Shaping idealisms : studies in Middle English romances and the literature of the Medieval Revival

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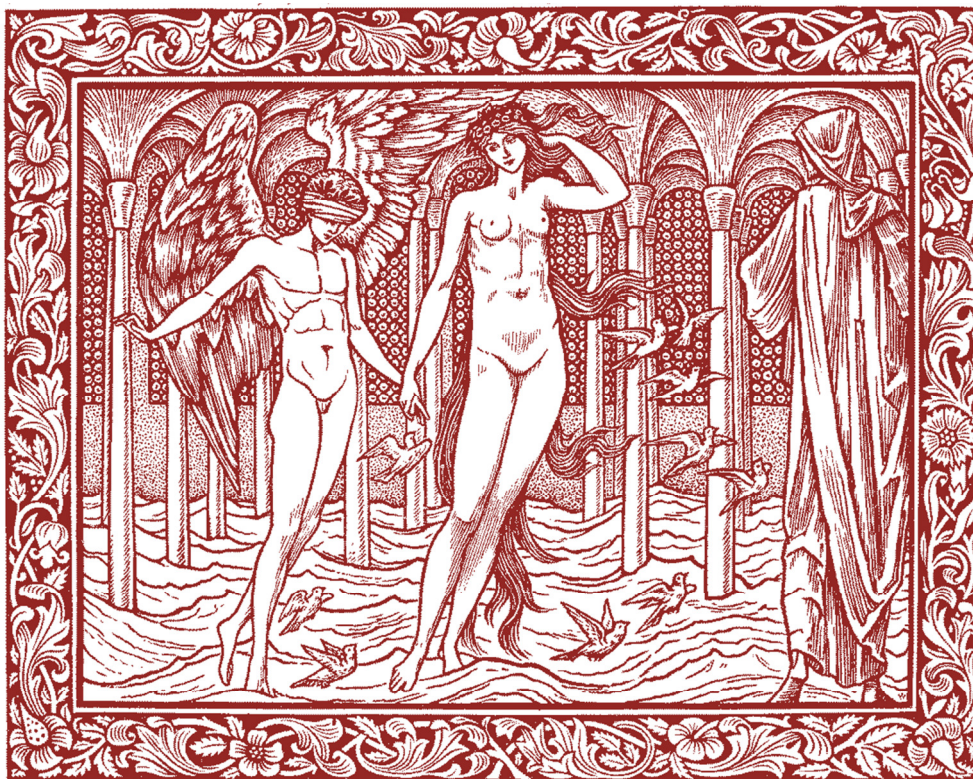The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/29983 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

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Title: Shaping idealisms : studies in Middle English romances and the literature of the Medieval Revival
Issue Date: 2014-12-10

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(not yet published)

A KEY TO *THE LAND OF COKAYGNE*: SATIRE OR PARODY?

Bart Veldhoen   2013

The Middle English *The Land of Cokaygne* (MS London: British Library, MS Harley 913, ff. 3^r-6^v) appears to have been written in Ireland ca. 1330 (Treharne, 2004:431). Its possible sources and analogues are described by Thomas Hill (1975: *passim*), Emily Yoder (1983: 228, 231-34) and Wim Tigges (1995: 93-94).

This 190-line poem is notoriously difficult to interpret, for two reasons: its genre is not marked in any clear way, and it requires a detailed knowledge of monastic life that is rare among present-day audiences. Such knowledge is necessary to recognize its genre as parody. A reading of the poem as satire is problematic, because the actions and descriptions of the monks in *Cokaygne* do neither represent nor ridicule any actual behaviour by any actual monks anywhere at any time falling short of any ideal. It may be comic, but it is not a castigation of actual vices or follies. It appears to be a travesty of monastic ideals (cf. Tony Davenport, 2004: 192). Literary historians who treat the poem only briefly, such as W.P. Ker, David Zesmer, Derek Pearsall, Piero Boitani, tend to assume that it is satirical, but give no detailed analyses to support that view. I do not deny, however, an occasional satirical drift in *Cokaygne*, but I would like to argue that parody as the generic medium provides a more helpful key to the text.

The problem of the genre, whether satire or parody, is, perhaps, best illustrated by looking at two passages first. The first describes the monks at mass, ll. 113-120 (Treharne, 2004: 433; I have normalized the thorns and yoghs as th and gh).

> Whan the monkes gooth to masse,
> Al the fenestres that beth of glasse   windows; are
> Turneth into cristal bright
> To ghive monkes more light.
> Whan the masses beth iseiid,   have been said
> And the bokes up ileiid,   put away
> The cristal turnith into glasse
> In state that hit rather wasse.   earlier on

This passage could be read as a satirical thrust at monks for whom the spiritual illumination that they receive from the divine service does not make a lasting impression. But the fact that the change that the illumination should make has been transferred ('translated') from the service itself to the windows can hardly be seen as typical of the satirical mode. Inversion of cause and effect is comic, but not effective for castigation-purposes. On the other hand, parody could be intended, in this case of

the common prayer at the beginning of the monastic day: 'Spiritus sanctus, illumine sensus et corda nostra' (Holy Spirit, illuminate our minds and our hearts; from memory of my own schooldays). In that case, it could well be a parody of a common practice of monastic life, rather than a castigation of some actual folly or vice.

The next scene (ll. 121-32) causes a similar problem:

The yung monkes euch dai	each day
Aftir met goth to plai.	their meal
Nis ther hauk no fule so swifte	hawk nor bird
Bettir fleing bi the lifte	through the air
Than the monkes, heigh of mode,	
With har slevis and har hode.	their
Whan the abbot seeth ham flee,	
That he holt for moch glee;	he considers that
Ak natheles, al theramang,	in the middle of all that
He biddith ham light to evesang.	alight for evensong
The monkes lightith noght adun;	
Ac furre fleeth in o randun.	further; at random

There could be a satirical suggestion here of a breaking of the monastic vows of obedience and of 'stabilitas loci' – not to leave the monastery without the abbot's permission –, as Thomas Hill (1975: 55) and Wim Tigges (1995: 98) suggest. The other two vows, of poverty and of chastity, are also seen to be implicitly broken elsewhere in the poem by the description of the abundance in the monastery and by the dealings with the nunnery respectively. The passage could also be read as a satirical castigation of monks not being inspired by spiritual food, but by physical: "Aftir met" (l. 122), so by gluttony. The punning association of Gula (gluttony) and Regula (monastic rule) was, after all, a wordplay that was very common throughout the Middle Ages (Cartlidge, 2003: 46-47).

The latter would suggest a parodic/linguistic approach rather than satire. Satire against monks' volatility might well be intended, but there is good reason to assume that a parody is being presented here of the monastic ideal of contemplation, because, as Thomas Hill states (1975: 57), contemplation was known in monastic circles as 'volare ad Deum' (to fly towards God). "Heigh of mode" (in high spirits/ in an elevated mood, l. 125) would then be the giveaway marker for the parody, as "to ghive monkes more light" was, by the same token, in the previous scene (l. 116). We shall see later that there are similar markers for a parody-reading in the other passages as well.

The manuscript-context would also seem to support a parodic reading. In his analysis of MS Harley 913 Neil Cartlidge points out that the codex contains a considerable number of texts of a parodic nature, among them a 'Drinkers' Mass', an 'Hours of the Seven Sleepers', and a 'Devil's Letter' (2003: 47-52). He also notices a preoccupation with food, drink and feasting throughout the manuscript, commonly as

absurd parodies of temperance (2003: 46). He argues that the Gula/Regula pun, mentioned above, underlies this preoccupation: in its parodic use it emphasizes the importance of temperance for living a Christian life according to a Rule.

For my conviction that the undoubted satirical effects are only occasional in *The Land of Cokaygne*, but that parody is the true medium of this text – the key to the interpretation of the whole poem – I am indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about the importance of parody in the Middle Ages (Bakhtin, 2000: *passim*).

According to Bakhtin, the Middle Ages inherited from classical antiquity the idea that everything serious needs to have its comic double. He points to the Greek satyr-plays following the tragedy-trilogies on the same themes on the stage and, more *à propos*, to the Roman Saturnalia, festivities mixing the serious with original productions for laughter, often based on local folklore. He sees these doubles as parodies liberating the serious from the power of language. The basis of his argument is that pre-Renaissance parody was much more important than it has been ever since. The "appropriation of words of others" (Bakhtin's definition of parody) was a central concern of the Middle Ages, he argues, because all the most important domains of official life – Holy Scripture, religion and political theory – had come down on them in Latin and had to be appropriated by them in a process of 'translatio' (transfer) into their vernaculars.

The freedom – or perhaps one should say respected necessity – of expression in terms of parody was especially connected with feastdays and school festivals. The Feast of Fools or Feast of the Ass encouraged laughter in the church at Easter and Christmas, to celebrate rebirth and resurrection by cheerful rather than reverentially serious means. In the schools at the end of term everything that had been seriously studied was ridiculed, from Sacred Writ to school grammar – in the spirit of the satyr-plays. Parodies of hymns, prayers, even complete liturgies followed (such as witnessed in MS Harley 913).

Bakhtin reminds us that the sacred Latin word was a foreign body that had invaded the organism of the vernacular languages, conceptualizing the higher ideological thought-processes. One might wish to add that the history of Russia and China, just to mention a few, gives ample illustration of similar problems in imposing a central 'foreign' ideology on large and diverse areas. Bakhtin continues to state that the fact that this is "someone else's word" was felt as much in the reverent acceptance as in the parodic ridicule. He mentions as examples of the one the many macaronic texts, and of the other the *Carmina Burana*. It is interesting to notice, by the way, that the latter includes a song by an "abbas cucaniensis" (abbot of Cokaygne).

Apart from the "parodia sacra", Bakhtin says, "intentional hybrid" texts appeared, consisting of a cross-over of styles of discourse within the vernacular language. The values of the parodied style are transposed and biased in a particular

direction. These are "dialogic texts", which Bakhtin sees as an argument between two generic languages within the same language, between two points of view which cannot be translated into one another. These are 'dialogues' between a dismal sacred world of joyless pedants or unctuous hypocrites and a cheerful folk world. In the vernaculars, he concludes, parody is a superstructure of laughter on the Roman model: the laughing double for each serious form, as Shakespeare's fools and clowns are, I should add, and, possibly, Rabelais and Cervantes (although, perhaps, the burlesque element in the latter two is too dominant to include them here).

Bakhtin's analysis of medieval parody appears to me to be eminently relevant to *The Land of Cokaygne*. Its picture of an upside-down world, like that of the *Carmina Burana*, is described by Bennett as a parodying style which "limits or sterilizes the satiric possibilities implicit in an account of the solid joys and liquid pleasures known to monks and nuns" (Bennett, 1990: 14-15). It is possible to read *Cokaygne*'s analogues as wish-fulfilments of a downtrodden peasantry, as Southern (1970: 230) and Hill (1975: 56) suggest, but I do not see how this elucidates our particular poem in hand (cf. Bennett, 1990: 17). Nor do I find in *Cokaygne* the kind of symbolism typical of romances and fantasies that creates extra dimensions of narrative space for allusive significations. I rather notice a limitation of significances by means of 'différances' (Lacan's term) created by the language of the poem, so: an 'intentional hybrid' *à la* Bakhtin, akin to the parody of sacred ceremony at the Feast of Fools.

The very opening of the poem, the 'translatio' of Paradise to the West, already appears to function as a comic double (Bakhtin), or as a 'comic antitype of Paradise', showing the goliardic impulse of those who lead a life of discipline to occasionally play the fool, as witnessed in the *Carmina Burana* (Bennett & Smithers, 1968: 137-38). Bakhtin's argument that these 'translationes' of religious, political and scholarly data from Latin or otherwise 'from another world' have a historical function for the common people to learn the languages and terminology in order to fully understand and integrate the concepts, is a key to *The Land of Cokaygne* that really unlocks its topsy-turvy world. It is this same argument that applies also to the comic 'translations' in the later Mystery Plays, and in Shakespeare's clowns and fools, as I mentioned earlier, just showing how important – and 'likely' – this type of intentional hybrid parody was for the Middle Ages.

That *Cokaygne*'s particularly sensual paradise in the West is, first and foremost, a parody of the spiritual paradise (Hill, 1975: 56) or of the monastic ideals, is borne out clearly enough by a detailed analysis of the text. The satirical implications are no more than natural side-effects of such a parody, not the core of the form. The *Land of Cokaygne* is localized explicitly in the Atlantic Ocean west of Spain:

Fur in see bi west Spayngne	Far into the sea
Is a lond ihote Cockaygne:	called
Ther nis lond under hevenriche	there is no
Of wel, of godnis, hit iliche.	Its peer in
Thogh Paradis be miri and bright,	
Cockaygn is of fairir sight.	

(Treharne, 2004: 431, ll. 1-6)

The fact that Cokaygne is presented as superior to the Earthly Paradise is subsequently illustrated by a wealth of strictly sensual details: richer food, better lodging, absense of labour, strife, noxious animals and bad weather (ll. 7-44). Like Thomas Hill and Wim Tigges, Emily Yoder uses this fact of Cokaygne's geographical position west of Spain to point to St Brendan's Island of Promise or Fortunate Isle as also situated in the Atlantic Ocean (south-)west of Spain (Yoder, 1983: 235 *et passim*), concluding that *The Land of Cokaygne* belongs to the tradition of the *Navigatio Sancti Brandani*. She does so with less suggestion of parody than either Tigges or Hill, who are referring to a much wider and, presumably, older tradition, especially in Ireland, of Blessed Isles in the West. The ancient Greeks, by the way, had also located their Elysium in the West beyond the Pillars of Hercules. It would appear that in pre-Christian times notions such as regions of the rising or the setting sun, or places as far away as possible from one's own world, have contributed to the allocation of places of reward for the deserving. The tradition seems to be rather more complicated than has been brought to bear on our poem. Moreover, the popular descriptions of the Earthly Paradise in the East also tend to concentrate on the physical luxuriance of the Garden of Eden rather than on the special pre-lapsarian spiritual grace; as if Bakhtin's notion of parody was already at work here from the start: to convey the spiritual ideal through the sensual.

I have found one authoritative text among the more ancient Irish 'historical' texts that has not, to my knowledge, been mentioned in connection with *The Land of Cokaygne*. It seems to me a more convincing source than the Blessed Isles texts, because it has more details directly corresponding to *Cokaygne* than just its geographical position. It is the *Lebor Gabála Érenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, which in its section 101: "An explanation of the Takings of Ireland" (in Old Irish) describes Ireland first in Latin*:

> The island of Ireland is situated in the west; as the Paradise of Adam is situated on the southern coast of the east, so Ireland is in the northern portion, toward the west. Those lands are as similar by nature, as they are similar by their positions on the earth: for as Paradise hath no noxious beasts, so the learned testify that Ireland hath no serpent, lion, toad, injurious rat, dragon, scorpion, nor any hurtful beast, save only the wolf. And so Ireland is called "the island of the west".… This [Hibernia] stretches northward from Africa, and its foremost parts tend towards Iberia (that is, Spain) and the Bay of

Biscay; whence also Hibernia takes its name…. Within it is no serpent, rare bird, nor bees;…

(Stewart MacAlister, 1938: 165)

* MacAlister gives the Third Redaction of section 101, which is in Latin from "Ut dixit historia" (162) onwards, from an originally independent 'Liber Occupationes', in which elements from Isidore of Seville, Orosius and Nennius have been interpolated. Extant MSS are sixteenth century, based on sources from the twelfth century.

The absence of noxious animals features prominently in *The Land of Cokaygne*, too. (ll. 31-44). There are striking similarities – both mention serpents first in the list – but also striking differences: the absence of the wolf is mentioned second in *Cokaygne*, whereas the wolf is the only noxious animal that is not absent in the *Lebor Gabála*. Nor does *Cokaygne* make the point that the absence of those noxious beasts is similar to their absence from Paradise. The other animals in *Cokaygne* are strikingly different: fox, horse, nag, cow, ox, sheep, swine, goat, studs, fly, flea, louse, worm and snail; some of these are hardly noxious, and some of them appear to be there merely for rhyming purposes. It would seem that *Cokaygne*'s list functions as comic hyperbole for the purpose of parody.

If *The Land of Cokaygne* parodies the *Lebor Gabála* or its sources for its opening description, its parody is a multiple one: not only do we have the 'translatio' of extreme geographical positions from one end of the world to its diametrically opposed position, but Cokaygne becomes a parody of Ireland, itself 'historically' seen as a type of Paradise ("ut dixit historia"). Blessed Isle, indeed!

Cokaygne's claimed superiority to Paradise is stressed by claiming that Paradise is "elinglich" (15: a miserable place) since it has but two inhabitants, Elijah and Enoch (13-14). As in the case of the triple parody of Cokaygne = Ireland = paradise, the lack of company in Paradise is particularly ridiculed by playing on the medieval meaning of 'paradisus' as either the Earthly Paradise (Vulgate trsl. of Genesis's 'Garden of Eden') or Heaven (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:4). Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) were taken up bodily into Heaven, specifically not to the Earthly Paradise, the obvious referent of *Cokaygne* (cf. Bennett, 1990:16). This complex play on 'paradise' seems to be parody to be enjoyed by an informed audience.

A similar double parody is found again with the four rivers "of oile, melk, honi, and wine" (45-46) in *Cokaygne*, which make Cokaygne a pleasanter place than Paradise where there is only "water manis thurst to quench" (12). This parodies the four rivers of the Earthly Paradise of Genesis, but adds the specifics of oil, milk, honey and wine as found, for instance, in the eighth-century *Visio Pauli* (cf. Bennett &

Smithers, 1968: 338 commentary on ll. 45-46). The same happens later on with the four wells in the monastery in Cokaygne, the specification of which (healing ointment, healing water, balm, spiced wine) derives from the twelfth-century tradition of St Patrick's Purgatory (Bennett, 1990:16). Both belong to visions of heaven rather than of the earthly paradise. Undeniably rich parody.

When we come to the description of the monastery in Cokaygne, my point about *The Land of Cokaygne* being essentially a parody of the ideal standard of monastic life comes up for the test. The external description of the monastery (ll. 51-112) is a classic hotch-potch of elements of traditional and popular paradise-descriptions, such as the Tree and the rivers of Genesis and the precious stones of Revelation, and the foodstuffs and spices as building-materials and the ready-baked birds flying into the monks' mouths from the rich tradition of the lands of Fair Ease, made comic here by strikingly hyperbolic detail. To see that this wealth of detail is serving the purpose of parody, Thomas Hill's reminder that the cloister of a monastery is traditionally called 'paradise' by monks ('paradisus claustralis') is particularly relevant. Monks do not only lead a monastic life in order to obtain Paradise, but they see the secluded and well-regulated monastery as one, and even call their cloister by that name (Hill, 1975:56). *Cokaygne*'s monastery as 'translatio' of Paradise is really linguistic parody.

The first two action-scenes in the monastery have already been discussed in the opening pages of this paper. For the scene of the mass I postulated a parody of the common prayer 'Spiritus Sanctus, illumine sensus et corda nostra', suggested by l. 116: "to ghive monkes more light". And for the scene of the flying monks I followed Thomas Hill's suggestion that the monastic ideal of contemplation, a flight of the soul or spirit known as 'volare ad Deum', is parodied, as suggested by l. 125: "the monkes, heigh of mode". The scene then continues:

Whan the abbott him iseeth	sees them
That is monkes fram him fleeth,	his
He taketh maidin of the route,	a girl from the crowd
And turneth up hir white toute	buttocks
And betith the taburs with is hond	beats the drums
To make is monkes light to lond.	come down to earth
Whan is monkes that iseeth,	
To the maid dun he fleeth;	they
And goth the wench al abute,	
And thakketh al hir white toute;	all thwack
And sith aftir her swinke	then; their labour
Wendith meklich hom to drink.	go

(ll. 133-44)

Thomas Hill notices that the beating of the girl's "white toute" to call back the monks

from their flight must be the abbot's way of pulling the monks out of their contemplative state back to an awareness of physical reality (Hill, 1975:58), but he has nothing to say about the amazing image itself. P.L. Henry had a sharper eye for detail here: he considers the juxtaposition of the "white toute" (142) and "swinke" (labour) in the next line as an allusion to the Benedictine and Cistercian Rule of 'ora et labora' (pray and work), which refers to the monks' duties to alternate prayer with physical labour, usually in the fields. More specifically he refers to the traditional monastic wake-up call 'pulsatio tabule', beating a tabletop with two hands to wake up the monks in the morning (Henry, 1972:136). He calls it "part of the satire", but it appears to me to be another instance of aspects of the ideal standard of monastic life being parodied here, with "swinke" as the giveaway marker for parody and the 'translatio' of the morning wake-up call to the evening meal ("collacione", l. 145) as another parodic device of the Gula/Regula type.

The next action-scene involves the nuns in a nearby abbey, apparently luring or inviting the monks to them for 'play'. On hot days the nuns go out on a "river of sweet milk" (149), where they "makith hem naked" (156: bare their bodies) to have a swim "sleilich" (158: stealthily). When the monks spot them, they "doth ham up" (160: make themselves ready), each monk takes a nun and "techith the nunnes an oreisun/ With jambleve up and dun" (165-66: teach the nuns a prayer with legs raised up and down). If a monk is a "good stallion" (167), he shall have twelve 'wives' each year "al throgh right and noy through grace" (171: all by right and not through grace) for his comfort.

About the "river of milk" Thomas Hill remarks that in the *Visio Pauli*, which may have provided the specification of the four rivers, the 'well of milk' is a chastity-well in which 'fornicatores' and impious souls are purified (Hill, 1975:58). On the surface this parodic borrowing might well be satirical, given the literal context. But I assume that it is the purification rather than the fornication that is operative here, seeing that the context in *Cokaygne* contains a number of other markers to suggest that what is parodied in this scene is, in fact, the sacrament of confession. Nunneries depend on regular visits of priests for saying daily mass, for spiritual guidance of the nuns and for administering the sacrament of confession. The latter would be done on a monthly basis, which might explain why in *Cokaygne* the monks "shal hab withoute danger/ xii wives euch yere:/Al throgh right and noy throgh grace (169-71: shall have without difficulty twelve women every year, by right and not through grace). J.A.W. Bennett pointed out already that l. 171 should be recognised as a parody of theological language, thus denying the possibility of satire against a specific abbey (Bennett, 1990:17). However, he did not specify the implications, nor has anyone else so far, to my knowledge. To me, it appears to be part of the parody of the nuns' monthly confession. This idea is further marked by the nuns 'baring their bodies' (156), parodying the popular phrase 'baring one's soul' commonly used for confession. The

monks 'making themselves ready' (160: "doth ham up") would then parody putting on the special stole that priests must wear for the hearing of confession. The "oreisun" (165: prayer) they teach the nuns then refers to the penance imposed after confession. Praying was commonly performed with arms raised in pre-feudal times, and later still by those in holy orders. Kneeling down with hands folded – a ritual borrowed from feudal homage – was only gradually taken up in the Middle Ages (Cook & Herzman, 2004: 174). The raised arms are parodied in Cokaygne by the "jambleve" (raised legs) of l. 166.

Using sex as a parody of the sacrament of confession appears to foreground the regenerative power of confession by presenting it as a generative action; another example of parody based on wordplay. The monks are presented as having to be "stalun gode" (167: good stallions). Even for the non-participant "that slepith best,/ And doth his likam al to rest" (173-74; because he is getting too old for sex?), there is hope to be a generator yet as "vadir abbot" (176; Father). J.A.W. Bennett also appears to detect parodic play on spiritual regeneration when he explains the emphatic mention of 'studfarms and studs' (35) among the noxious animals absent from Cokaygne as being compensated for by the monks acting as 'good stallions': the (re)generative power of priesthood, as opposed to the noxious studs (Bennett, 1990:16).

The idea of penance also dominates the final description of how to get into the Cokaygne-paradise (177-end). The traditional barrier of rice-pudding to a land of Fair Ease is replaced by wading through pigs' dung for seven years. A "ful grete penance", indeed (178). This barrier parodies the church's teaching that the heavenly paradise can only be entered after penance on earth, or else in purgatory. Elaine Treharne's suggestion that the pigs' dung has possibly been borrowed from non-orthodox homilies, in which standing eternally in dung constituted a punishment of one hell set aside especially for liars (Treharne, 2004:431), may add a final parodic inversion, telling us that the author is speaking the truth, because he has not been stuck in the dung. Similarly, Dante's punishment of flatterers by being stuck in dung (*Inferno*, XVIII) might also come to mind, with comparable effect. Anyway, we are, apparently, not to take the poem seriously, that is: not as a castigating satire. It is, instead, a topsy-turvy presentation of a serious way of life, very much in the mode of the Saturnalia and of Bakhtin's 'intentional hybrid' medieval parodies. This is the key to *The Land of Cokaygne*.

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