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Elizabeth Walsh

Upward Bound: The Sociopolitical Significance of the King-in-Disguise Motif

It may seem incongruous to apply a Marxist perspective to tales written three or four hundred years before Marx was born. Yet the application of a Marxist hermeneutic may further elucidate the underlying tensions and contradictions inherent in the narratives. In *The Political Unconscious* Fredric Jameson proposes to construct a hermeneutic based upon a Marxist reading of history:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles: free-man and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman—in a word, oppressor and oppressed—stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes.¹

This is the narrative, often repressed and hidden, which the idea of the political unconscious seeks to disclose. The individual literary work becomes part of this unfolding narrative, a text within the greater text, a discourse within the greater discourse of a history which is moved by the political unconscious.

¹Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," quoted from Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, NY, 1981), p. 20. Further references to this work will appear in the text.

Fictional encounters between kings and commoners were popular in the late fourteenth, fifteenth, and early sixteenth centuries, especially in England and Scotland. The stories, told in the forms of metrical romance, lay, ballad, and alliterative romance, comprised several folklore motifs, particularly "Incognito King helped by humble man. Gives reward." (K 1812.1) The motif seems to have been a timeless one and exists in the chronicles and fictional records of many countries.² In the transitional years between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, however, such stories were particularly popular. Four English versions and one Scottish are extant. "King Edward and the Shepherd" is a metrical romance written in the northern dialect towards the end of the fourteenth century; the king of the story is probably Edward III. "The Kyng and the Hermit" is another tale of a King Edward found in a mid-fifteenth century manuscript. "John the Reeve" is a fifteenth-century lay or romantic ballad found in the Bishop Percy Folio Manuscript. "The King and the Miller," a story about Henry II and John Cockle, the Miller of Mansfield, dates from the end of the reign of Elizabeth and is also found in the Percy Manuscript. The Scottish version is *The Tail of Rauf the Coilyear how he harbret King Charlis*, an alliterative romance usually dated c. 1475. All five of these romances and/or ballads follow a similar pattern. In all except the first where King Edward disguises himself as a merchant, and *Rauf Coilyear* wherein Charlemagne and his companions are beset by a terrible storm, the king is separated from his companions or loses his way while on a hunting expedition. He meets a commoner who, unaware of the identity of his guest, offers him hospitality. A lavish meal is served, usually supplied from the king's preserves. Several of the tales contain incidents in which the "humble person" insults his royal visitor in some way. Finally the king invites his host to visit the palace where a recognition scene takes place and the king rewards the peasant in some magnanimous gesture. In all of these tales elements of comedy, burlesque, and parody flaunt conventional modes of social intercourse as well as the static political structures of the feudal age. The manuscript versions of the first two tales mentioned are incomplete but in the completed tales the peasants assume a higher rank. John the Reeve and Rauf the Coilyear are knighted, John Cockle is made overseer of Sherwood Forest. These tales of the king-in-disguise would seem to be a perfect locus for the realization of Jameson's theory.

What occurs in these tales is a social and political metamorphosis, the particular of what M. M. Bakhtin asserts about transformation in the folktale:

²For a more thorough treatment of this motif in its various versions see my *Tale of Ralph the Collier* (New York, 1989), ch. 1.

The themes of *metamorphosis* (*transformation*)—particularly human transformation—and identity . . . are drawn from the treasury of pre-class world folklore. The folkloric image of man is intimately bound up with transformation and identity. This combination may be seen with particular clarity in the popular folktale. The folktale image of man—throughout the extraordinary variety of folkloric narratives—always orders itself around the motifs of *transformation* and *identity* (no matter how varied in its turn the concrete expression of these motifs might be.)³

The modern reader may have a somewhat vague understanding of the social status of millers and reeves in the Middle Ages. Two of the characters in *The Canterbury Tales*, however, fit this description and may remind us of their roles in the society of the time. Chaucer has acquainted us with the popular image of the miller and the reeve.⁴ The miller of the General Prologue is a big, boisterous man, "a jangler and a goliardeys" whose rough manners and speech mark him as a man to be feared. Like the proverbial miller he is a thief and manages to exact three times the actual price of the grain. The reeve, although a serf, is a sharp businessman, careful in the keeping of accounts and skilful in acquiring profit for himself. The enterprising nature of each is threatened by the other and each tells a tale at the other's expense. Both the miller and the reeve take advantage of the world and mock the naivete of the proud. Their tales are fabliaux and reveal their comic perception of life. In themselves they are rogues, but their stories impart a wry wisdom. And this wisdom is a questioning of the accepted values of their society, values which will keep them forever in their place as "aspiring peasants."

Strictly speaking the miller was not a peasant. He was, however, a prominent member of the village community and evidence shows that some millers took part in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. He belonged to the rural, agricultural society which was distinct both from the seigneurial class and that of the urban commercial society. In a recent article on the social antagonisms expressed in *The Canterbury Tales* Lee Patterson describes the miller as representing the peasant consciousness: his Tale attacks the feudal

³"Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX, 1981) pp. 111-12.

⁴"The portraits of Chaucer's pilgrims nevertheless owe a great deal to medieval traditions of literary portraiture, including the series of allegorical descriptions in *The Romaunt of the Rose*. The hypocritical friar, the hunting monk, the thieving miller and others are familiar types in medieval *estates satire*, in which representatives of various classes and occupations are portrayed with a satiric emphasis on the vices peculiar to their stations in life." *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, MA, 1987), p. 5.

chivalry of "The Knight's Tale" and proclaims a new order, that of the natural world.⁵

Such aspirations are more evident in the king-in-disguise romances mentioned above. I would like to give a brief summary of two in particular which seem quite relevant to the concept of the political unconscious. John the Reeve, the hero of the fifteenth century romantic ballad, is not so choleric as Chaucer's Oswald but he does present the appearance of an affluent householder. When King Edward III along with a bishop and an earl become separated from their companions, they encounter John and request his help. Suspicious of their noble bearing, the reeve is reluctant to harbor them and protests the poverty of his home. He is eventually persuaded to take in the strangers and when they arrive at his dwelling, they are surprised when four servants appear to attend them, and his wife enters in silk kerchiefs. The king identifies himself as the queen's chief falconer. John invites his daughters and his neighbors to dine with the visitors who are disappointed at the simple meal of bean bread and salt bacon provided. The Falconer demands better fare and John, assured that the nobles will not reveal his opulence to the king, orders a feast. White and red wine, boar's head, capons, woodcocks, venison, swans, coneys, curlews, heron, and other foods are brought in: so the reeve hosts the proverbial medieval banquet!⁶ A dance in which all participate ends the evening. The dance includes a kicking game and John enjoys himself by hitting "the king ouer the shinnes." Upon his return to court the king relates his adventure to the queen and they send for John. John's behavior at court is characteristic of the outspoken, assertive reeve: he attacks the Porter with a pitchfork, rides into the hall and frightens the queen. At last he learns the true identity of the Falconer who knights him as a reward for his hospitality.

This is a perfect image of transformation. The reeve, a member of the lowest class, that of the serf, becomes a knight and a member of the nobility. The reeve is a genial rogue. Alienated and suspicious of the higher orders of society his own way of life parodies that of the nobility. Although he holds a subservient position in the world he is lord of his own household and rules there with confident assurance. Only when his world is invaded by strangers

⁵"No Man His Reson Herde': Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley, 1990), p. 137.

⁶These fictional feasts are illustrative of Patterson's statement that "one of the goals of peasant resistance was to achieve access to the bounty of the natural world—the woods, fish, and game—that they felt was theirs by right of being natural creatures like their lords" (p. 137).

seeming to belong to the genuine nobility does he become fearful and suspicious. His obstreperous nature asserts itself toward the strangers in his own home and in his behavior at court. His gestures represent a challenge to the rigid class society of the Middle Ages. The new identity conferred upon him at the end of the tale symbolizes the reach of the imagination toward a new order of society.

No colliers are to be found among Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims but the Scottish Rauf presents another image of upward mobility. The structure of the tale is very similar to that of John the Reeve.⁷ When he first encounters Charlemagne Rauf is somewhat defensive and when the emperor thanks him for the offer of hospitality the collier is edgy, perhaps fearful that the stranger will not find the accommodation adequate. In his own home, however, he is imperious and demanding. He asserts himself as the host and rebukes Charlemagne several times when the latter courteously assumes a superior role (by stepping aside to allow Rauf to enter first and by gallantly asking his host to begin the board). Like John the Reeve he serves an elegant meal: brawn of a boar, capons, coney, wine, venison, and meat pies. Boastfully Rauf admits that he has been poaching the king's deer and proudly asserts that he has not been caught although the foresters have warned him that someday he will be sent to Paris to account for his bounty. The collier asserts that he needs these supplies to entertain his friends and guests.

When he leaves the next morning the king invites Rauf to come to the court where he will find a good market for his coals. Despite his wife's misgivings, Rauf agrees. At court he recognizes his guest who reveals his identity and knights the collier. "Schir Rauf" is given sixty squires as a retinue. The poet has added a conversion story to the simpler king-in-disguise motif. On his way home Rauf meets a Saracen and challenges him to a duel. As they fight Sir Roland appears and urges the Saracen to believe in the true God. They return to court where the Saracen is baptized and given a Christian bride. Rauf is made Marshal of France. The tale concludes symmetrically: the collier and the Saracen become part of the established order and take their place in society. The boundaries, however, have been broken through. His pretentious life-style, his defiance of the king's prerogative have marked the collier as an affable rogue whose inner sense of his own worth is at variance with his image in society. He has revolted against the restrictions which govern his existence and he arrogates to himself a comfortable way of life. The new identity which he is given at the end of the tale corresponds with the delusions of grandeur on which he operated. He

⁷H. M. Smyser believes that "John the Reeve" was a direct source of the Scottish poem. See his article "The *Taill of Rauf Coilyear* and its Sources," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, 14 (1932), 135-50.

imagined himself to be more than society accounted him, and at the end his reality far exceeds his former fantasy. His new title also gives him a confidence and a security which he previously lacked. Now he belongs.

These stories of social and political transformation touch the heart of life. Change, growth, transformation are the law of nature and the fundamental mark of mortal beings. In the social and political spheres, however, change is rarely welcome, at least to those in power. Allen Mandelbaum, in an essay on Ovid, implies that such was among the reasons for the poet's exile:

Augustus would finally sentence the sedentary Ovid to the bitterest voyage—the journey into exile. As if the state and history had banished—from their strict precincts—both disruptive desire and the images of cosmic forces whose magnitudes and urgencies might belittle the dimensions even of a "universal" empire. For even "universal" empire is born out of a sense of boundaries. Not only the boundaries between man and man—between citizens and to-be-pacified barbarians—but between man and animals and plants. The state needs stable populations, stable species. But metamorphosis involves continuous trespass.⁸

Nor were feudal structures easily overcome. Implicit in these stories is a criticism of the structured society of the late Middle Ages. Yet these tales contain a double perspective. The heroes flaunt some of the conventions and laws of society and technically speaking indulge in some criminal activity. Yet the rulers are presented as benevolent, affable, even indulgent despots. The authority of the rulers is not questioned. What these tales seem to challenge is the exclusive nature of higher society. The common man has his dreams. His political assumptions were not revolutionary, as we understand revolution, but for that moment in time, they were outrageous. The laughter moves in two directions: we may laugh at the narrow perspective of kings and nobles, but in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries the laughter was no doubt directed at the incongruous appearance of a miller, a reeve, and a collier at court. Fredric Jameson's theory, however, that all texts are part of an unfolding historical consciousness allows us to regard these narratives in a new way and perhaps to understand them more thoroughly.

The application of a Marxist perspective to a literary text must take place within three concentric frameworks, which mark a widening out of the sense of the social ground of a text through the notions, first, of political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes;

⁸ *Ovid in Sicily* (New York, 1986), p. 18.

and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us (Jameson, p. 75). These frameworks represent phases in the structure of interpretation. In the first the individual literary work is seen as a specific text written in a given historical time; as such it is a symbolic act. The second horizon is that of the social order itself whose utterance is "the great collective and class discourses." In this discourse the individual text is an *"ideologeme*, that is, the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes" (p. 76). The third perspective is that of human history as a whole. Seen from this point of view the individual text is again transformed and has to be read in terms of the *"ideology of form*, that is, the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production" (p. 76).

To explain the first phase Jameson uses an example from Claude Lévi-Strauss which describes the facial art of the Caduveo Indians which, according to the anthropologist, resolves a social contradiction. Thus the text is seen "as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (p. 79). The description of the Caduveo, a hierarchical society characterized by social relations of domination of one group by another, could apply as well to the situation of John the Reeve and Rauf Coilyear:

they were never lucky enough to resolve their contradictions, or to disguise them with the help of institutions artfully devised for that purpose. On the social level, the remedy was lacking...but it was never completely out of their grasp. It was within them, never objectively formulated, but present as a source of confusion and disquiet. Yet since they were unable to conceptualize or to live this solution directly, they began to dream it, to project it into the imaginary.⁹

John the Reeve and Rauf Coilyear would not have dreamed of becoming knights. The elegant meals, however, which they offer to their guests, and the bold assertion of each that he is "lord of his own" signify an inner conflict or dissatisfaction which they would never have voiced. The social contradiction of the feudal society with its Christian ethic of brotherhood and its rigidly codified estates seeks resolution through the dream of social mobility and ultimate equality.

Seen in the second perspective, that of the social order, the text becomes a term in a dialogical discourse between two antagonistic social classes. That

⁹Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, tr. John Russell (New York, 1971), p. 176, quoted from Jameson, p. 78.

is, in the Marxist view "the constitutive form of class relationships is always that between a dominant and a laboring class" (Jameson, p. 83), the latter opposing the values and ideology of the former. The individual text, considered in this framework "is grasped as a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes, . . ." (p. 85). The stories we have been considering: stories of shepherds, millers, reeves, and colliers give utterance to voices lacking in the dominant culture, voices "for the most part stifled and reduced to silence, marginalized," ignored and forgotten. The dialogical discourse is created by the utterance of these voices, the voice of the laboring class. John and Rauf find themselves at court, recognized, treated as individuals of value and esteem, rewarded. Most "ordinary people" long for such recognition from those who hold power, whether it be economic, social, political or a combination of all three.

Jameson's third focus is to "rewrite" or interpret the text in the perspective of history itself, understood as the modes of production or stages of human society. The object of study now becomes cultural revolution, "that moment in which the coexistence of various modes of production becomes visibly antagonistic, their contradictions moving to the very center of political, social, and historical life" (p. 95). Considered in this light the text reflects several different and opposing modes of society and thus is termed "*the ideology of form*, that is, the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation" (pp. 98-9). The text reveals the coexistence, in a given historical moment, of different "modes of production."

Such a perspective dissolves the ambivalence apparent in the stories of John and Rauf. The harmony evident at the end of each tale assumes the superiority and stability of the dominant class. However, beneath the laughter evoked by these stories are signs of a cultural revolution which began years before and continues to this day. The literary adumbration of these folktales in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries has created a few comic narratives which are often dismissed as insignificant burlesques of social striving and pretension. They can also be read, however, as literary enactments of the political unconscious of the late Middle Ages.