

Reflection Statement

My short fiction piece is a multimodal pastiche of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*.⁹ It combines disparate modes and genres as a means of exploring narrative authority. With its literary underpinnings, the work was developed for an audience who would be familiar with the original text and the allusions that shape the work. Therefore, I envisioned that the piece might be published in a literary journal, such as *Southerly*, that specialises in experimental fiction, 'connecting the academy and the garret'.¹⁰ An online publication would be *Long Paddock* which showcases the 'spectrum of writing across creative and critical modes'.¹¹ With this audience in mind, the development of my piece focuses on three specific areas: form, voice and intertextuality.

Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* is an *exemplum*, in which three rioters go out to find and kill Death. In their search for Death, they are directed to a place where they find a mysterious pile of gold, with the outcome being that they kill each other in their greed for the gold. The tale clearly has an in-built irony, that in seeking Death they find it, but not in the way that they expected. As an *exemplum*, the *Pardoner's Tale* is designed to have a moral to it, that the narrator reveals. However, in effect, I have sought to destabilise the form and turn it into an Absurdist parody.

⁹ A literary pastiche is a work that imitates other works for the purpose of paying homage to them (Bowen 2012) p. 1005.

¹⁰<http://southerlyjournal.com.au/about-us/>

¹¹<http://southerlyjournal.com.au/project/79-1-southerly-80/>

My interest in writing a pastiche stems from studying *The Canterbury Tales* in Preliminary English, Extension 1. I was particularly interested in the structural interplay between the authorial voice of Chaucer in his 'Prologue' and his narrative voice as a character within his embedded stories. In creating this interplay, he establishes sets of concentric circles and textual complications. With the 'Worlds of Upheaval' novel, *Frankenstein*, we investigated the structure of that novel, as another example a framed narrative. This concept of texts-within-texts then became the starting point of my work.

My 'Introduction' consciously serves a similar framing function to Walton's 'Letters' in *Frankenstein* or Chaucer's 'Prologue' in *The Canterbury Tales*, utilising the concept of *mise en abyme*, where the inner story is shaped or mediated by the exterior narrative. This academic 'Introduction' was inspired in part by the epilogue of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*; a piece that is itself a nod to *The Canterbury Tales* in both in title and form. As with Professor Pieixoto's 'Historical Notes' in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the editor of *Begging Your Pardon*, offers an academic mediation, which self-reflexively 'satirises academic pretension'.¹²

However, I wanted to see how far I could push the structural form of texts-within-texts and this led to an exploration of multimodal literature. Galster points out that multimodal texts, 'combine, transform, and subvert the conventions of several narrative subgenres; break[ing] down the boundaries between fiction, poetry, and drama.'¹³ I've used three

¹² Stein, Karen F. "Margaret Atwood's *Modest Proposal: The Handmaid's Tale*." *Canadian Literature*, vol. 148, 1994.

¹³ Galster, C. "Hybrid Genres" in D. Herman, M. Jahn & M.L. Ryan (eds) *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory*. London: Routledge, (2005).

different structural forms, bringing together academic non-fiction, prose and playscript. My reason for doing so was to challenge the ways in which various structures change how meaning is understood, and in particular, the authority of the narrative voice.

As I worked on early drafts, I began to contemplate how various multimodal works removed or manipulated narratorial voice. My first encounters with this form, in a literary narrative, was in *Hugo Cabret* and *Wonder Struck* by Brian Selznick. Both these texts utilise pictorial storytelling, rather than dialogue or narration, to convey certain portions of the narrative. What became evident is that by varying the modes, the authority of the narrative voice can be disrupted and destabilised. In reading *Crusoe's Daughter*, by Jane Gardam, I discovered how playscript can be used alongside prose to create an immediacy that essentially removes the narrative voice entirely and places the reader directly within the action of the text.¹⁴ This provided the perfect vehicle in my work, for disrupting narrative voice. In the original *Pardoner's Tale*, 'almost the entire story consists of the actual dialogue of the actors.'¹⁵ The immediacy of the tale's dialogue made the progression from prose to the playscript's inherent fast pace, an obvious decision. Stichomythia within the discourse moves energetically in the absence of a narrator, and even in the pauses between lines, there is the sense of unfolding action. While never intending to be performative, the playscript enabled the whimsical alternation between the different levels of narrative control.

¹⁴ Owen, C.M. *The Female Crusoe: hybridity, trade and the eighteenth century individual*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010

¹⁵ Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*, A selection Edited with Introduction and Notes by Daniel Cook. Anchor Books, 1961, p.218.

My decision to employ a column structure to visually distinguish the inner modes was informed by the idea that ‘the visual aspect of printed verbal language is meaning-making in its own right’.¹⁶ Nina Nørgaard points out, that the way print interacts with other modes of meaning, creates complex semiosis, enabling the reader to move from one modality to another.

Voice was critical to the success of my work and what I hope the audience finds most engaging. Chaucer’s pilgrims have been noted to be ‘gloriously capricious and unique ‘characters’ in the English sense of ‘eccentrics’’.¹⁷ As such, they ‘do not exist for the sake of the stories but vice versa’.¹⁸ In building upon this heritage, I tried to ensure my characters had a strong sense of connection to the original text. For example, the Prioress unconsciously revealed her own facile hypocrisy and the Physician was not a man to be trusted with the sick. These distinctions also form a vehicle for the many disruptions that also serve to destabilise narrative authority.

In our Preliminary Extension 1, we completed an activity that appropriated and recreated Chaucer’s voice and style within our own writing. We explored elements such as word-choice, rhythms, imagery and syntax structure. From the start, I hope I have captured this, so that when audiences read, ‘And it came that there were a Pardoner, travelling with that merry company of pilgrims,’ it sounds like Chaucer’s narrative voice. The three rioters

¹⁶ Nørgaard, Nina. "The Semiotics of Typography in Literary Texts. A Multimodal Approach." *Orbis Litterarum* 64, no. 2 (2009), 141-160. doi:10.1111/j.1600-0730.2008.00949.x.

¹⁷ Ruth Nevo. "Chaucer: Motive and Mask in the "General Prologue"." *The Modern Language Review* 58, no. 1 (1963): 1-9. Accessed August 19, 2020. doi:10.2307/3720388.

¹⁸ Spearing, A. C. "Narrative Voice: The Case of Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale"." *New Literary History* 32, no. 3 (2001): 715-46. Accessed February 12, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20057689.

use a different register again, oscillating between a more modern and archaic world. Their voice is intentionally unstable and at times incongruous. This enables both a contrast to the Chaucerian characters but also enhances the absurdist nature of the piece: a technique I gleaned from Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The third voice is the academic voice in the introduction and footnotes. The tone has a heightened formality that separates it from the rest of my writing. The humour here is more restrained, creating uncertainty about the whimsical references to the possible authors of the text.

As my work is a story about telling stories, it was natural that it would be layered with intertextual references. In writing for a publication like *Southerly*, the expectation is that the reader would be aware of the textual layering. Even though the work parodies Chaucer, the success of any parody is to preserve the authenticity of the original work. Despite combining Chaucerian narrative and postmodern Absurdism, the work still had to be conceptually driven and not devolve into farce. With each draft, I kept returning to the question about how much the appropriation 'honoured' the original.

In considering the other works that influenced the direction of my piece, it is impossible to go past Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Not only do I draw on Stoppard's style, but I was guided by the way in which his work appropriates the canonical text. His work was also foundational as I undertook an adventurous leap in reworking a non-theatrical text, in the form of *The Canterbury Tales*, into Absurdist theatre.

Part of my treatment of intertextuality is to reinforce the concept that nothing is *truly* original, but in the case of a forgery there is a heightened possibility of raiding works to create something that is new. As such, I blatantly *borrowed* from Shakespeare's death speeches. Thus, the comic death scene takes on a vibrant ransom-note effect, with numerous 'cuttings' from all manner of Shakespeare's plays, from *Hamlet* to *Titus Andronicus*. They are all strung together to form an overtly conscious patchwork of plagiarism. I have also heavily leant on biblical allusion, especially in the Jobian-style speech where the young rioter 'meets his maker'.

My final product, *Begging Your Pardon* holds together as a piece that is both provocative and humorous. Through the process of writing, I have been able to draw on a wide body of research in order to form something that is unique and succeeds in creating a sustained piece of work that explores some of the profound complexities of narrative voice.

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