

Whence the *buf*? Chaucer's Philological Burp

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Abstract Although the word *buf* has been read as little more than an onomatopoeic representation of a monkish burp, this paper posits an etymological and semantic explanation for Chaucer's use of the word in *The Summoner's Tale*. It shows how Chaucer drew on several closely related Old French, Anglo-Norman, and Latin words to create a compound and dense image of monastic gluttony and corruption.

Keywords Chaucer · Summoner · Middle English · Medieval Latin · Anglo-Norman · Old French

A few of Chaucer's more notorious puns, such as the recurring *queynt*, have attracted some critical attention, but others are only mentioned in passing or missed entirely. This is the case for what I believe to be one of the most complex and clever morsels in *The Summoner's Tale*, the eructation 'buf!' (III.1934). The word occurs in the course of Friar John's mockery of monastic gluttons following his own voracious requests:

Fy on hire pompe and hire glotonye!
And for hir lewednesse I hem diffye.
Me thynketh they been lyk Jovinyan,
Fat as a whale, and walkyng as a swan,
Al vinolent as botel in the spence.
Hir preyere is of ful greet reverence,
Whan they for soules seye the psalm of Davit:

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Lo, ‘buf!’ they seye, ‘*cor meum eructavit!*’ (III.1927–34)

This unassuming pun is overshadowed by its neighbouring joke, the twisted meaning of the opening line of Psalm 44 (45 in the Authorised Version).¹ Those scholars who do take note of the word comment on how the onomatopoeic *buf* corresponds to a contemporary amusement based on the Latin pun *eructavit*.² In his otherwise thorough investigation into the philological history of Chaucer’s language, Christopher Cannon’s entry for *buf* misses the significance: ‘interj. no etym’ (1998, p. 225).³ Susan Phillips notes that the word is ‘French-sounding,’ but says no more (2011, p. 44). The joke runs deeper. I contend that there is a French etymology for this word, albeit a somewhat confused and compounded one, of which Chaucer was aware, and that this etymological knowledge demonstrates the philological care Chaucer used even when making seemingly throw-away jokes.⁴

Before I address the philological possibilities of the word, I must consider its purely sonic qualities, the onomatopoeia that scholars often note. The combination of the voiced bilabial plosive with the unvoiced labiodental fricative accurately captures the sense of an unexpected eruption followed by the dispelling of a quantity of air. (Compare the English word *puff*.) The sound of the word also suggests a French near-homophone, *bœuf*. It seems highly unlikely that any polyglots in Chaucer’s contemporary audience would have missed this simple pun.⁵ At a sonic-semantic intersection, it is as though the monks are so completely stuffed from their rich meal that some remnant of the food pops up when they open their mouths to sing.

The sound the monks emit is more than hot air or the emanations of an undigested bit of beef, however. *Le Grand Robert* (Rey and Morvan 2001) contains entries for four related words: two verb forms, *bouffer* and *bouffir*; a feminine noun, *bouffée*; and an adjective, *bouffi*, *-ie*. In each instance, the word’s origins are traced back to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. The verb *bouffer*, which is first attested in the middle of the twelfth century, refers to the action of puffing up, specifically in terms of one’s cheeks, as in Béroul’s *Tristan*. The word later became associated with eating too much and being stuffed with food (the cheeks ballooning as a result). *Le Robert* points to Wace’s *Roman de Rou* (c.1160) where the word appears as an onomatopoeia for that which is swollen or puffed up (‘onomatopée désignant ce qui est gonflé’).⁶ The *Dictionnaire de l’ancienne langue française* (Godefroy 1937)

¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Coogan et al. 2010) glosses the first line of the psalm ‘My heart overflows.’ *The Riverside Chaucer* (Benson 1988) gives ‘My heart has uttered (a good word’).

² See Beichner (1956) and Hamilton (1942).

³ The *Middle English Dictionary* (McSparran 2001) entry for *buf* is in line with Cannon’s, but it provides a definition based solely on *The Summoner’s Tale*: ‘the sound made in belching.’

⁴ For a further consideration of some of Chaucer’s language-crossing puns, see Donaldson (1981). For a discussion of the linguistic tensions at play in the colloquy of the friar, Thomas, and his wife in *The Summoner’s Tale*, see Shippey (2003).

⁵ I believe Chaucer prepares his audience to make this connection. In the Summoner’s presentation of fraternal mooching, the friar asks for ‘[b]acon or beef, or swich thyng as ye fynde’ (III.1753). It is also worth noting that *bœuf* (*buef*), the meat of a bull or cow, dates to the late twelfth century, roughly the same period as the French and Anglo-Norman forms of *buf* examined below.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

links the verb to the thirteenth-century *bouffard*, a gluttonous person. The friar's voracious monks are indeed filled to bursting: they are '[f]at as a whale and walkyng as a swan/ Al vinolet as botel in the spence' (III.1930–31).

Bouffir is listed in *Le Robert* as an alternate form of *bouffer*, but dates to c.1265 in the encyclopedic *Trésor de Brunetto Latini*, a work from which Chaucer drew on several occasions.⁷ While *bouffir* is supposedly descended from *bouffer*, a supposition which the dates of the citations seem to confirm, *Le Grand Robert* gives a somewhat different definition for the second conjugation. The word still carries the general sense of swelling or puffing up (a synonym of *gonfler*), but with significantly more pejorative overtones: 'Produire l'enflure morbide, disgracieuse' [Produce a morbid, unpleasant tumescence].⁸ *Bouffie*, -ie. is an adjectival form that, according to *Le Robert*, derives from the verb *bouffir*. The definition provided for the adjective arguably confirms this etymology. It refers to the state of being inflated, swollen, or puffed up, importantly with the same derogatory sense as the verb: 'Gonflé, enflé de manière disgracieuse.' This meaning, found in both the verb and the adjective, further captures the disgraceful physical and spiritual corruption of the monks, their unnatural appetites, and the grotesque results of their gluttony.

The noun *bouffée* is closer to what literally comes out of the monks' mouths. This is a likely candidate for the primary meaning of Chaucer's *buf*, but I want to stress that it does not preclude the semantic layering I have discussed above. *Bouffée*, which is first documented in the works of Chrétien de Troyes (c.1174), refers to an exhalation, '[une] [s]ouffle d'air, vapeur, courant qui arrive par intermittence [a breath of air that flows intermittently]. *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (1992) links *bouffée* with scents of food or drink: 'bouffées de vin ... bouffées d'ail' [breaths of wine ... breaths of garlic]. The effect is a synesthetic blurring of the monks' gluttonous, rude sounds with the pungent odours that waft from their open mouths.

The interpretation of the Chaucerian *buf* as breath is attested in literature much closer to the poet in space if not much closer in time. The *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* (Rothwell 2005) contains multiple definitions for *buf* (with the variants *bufe* and *buffe*, as well as *bouffe*, *bofe*, and *boffe*) and for *buffee* (*buffai*, *buffei*, *buffoi*, *buffois*; *boffee*; *bufai*, *bufee*, and *bufoiz*). Both Anglo-Norman *buf* and *buffee* can refer to a puff of wind or air, as is the case in Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence's *La Vie de Saint Thomas Becket* (c.1174) and Thomas of Kent's *Le Roman de toute chevalerie* (c.1175–85), also known as the 'Anglo-Norman Alexander'.⁹ This sense of *buf* also appears in the late-thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman version of *Ancrene Riwle*. In each case, the puff of wind is associated with challenges to, or tests of, faith. For instance, in the *Ancrene Riwle*, the *boffees* of wind are metaphors for the devil's

⁷ For instance, *The Squire's Tale* makes use of Brunetto's chapter on falconry.

⁸ *Le Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* (Rey et al. 1992) explains that in the earliest recorded instances (1150–1200), *bouffir* was distinct from *bouffer*, and it was only in the late thirteenth century that the former became a variant of the latter.

⁹ See Walberg (1936), v. 2830, and Foster (1976). Chaucer was likely aware of the latter text, if not intimately familiar with it. In *The Monk's Tale*, the pilgrim acknowledges the popularity of the Alexander cycle: 'The storie of Alisaundre is so commune/ That every wight that hath discrecioun/ Hath herd somewhat or al of his fortune' (VII.2631–33).

temptations: ‘de tant sont les boffees au deable e les nerz [var. *venz*] de ses temptacions sur celes [i.e. highly-placed people] plus forz’ (Threthewey 1958, §254.8). Again, the suggestion is toward the bloated monks’ fallen state: they have given into the temptations of worldly fare (as the Summoner’s friar is in the process of doing himself).

Buffe (with variants *buffoy*, *buffois*) can also mean arrogance. This sense is widely attested; it appears in Wace’s *Brut* and *Roman du Rou*, Marie de France’s late-twelfth-century *Dit d’Ysopet*, the *Roman de toute chevalerie* (vv. 1438, 3780), and a collection of late-thirteenth-century of rolls of arms (Brault 1973, §118.772) among other texts.¹⁰ The *Roman de toute chevalerie* also contains an instance of the word in its adjectival sense (v. 4814). In the *Romance of Horn* (c.1175), the phrase ‘faire buffe a’ means to treat another arrogantly, with insult: ‘Il n’a veisin si fort, ki i face buffei/ Qu’il tost ne se venge’ (vv. 505–506).¹¹ If indeed Chaucer had encountered these forms, then the monks’ eructation gains significant weight and force: the disrespect the monks show by burping their way through the holy psalms is yet another indication of the contemptible pride of the friar’s cloistered rivals.

The monastic *buf* may also have Latin resonances. As the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (Latham and Howlett 1975) shows, the Latin verb *buffare*, like the French words from which it is derived, means ‘to puff, blow.’ This sense of the word appears in the *Fabulae* of Odo of Cheriton (c.1225).¹² In the fable of the fly, Odo censures the greedy, gluttonous, and ostentatious men who plunder their benefices. Such men are eventually punished, he writes: “Tandem uenit uentus buf[f]ans [et] totum asportat” [“After a time, the wind comes ripping along and carries off all of this”].¹³ The monks that Friar John condemns are distillations of the avarice and cupidity of the churchmen Odo lists (and, ironically, so is the Summoner’s friar).

A link between the Chaucerian *buf* and another Latin word may prepare the audience for the pun on the psalm’s *cor meum eructavit*. Latin *bufa* means ‘trifle’ or ‘jest’.¹⁴ Latham and Howlett provide one instantiation of the term in the Registers

¹⁰ The *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* provides the last two examples. *Le Dictionnaire de l’ancienne langue française* gives many more examples ranging from the middle of the eleventh century (Wace) to the first decades of the thirteenth (*Lai de conseil*).

¹¹ See Pope (1955).

¹² That Chaucer knew Odo’s fables seems highly likely, for they were popular in England as well as on the Continent. For instance, Friend (1954) notes links between Odo’s sermons and the Pardoner’s. Odo’s *Fabulae* contains nine tales of Reynard the Fox, three of which have striking parallels with *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. In one, the fox plays dead in order to capture an unsuspecting bird. In another, the hungry and shivering fox talks his way into the chicken coop, even swearing by the saints that he will not harm the hens. In a third, Reynard goes to Chantecleer to confess his sins and succeeds in devouring the cock. See also Shallers (1975).

¹³ For the Latin text, see Hervieux (1896). For the English translation, see Jacobs (1985). Jacobs’ translation obscures the more general sense of the Latin by inferring the violence of the gust.

¹⁴ Latham and Howlett note the connection to the Italian *buffone* and *buffa*, both of which appear to derive from the verb *buffare* (to blow violently, to puff out the cheeks). Like the Latin *buffare*, the Italian word derives from the French verbs *bouffer*, *bouffir* (*bofer*). Entries for *buffone* in the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (Squarotti et al. 1961–) emphasize the grotesque deformity of the buffoon, with instantiations of the sense dating to the second half of the thirteenth century in the poetry of Giacomo de Verona. The word *buffa* has a meaning similar to French *bouffée* and Anglo-Norman *buf*. ‘Soffio di vento

of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Winchelsey (Graham 1952–56). The word appears in a letter sent from the Archbishop to the prior and monks of Rochester. The letter, dated 31 July 1299, contains a number of injunctions given in response to the monks' neglect of their holy duties, hoarding of wealth for the monastery, and other infractions. The Archbishop first orders that all brothers of the house—who are not infirm or excused by reason of other duties—attend the Divine Office both day and night, especially the High Mass. The letter goes on to list several of the punishments for truancy, including a limited diet of bread and porridge. (Winchelsey also reminds the erring brothers that the monks should keep away from women—and women should especially not be taken into the crypts!) The Primate then turns to disruptions of the Mass:

Item statuimus et ordinamus quod locis et temporibus constitutis omnes
silencium teneant nec aliquis alterum presumat verbo vel signo aliquem
provocare et a sermonibus ac signis scurilibus derisoris detractoris convicti-
catoriis et tumultu summopere studeant abstinere; et in parliamentis vestris in
claustro de vita, fide, moribus, sciencia et observancie regularis honestate que
ad juniorum et aliorum informacionem operentur, non autem de truphis et
bufis ac omnino inutilibus... (Graham 1952–56, p. 839)

Also, we declare and ordain that at the appointed places and times [i.e. during the celebration of Mass] all [brothers] should remain silent nor by any word or other sign presume to call out and should strive to abstain from scurrilous, derisive, slanderous, abusive, and particularly troubling words and signs; and [I further declare that], in the cloisters, in your discussions about life, faith, morality, knowledge, and of the honest observance of the [Benedictine] rule, which are performed for the instruction of the young and others, [you speak] nothing of entirely useless quibbles and jokes...

Though it is extremely unlikely that Chaucer would have encountered this letter to the unruly Benedictines of Rochester, the similarities with Friar John's criticism of monks are intriguing. Like the burping brothers in *The Summoner's Tale*, the monks of Rochester are known for their corruption of the Divine Office with 'troubling', 'scurrilous', and 'derisive' words and signs. What is more, Winchelsey's objections to the monastic descent into needless pedantry and foolish (if learned) jests neatly parallels the Summoner's mockery of scholastic parsing that ends the tale.¹⁵ No matter Chaucer's exposure to this letter in particular, the archiepiscopal injunction demonstrates that *bufa* was a term circulating in clerical Latin at the turn of the fourteenth century and, in what may be only a fortunate coincidence, was associated

Footnote 14 continued

impetuoso' [a gust of strong wind] (Squarotti et al. 1961–). It is similar to *bufēra*, a windstorm, which appears in *Inferno*, Canto V (Dante 1977, vv. 31). Dante uses *buffa* figuratively in Canto VII (61–63) when Virgil speaks about the punishment of avaricious men who hoarded wealth: 'Or puoi veder, figliuol, la corta buffa/ de' ben che son commessi alla Fortna/ per che l'umana gente si rabbuffa' [You see, my son, the short-lived mockery/ of all the wealth that is in Fortune's keep/over which the human race is bickering' (Dante 1996)]. In his commentary on the *Comedia*, Boccaccio glosses *la corta buffa*: 'cioè la breve vanità' [that is, fleeting vanity] (1965, p. 392).

¹⁵ See, for example, Olson (2009) and Finlayson (2007).

with monkish frivolity. For some in Chaucer's contemporary audience, the appearance of *buf* at the head of line 1934 would serve as a signpost for the Latin joke that follows.

The etymological and semantic webs of *buf* and its variants constitute a dense condemnation of the monastic orders. The Summoner's Friar John creates an image of arrogant, gluttonous monks, bloated by their excesses, marring the purity of the holy songs with the sensory remnants of their earthly indulgences. Chaucer's use of *buf* is a component of his exploration of anti-ecclesiastic satire, including the irony which often appears in the genre. (The friar is no less a glutton than his imagined monks, if better mannered.). His choice of *buf* is no accident, an off-hand interjection with no etymology. Rather, the word has rich semantic and linguistic resonances, and Chaucer deploys these through the Summoner's friar, himself a savvy wielder of multiple languages.

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