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Silver and Gold: The Markers of Goodness, Greed, and Vanity in Chaucer's Travelers

In Chaucer's depictions of the characters from his prologue, the terms "silver" and "gold" come up repeatedly in his descriptions of the characters. In reference to the use of silver and gold in their portraits, Chaucer's travelers are mostly divided up into three groups: the travelers in which gold and silver describe appearance or substance of an item, travelers who are described as receiving money, and travelers in whose portraits gold or silver is used in metaphor. No matter how these two terms are used, it is pretty much impossible to separate them from the things they tend to represent: wealth, status, money or affluence. Even when a characterization seems benign, the use of gold and silver color the description and cause the reader to make connections between the pilgrims and the wealth, status, etc. that the two metals symbolize. This allows Chaucer to introduce some subtle commentary on the characters on the way they interact with wealth, morality and class in regard to the way they are interacting with the metals through appearance, money, or through metaphor.

In regards to appearance, there are about eight characters who are portrayed as having an item on them that was made of silver or gold, that was significant enough to be mentioned. These eight characters and their respective items are the Yeoman with his silver Medal, the Prioress with her golden brooch, the Monk with his gold pin, and the Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, and Tapestry Maker bearing solid silver knives, though we will not be looking at them in detail.

The Yeoman was brought on the trip by the Knight and the Squire. Unlike some of the characters, there's nothing really to indicate that he's really a bad guy. He is described as a servant for the Knight and Squire, so the reader is already a bit inclined to like him. Some of Chaucer's characterization indicate that he might have some concern for his appearance because he used peacock feathers to adorn his arrows: "A sheef of peacock arwes, bright and kene, under his belt he bar ful thriftily" (104-105). Peacock feathers were probably not the easiest to come by and were likely more for show than for actual enhancement of skill, but the Chaucer shows that he was a good aim, nonetheless: "His arwes drouped noght with fetheres lowe" (107). His medal made of silver echoes the statement made by the peacock feathers. It bears the viage of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers: "A Cristopher on his brest of silver sheene" (115). Because he was employed by the Knight, his medal was likely given by him, and the giving of silver or gold was a sign of good leadership. Therefore, the vanity that may be described may not be limited in only describing the Yeoman, but the Knight as well. It would not even be so far-fetched to suggest it was a critique of the knightly chivalric code for Knights to try to give out medals to everyone, even their servants.

The Prioress' golden brooch aid in Chaucer's characterization of her as being a little bit vain. The Prioress' brooch is described as pinned to her rosary: "And thereon heng a brooch of gold ful sheene,/ On which ther was first write a crowned A,/ And alter *Amor vincit omnia.*" (160-162). The Latin inscription means "love conquers all." Dr. Hoffman in his article, "Chaucer's Prologue to Pilgrimage: The Two Voices" describes this message as a continuance of ambiguity, a reference to the tendency of her portrait to attain the "delicate balance" (36) between the earthly and the heavenly:

The motto itself has, in the course of history, gone its own double pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Venus and to sacred shrines; the original province of the motto was profane, but it was drawn over to a sacred meaning and soon became complexly involved with and compactly significant of both. (38)

As the “amor” mentioned can and has been taken to mean either a heavenly love or an early romance, there’s a bit of ambiguity that is present and is also reflected in the rest of her description. She both adheres to and departs from the point of what is acceptable for a nun. She is described as being “symple” and “coy” (119) which have both very plain connotations that would befit a nun, but also romantic connotations that one might also liken to a lady of the court. The brooch is attached to a rosary, that Chaucer doesn’t even describe as such, and because of this it is likened more too a fashionable bracelet than a religious symbol. The gold brooch is a symbol of the way in which the Prioress tries to be more than what she is, and portray the image of a courtly lady while also being a proper prioress. Ultimately, it comes down to vanity, because the Prioress is not satisfied with the religious, pious dignity that the cloister allows of her, and instead aspires to be of a more noble visage.

The Monk has a very similar agenda as the Prioress. He expends his effort in trying to be more of a lord of the church’s land, than a monk who should reside on it. The Monk’s gold pin is described in relation to the expensive jacket it adorns: “I seigh his sleves purfiled at the hond/ With grys, and that the fyneste of a lond;/ And fir ti festne his hood under his chyn,/ He hadde of gold ywrought a ful curious pyn;/ a love-knotte in the gretter ende ther was” (193-197). The jacket made from expensive furs and cinched together with an elaborate gold pin, highlight the extravagance displayed by the Monk. The speaker also makes a tongue-in-cheek comment that highlights his hypocrisy

by suggesting that Monks should leave the work to St. Augustine, the man who is supposed to have created the monastic order: “What sholde he studie... Or swynken with his hands, and laboure./ As Austyn bit? How shall the world be served?/ Lat Austyn have his swank to hym reserved!” (184-188). The Monk’s vanity is more of a symptom of his outright negligence and inability to follow through on the oaths he must have taken. As he began to abandon what he ought to be doing, he deluded himself into thinking that this is something that is actually acceptable for a Monk. Eric Meljac in his article, “What It Means To Own: Geoffrey Chaucer’s Monk, Monastic Rule, And Giorgio Agamben,” comments on the Monk’s line of thinking, saying, “Indeed, he is a man prone to ownership and sin” (80). Like the grounds, greyhounds, and expensive coat, the gold pin is an example of his vanity and the way it has turned into materialism. Hoffman compares his vanity to that of the prioress, and calls him out for portraying an “emphatic discrepancy” (36). There is no tip-toeing around what is accepted and what is not. The Monk knows what he is doing is improper, but if he’s in charge, he wants to live as he wants to live whether or not it’s befitting a monk.

The act of receiving gold is very different from the action of simply wearing it. In the characters of the Friar, the Pardoner, the Clerk and The Doctor, all have been described as receiving silver or gold, as a form of money. It really goes without saying that in order for receiving money to be factored into someone’s description of them, money must be a pretty big factor. Naturally, greed and money go hand in hand.

The Pardoner and the Friar are the most alike in their devotion to money. Both are dirty church officials, using their positions to increase their own earnings. The Pardoner uses his voice through singing and preaching to encourage his audience to give him more of their money: “For wel he wiste, whan that song was songe,/He moste

preche and wel affile his tonge/ To wynne silver, as he full wel koude” (711-713). The Friar receives bribes in order for people to get out of confession: “Therefore in stede of wepyng and preyeres/ Men moore yeve silver to the povre freres” (230-231). Both portray the men as giving in to their greedy desires, by convincing people to give them money. There’s not a critic or scholar or moralist who would disagree that at the heart of their actions is a greed and desire for money, in spite of their religious obligations. In fact, it seems most likely that their religious obligations are exactly why they are being portrayed so reprehensibly.

The Clerk was greedy not so much for money, but for knowledge. The mention of gold in his portrait mentions how he has spent all the money given to him by his friends on books: “But al be that he was a philosopher,/ Yet hadde he but litel gold in cofre;/ But al that he myghte of his freendes hente,/ On books and lernynge he it spente” (297-300). Because of the way his appearance is described as “holwe”(289) and “nat right fat, I undertake” (288), it can be inferred that he may also be starving himself in his quest for knowledge. Obviously, the man may be very smart and well-educated, but he is not really that smart. The speaker suggests this in his reference of the clerk to a philosopher which was another name for an alchemist. As alchemists were supposed to be able to make gold, he is obviously a very poor one, and it suggests that his obsessive studying is for naught, as he may be educated, but isn’t exactly putting his intelligence to good use.

The Doctor is also mentioned as receiving gold for his services, as are the Pardoner and Friar, though the Doctor seems to be doing a bit more honest work. In Medieval Europe, it is not exactly clear how doctors were paid and there was a bit of variation. Scholar Tom Warren discusses how payment might have been settled in Chaucer’s Era:

In Medieval Europe, some physicians were employed by royalty and attended to the health of the royal court and perhaps some of its subjects, others were paid by the church to treat the sick of the parish and the poor. Some city- states such as Venice employed physicians to give free treatment to the poor, treat the rich at reduced rates and advise the state on medico- legal and public health matters. (39)

Though this suggests that there were some favorable contracts between doctors and potential patients, it's clear that not all were so favorably covered. Due to a lack of receipts, it is obviously quite difficult to prove exactly who paid and how much, but due to Chaucer's depiction, we can assume that greed among doctors was at least a bit of an issue if he chose to write about it. Chaucer's doctor and his opinion of gold is described as "gold in physic is a cordial,/ Therefore he lovede gold in special" (443-444). Describing gold as a cordial, or a medicine for the heart, is quite suggestive as it implies that physicians' hearts must only be concerned with money, if money is the answer for their problems. As Chaucer proves with the Clerk and the Doctor, one doesn't necessarily have to be a church official to receive condemnation for their greedy hearts.

The two times in which Chaucer describes travelers in terms of silver or gold, but instead of literal gold, he uses figurative gold in relation to the both the Miller and the Parson. Obviously the two characters are on two very different planes of morality and class, but Chaucer uses both to highlight faults in the systems that society relies on.

In calling the Miller, a man with a "thombe of gold," Chaucer is using a very common expression of the time ironically to describe the man as crooked, without being outright critical. The avoidance of being forthright in his criticism is abundant in his portraits, and it allowed for Chaucer to be critical by using humor to dull the edge of his

satire so that it was palatable and enjoyable for readers. The thumb of gold saying comes from a common understand and tradition of portraying millers as wicked, which George Fenwick Jones elaborates on in his article, “Chaucer and the Medieval Miller,”:

It will show that he did not intend to describe any particular miller, but rather to create a character embodying certain characteristics popularly attributed to the millers as a class. Even though his miller has many individual traits and a convincing personality, he nevertheless conforms to the medieval concept of what a miller should be...He never is red-haired, coarse-featured, socially ambitious, muscular, well-armed, vulgar, drunken, stupid, and dishonest. (1)

Jones cites German folk songs, Swiss depictions of Biblical Judas, and the Middle English *Secreta Secretorum* as all supporting the idea of a red-headed, dishonest miller stereotype. Though it is not exactly clear, how millers came to get this stereotype, Jones does explain why society had a large amount of disdain for millers:

(1) The mills were owned by the lords and operated for them by the millers; (2) the tolls were so burdensome that people tried to evade them; (3) tolls and weights were not adequately standardized. The three conditions were ideal for making people suspect the millers. Because the peasants were required to take their grain to their lord's mill regardless of the treatment they received there, the millers feared no competition and felt little incentive to render good service. (9).

Naturally, a large amount of people began to see all millers as cheaters and untrustworthy, and the proverb mentioned in the reference to a “thumb of gold” is direct reference to that. The understanding of the proverb is that an honest miller would

have a thumb made of gold, and since that is an impossible occurrence, it follows that it is equally impossible that a miller could be honest. Thus, by referencing this, Chaucer is touching on a very real social problem of the era.

In Chaucer's description of the Parson, he allows the him to be the voice that makes the comparison of the proper clergy, that the Parson aspires to be, versus the clergy that others on the trip are: "And this figure he added eek therto,/ That if gold ruste, what shall iren do?/ For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,/ No wonder is a lewd man to ruste" (499-502). In this instance, of using gold, its not used to degrade or insult the way a person is behaving, but to validate they position that they have. The Parson's own agenda in speaking this quote was to teach and guide, which is entirely different motivation than any other characters and their interaction with gold and silver. After pretty scathing portraits of other religious officials, it's almost surprising to have one positive one. Chaucer makes care to portray the one good clergy on the trip as a very particular kind of clergy, as Scholar Sadenur Dogan writes in their article, "The Three Estates Model: Represented and Satirised in Chaucer's General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales": "Chaucer's choice of a poor peasant parson –rather than a virtuous bishop, monk or friar... reflects an ideal gospel simplicity, and perhaps also contemporary disapproval of the wealth and power of the Church hierarchy and the well-endowed religious orders" (53). In order to further Chaucer's own anti-hierarchical opinions about what makes for corruption in the church, he made sure to use a clergy member who represented the type of simple, straightforward church that he expected the church to operate like.

By utilizing the terms silver and gold in so many of his portraits, Chaucer sets up a system by which readers can analyze and consider each character in the way that he

has them relate to the terms. As the characters align themselves along with their values and transgressions, Chaucer reveals his own opinions and weighs in on some of the social ills that many of the characters were right in the middle of. From nobility to clergy to peasant, all are critiqued and few are praised. Vanity and greed are ridiculed, as are those who fall into them, but ultimately Chaucer lets the reader decide if silver or gold are to blame, or those who seek and display them.

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