these threats had the potential of disrupting the city's trade or hurting the business of its individual shops. Even today, we divide our time between work and play with the sense that the two are distinct pastimes that do not mix really well. This distinction was also true in Chaucer's London where play (which also included but was not restricted to jokes and pranks) needed to be regulated or its citizens could be hurt.

Tools

Before examining the text, we need to understand the situation behind the jokes or pranks played by its characters. There are two issues to make clear first. Appreciating the occasion for the jokes requires some background on the shopkeeping world that the Host and the Cook inhabit. The

other issue is to recognize how we as humans approach jokes themselves. I will treat the second issue first.

Jests, jokes, and pranks make cruelty (either physical, emotional, or fiscal) part of their structure. The person in a literary work who plays jokes on others is sometimes called a trickster. The trickster character is a common one in cultures all over the world. The trickster exists to disrupt acceptable social practices, usually to make fun of how artificial or silly they are or to punish the pride or naivety of a certain person or group. A trickster is always outwitting another person for the trickster's own gain. For instance, in the animated comedy television show *The Simpsons* (1989-), Bart Simpson plays jokes on Principal Skinner to expose Skinner's devotion to rules, whether these rules make sense or not, or to deflate his fussy ego.

We, as readers, give license to the prank if we believe the recipient deserves it. In so doing, we agree that the cruelty is justified. Since *The Simpsons* is a cartoon, any injury Principal Skinner gets from Bart's pranks is not real, so we can laugh at him. Our laughter says as much about us, the readers, as it does about the trickster. For instance, we may find enjoyable a prank that humbles a proud character by convincing ourselves that this person "had it coming." Conversely, we may find disturbing a prank played on someone who is sick, injured, or infirm. In other words, the pompous jerk slipping on a banana peel in the middle of a self-righteous rant may seem hilarious to us. But the sad woman who slips on a banana peel while crying over how she just had to put her beloved dog to sleep should not. I say "should" because some people may find all pranks hilarious regardless of the harm they do. The *Cook's Tale* describes such a concern.

Pranks can also be seen as substitutions for work, especially by characters devoted more toward play than toward legitimate or "honest" labor. Some stories in Boccaccio's *Decameron,* of the late-medieval German trickster Till Eulenspiegel, and even from *The Canterbury Tales* detail how tricksters obtain things by playing a prank on an honest (if gullible) shopkeeper. These stories also allow greater opportunities for play, which could be competitions with or distractions from work. Sometimes the teller judges the trickster's actions as a way to instruct the reader on the proper response to the trick. Often, though, the teller of the tale does not judge whether the trickster's behavior is good or bad but leaves it to the reader or hearer to decide. The fragmentary nature of his tale makes it unclear exactly why the Cook condemns Perkyn Revelour's choices, but enough of the tale remains to show that he does.

To accept whether the recipient of the trick "has it coming," one needs to know the context in which the trickster plays the joke or prank. In the *Cook's Prologue* and *Tale,* all four characters (the Host, the Cook, Perkyn Revelour, and his unnamed master) sell food. This trade, as with any other major trade in medieval London, had a guild to which all practitioners of that trade needed to belong in order to sell their wares in the city legally. London was the largest city in the British Isles since before Chaucer's time. By 1400, it had about 35,000 inhabitants who lived within one square mile bounded by a wall to the north, east, and west, and the River Thames to the south. Its growing size and increasing trade attracted many people from all over Britain and Western Europe to buy and sell, as well as live and raise families. In order to become a legal resident (or citizen) of London, one needed to become a member of a guild. Guild membership provided a society that would support each member and his family, especially when that member was sick, injured, or otherwise unable to work. In exchange, the guilds expected all their members to

produce a quality craft, contribute to the guild's upkeep, and follow a common code of behavior that we might call a "professional code of ethics." If a member of a guild was found to have cheated a customer or committed fraud, the guild could fine that member or even bar him entirely from trading.

In order to become a member of a guild, a person needed to complete an apprenticeship of usually seven years. During this time, the apprentice would live in his master's house with his master's family. The master would be responsible for feeding, clothing, housing, and instructing his apprentices. In many ways, he functioned as a surrogate father and was liable for any damage or trouble any of his apprentices caused. When the contractual period of the apprenticeship ended, the master presented his apprentice to the guild for evaluation and membership. In all things, the master served as the apprentice's benefactor. Once accepted into a London guild, a former apprentice would become a citizen of the city, could open a shop, and could marry. He could also train apprentices himself in his trade. Consequently, being a good apprentice made thriving in London much easier. A failed apprentice, in contrast, would obtain more than just a poor reference. He could never join a guild and could never become an enfranchised member of London society.

Text

Both the *Cook's Prologue* and *Tale* show the conflict between playing pranks or making jokes and the potential harm they can cause. Reacting to the events of the *Reeve's Tale*, the Cook observes in his prologue that one should "bryng nat every man into thyn hous" because harboring people at night is "perilous" (CkP 4331-32). These strangers could play similar tricks on the householder, or worse. Indeed, in 1384 the *Plea and Memoranda Rolls* (a collection of the official London proclamations as well as accounts of trials held in the Lord Mayor's Court) record a statute stipulating that any person harboring a stranger for more than one night was responsible for any mischief that person got into while in the city. Harry Bailly takes offense from the Cook's statement about bringing people into his house since Harry's profession relies on harboring strangers all the time. The Host responds to the Cook's offer to tell his "jape" by attacking his character and then saying it was all a joke. His attacks get reflected in the Cook's tale as another food-seller potentially suffers the loss of his business by the pranks and jokes of someone else.

The *Prologue* and *Tale* ask what makes a "true jest." Those words come from the Cook after the Host has alleged that the Cook routinely practices fraud. Frauds themselves are pranks played on those who cannot tell a true product from a fake one. The Host telling a large party of perfect strangers, such as the Canterbury pilgrims, that the Cook is terrible at what he does (and this after he has convinced them all to return to his inn for a celebratory dinner after they come back from the pilgrimage) could hurt the Cook's own business. The Host uses the term "game" to mean that he is joking, yet a joke that destroys someone's life is rather more serious than a game.

What complicates this question of the "true jest" is that Chaucer gives us two contradictory accounts of the Cook. First, we learn from the Cook's portrait in the *General Prologue* almost nothing about him except that he is alleged to be good at making many kinds of food (perhaps according to his own testimony) and that he has a weeping sore or "mormal" on his shin (GP

386). The list of food is presented as an advertisement for his services. The weeping sore on his shin shows his vulnerability in the precarious world of London commerce. While some readers may see the sore as evidence that he is unsanitary, its presence could also mean that he is too poor to afford a physician's care. The list of food then seems to hide the person of the Cook because, for the Cook, his work needs to be his life. He is, in essence, the sum of his abilities, not the suffering of his body. He may, though, believe that the sore's appearance could take down his entire livelihood because it may convince people that he is unsanitary.

But what the Host claims is just "for game" is giving an opposite account of the Cook's business practices and attacking the Cook's vulnerability (CkT 4354). According to the Host, the Cook is the one playing jokes on his customers because no one is able to inspect the contents of his pies before the Cook sells them. The Host claims that the Cook's pies are "twies hoot and twies coold" (4348). He implies that the pies are not fresh because they have been reheated. In the centuries before refrigeration, meat went bad quickly, and meat that was a day or two old could be potentially harmful to anyone eating it even if it were reheated. The Host also claims that the Cook's pies are filled with rotten parsley and meat from geese (4349-52). Geese were not allowed in pies sold in London, according to a statute from the Guild of the Pastelers (or pasty-makers). The potential customer only has the Cook's word for it, just as the reader of the *General Prologue* portrait of the Cook only has the narrator's word that the Cook is really good at what he says he does. These charges, even if they were jokes, threaten the Cook's business because they show him as a cheat. As such, they are worse than the appearance of the sore.

The Host's words put the Cook at a disadvantage because the Host is the governor of the pilgrims, and, as such, the Cook may not be powerful enough to defend himself against the Host. The Cook's enigmatic cries that the Host says "ful sooth" and his words in Flemish to him are codes that he intends the Host alone to understand, creating a situation where the Host would deserve any trick that would get played on him (4356). The Flemish proverb "sooth pley, quaad pley" argues that a "true jest is a bad jest," meaning, perhaps, that a joke that is true is not funny (4357). He says this in Flemish. Unlike Latin or French, Flemish was not a prestige language because the Flemings were among the poorest groups of aliens inhabiting London. The Cook admits to being a "povre" or poor man, himself (4341). In speaking Flemish to the Host, the Cook is probably assuming that none of the other pilgrims would have known it. Therefore, the Cook has perhaps admitted that the Host's words may be true but only to him. In any case, saying that the Host's words are jokes does not make them any less damaging.

When he turns to his tale, the Cook presents his "jape" about the threat to the shop of an apparently honest food seller from a lazy apprentice who wants to do no work and, instead, plays pranks on his master. Perkyn Revelour is a figure of play who is antagonistic to honest work and, as such, shows how pranks can hurt an honest tradesperson. As someone who likes parties, games, and jokes, a reveler is poorly suited for the relatively mundane tasks of serving in a shop that sells food. The Cook describes Perkyn as dancing, playing the guitar or fiddle, playing dice, hanging out at the tavern when he should be working, running out of the shop when any distractions went by it, and always hanging out with a "meynee of his sort," meaning a group of young men who behave as he does (CkT 4375-84). All these examples are different kinds of play and each is opposed to work. The implication is that Perkyn would rather waste time than help with the shop.

But Perkyn also steals from his master, taking money from the "box" or till (4390). His wild play and pranks cause him to be thrown in Newgate prison (4402). Newgate was a prison established during the reign of King Henry II (1154-1189) to house prisoners until their trial. It was located inside Newgate, which was one of London's fortified gatehouses. For Perkyn to be led to one of London's more notorious prisons, his behavior had to be more serious than simple pranks. Perkyn also cannot be any help to his master or learn anything about his trade while he is in prison. Moreover, his riotous "meynee" may be driving away customers. Rifling the till wastes the profits of the shop as well as the master's time. Taken one at a time, Perkyn's actions are playful; taken together, they seem to be a concerted campaign to destroy his master's business. Since the master appears to be a good person, Perkyn's need to play pranks on him is basically cruel.

As the Cook describes him, the master does not appear to deserve the treatment that Perkyn has given him. The master has brought this stranger into his house, and the stranger is destroying it through his play and his pranks. The master attempts to reprimand Perkyn, but Perkyn ignores him. The only power that the master has is to deny Perkyn membership in a food-selling guild, refusing to give him his "papir" formally releasing him (4404). The "papir" would acknowledge his successful completion of his apprenticeship and would be the master's recommendation for Perkyn to join the guild. Without it, Perkyn loses the ability to become a member of the legitimate society of London as a shopkeeper. Denying Perkyn his "papir" seems to be the only thing that Perkyn's former master can do to express his displeasure at Perkyn's behavior. It may do nothing to repair either his business or Perkyn's character. Given the amount of time that Perkyn has appeared to waste, he may not have learned much about the trade during this apprenticeship. As such, the *Cook's Tale* seems to support his response to the Reeve that one should be wary of bringing any stranger into one's household. It also shows how a shopkeeper who does not deserve these tricks gets needlessly harmed by them.

The end of the tale, at least as it appears in the early Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts where it is not given additional concluding material by scribes, seems to show the punishment for Perkyn's bad jokes at the expense of his undeserving master. When Perkyn leaves his master's shop and joins the household of a thief and his wife who lives by sex work, he leaves the world of legitimate work for the life of tricks and pranks (4419-22). The wife, the Cook says, tricks the city authorities by having a shop as her cover for her trade. Prostitution was legal only on Cock Lane in London and in Southwark, its suburb south of the river. Unlicensed prostitution inside London was illegal. Similarly, her husband, the thief, needs to rely on stealth or tricks in order to steal anything. Perkyn, who can do nothing but play, can bring nothing to this false shop except to add one other person to it who wastes time cheating people. Since the story breaks off at this point, we are unsure how the Cook would have ended the story. What there is of the tale does show what can happen to individuals who play jokes, deceive, or trick others when they do not deserve it. Like Perkyn, people devoted to jokes and play can harm others and potentially also themselves. In short, jokes can harm in the tale that the Cook tells as well as the goods that he sells.

Transformation

1. The Cook says that his tale will "quit" the Host, meaning it will pay back the Host. How does this tale "pay back" the Host?
2. What do we learn about Harry Bailly from his words with the Cook?
3. How does this tale work as a "jape"?
4. How might Perkyn's pranks at the expense of his master compare with the pranks played by John and Aleyn against Symkyn in the *Reeve's Tale*, since the Cook claims that he is inspired by that tale to tell his?
5. Why is it significant that the rivals here (Innkeeper, Cook, Perkyn, and his master) are all food-sellers and not, for instance, sellers of clothing or workers in construction? Are jokes of a different degree of severity or fun when dealing with food?
6. Why would the Cook want to condemn play in his tale?
7. Have you ever worked with a person like Perkyn? How does/did this person's behavior affect the work environment? How might that experience help to understand what the Cook is saying?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

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