

Chaucer's Devil Among the Irish

by
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Some years ago an article appeared concerning a modern American analogue of Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*.¹ The writer had heard this shorter and updated version from the mouth of a freshman student out of rural South Carolina, and he sensibly left it to the reader's judgment to decide whether the boy's story derived from Chaucer via some long-dead schoolmaster of rural America, or had come down in a version independent of the poet, for it really does not matter much. We look at analogues presumably to be instructed — and sometimes entertained — by comparing the treatment of the same story at the hands or in the mouths of different tellers, and by observing the adaptations necessary to suit the needs of different times and places — in this case the amusing changes required to re-tailor a rather elaborate medieval garment into something like a mini-skirted version more appropriate to modern America.

I have recently come across a couple of other modern analogues of a Chaucer story, this time of the *Friar's Tale*, and dealing with Ireland or Irishmen rather than with the citizens of modern Carolina or medieval England. The first is a ballad called "The Devil and the Bailiff" with words by McCafferty and Ryan to a traditional Irish tune.² The song is redolent of the 19th century in that most distressful country when landlords and their agents were notorious for rack-renting the unfortunate peasants, and for evicting those who could not pay what they did not have. Captain Boycott is only the best known of the many agents and bailiffs who tormented the people to the point that they sometimes rose in revolt when curses failed, as unfortunately they did. Ballads like "The Devil and the Bailiff" give voice to the fantasies of those so oppressed by Boycott and his kind that they have no hope except in God and the devil, the only powers who might inflict appropriate punishment on their tormentors.

And, yet, the Irish ballad retains a lighter tone than Chaucer's version and

¹ M.H. Hogan, Jr., "A New Analogue of the Shipman's Tale," *Chaucer Review*, V (1971), 245—246.

² The song can be heard very engagingly sung on a Decca record entitled *The World of Val Doonican*,

is a good deal less sinister. This is not to commend it, but merely to note a difference between the fully developed narrative with more than one aim, written by a master, and, on the other hand, a short ballad where the poignancy of the situation is not exploited — where, indeed, it is deliberately undermined by the homely colloquialisms of both the narrator and his characters. Awe, or any other deep feeling, is thus kept at arm's length.

The ballad does have one advantage, however: it comes with a tune. Any teacher with sufficient voice and spirit can try to emulate the ballad-singing Friar himself with a rendition of a version of that cleric's own tale. If the effort does not bring a twinkle to the eye of the teacher, it should at least bring a smile to the faces of the students.

This version of the story, incidentally, does not derive from Chaucer. The incident of the mother cursing the child, which is central to many of the other early versions, is present in our Irish version also, but does not appear in Chaucer at all.³ Here are the words and music to “The Devil and the Bailiff”:

THE DEVIL AND THE BAILIFF

A musical score for the ballad "The Devil and the Bailiff". The score is written in a single system with ten staves. The first staff is a vocal line with lyrics "Ah, ha. Ah, ha. Um". The following nine staves are a piano accompaniment with lyrics: "fine ple-a-sant eve-ning last sum-mer I was strol-ling through Con-dai na Mide When a cou-ple of play-boys a-stand-ing de-fore me I hap-pened to see. Now to know what these fel-lows were up to a tri-ble I has-tened my walk. Pret-ty soon did I learn their pro-fes-sion When I got with-in line of their talk. Ah,". The music is in a simple, folk-like style with a clear melody and accompaniment.

³ See *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1941), pp. 269—274; Larry D. Benson and Theodore Andersson, *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 362—365.

THE DEVIL AND THE BAILIFF

One fine pleasant evening last summer
I was strolling through Condai na Midhe⁴
When a couple of playboys a-standing
Before me I happened to see.
Now to see what these fellows were up to
A trifle I hastened my walk.
Pretty soon did I learn their profession
When I got within line of their talk.

Ah, ha.

Now one of these lads was the devil,
And the other was Bailiff McGlynn;
And sure one was as nice as the other,
For they both were as ugly as sin.
Said the auld lad: "You know I'm the devil,
"And you are the bailiff, I see."
" 'Tis the devil himself," says the bailiff.
"Ah, sure, that beats the devil," says he.

Ah, ha.

Then a young lad ran out of a cottage,
And off with him over the fields.
"May the devil take you," says his mother,
As she rattled the stones off his heels.
"Ah, sure, why don't you take the young rascal,
"Your Highness," the Bailiff he cried.
"Ah, 'twas not from the heart that the wish came,"
The devil he smiling replied.

Ah, ha.

Then the young lad came back and espied them,
And into his mother he fled,
Shouting "Oh mother dear, it's the Bailiff;"
And she clasped her two hands and she said:
"May the devil take that ugly bailiff."
Says the devil "Bedad, that I'll do.
"It was straight from the heart that the wish came;
"So Bailiff McGlynn, I'll take you."

⁴ Pronounced something like Coon-they na Mee. It means County Meath.

Ah, ha.

— — An' he did.

In the mid-1960's, the BBC commissioned the modern balladist Ewan McColl to write songs about the experiences of the immigrant Irish workers in England. McColl used a variation of the tale and the tune given above for his own song, which he called "The Devil and Ganger McGlynn." The 14th-century Summoner and the 19th-century Bailiff are here transformed into a ganger, the hard-driving boss of a gang of working men on a road-building job in modern industrial England. There is a nice irony in the choice of this particular tune and "plot" for a new song about the descendants of Captain Boycott's victims: the landless Irish are still landless, and are now, in addition, homelandless in the very country of the old oppressor now turned employer, but still engaging an Irish overseer to persecute his fellow-countrymen. There is not here, though, as there is in the two earlier versions, a sense of the genuine oppression that evokes heartfelt imprecation of the kind which damns the offender to hell. It is replaced by a less elemental feeling that is probably better described as grumpiness at the cussedness of men and machines.

THE DEVIL AND GANGER MCGLYNN¹

Laconically, somewhat free

One fine sun - ny morn - ing in sun - mer I
wan - dered a - long the M - 3, When a
cou - ple of swag - ger - ing play - boys be -
fore me I hap - pened to see; Well, the
one of these boys was the de - vil and the
oth - er was gang - er Mc - Glynn And the
one was as black as the oth - er and the
both was as ug - ly as sin.

THE DEVIL AND GANGER McGLYNN ⁵

One fine sunny morning in summer,
I wandered along the M 3, [a highway]
When a couple of swaggering playboys
Before me I happened to see;
Well, the one of these boys was the devil
And the other was ganger McGlynn.
And the one was as black as the other
And they both was as ugly as sin.

Now a boy sweating at the muck-shifting
He lifted his shovel too high,
“May the devil take you!” says another,
“You’ve landed that muck in me eye!”
“Now why don’t you take him, the rascal,
Your Highness?” the ganger he cried,
“O, ‘twas nor from the heart that the wish came,”
the devil he smiling replied.

A bulldozer stalled and the fitter said
“The gasket is all blown to hell!”
“May the devil take you,” said the driver,
“Likewise your old gasket as well.”
Says the ganger, “Now there’s a fine offer!
Why nor take the fitter?” said he.
“O, ‘twas but from his lips that he said **it**
and that’s nor sufficient for me.”

Some tigers were working a tunnel,
When part of the shield it did jam,
“May the devil run off with the feller
invented the hydraulic ram!”
“Now there’s a fine chance,” says the ganger,
“Your Lordship can have him for free!”
“O no!” says the choosy old devil,
“There must be conviction for me!”

A carpenter building a shutter,

the timber was twisted and bent,
“May the devil snatch up the contractor
and board him in hell without rent!”
The ganger then said with impatience,
“Now there’s a soul well within reach.”
“O no!” says old Nick, “You’re mistaken.
‘Twas only a figure of speech.”

As they jogged on, a trench-digger spied them
and straight to his mates then he fled,
“Ah, fellas,” says he, “here’s the ganger!”
And every man looked up and said:
“May the devil take that ugly ganger!”
Says the devil, “Bedad! That’ll do —
‘Twas straight from the heart that came surely,
So Ganger McGlynn, I’ll take you!”