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Fortune as a Hunter: Elements of Masculinity in The Monk's Tale

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Fortune as a Hunter: Elements of Masculinity in The Monk's Tale

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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English

by

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Abstract

In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, The Monk's Tale is comprised of seventeen individual tales, which instead of serving a moral lesson one would expect of a clergy member, serves as a quasi-hunt that allows the Monk to participate in his favorite, violent hobby. The Monk personifies fortune as a hunter, striking down successful men who are unsuspecting of the violent downfall, which awaits them. The Monk structures his tale to resemble the different stages of a hunt and fills it with violent, animalistic, and erotic imagery that works to strengthen the Monk's perception of his own masculinity while simultaneously providing a form of sexual pleasure that he is otherwise forbidden to experience. Hunting played a significant role in medieval society and literature. Though clergy members were typically forbidden or discouraged from participating in the sport, significant aspects of the history surrounding medieval hunting shed light on the Monk's identity as primarily a hunter.

Keywords: The Monk's Tale, medieval hunting, Benedictine monks, fortune, huntresses, monastic law, hunting ritual, erotic imagery.

Introduction

Nicholas Orme writes: “The passion [for hunting] has seldom been stronger than it was in medieval England, when hunting occupied the minds and bodies of people across the whole of society.” Chaucer frequently refers to the sport in his late fourteenth-century poem *The Canterbury Tales* (133). Chaucer’s Monk, one of the twenty-nine pilgrims on his way to Canterbury, tells a rather repetitive, long-winded tale featuring seventeen tales. These tales serve as examples to demonstrate the tragedies of misfortune. The Monk uses an extensive selection of biblical, historical, and political figures to exemplify the misery that follows when “Fortune list to flee” (1995). The Monk fills his tales with graphic and violent imagery associated with hunting. The Monk portrays fortune as an entity that cannot be trusted; this idea is hardly new, Donald R. Howard writes, describing medieval beliefs about fortune: “. . . man was subject to fortune, ‘the goddess Fortuna,’ . . . Fortune meant that man could not count on any outcome in the corrupted currents of this world” (60). However, the Monk portrays misfortune as an entity that lurks around those with success, waiting to strike and kill its prey. It is a new idea, the conception of misfortune. The Monk’s portrayal of misfortune as a hunter by way of tales of those who have been hunted down mercilessly allows the Monk to participate in a quasi-hunt himself and satisfy his own bloodlust. John Ramazani

describes the Monk's character in relation to his tale: "... the Monk is violent in temper, his aggression finding its only outlet in tragedies" (269). In the *General Prologue*, the narrator reveals that the Monk is an avid hunter. Jane Zatta Dick writes: "Looking at the description of the Monk in the *General Prologue* from the perspective of issues raised by the Monk's Tale recontextualizes the cleric's favorite pastime" (114). To understand the Monk's Tale as a hunt, the Monk's full character description must be taken into account, because being a hunter is a more important part of the Monk's nature more than his clerical identity.

Rosalyn Rossignol states: "In [the General Prologue's description], Chaucer embedded an old-fashioned ideal of social harmony, the 'Three Estates'" (410). The "Three Estates" in medieval social hierarchy consisted of knights, clergy, and commons: "those who fight, those who pray, and those who work" (410). Chaucer follows the hierarchal order of the estates as he introduces the twenty-nine characters making the pilgrimage to Canterbury. The narrator introduces the Monk in proper order, but it is clear from his luxurious wardrobe that the Monk is noble in a sense:

I seigh his sleves purfiled at the hond
With grys, and that the fyneste of a lond;
And for to destne his hood under his chyn
He hadde of gold ywroght a ful curious pyn;

A love-knotte in the gretter end ther was . . .

His bootes souple, his hors in greet estaat (193-97, 203).

As Howard notes, the Monk “ . . . is of an aristocratic family and has never left behind the nobleman’s interests – horses, hunting, clothes, jewels, women” (438).

The Host also points out the Monk’s curious appearance in the Monk’s Prologue, almost in disbelief that the Monk is a part of the clergy:

Of what hous be ye, by youre fader kyn?

I vowe to God, thou hast a ful fair skyn

It is a gentil pasture ther thow goost.

Thou art nat lyk a penant or goost:

. . . For by my fader soule, as to my doom,

Thou art a maister whan thou art at hoom;

No povre cloysterer, ne no novys (1931-34, 1937-39).

Orme writes: “In the Middle Ages, hunting was mainly for noblemen to participate in as it “cemented relations between the king and his nobility and gentry” (133).

Hunting was regarded as a privilege and the Monk’s position as an “outridere” is most likely the only reason he is able to participate in the sport. The first lines of the Monk’s description have nothing to do with the clerical life besides mentioning his specific position within the monastery; readers are informed instead that he is “ . . . an outridere, that loved venerie” (166). The *OED* defines “venerie” as “the

practice or sport of hunting beasts of game.” The Benedictine order, of which Chaucer’s Monk is a member, was one of the two monastic sects established in England by the late fourteenth century. In addition to the regulations of the monastic orders, individual monasteries also had their own rules and rituals that the monks had to abide by. Rosalyn Rossignol describes the Benedictine Rule:

The Benedictine Rule, established by St. Benedict in the sixth century, contained the first set of regulations created to govern monastic life. These regulations were intended to lead monks to religious perfection by the practices of humility, obedience, prayer, silence, and retirement from the concerns of the world (62).

Chaucer the narrator informs readers that the Monk does not follow the regulations of the Benedictine order: “The reule of Seint Maure or of Seint Beneit - / By cause that is was old and somdel streit / This ilke lee tolde thynges pace / And heeld after the newe world the space. / He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen, / That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men” (173-78). The Monk rejects any criticism of clergy who participate in hunting and does not see the purpose of remaining within the monastery. According to J.C. Dickinson, “Privacy – one of the essentials for monastic life – led to the whole monastic establishment being strictly enclosed by a lofty wall” and “The cloister was the heart of the monastery” (5, 28). The Monk seems to spend little to no time within the monastery, much less his cloister.

Chaucer the narrator defends him: “How shal the world be served” in such a way? (187). It is not clear that his time is better spent serving others through hunting, but this question is also unanswerable. The world is not served through the Monk’s violent hobby, but the Monk himself is served and as far as he is concerned, if he is satisfied then so is the world.

Amanda Richardson notes: “Hunting is traditionally considered in academic discourse in terms of formation and reinforcement of various masculinities” (253). The Monk does not constrain his physical body as members of the clergy were typically encouraged to do. Instead, the Monk engages in feeding his physical body and its desires literally as well as figuratively. The Monk does not deny himself pleasure: he “. . . was a lord ful fat and in good point; / . . . [And] a fat swan loved he best of any roost” (200, 206). The Monk does not aim for a more spiritual nature to restrain his physical nature; through hunting, he is able to assert his masculinity and strengthen it: “Hunting was basic to male identity in all classes with legal or illegal access to the forests” (Howard 18). Within his tale, the Monk confronts idealized and supernatural versions of masculinity through figures such as Sampson and Hercules, so the Monk especially enjoys seeing figures so superior to himself fall. According to William Percy Martin, “The rhetoric of medieval technical literature on hunting practice . . . regarded the craft of killing wild animals as an experience that had less to do overtly with war than with modes of

personal and collective self-expression and varied psychological experience, notable regarding death and love” (132). Historically, hunting in medieval times had many purposes including “ . . . to exercise the horses, keep up one’s horsemanship, release one’s competitive urges, [and] play at exercising power” (50). All of these purposes motivate the Monk to hunt, especially the lure of competition and power. Hunting is a form of release, one not without sexual connotations. Though the Monk must remain chaste within his order, his description in the General Prologue hints at his sexual nature. The Monk is merciless when he hunts, as the narrator mentions: “Of prikyng and of hunting for the hare / Was al his lust, for no cost wolde he spare” (191-92). The use of term “lust” regarding the Monk’s savage hunting instincts carries a sexual connotation. The Monk’s desire to catch and kill a hare is as strong as sexual lust: “The hunt’s synthesis of pleasure and violence indeed derives from the fact that were it not for animals resisting capture, there could never be sport in it” (Martin 6). The Monk’s desire to hunt, once enticed, must be fulfilled, and the Monk goes to whatever lengths he must to fulfill that desire. Like the act of sex, hunting has a climax: the moment the hunter seizes the prey. The “inner structure” of the Monk’s Tale is clear from his portrait in the General Prologue, like that of some other tales: “The General Prologue is the heart or backbone of *The Canterbury Tales*. It imposes in

advance the ‘outer’ structure of the pilgrimage and the ‘inner’ structure of the pilgrims’ tales” (Rossignol 409).

Chapter 1

The Monk orders his tale according to a hierarchy that resembles the social hierarchy governing portraits' order in the General Prologue. He starts with a divine figure, Lucifer, and follows with another biblical figure, Adam, the first man. Robert Boenig notes that the tales "are rather chaotically organized with some claim to chronological progression, since they start with Lucifer and Adam and work their way up to some of Chaucer's contemporaries . . ." (262). The Monk spends little time reflecting upon Lucifer and Adam since both downfalls were self-inflicted. The Monk is unable to relate the two figures to hunting. Sampson is the first figure in the tale whose treatment is detailed; in it, the Monk uses the word "slow" for the first time. Specific terms associated with hunting recur throughout Sampson's tale: *slow*, *slayn*, *preye*, and *wepen*,"and a variety of hunting imagery appears. Sampson is the strongest male figure the Monk describes because Sampson's strength is divinely appointed:

. . . was annunciat,
By th' angel longe er his nativitee,
And was to God Almyghty consecrate,
And stood in noblesse while he myghte see.
Was nevere swich another as was hee,
To speke of strengthe, and therwith hardynesse . . . (2015-20).

The *OED* defines “hardiness” as not only “the capability to endure hardship” but also “physical robustness.” Consistent with the Monk’s portrait in the General Prologue, Sampson is a robust figure. Sampson’s divine strength paired with his physical superiority may even be a threat to the Monk’s own masculinity. The Monk may be a “man of god” in his position as a clergy member, but he is only a man. He does not have attributes or skills appointed to him by God. The Monk takes pleasure in emasculating Sampson in his tale with the goal of elevating himself above the biblical figure. Therefore, immediately after defining Sampson’s robust masculinity, the Monk mentions that “. . . to his wyves tolde [Sampson] his secree, / Thurgh which he slow hymself for wrecchednesse” (2021-22). Fortune does not hunt Sampson as it does several figures in the tales that follow. However, the hunting imagery used in Sampson’s tale overshadows any moral lesson Sampson’s downfall may provide.

The Monk focuses on the most malicious and violent of Sampson’s actions described in the Book of Judges. To more accurately depict the degree of Sampson’s strength, the Monk notes that Sampson “slow [a] leoun . . . withouten wepen save his hands” (2024-25). Hunting tactics in the Middle Ages included the use of many weapons and even hounds; a lion was not an animal that even the most skilled hunter could imagine stalking. The Monk returns to his narrative by explaining how Sampson’s downfall began: “Toward his weddyng walkynge by

the weye / His false wyf koude hym so plese and preye / Til she his conseil knew .
..” (2026-28). Sampson walks unaware of any danger, much like an animal before
the action of a hunt begins. Once Sampson reveals his secret and Delilah deceives
him, Sampson’s strength turns into an animalistic rage. The Monk appreciates
Sampson’s divine capabilities when it comes to destroying both animals and men.
Through Sampson, the Monk is on a quasi-hunt as he relays Sampson’s slaughters:

Thre hundred foxes took Sampson for ire,
And all hir tayles he togydre bond,
And sette the foxes tayles alle on fire,
For he on every tayl had knyht a brond;
And they brende alle the cornes in that lond,
And alle hire olyveres and vynes eke.
A thousand men he slow eek with his hond,
And hadde no wepen but an asses cheke (2031-38).

If Sampson’s tale at first appears to transmit a moral lesson, these lines prove
otherwise. Why does the Monk include these details if readers are to learn from
Sampson’s poor example? Is it important for readers to know exactly how
Sampson killed the foxes in order to reflect upon their own behavior? Clearly, the
Monk’s purpose in including such a description is for his own enjoyment and to
display his own knowledge of hunting tactics.

The Monk chides Sampson, speaking to him directly: “O noble, almyghty Sampson, lief and deere, / Had thou not toold to wommen thy secree, / In al this world ne hadde been thy peere!” (2052-54). The Monk implies that with Sampson brought to ruin there is a chance for another to rise up and be his match; it is not unlikely to think the Monk may be thinking of himself. The Monk reduces Sampson to the level of an ordinary human or animal as he loses all of his divine abilities. After his hair is cut, Sampson’s enemies bind and contain him as an animal would be if captured during a hunt. The removal of Sampson’s eyes can also be related to the cutting up of an animal killed during a hunt. Once Sampson loses his eyes, the Monk only refers to him as a “creature”; Sampson is no longer a divine figure or even a human figure. The Philistine’s butcher Sampson just as hunters butcher animals: “The hunt, or the “chase” culminated in the butchering of the animals caught . . .” (Howard 50). As Sampson’s tale nears the end, the Monk repeats that Sampson “slow hymself,” but unlike an animal, Sampson is able to take his enemies down with him. The image of Sampson attempting to break free from the ties that bind him to the palace pillars is similar to an animal trying to escape once captured. The final scene is one of mass destruction, which suits the Monk’s violent tendencies:

For he two pilers shook and made hem falle,
And doun fil temple and al, and ther it lay –

And slow hymself, and eek his foomen alle.

This is to seyn, the prynces everichoon,

And eek thre thousand bodyes, were ther slayn

With fallynge of the grete temple of stoon (2084-89).

Following Sampson's account, the Monk features Hercules, the first secular figure of his tale. The Monk refers to Hercules as "the sovereyn conquerour," but Fortune does not allow Hercules to hold this title indefinitely (2095). "Sovereyn" refers to "one who has supremacy or rank above, or authority over, others" (*OED*). The Monk immediately lists this demi-god's most heroic hunting feats:

He slow and rafte the skyn of the leoun;

Her of Centauros leyde the boost adoun;

He Arpies slow, the crueel bryddes felle;

He golden apples rafte of the dragoun;

He drow out Cerberus, the hound of helle;

He slow the crueel tyrant Busirus

And made his hors to frete hym, flesh and boon;

He slow the firy serpent veymus;

Of Acheloys two hornes he brak oon;

And he slow Cacus in a cave of stoon;

He slow the geant Antheus the stronge;

He slow the grisly boor, and that anon;

And bar the heven on his nekke longe (2098-110).

Hercules reigns over animals, kings and men, and mythical creatures and beasts.

As in Sampson's account, the Monk uses the term "slow" consistently and repetitively. The violent implications in the language and imagery resemble the Monk's own relentlessness when he is hunting a hare: "for no cost wolde he spare" (192). Figures with supernatural abilities fascinate the Monk as much as they threaten him. Sampson and Hercules have the inherent ability to conquer nature, which is admirable in the Monk's eyes because it is an essential ability for hunters. Matt Cartmill notes the confrontational ways medieval hunters attempted to conquer nature: "The hunt is thus by definition an armed confrontation between humanness and wilderness, between culture and nature. Because it involves confrontational, premeditated and violent killing, it represents something like a war waged by humanity against the wilderness" (6).

The Monk notes that Hercules is known for his strength, primarily his physical strength; because he is a member of the clergy, one would expect the Monk to focus on figures with strength of character verses physical strength, but strength of character does not help hunters. Physical strength allows Hercules to defeat and devour any creature: "Was never wight, sith that this world bigan, / That slow so manye monstres as dide he. / He was so stroong that no man myghte

hym lette. / At both the worldes endes, seith Trophee, / In stide of boundes he a
pileer sette” (2111-12, 2116-17). The Monk does not conclude Hercules’ tale with
a warning, but he does include a short piece of advice for those who wish to avoid
the snares of Fortune: “Ful wys is he that hymselfen knowe!” (2139). The Monk
asserts his masculinity by believing he is wiser than the miserable men he has
portrayed thus far, for the Monk knows that if a man knows himself he can escape
the tragedies of misfortune. By implying that he is wiser, the Monk compensates
for his physical inferiority to men with supernatural strength such as Sampson and
Hercules.

The tale of Nabugodonosor does not resemble the tales that precede it; there
are no hunting references and in the end he finds himself redeemed by God. But
Nabugodonosor’s tale contains a fair amount of animalistic imagery. Before
reaching redemption, Nabugodonosor

. . . lost his dignytee,
And lyke a beest hym semed for to bee,
And eet hey as an oxe, and lay theroute
In reyn; with wild beestes walked hee
Til certain tyme was ycome aboute (2170-76).

Because Fortune flees the Assyrian king, he is reduced to an animal state in which
he grovels on land and behaves in a primitive, savage manner. He becomes wild

and untamed as his hair and nails grow. In the account of Belshazzar, Nabugodonosor's son, the Monk for the first time personifies Fortune specifically putting into action a man's downfall in his tale. Belshazzar follows a path similar to his father's and the consequences of his actions mirror Nabugodonosor's fate. Belshazzar is also redeemed, but before he receives God's mercy and grace, he is reduced to an animal-like state. As soon as Belshazzar is secure in his lofty position as king, "Fortune cast hym doun, and ther he lay, / And sodeynly his regne gan divide" (2189-90). Like his father, Belshazzar experiences the lowest hierarchal level of creation possible: "He was cast out of mannes compaignye; / With asses was his habitacioun, / And eet hey as a beest in weet and drye" (2215-17).

The Monk features only one woman in his entire tale, Cenobia, the unconquerable huntress and Persian queen; perhaps the Monk only features one woman because out of the seventeen figures in his tale Cenobia is the one who threatens his masculinity and hunting skills the most. In the Middle Ages "Women themselves sometimes engaged actively in hunting" (Cummins 7). In fact, many medieval "writers approved of hunting by noble women too" (Orme 142). Women typically were responsible for preparing the meat which would be brought on the return of a hunt; therefore, it is safe to assume that "All women must have been in touch with hunting through hearing about it and helping to dress the spoils" (137).

However, women's participation was not limited to meal preparation, Orme notes: "One popular late-medieval hunting treatise professes to be the advice of a mother to her son on all the techniques of the sport, which . . . implies that a gentlewoman could possess such knowledge" (137). As a child, Cenobia would flee to the woods to shoot her bow to escape the daily tasks that women in her village were expected to perform:

From hire childhede I fynde that she fledde
Office of wommen and to wode she wente,
And many a wilde hertes blood she shedde
With arwes brode that she to hem sente
She was so swift that she anon hem hente;
And whan that she was elder, she wolde kille
Leouns, leopardes, and beres al torente,
And in hir armes weelde hem at hir wille (2255-62).

The Monk specifically mentions the types of animals Cenobia hunts; if the Monk was merely reciting a tragedy, why would the types of animals she hunts be significant to the tragedy? It is not a fact significant to a tragedy, but it is significant to a hunter. The hart " . . . in most countries . . . was the largest hunted animal; it was the noblest in appearance; it was an animal combining innocence with guile in a way which drew the best out of hounds and hunter and made the

chase a cerebral as well as physical exercise” (32). Again, hunting is more than a physical endeavor; it is a sport or game that stimulates the physical body and the mind, an erotic experience that must have especially appealed to celibate monks.

The Monk introduces Cenobia as if she is a knight, commenting on her noble valor: “noblesse . . . so worthy was in armes and so keene” (2248-49). Further, “no wight passed hire in hardynesse” (2250); this line has both masculine and sexual connotations. The Monk mentions Cenobia’s physical attractiveness to remind his audience of her inferior position as a woman. The Monk thus establishes himself as superior to her. To establish himself as superior to the men he has portrayed thus far, he has simply reduced them to an animal-like state, but Cenobia may be reduced by her inferior status as a woman. The Monk takes offense at Cenobia’s ability to assert herself outside of the societal structure women to which were expected to adhere. Though, his own behavior deviates from the standard regulations of the Benedictine order. However, his frustration may stem from sexual frustration, which Cenobia most likely agitates. Often in medieval literature the chase of prey in a hunt became a symbol for the chase to attain a woman: “Hunting . . . is a rich source of erotic imagery; the combination of love-making and the chase can vary from a tapestry of hunting scenes in which erotic activity is a by-product to a mural about love in which the hunt is a supporting motif” (8). Cenobia or any other woman is one prey the Monk is not

allowed to capture. Part of Cenobia's exceptional strength lies in her discipline not to surrender her virginity to any man:

. . . and she koude eke

Wrastlen, by verray force and verray myght,

With any yong man, were he never so wight.

Ther myghte no thing in hir armes stonde.

She kepte hir maydenhod from every wight;

To no man deigned hire for to be bonde (2264-69).

In recounting Cenobia's greatest defeats, the Monk does not use the term "slow" once, whereas in all the male figures' tales he uses it repetitively. He does not use the term because it is a masculine term and he needs to defend his masculinity; the term establishes power in reference to the figure who "slays" and the Monk is not willing to let a female possess that power despite her skills. The Monk envies not only Cenobia's skills, but also her luxurious riches. The description of her riches recalls somewhat the Monk's own description in the *General Prologue*: "Hir riche array ne myght nat be told, / As wel in vessel as in hire clothing, / She was clad in perre and in gold" (2303-05). There is a connection between Cenobia's gold and the Monk's own "love-knotte of gold," which he wears despite his clerical position (196-97). Monks within the Benedictine order were expected to denounce all material possessions in order to cultivate a higher

level of spirituality. The Monk's entire dress is that of a nobleman, his "... sleeves purfiled at the hond" and "boots souple" (193, 203).

As the Monk continues Cenobia's tale, he notes that once she marries, her husband only has one chance to get her pregnant between her menstrual cycles: "... And also soone as that she myghte espye / That she was nat with childe with that dede, / Thanne wolde she suffre hym doon his fantasye / Eft-soone, and nat but oones, out of drede" (2282-86) In a hunt, the hunters typically had a very small window of time within which to capture the animal they were hunting; if it was not captured precisely and swiftly, there was a good chance the animal could escape. The Monk refers to Cenobia's demand as a "game," which echoes his hunter's vocabulary. Even following her husband's death, Cenobia remains unconquerable for a significant amount of time; she drives fear into men of power and they cower, much like animals escaping hunters, to avoid engaging in battle with her:

The Emperour of Rome, Claudius
Ne hym bifore, the Romayn Galien,
Ne dorste nevere been so corageus,
Ne noon Ermyn, ne noon Egipcien,
Ne Surrien, ne noon Arabyen,
Withinne the feeld that dorste with hire fighte,
Lest that she wolde hem with hir hands slen,

Or with hir meignee putten hem to flighte (2335-42).

When Fortune aims to strike Cenobia down, the imagery the Monk evokes is sexual: “But ay Fortune hath in hire hony galle; / This mighty queene may no while endure. / Fortune out of hir regne made hire falle / To wrecchednesse and to mysaventure” (2347-50). Here Fortune inserts something “bitter” into Cenobia’s honey, which is a sexualized image. Fortune typically strikes down the male tragic figures in the Monk’s Tale, but here Fortune penetrates the huntress and brings her to ruin through an act much like rape.

Following his account of Cenobia’s downfall, the Monk tells three short accounts of kings, each no longer than a stanza long. The brief accounts might suggest the Monk’s lack of interest in these kings; in fact, the Monk knows very little about their lives. The Monk includes them because he at least knows they were viciously slain, like animals captured in a hunt. Pedro of Castile (De Petro Rege Ispannie) is driven out of the land he reigns over by his brother, much as hunters drive their prey out of their habitat. If possible, hunters used hounds to drive animals out of their habitat and into the open to make them an easier target. Pedro’s brother drives him out of the land in order to kill him more easily:

Out of thy land thy brother made thee flee,

And after, at a seege, by subtiltee,

Thou were bitraysed and lad unto his tente,

Where as he with his owene hand slow thee,

Succedyng in thy regne and in thy rente (2377-82).

This act resembles the kill of a hunter. Pierre de Lusignan (*De Petro Rege de Cipro*) meets his death in his own bed at the hands of his “own liges”: “They in thy bed han slayn thee by the morwe. / Thus kan Fortune hir wheel governe and gye, / And out of joye brygne men to sorwe” (2396-98). The Monk derives pleasure from kills in which the victim is unsuspecting. The ignorance of the prey adds an extra layer of violence and surprise. There is no mercy in any of these killings; they are premeditated and cold-blooded, like killings that take place during a hunt. Hunting was seen as a way to train men for war. The last king in the series of short tales is Bernabó Visconti (*De Barnabo de Lumbardia*). The Monk directly mentions that Bernabó, “God of delit and scourge of Lumbardye,” climbed high on the ladder of fortune and eventually fell from the highest rung (2400); because of this the Monk must include him in his tragedies:

Why sholde I nat thyn infortune acounte

Sith in estaat thow cloumbe were so hye?

Thy brother sone, that was thy double allye,

For he thy nevew was and sone-in-lawe,

Withinne his prisoun made thee to dye –

But why ne how noot I that thou were slawe (2401-06).

Chapter 2

The Monk's use of animalistic imagery is most prevalent in the account of Ugolino of Pisa's downfall; accounts of Ugolino circulated widely in the Middle Ages because of the gruesome death he suffered with his children. The Monk offers no details about Ugolino's life before his imprisonment. The Monk begins: "Off the Erl Hugelyn of Pyze the languor / Ther may no tonge telle for pitee (2407-08). Ugolino is not merely struck down by fortune as some of the other figures in the tale have been, but rather he languishes: his death is slow and agonizing. The Monk compares his imprisonment with his three children to the plight of captured animals who are utterly helpless: "Allas, Fortune, it was greet crueltee / Swiche briddes for to putte in swich a cage!" (2413-14). Due to false accusations, the people of Pisa rose up to bring Ugolino down; they surrounded him as a band of hunters would surround an animal. Ugolino's innocent children have to suffer the consequences of the actions of their father. There is no mercy as hunted animals do not deserve vicious deaths either. The four are deprived of food and drink, essentially starved as an animal awaiting butchering would be. Fortune not only reduces Ugolino to an animal, but Ugolino reduces himself as well. His instinct to survive becomes greater than his moral and reasoning capacity and when his

children die before him, he begins to feed on them: “And whan the woful fader deed it say, / For wo his armes two he gan to byte, / And seyde, ‘Allas, Fortune, and weylaway! / Thy false wheel my wo al may I wyte” (2443-46). Ugolino places blame entirely on fortune. The Monk mentions that if any listener would like to hear a more detailed account they need to refer to Dante where “. . . he kan al devyse / Fro point to point; nat o word wol he faille” (2461-62). The Monk has included the details which are in keeping with the rest of his tale.

Listeners can hear the Monk’s interest peak as he describes the senseless, violent acts committed by the “vicius fiend” Nero. The Monk takes notice of the luxuries that come with Nero’s powerful position: “Of rubies, sapphires, and of peerles white / Were alle his clothes brooded up and down, / For he in gemmes greetly gan delite” (2468-70). Nero does not hunt animals but he does fish, and the Monk takes special notice of this because it is similar to his own hobby. For some time, Nero was in control of fortune, “For Fortune as his freend hym wolde obeye” (2478). Nero is one of the more violent figures the Monk features:

He Rome brende for his delicacie;
The senatours he slow upon a day
To heere how that men wolde wepe and crie;
And slow his brother, and by his suster lay.
His mooder made he in pitous array,

For he hire wombe slitte to biholde

Where he conceived was – so weilaway (2480-86).

Nero commits violent acts because he loves violence. He slits his mother's womb open, as if butchering an animal. Nero was not always a "vicious fiend"; the Monk notes that Nero was a different figure when he was growing up with a master who taught him the art of morality. The Monk deems this as truth, unless "bookes lye" (2498). This statement exemplifies the Monk's skepticism of textual authority.

Instead of relating stories that are held in high esteem, the Monk relays stories that give him a sense of pleasure. Nero's merciless nature seems to begin to appear, according to the Monk, when he disagrees with his master's way of thinking. Due to their disagreement, the Monk decides to kill the master in the slowest way possible, letting him bleed to death from his arms: "This Nero hadde eek of acustumance / In youth agayns his maister for to ryse, / Which afterward hym dyen in this wise. / But natheless this Seneca the wise / Chees in a bath to dye in this manere / Rather than han another tormentise" (2501-17). Hunted animals often died slow deaths like this.

The Monk personifies Fortune again as he tells, "Now fil it so that Fortune liste no lenger / The hye pryde of Nero to cherice, / For though that he were strong, yet she was strengre" (2519-21). Zatta claims The Monk's Tale, like many Middle Age tragedies, personifies fortune: ". . . and she is shown to be not the goddess

wicked men consider her, but merely the result of pride and sin” (116). The Monk describes the chase and hunting of Nero which will bring him to his end: Nero becomes prey when “the peple roos upon hym” (2527). He begins to flee with the hope of escaping capture; his anxiety grows, much like a helpless animal, as he cannot find a hiding place. Out of fear, Nero “slow hymself / Of which Fortune lough, and hadde a game” (2550). The manner in which the Monk makes fortune laugh at the death of Nero, shows the merciless nature she shares with Nero.

The personification of fortune continues in the account of Holofernes (De Oloferno): “Fortune ay kiste / So likerously, and ladde hym up and doun / Till that his heed was of, er that he wiste” (2556-58). Fortune seduces Holofernes and the Monk uses erotic symbolism to illustrate it. Holofernes’s account is only three stanzas, but it has the similar theme of being killed unsuspectingly. He is asleep when he meets his death when a tent peg is driven into his skull by a woman, Judith. There is erotic imagery surrounding the way in which he died as well:

Amydde his hoost he dronke lay a-nyght,
Withinne his tenet, large as is a berne,
And yet, for al his pompe and al his myght,
Judith, a womman, as he lay upright,
Slepyng, his heed of smoot, and from his tente,
Ful pryvely, she stal from every wight,

And with his heed unto hir toun she wente (2568-74).

None of the figures the Monk has presented thus far have died in peace, and the illustrious King of Antioch is no exception for “. . . in an hill how wrecchedly he deyde” (2582). Fortune is presented as having supernatural abilities, allowing men to attain heights in wealth and success that are divine in nature. King Anthiochus is given capabilities that he believes to be beyond the power of god:

Fortune hym hadde enhaunced so in pride

That verrailly he wende he myghte attayne

Unto the sterres upon every syde,

And in balance weyen ech montayne,

And alle the floodes of the see restrayne,

And Goddes peple hadde he moost in hate;

Hem wolde he sleen in torment and in payne,

Wenyng that God ne myghte his pride abate (2583-90).

Because of the elevated level Anthiochus has risen to, God hunts him instead of fortune. However, the King is relentless in his fighting and will not even heed God. God physically destroys him. His body is ripped of its flesh: “For he so soore fil out of his char / That it his limes and his skyn totar, / So that he neyther myghte go ne ryde, / But in a chayer men about hym bar, / Al forbrused, bothe bak and syde” (2610-14). Anthiochus begins to decay and his body resembles the carcass of an

animal. The Monk depicts the gruesomeness of the scene: “The wreche of God hym smoot so cruelly / That thurgh his body wikked wormes crepte, / And therwithal he stank so horribly” (2615-17). Anthiochus’s decay repluses his troops and he is left to die alone outside.

The Monk’s Tale culminates in the capture of Cressus, “kyng of Lyde” (2727):

Yet he was caught . . .

And to be brent men to the fyr hym ladde.

But swich a reyn doun fro the welkne shade

That slow the fyr, and made hym to escape;

But to be war no grace yet he hadde,

Til Fortune on the galwes made hym gape (2729-34).

The Monk suggest the image of a captured animal: Cressus hangs on the gallows tied up. His mouth is gaping open as if he has been running and is out of breath, facing his captors in the last few minutes before inevitable death. He escapes before he can be hanged and attributes his luck to Fortune, unaware that Fortune is the reason for his capture in the first place. It was not uncommon for an animal to sometimes elude hunters and to escape after being caught. However, Fortune helps the captors hunt down Cressus a second time and he is finally hanged: “But that Fortune alwey wolle assaille / With unwar strook the regnes that been proude;”

(2762-63). This line reiterates the Monk's favorite moment in a hunt: when an unsuspecting creature receives the final blow. Catching an animal for the second time gives rise to more excitement, as the animal has provided the hunters with a harder chase.

The Monk would have continued on with many more tragedies but the Knight interrupts him. The Knight as well as the other pilgrims are all disturbed by the accounts the Monk has told and cannot bear to hear more:

‘Hoo!’ quod the Kngyht, ‘good sire, na-moore of this!

. . . I seye for me, it is a greet disese,

Whereas men han been in greet welthe and ese,

To heeren of hire sodeyn fal, allas! (2768-69, 2773-74).

The Host agrees and also begs for no more to be told, “‘Ye,’ quod oure Hooste, ‘By Seint Poules belle! Ye seye right sooth; this Monk he clappeth lowed’” (2780-81). It is ironic that the Host appeals to a Saint when it is a member of the clergy he is criticizing. The Host further says “Ther is no desport ne game” in the telling of tragedies, but the Monk has turned the telling of tragedies into a sport in which he is able to participate in a quasi-hunt.

The Monk's obsession with hunting is a delight which all his senses partake in:

“ . . . men hunted because it was a delight. The specific joys of the hunt, the

skills of the tracking and harbouring game, the empathy with the hounds and hawks, the security in the recurring rhythm of the seasons in a turbulent brought by successful attuning of the mind, eye and muscle . . . “ (Martin 6).

Through his tale the Monk displays his knowledge of the hunt and his vicious nature through personifying misfortune as a hunter. While on the pilgrimage to Canterbury, the Monk is unable to participate in his favorite sport and instead of using his tale as an opportunity to present a moral lesson, the Monk focuses on his hobby of hunting. Through the genre of tragedy the Monk is able to participate in a sort of “quasi-hunt.” There is a sense of the Monk deriving pleasure when the figures in his tale are captured and “slayn” by misfortune without mercy; it is very similar to the merciless nature of the Monk’s hunting habits. The Monk defends his secular habits – his love for hunting, fine clothes and riches, and disregard for holy texts. The Monk personifies fortune as a hunter, striking down successful men who are unsuspecting of the violent downfall, which awaits them. The Monk structures his tale to resemble the different stages of a hunt and fills it with violent, animalistic, and erotic imagery that works to strengthen the Monk’s perception of his own masculinity while simultaneously providing a form of sexual pleasure that he is otherwise forbidden to experience.

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