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LTEN 107: Chaucer

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The Plowman's Tale

Here begins the Plowman's Tale.

Spring was here and Spring is now ready to go,
 It is time to welcome June, let's say hello.
 The lambs have been tended to – well-groomed and fed,
 Fertilizer and muck throughout the field have been spread
 5 For crops such as barley, legumes, and oats,
 Harvests are now being prepared for some other crops,
 Everything seems perfect, and is so portrayed in books,
 But open your ears and you'll hear the howls and hoots.
 I was on my way to work with full dedication
 10 When approaching from the North I saw a small procession,
 A company of three men it seemed, appearing weary,
 They looked quite disturbed and impatient and angry.
 Upon asking them of their identity, their situation,
 Where they came from and their destination,
 15 Let me tell you what I saw and what I heard,
 Repeating verbatim exactly what had occurred,
 And so, with a King let me therefore begin.
 Named Richard II, at ten he was made a King,
 And in his minority,
 20 The government was conducted jointly by his uncles three,
 The most influential being the brother-in-law of Chaucer,
 Who married the great poet's wife's sister.
 To project passion for kingship and his regal ideals, the King
 Had himself portrayed in the Diptych – a religious painting,
 25 Paying homage to the Virgin and Child.
 Of how he looked and how he styled,
 He had a fair face and a small-forked beard,
 Wearing royal clothes and a golden crown on his head.

Then there was a priest who talked very little,
30 And he was mostly immersed in reading the Bible,
He preached and delivered sermons at many places,
And insisted publicly on social justice.
He attacked secular lords and clergymen in a letter,
Inspiring leaders of the commons for the better.
35 He had simple clothes on, a tippet that was blue,
And a canterbury cap of the same hue.
He was known by the name of John Ball.
And let me tell you that that was not all,
Because finally, I met Wat Tyler who must have been
40 The most outspoken person I had ever seen.
He was by profession an Essex-tiler,
But his skills could very well make him a leader.
You might be wondering what a King, a priest,
And a tiler – a diverse group, to say the least,
45 Were doing together arguing and fighting and shouting.
It appeared as if they were to each other “quiting”
Over tensions political, social, and economic,
The Black Death and the brutal conflict
With France during the War of a Hundred Years,
50 Which left most of the people in tears,
When to make it all right the peasants were asked
To pay high taxes on the money they had amassed.
Now let me tell you of their discussion, their debate,
What the results were and what happened of their fate.
55 It was Tyler who started by presenting his argument,
The peasants’ demands and the reason for their torment.
Tyler began, ‘Enough is enough!
We as peasants have had it rough.
With what is and has been happening,
60 We must put an end to this thing.
It is not just about the money and the taxes,
Your Majesty, please understand this,
It is time that we as peasants get to decide
Whom we want to work with; Take our side
65 And put an end to serfdom, give us liberty,
Help us improve our lives’ quality,
Listen to us and we’ll listen to you.’
Having heard Tyler’s argument through,

The King spoke up, 'That's all well said,
 70 But I just can't get it out of my head –
 The protest and the things that your people have done,
 They've burnt court records and opened the local prison.
 Tell me, Tyler, who entered London and destroyed
 The Savoy Palace, the Temple, and killed
 75 Anyone associated with the royal government.
 Are they not your people? The extent
 To which they went! But you are their leader
 And you already know this, right Tyler?'

It was at this point that the Priest interjected,
 80 Directed toward Tyler, it was a sermon that he narrated:
 'When Adam delved and Eve span,
 Who was then the gentleman?
 All men by nature were, from the beginning,
 Created alike, our bondage originating
 85 From the unjust oppression of naughty men.
 For if God would have had any bondmen
 From the beginning, He would have appointed
 Who should be bond, and who extricated
 From servitude. And therefore, I exhort you
 90 To consider that the time is come, appointed to
 Us by God, in which you may cast off the tyranny
 Of bondage and recover liberty.'

What happened next, I could never have imagined.
 Had Fortune perhaps her wheel turned?
 95 There was violence and gore—but, oh!
 I dare not speak of it. But you know
 I must; I must because I have promised
 To you and so here are how things progressed.
 The King agreed to Tyler's demands,
 100 And he was ready to shake hands,
 But Tyler was not convinced of the King's sincerity,
 He was skeptical about the proposal's surety.
 The King's men – both soldiers and guards –
 Observing all this from a few yards,
 105 Became impatient and lost their calm and quiet,
 And soon an altercation started.
 He who had the role of Lord Mayor begun,
 Earlier had served as Sheriff of London,

And worked for quite some time in the Customs House
110 Under Chaucer, pulled Tyler down from his horse,
And killed him. The rebels were furious, but confused
On what to do next since their leader was executed.
The King, taking his chance and acting
With calm resolve and saying,
115 'Follow me, I am your captain',
He defused the situation,
Long enough for his men on horses,
To disperse the rebel forces.
And so, most of the rebel leaders were tracked
120 Down by the King's men and assassinated.
This is how the tale ends, not looking good
For the peasants, and God knows if they ever stood
Up to the King and his decrees,
Or if they revolted again for a reduction in their fees.
125 But my job as a narrator comes to an end here,
1381 has been a tumultuous year,
And I pray good wishes for my peasant brothers,
My tale is done, don't forget the cheers.

Here ends the Plowman his Tale.

The Plowman's Tale: Analysis

In the General Prologue, Geoffrey Chaucer portrays the Plowman in a way that is not representative of the contemporary plowman. Chaucer writes that the Plowman is “Living in pees and parfit charitee. / ... His tithes payede he ful faire and wel, Bothe of his propre swink and his catel” (GP, l. 532 – 540). According to Chaucer, the Plowman lived in peace and perfect charity, and he never missed paying his taxes in full. However, the contemporary plowman and peasants in general were involved in what we call the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. People from the lower strata of society were demanding a reduction in taxes, an end to serfdom, and equal treatment from the government and the royals. The Plowman not being portrayed as how he really was at that time makes him tell a tale that is strikingly similar to Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* in an attempt to “quite” Chaucer himself (Mil, l. 3129).

There are several ways in which the Plowman “quites” Chaucer through his tale. One of them is by narrating a tale that is similar to Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. The Plowman starts off his tale by giving his readers vivid descriptions of the characters involved in the tale, their clothes, and their appearance, often emphasizing the details like Chaucer does in his book. After the general prologue, the Plowman begins narrating the events of the Peasants’ revolt through interactions between the characters of his tale, reminiscent of the “quiting” that occurs between Chaucer’s characters through their tales. The Plowman’s characters are from different strata of the estates – King Richard II from the nobility, John Ball from the clergy, and Wat Tyler from the Peasantry class – who help us understand the dynamics within the estates, like how Chaucer does through tales told by characters from different sections of society in his book. This shows how similar the Plowman’s tale is to Chaucer’s book, but in order to “quite” Chaucer, the Plowman has to respond in a way that is elevated and corrects the shortcomings in Chaucer’s

book. The Plowman makes John Ball, one of the characters in his tale who mirrors Chaucer's Parson, give a sermon. But he does not stop his tale there. He finishes his tale by providing the complete sequence of events from the Peasants' Revolt. The Plowman by narrating a complete, finished tale in contrast to Chaucer's unfinished work "quites" Chaucer.

Another way in which the Plowman "quites" Chaucer is through his emphasis on details that are hidden throughout the tale. Towards the end of his first stanza, the Plowman says that books portray everything as being perfect even though it is not. Here, the Plowman is making a subtle reference to Chaucer and how his book *The Canterbury Tales* overlooks the Peasants' Revolt and mentions nothing about it when trying to portray how people lived in the Middle Ages. The Plowman also identifies Chaucer's relations with John of Gaunt and William Walworth, both of whom had a major role to play in the Peasants' Revolt against the rebels. John of Gaunt was one of the closest to Richard II and advised him on numerous occasions. William Walworth killed Wat Tyler, paving the way for the royals' and the government's win against the rebels. By identifying Chaucer's relations to these men, the Plowman is letting his audience know the reason behind Chaucer not talking about the Peasants' Revolt in his book. Chaucer had good connections with these people from the higher strata of the estates, and to show his allegiance to them, he does not engage with what happens during the revolt in his book.

Being a peasant, it seems fitting for the Plowman to tell a tale about what was happening in the lives of the peasants in contemporary England, and by "quiting" Chaucer through his tale and bringing out the real peasant, the Plowman highlights some of the most important events of that time and the values that the peasants were fighting for that later audiences should know about.

Notes to the Plowman's Tale

- 1 – 2 The Peasant's Revolt started near the end of May and beginning of June of the year 1381, and lasted till November of the same year.
- 3 – 6 In Medieval England, rearing of sheep in pastures was prominent (Harrison, p. 6). Also, barley, dredge, legumes, and oats were planted as spring crops whereas wheat and bere were planted as winter crops, ready to be harvested by the end of spring (Harrison, p. 9).
- 7 – 8 There is a reference here to Chaucer's idealized representation of the plowman and his overlooking of the Peasants' Revolt that occurred during his lifetime (See Analysis for more information).
- 18 – 20 The most influential of the uncles leading the government alongside Richard II was John of Gaunt (Szarmach et al., p. 638).
- 21 – 22 John of Gaunt was a close friend of Chaucer who took Chaucer's wife Philippa's sister Katherine Swynford as his third wife (Szarmach et al., p. 172).
- 23 – 25 Richard II portrayed himself in the Wilton Diptych, paying homage to the Virgin and Child, which can be found at the National Gallery, London (Szarmach et al., p. 639).
- 27 – 28 King Richard II's appearance has been taken from his portrait in *The Wilton Diptych*.
- 31 – 32 John Ball was a chaplain from Colchester and is best known for delivering a sermon preaching equality to the rebels at Blackheath (Justice, p. 4).
- 33 – 34 A letter attributed to John Ball was found in the garment of a man about to be hanged, addressed to the leaders of the revolt, asking them to finish what they had begun (Justice, p. 14).
- 35 – 36 John Ball's appearance has been taken and adapted from his portrait in the *Peasants' Revolt* at the British Library.

- 41 – 42 Wat Tyler was the leader of the Peasants' Revolt, and his occupation is mostly associated with that of an Essex tiler (Dobson, p. 18).
- 46 The word "quite" has been taken from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* where pilgrims respond to (quite) each other's tales with their own tales (Mil, l. 3129).
- 48 – 49 The Black Death and The Hundred Years' War with France left England in a situation of socio-economic disadvantage. To recover from it, England started levying high taxes.
- 61 – 66 The rebels demanded "abolition of villeinage, fixed rents, disendowment and dispersal of Church goods, ... abolition of outlawry, equality of status ..." (Justice, p. 3).
- 71 – 75 The rebels had attacked and burnt the Savoy, plundered the Temple, broke prisons and released prisoners, and demanded that officials meet their requests (Justice, p. 2).
- 81 – 92 The famous sermon of John Ball inspiring the rebels at Blackheath (Bragg), presented almost verbatim except to match the rhyme scheme of the tale.
- 107 – 109 The person being referred to here is William Walworth (Wikipedia contributors).
- 115 After Tyler's death, Richard II declares himself the rebels' new captain and leads them to Clerkenwell (Justice, p. 3).

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