

Document Citation

Title	Chaucer's heads, Pasolini's tails
Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1980 Jun 09
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	racconti di Canterbury (The Canterbury tales), Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 1971

Chaucer's Heads, Pasolini's Tails

VOICE, 6/19/80

By J. Hoberman

THE CANTERBURY TALES. Written and directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, from the poem by Geoffrey Chaucer. Produced by Alberto Grimaldo. Released by Aidart Distributors Corporation.

UNDERGROUND U.S.A. Written, directed, and produced by Eric Mitchell. Released by New Cinema. At the Theater for the New City, Friday and Saturday nights.

Chaucer is played for maximum ribaldry in the late Pier Paolo Pasolini's sumptuously uneven 1972 adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales*. It's not *Salo* but there's sufficient nudity, roistering, and general gaminess to have gotten the film an X-rating. Pasolini flashes more moons than *The Hollywood Knights*—no house seems complete without an adorably naked posterior wedged out the window. Perhaps someone told him the English call Chaucer their "immortal Bawd."

The Canterbury Tales falls between *The Decameron* (1971) and *The Arabian Nights* (1974) in what Pasolini called a "trilogy of pleasure." Whether he meant his or ours, *Tales* is easier on the eye than on the ear or the brain. Pasolini's compositions, Danilo Donati's costumes, and the English locations are uniformly gorgeous. The film is badly acted but that hardly matters—an effective counter-irritant is provided by overdubbing everyone into howling Cockney and filling the dead spots with a Spike Jones cacophony of grunts, belches, and farts. Some years ago an incoherent rough cut of *The Canterbury Tales* caused a minor scandal by winning the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. It's hard to tell if the film has been fixed. The continuity here is so clumsily knocked together it often seems as though the projectionist jumbled the reels.

However, discounting its one-note shapelessness, the film is not unenjoyable. Pasolini's haphazard reordering of the *Tales* squanders Chaucer's tit-for-tat structure but there's genuine exuberance to the musical-beds shenanigans of "The Reeve's Tale" and the half pagan rite of spring in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." Every once in a while you encounter an idea: "The Cook's Tale" almost works as an homage to Mack Sennett, with a Chaplinesque knave outwitting a slew of Turpentine constables. The opening of "The Friar's Tale" is pointedly politicized so that the entrapped victims of the corrupt summoner are pederasts (rather than Chaucer's ordinary libertines) and a wealthy one buys his freedom while a poor



Pasolini posing as the Great Bawd Chaucer

one gets burned at the stake. Capping its intermittent pageantry the film winds up in a splendidly tacky hell—a Boschian vision of red and green demons with an enormous Satan excreting priests into the camera—the sort of belligerent blasphemy that must have brought the house down in Italy.

Pasolini cast himself as Giotto in *The Decameron*; here he turns up as a clownishly scruffy Chaucer. His get-up is like a metaphor for this whole vaguely disreputable project. I don't for a minute buy Pasolini's announced intention of showing the development of the English bourgeoisie. (*The Canterbury Tales* is far too garbled to demonstrate the development of anything, except perhaps the director's taste in 19-year-old boys.) But, while the British reviews are snippy classics of wounded national pride, I can't see the film as a desecration. If Pasolini buries Chaucer, at least he doesn't spit on his grave.