Are We There Yet? (or, Fear and Loathing in Kent)

by angevin2

Summary

Snapshots of the bits of the pilgrimate that didn't have literary merit. It's three days' travel from London to Canterbury, and a lot of the pilgrims are jerks.

Notes

First of all, I'd like to thank the_red_shoes and lareinenoire for offering comments on drafts, and Skeiler for Chaucer consultation. Secondly, there's a lot of obscure medieval lit humor in this, so: the fate the Squire mentions for Criseyde is actually drawn from Robert Henryson's <i>Testament of Cresseid,</i> a sort of Chaucer fanfic, if you will. It is probably better than this one. King Richard II did not actually chain his shoes to his knees. The poem Queen Anne asked Chaucer to write is <i>The Legend of Good Women,</i> which (like many of his works) he never did actually finish (possibly Anne's death in 1394 has something to do with that). The poem addressed to Sir Philip Vache is called "Trouthe." I did not, strictly speaking, <i>invent</i> anything about it so much as point out that many of its lines sound extremely dodgy, whether out of context or in it. Finally, this fic owes something to John Lydgate's <i>Siege of Thebes,</i> which opens rather like this fic ends, although I am much nastier to poor Lydgate than he really deserves.

Written for ghost lingering

I. Of This Cokes Tale Maked Chaucer Namoore
"Okay, so this guy Perkin?" said Roger the Cook. "His buddy that he shacked up with had a wife who was really hot. And, like, she ran a store officially, but actually? She was a total whore."

"Excuse me!" a voice piped up from the middle of the procession. It was the Prioress, raising her hand primly and looking down her nose as if the salacious tale in the works had been plucked off a dungheap, while somehow managing to look simultaneously abashed. "Some of us would like to use the, erm, the necessarium!"

"Cock's bones," Harry Bailly said, lifting his eyes skyward, "I told you all to go before we left the Tabard."

"The Tabard's privies," sniffed the Prioress, "are filthy, even for a Southwark tavern."

"Excuse me, Sister Thimble-Bladder, but I haven't finished my damn story yet!" the Cook protested. "I'm probably going to have to listen to whatever boring moral tale you come up with!"

"Oh, for -- " The Wife of Bath rolled her eyes and adjusted her enormous hat. "Tell you what," she said, turning to the Prioress. "Why don't you and I head off to Deptford and catch up with everyone?"

"Deptford?" The Prioress raised an eyebrow. "What, pray tell, is in Deptford?"

The Wife of Bath leaned over and whispered something which sounded very like first-rate booze.

"Oh!" said the Prioress, and smiled. Decorously, of course, because that was how she did everything.

When the Prioress and the Wife of Bath returned two hours later, giggling madly, clinging woozily to their horses, and suspiciously redolent of metheglin, the other pilgrims thought it best not to ask too many questions. Most of them didn't want to know.

II. I Smelle a Lollere in the Wynd

"I spy," said the Pardoner, in a tone that was far more mischievious than the words merited, "with my little eye, something beginning with...L."

"Oh, that's easy." the Summoner said, abandoning his vigorous nose-picking in order to point to the Clerk. "Loser!"

"Please don't point that thing at me," the Clerk said, politely.

"Good guess!" said the Pardoner. "But no."

"Lardass?" This time, he pointed to Alisoun of Bath.

"I'm more woman than you can handle, skankface," Alisoun replied.

"Oh, hey, I know," said the Summoner. "Lollard!"

The Parson sighed in long-suffering manner, rolled his eyes, and then crossed himself.

"Right!" said the Pardoner, and he and the Summoner exchanged high-fives, the smug high-fives of those still technically, and by no means on their own merits, deemed orthodox.

"My brother's no Lollard!" The Plowman had gone all red-faced; he was a mild-tempered man, normally, but this was something of a sore point, enough that the affront to his brother's orthodoxy
drew words out of him for the first time on the journey.

As the Summoner noticed: "Oh, look, he can talk after all!" He elbowed his colleague and the two of them laughed. "I bet he doesn't get to do it much while hauling shit!"

"Look you, sir Summoner," Harry Bailly interrupted, "and you, sir Pardoner, don't make me separate the two of you!"

The two of them, in unison, rolled their eyes.

"Now, good sir Plowman, Piers Plowman --"

"My name's Giles," the Plowman said, glaring.

"Good sir Piers," Harry continued, "forbear a while."

The Parson leaned over and whispered something to his brother, who frowned but nodded and rode along in his usual laconic state.

After a few minutes of silence, the Summoner started up again: "I spy, with my --"

"If you don't shut up right now we're going to turn this pilgrimage around and go home!"

III. The Doble Sorwe of Troilus To Tellen

"And so Troilus died in the war," said the Squire, "but it was all right, because he went up to heaven to sit in the spheres. And there he sat all day long pointing and laughing at the people on earth who were still alive and had to decide whether they were sitting in chairs because they wanted to be or because they were fated by the gods to be there, or maybe because people knew they'd sat in them. So he kind of lived happily ever after, even though he was dead. And also Criseyde became a prostitute and then got leprosy and died. The end!"

The assembled company of pilgrims blinked as one. Then the slightly boggled silence was shattered by a question which, while voiced from the back of the crowd, nevertheless spoke for everyone.

"What the hell was that?"

The Squire sniffed. "I heard it at court!" he said, quite pleased with himself for having connections, and certain that the bafflement displayed by his fellow pilgrims was the result of their coarse and unrefined taste. "King Richard thought it a very fine tale."

"Oh, please," scoffed the Man of Law, enough under his breath to avoid getting called up on a treason charge, but the bile in his voice was unmistakeable. "King Richard also chains his shoes to his knees."

"The Matter of Troy is a venerable subject for invention," the Clerk chimed in mildly. "Benoit de Sainte-Maure and Boccaccio, those noblest of poets, both treated it. And you may know that our own London is sometimes called Troyenovant, or New Tr--"

"Cram a sock in it, poindexter!" the Cook (who had broken out a flask hours ago) interrupted. "If I wanted a lecture, I'd go to Cambridge!"

The Clerk bristled with Oxonian indignation.

"I simply thought," he said, lips pursing, "that everyone might appreciate a bit of information about an important chapter in literary history."
"Screw that!" the Miller chimed in. "If you've got to talk, tell us about the hookers!"

This request was met with a few hearty cheers from certain members of the company.

"I'm not sure it's appropriate subject matter for a pilgrimage," the Clerk said, brightening less at the salacity of the question than at the chance to explain something, "but of course prostitutes were common in the ancient world! Why, according to Ovid..."

His extempore lecture on prostitution and the classics lasted fifteen minutes and was enjoyed by one and all (except the Parson). It was the greatest success of his teaching career.

**IV. Good Night, Sweet Prince**

Just south of St. Thomas's shrine in Canterbury Cathedral stands the tomb of Edward, late Prince of Wales, called the Black Prince in later ages. The Knight stood before it, head bowed and fingers steepled in unconscious imitation of the prince's effigy.

He looked up, crossing himself, and noticed, startled, that the curious little round man who rarely spoke to his fellow pilgrims -- devout, perhaps, he might have thought (if he'd noticed), but his taste in storytelling suggested otherwise. Master Bailly had called him *elvish,* and perhaps he wasn't altogether wrong, for he clearly knew more than he let on, never mind his penchant for excruciatingly rhymed romances.

"Come to pay reverence, sir knight?" the man said.

"One need not be a saint to deserve it," the Knight replied, smiling, "and I think St. Thomas would not begrudge a few minutes for the soul of one's dead lord, and indeed comrade-in-arms."

"I was on campaign with Prince Edward, you know," the man -- Geoffrey, the Knight thought he might have been called? "Not 'on campaign' really. I was a page; I suppose that counts."

The Knight nodded, and smiled again.

"You know, I'm a bit of a poet," Geoffrey said, and his grin as he said it was *definitely* elvish. Or impish, one or the other. "Sometimes I even finish poems. In my vainer moments I like to think I'll be entombed in those. Though I hate to think what some of them would say for the state of my immortal soul."

"Well, God have mercy on all the dead, anyway," said the Knight.

"Amen," said Geoffrey, and the two of them turned back towards Becket's shrine.

**V. So Ofte a Daye I Mot Thy Werke Renewe**

"Adam?"

"Yes, Master Chaucer?"

"What is all of this stuff in the margins of this copy?"

Adam smirked, a little guiltily, like he'd been caught doodling naked women in the margin of the Mercers' accounts (not that that had *ever* happened to him, of course).

"Um...glosses?"

Chaucer raised an eyebrow, clearly trying to suppress a smirk himself. "Glosses."
"Yes, sir!"

"Glosses about *looking for a privy in the wilds of Kent.*"

"Well, you know, Master Chaucer," Adam began, clearly on firmer ground with material he was comfortable explaining, "people have to use privies a lot, don't they?"

"Yes, but I don't see what -- "

"But you never see people in poetry who do! Are we to expect that they all have, like, magical bladders or something?"

"Magical bladders?"

"And you keep saying you want to write an English poem where it's realistic, right? And the characters are real people? And act like real people do?"

"For God's love, Adam, that doesn't mean you have to include *everything* people do. I think we can *assume* they stopped to take a whiz once in a while. And that doesn't explain why you're making fun of *Troilus and Criseyde.*"

"Well..." Adam blushed. "I wasn't making fun of the *poem.* I was making fun of its *fans.*"

"And this thing about leprosy isn't even in the poem to begin with! I *meant* the bit about wanting to give Criseyde a happy ending, but it just wouldn't *work,* thematically."

"Queen Anne didn't think so," Adam reminded him. "Incidentally, are you ever going to finish that poem she asked you to write?"

"You are changing the subject, Adam," said Chaucer. "The issue at hand is that I am going to need a new copy of the Cook's Tale, and you are going to put in some extra hours copying it out. Properly, this time."

"Of course, Master Chaucer."

"And pay attention! I haven't forgotten having to explain to Vache that I wasn't actually suggesting he does dodgy things by himself up against walls."

"That wasn't what made him mad," Adam said. "That line about 'suffice thine own thing though it be small' is *entirely* your fault."

"O Lord," Chaucer sighed, throwing up his hands, "deliver me from insolent scribes and I promise I'll take back everything I ever wrote!"

Adam nodded, somberly. "That'd probably work," he said.

**Epilogue: Whan Brighte Phebus Passed Was the Ram, or, The Other Monk's Tale**

"So what brings you to join our merry company -- is it Dom Piers, or Dom Dominic, or Godfrey or Clement?" Harry Bailly asked, to the newcomer who had just joined the band of pilgrims. He had prominent eyebrows, a more prominent chin, and a still *more* prominent nose, and his shaven head and black cope proclaimed him a Benedictine monk. The group had spotted him along the road out of Canterbury, gesturing vaguely northward with his thumb, and he had insinuated his way into their ranks before you could say "Wat" (not that you would want to, unless you were the Summoner and had had a few too many).
"John Lydgate, monk of Bury," he said. "I'm headed back there, of course, and London is kind of on the way. Sort of. I set out myself yesterday, but I got all turned around at Crundale and I was halfway to Maidstone before I figured it out. I've, um, never been very good at not getting lost, you see, and you guys seem pretty above-board. Plus I see one of my fellow brothers here. *Benedicite*, brother Benedictine!" he said, grinning gormlessly and waving at the Monk, who nodded gravely.

"So, was anyone else there to take the Becket-water?" Lydgate said, by way of breaking the ice. "Wasn't that weird? They said you can't taste the brain, but I'm pretty sure I could. And now I can say I drank bits of a saint's brain; isn't that fantastic?"

Somewhere a cricket chirped, even though it was morning. The sixty miles to London had never looked quite so long as they did at this moment.

"So," Lydgate said, again, only slightly daunted by the simultaneously disgusted and baffled silence his enthusiasm for relic-infused well-water had generated. "Anyone want to hear a story about Thebes?"

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