The Miller in Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*

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Introduction: One reason for the popularity of Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* is its democratic implications. While Chaucer himself was a gentleman and an ambassador and served more than one king, this story is a blow for the common man. Chaucer calls the Miller a clown in the Prologue to his *Tale*, but this seems to me another example of a principle evoked by many modern critics, and expressed concisely by D. H. Lawrence, that we should believe the work and not the author. As I will explain, this especially holds true for *The Canterbury Tales.* And if we inspect the *Tale,* what we find is that the Miller is actually quite clever on a number of scores. He is a first-rate satirist of his society: of the aristocracy and their tastes, of amorous young students, and, naturally, of carpenters in general and the Reeve in particular.

This paper will confine itself to the Miller's implied criticism of the aristocracy, since that is the least obvious of the three groups being satirized. It is plain that the Miller is satirizing carpenters. John the old husband – clown, cuckold, and dunce – is a carpenter, after all, and the Reeve tries to keep the Miller from telling his tale because (besides being a Reeve) he is a carpenter too.[1] And the plot makes it obvious that scholars consider themselves more "*subtile*" (the Miller's word for *subtle*) than they really are.

But the class represented by the Knight is another matter. In what

sense are they satirized? Surely not as being stupid, vain, or evil; in fact, in no way relating to their collective character. And this is natural, considering the sterling characters of the only two aristocrats on the pilgrimage. The Miller simply presents his tale in such a way as to comment on the Knight's story and undermine the Knight's sense of the ways of the world. Therefore, after a plot summary (which can be ignored by anyone familiar with *The Miller's Tale*), this paper will treat the Miller's satire on aristocracy, as implied in his send-up of *The Knight's Tale*. Finally, there will be an appendix on Chaucer's ironic method, to explain how the Miller can be as intelligent as I claim when Chaucer himself calls him a clown.[2]

Plot: John the carpenter has married a fetching lass named Alison. He is "old," and she is eighteen. In marrying Alison, John has ignored conventional wisdom about the gulf between youth and age, yet he feels acutely the dangers of his predicament, and he keeps a jealous eye on his young wife.

Lodging in John's house is a handsome young student named Nicholas. This scholar conducts bogus sessions in astrology and fortune-telling and passes himself off as a seer, while secretly indulging his real talent: the seduction of local women. As jealous as John is, he never considers the possibility that Nicholas could be a threat. The carpenter is gullible and superstitious and thinks this harmless-looking seer has risen above the sensual world.

One day, while John is out on business, Nicholas grabs Alison in the crudest manner and tries to seduce her. Alison springs free and objects, but only because she fears her husband. Having established her virtue, she promises to reward the scholar's initiative at the first safe

opportunity. Nicholas assures her that the chance will come very soon, since any worthy scholar can outwit a carpenter, and in the coming days he devises a plan.

Following his plan, Nicholas locks himself in his room, apparently too absorbed in the stars for food or human companionship. Finally, the concerned carpenter has his servant break down Nicholas's door, and, after some histrionics on Nicholas's part, John convinces the scholar to explain himself. Nicholas confides his latest astrological discovery: A world-drowning Deluge — a second Noah's Flood — is imminent. It will come next Monday. Only the three of them (he, John, and Alison) can be saved, and they must keep the secret of the coming Flood from everyone else, including the two servants of the house.[3] If John tells the secret to anyone, God will drive him mad. Nicholas then directs the carpenter to buy enough provisions to tide the three survivors over for one day (the time table for this Flood being much more than forty times as fast as it was for Noah's[4]), and to hang three large tubs[5] from the roof beams. Unlike the survivors of the original Flood, who occupied the same Ark, each of these survivors (the future lords of the earth) will sit in a separate tub with its own provisions, including bread, cheese, and ale. Until they climb down rope ladders hanging from each tub, John must remain pure in thought and deed by observing absolute silence and total isolation from his wife. The carpenter readily agrees to everything and sets about buying the provisions and hanging the tubs from the roof beams.

All this is accomplished by Monday, and Nicholas, John, and Alison move to their tubs. The carpenter soon falls asleep, so Alison and Nicholas climb down their rope ladders and join each other in Alison's matrimonial bedroom.

That same night, a handsome parish clerk named Absolon has made up his mind to seduce Alison. However rash his decision may be, it is more than a sudden impulse. For most of the period that Nicholas was wooing Alison, Absolon was lusting after her in a rather public way. His approach was to croon ballads at her low bay window, which allowed Alison to demonstrate her fidelity to John by openly shunning this second clerk. And so, while Nicholas frolics with Alison, and while John snores away in his tub, the unsuspecting Absolon — spurred on by the mistaken assumption that John is away on business — decides to take more positive action. He creeps up to Alison's window and pleads for a kiss, refusing to take "No" for an answer. It is pitch-dark, and Alison, in high spirits, whispers to Nicholas that she has a little surprise for Absolon. She goes to the window, but, instead of offering her lips, she offers what the Miller vulgarly refers to as "hir naked ers" (75). Completely in the dark in every sense, Absolon kisses what is offered, and then Alison removes her person from the window and slams it with a giggle.

Absolon feels something awry from the moment of the kiss. As he stands outside the closed window, he reflects that women don't have beards, then comprehends the trick that has been played on him. Aggravating the insult, he can hear Nicholas and Alison laughing. This cures Absolon of his infatuation. He swears off women forever and vows revenge.

To accomplish his revenge, Absolon goes directly to the forge of a friendly blacksmith and borrows a red-hot poker. Then he returns to Alison's window and calls out to her once more, begging sweetly for another kiss. To Nicholas, smitten with hubris, this is a chance to improve on Alison's joke: if Absolon can't tell *what* he kisses, how can

he tell *whom*? And so, protected, he thinks, by the dark, Nicholas offers his own posterior and, to heap insult on insult, loudly passes wind. Absolon recoils from this crude gas attack, but quickly recovers and strikes back with the hot poker, branding Nicholas on the offending bottom. Nicholas screams,

> "Help! Water! Water! Help, for Goddes herte!" (76).

Hearing this pious reverence to water, John is startled out of his sleep and reflects that the Flood has come. He cuts the rope of his tub, falling down to his own room, where he breaks his arm and passes out. Alison and Nicholas, far from being shamed by this sudden development, run out of the house and summon the neighbors to witness the scene. When John wakes up, they overbear him with their own story of his Flood-fixated madness, inviting the neighbors to come in the house and see for themselves the tubs suspended from the rafters. As for their own part in this silly Flood vigil, they claim that the carpenter wanted company and they were only humoring him. From then on, no one in the town takes the carpenter seriously. In convincing the carpenter to prepare for the Flood, Nicholas had warned John not to say a word about the Flood or God would drive him mad. Now, in fact, all John's attempts to explain himself are dismissed as the ravings of a madman.

The Aristocracy: There are only two aristocrats on the pilgrimage to Canterbury, the Knight and his son, the Squire. The pilgrims are a motley group, exhibiting every Deadly Sin, from the Prioress's harmless pride, to the Monk's sloth and gluttony, to the blackest avarice in the case of the Pardoner. In this company the Knight and the Squire are

exemplary. For virtue, they are unrivaled by anyone in the group except the Plowman and the poor Parson.[6]

The Knight is a perfect gentleman who has put his courage to the test in many parts of the world, from Russia to North Africa. Furthermore, distinguished as he is, he does not remind us at all of the proud Japanese samurai, whom one imagines growling short orders to his subordinates. He treats everyone according to the Golden Rule:

> He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
> In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
> He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght. (24)

The nuance to notice here is that *vileynye* means "rudeness" rather than "slander" (Benson, 24); so he has never been rude to anyone in any station. The knight represents an ideal that most cultures in the pre-democratic past did not even aspire to.

As for the Squire, he is his father's son. Like the Knight he is polite to everyone, which, because of his youth, means being actively humble and helpful:

> Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable.... (25)

He is hardly a battle-scarred veteran but has in fact been tested in battle:

> And he hadde been somtyme in chyvachie
> In Flaundres, in Artroys, and Pycardie,
> And born hym weel, as of so litel space,
> In hope to stonden in his lady grace. (24)

Furthermore, as suggested above, he is a courtly lover, and does everything in hopes of standing in his lady's good graces. He is sleepless, in contemplation of her, yet, in Chaucer's own words, "as fressh as is the month of May" (24). Even his clothes are embroidered with flowers. There is no accomplishment appropriate to his class that the Squire hasn't mastered. He jousts in tournaments, sings, plays the flute, writes songs, and dances. In sum, the Squire is the perfect young gentleman. He is to youth what his father, the Knight, is to age; and he and his father are to the aristocracy what the poor Parson is to the clergy. All are ideal.

Mention of the Parson, however, like the word "ideal," suggests the one drawback which these characters betray: they are rather too good for this life. The Parson is set against all the bad clergy as an exemplar of what a good "shepherd" should be. He seems less a character in flesh and blood than a rhetorical foil to the shady guardians of the Church who are presented realistically. Underscoring this is the undeniable fact that *The Parson's Tale* is no tale at all but a tedious theological tract, in prose, imparting the teachings of Boethius. It is somewhat incongruous that Harry, the Host, can sit though this sermon when he has bluntly objected to the Reeve's tiny sermon (the Prologue to *The Reeve's Tale*).

In fact, the Miller has no chance to comment on *The Parson's Tale* or *The Squire's Tale*. As the most distinguished member of the group, the Knight speaks first, and the Monk is invited to speak next. It is at this point that the drunken Miller steps in and insists on telling his own story at once, thus flouting the rule of precedence. And he states this part of his intention directly:

"...By armes, and by blood and bones,

I kan a noble tale for the nones,
With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale." (67)

This is a hilarious scene, with the Miller shouting in drunken inspiration and threatening to leave the company unless Harry the Host lets him speak. He also intends to put the Reeve in his place. But the first point is clear enough: the Miller aims to "*quite*" (repay) the Knight with his own "noble tale." His main way of doing this is to exploit the courtly love tradition.

The Miller's Tale is an example of the *fabliau*, a genre of risqué stories associated with Chaucer's possible Italian source Boccaccio[7] and often involving students and cuckolded husbands, as this story does. But what in Boccaccio might be regarded as simple and even crude[8] in *The Miller's Tale* is transmuted into great art. The Miller's method is to take certain situations in the Knight's heroic story and bring them down to earth.

The first of the two situations I will discuss is the courting of Alison, which contrasts so amusingly with the circumstances in *The Knight's Tale*. In the earlier story, the courting is carried on in charmingly distant terms. The two lovers, Palamon and Arcite, first see the virgin Emelye[9] through the bars of their prison cell, where they pine away for seven years and do not even meet the object of their spontaneous affections. In truth, they only meet Emelye after they fight a duel over her — and a lot of water has passed under the bridge by this time. Arcite has been released from prison, on the condition that he never again set foot in Athens, which condition he violates immediately; and Palamon has escaped from prison. And even so they only meet Emelye because her brother Theseus, the king, and his party happen to be hunting in the

region and (guided by the Goddess Fortuna) see the two lovers with their swords drawn. These lovers are more than chaste; they are devoted, and it is very fitting that one worships at the shrine of Venus, the other at the shrine of Mars, and in doing so both parallel the chaste Emelye, who worships at the shrine of Diana, the virgin huntress. Perusing this story, a reader must make a distinction between the sober knight telling his tale and Chaucer, the real author, having fun with the assumptions of courtly love. But Chaucer's more earthy comment on Palamon and Arcite's approach is to set it off against the approach of Nicholas, the student-lodger, the very first time he courts Alison in *The Miller's Tale*:

> Now sire, and eft, sire, so bifel the cas
> That on a day this hende Nicholas
> Fill with this yonge wyf to rage and pleye,
> Whil that hir housbonde was at Oseneye,
> As clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte;
> And prively he caughte hire by the queynte,
> And seyde, "Ywis, but ifich have my wille,
> For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille."
> And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones,
> And seyde, "Lemman, love me al atones,
> Or I wol dyen, also God me save!" (69)

One example of the exquisite vulgarity of this scene is the pun on the word *queynte*, which means *ingenious* in the first case and *pudendum* in the second.[10] This may also refer to another pun on the same word in *The Knight's Tale*. Emelye is praying for a life of chastity at the temple of Diana, when the goddess suddenly appears to her and denies her

request, since the gods have ordained that she marry:

> But sodeynly she saugh a sighte *queynte*,
> For right anon oon of the fyres *queynte*,
> And quyked agayn, and after that anon
> That oother fyr was queynt and al agon.... (56 italics mine)

Whether this was intended or accidental on Chaucer's part, these earlier uses of *queynte* (respectively meaning *strange* and *went out*, as does the subsequent *queynt*) render the Miller's reference more clever still – he can play the Knight's game and mock the gentility of the earlier tale at the same time. By reminding us of the scene in the temple of the Virgin Huntress, the Miller sets Alison's perfidious animal spirits against Emelye's immaculate sweetness. It takes a very solemn person, given the contrast, not to relish the gross directness of Nicholas's approach. He holds Alison "harde" by the haunch bones, an amusing anatomical rendering of the "subtile" technique. Alison protests and springs away like a shying colt:

> And she sproong as a colt dooth in the trave,
> And with hir heed she wryed faste awey,
> And seyde, "I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!
> Why, lat be!" quod she, "Lat be, Nicholas,
> Or I wol crie 'out, harrow' and 'alas'!" (69)

As suggested in the plot summary' this is all part of the mating ritual, and having established her respectability, Alison soon comes to terms with the subtle scholar: they will have their tryst as soon as it can be

safely accomplished behind her husband's back.

But what makes this scene so fresh – as fresh as if it were modern, though we are conscious of it being from another (and in some ways a better) culture – is the way Alison actually talks and acts. To the extent that we attribute this invention to the Miller himself, we have to give him an advantage over the Knight.

Emelye talks too, and her total number of lines might equal or surpass Alison's, but her speech and actions are stereotyped. Mostly, she prays to Diana, and she is an attractive figure. The difference between Emelye's presentation and Alison's correponds to the difference between Brutus's funeral speech and and Antony's in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. With nothing to compare it to, Brutus's speech seems eloquent, but when Antony has spoken we are aware of what the former speech lacks.

And in the same way, Alison's ingenuity and invention represent a dimension that is missing in the presentation of Emelye. The Knight evokes his maiden in light, pleasing tones: "Up roos the sonne, and up roos Emelye," begins her lovely temple scene. But Alison is a sly little fox, or rather, as the Miller calls her, a weasel, and she is full of invention from the beginning. For one thing, she is a shameless hypocrite, who is constantly invoking the Divine and priding herself on her fidelity, while she cares nothing for either abstraction. The "by my fey!" in this passage (by my faith) is her normal tone. And she is always conscious of the words she uses. Consequently, she doesn't just say, "Let me go, Nicholas, or I'll cry out!" She has already framed the words that she will use in crying out – or rather the words that will most alarm Nicholas in contemplation of her crying out, since she has no intention of really putting Nicholas off: "'out, harrow' and 'alas'!" This is a

devilishly charming touch and reminds one of two even better examples, both in the scene in which Alison plays her trick on Absolon. The point is that her partner in the room is not her husband (he is sleeping in one of the tubs hanging from the rafters high above) but Nicholas, the other student:

> "Go from the wyndow, Jakke fool," she sayde;
> "As help me God, it wol not 'com pa me.'
> I love another – and elles I were to blame –
> Wel bet than thee, by Jhesus, Absolon." (75)

One hesitates to explain the joke here: it is clear enough, and such amazing touches shouldn't be spoiled by the heavy hand of analysis. Since, however, this is in Middle English, a little explanation and relevant comment is perhaps in order. A simple prose translation of the words might be, "Go from the window, Jack fool! So help me God, I will not kiss you. I love another – or else I were at fault – much better than you, by Jesus, Absolon." The center of this reply is the crafty statement, "I love another," with that presumed *other* being her husband, since she continues "or elles I were to blame" and buttresses this with invocations of both God the Father and God the Son.[11] But of course the true identity of the *other* is Nicholas, and this is as much a private joke between Alison and him as it is a misleading statement.

Alison is more than a hypocrite; she is droll inventress, and she proves it be playing her famous trick on Absolon (allowing him to kiss her in the pitch dark, though not really on the lips). But the funniest line of all comes immediately after the trick. It is Alison's laugh as she slams the window closed. It has been called the funniest line in

literature[12]:

> "Tehee!" quod she, and clapte the wyndow to.... (75)

Without spoiling this line, the humor of which ultimately defies explanation, surely some of its charm derives from the fact that Alison is enjoying herself. She is a spirited girl, and John the carpenter's ultimate act of stupidity was marrying her in the first place. The traditional advice would have been good enough, had he taken it: you shouldn't marry someone much younger than you are. Just as truly John might have been advised, however futilely, not to marry someone much sharper than he was.

Nor does this really undermine the Knight or his *Tale*. The story is quite charming — if mischievously wordy[13] — and the Knight is even capable of gentile waggishness. He cuts off the description of Emily's morning bath at the point where nudity would be involved, but then, good-naturedly admits it would be fun to pursue the scene a little farther:

> This Emelye, with herte debonaire,
> Hir body weesh with water of a weele.
> But hou she dide hir ryte I dar not telle,
> But it be any thing in general;
> And yet it were a game to heeren al. (56)

In other words, "I can only tell you of Emelye's bath in general terms; I dare not tell you in detail. But it would be fun to hear a full account." Assuming, as I feel we must, that this is a manifestation of the Knight's

personality, and not just Chaucer speaking through the Knight, we can see that he is as tolerant as he is gentle. But having admitted that, we must still conclude that the Miller presents another level of life that is at least as vital as the Knight's — in my personal opinion more vital — and one that has stood the test of time much better.

In case there is any doubt in the reader's mind that these contrasts were part of Chaucer's conscious intention, let us finish with this discussion of how the Miller "quite[s]" the Knight's story with the summaries of each. First the Knight's summary:

> For now is Palamon in alle wele,
> Lyvynge in blisse, in richesse, and in heele,
> And Emelye hym loveth so tendrely,
> And he hire serveth so gentilly,
> That nevere was ther no word hem bitwene
> Of jalousie or any oother teene.
> Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye;
> And God save al this faire compaignye! Amen. (66)

And now the Miller's:

> Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
> For al his kepyng and his jalousye,
> And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,
> And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
> This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte! (77)

The key word in the first passage is "gentilly." Everything in *The*

Knight's Tale ends in a way that is at once gentle and gentile. If we count the problems that Palamon and Emelye have in their marriage, the total is zero. They both live happily ever after, as in a fairy tale. We may note that the Miller's summary, like his tale, is not only more realistic by an absurd margin, but more succinct. It is the product of a rude mind, but a sharp, intelligent one.

Appendix: Apophasis

At least one objection will occur to some readers familiar with *The Canterbury Tales*: Chaucer himself tells us that the Miller is a clown, so shouldn't we be guided by him? The answer is that Chaucer often resorts to a literary device classically referred to as *apophasis*, by which something is affirmed by ironic denial. We see it in his comments on the foibles of the characters in the General Prologue. To see how Chaucer's method works, let us take the cases of three religious figures: the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar. They are convenient because they represent an ascending scale, running from peccadillo, to vice, to genuine evil.

In the case of the Prioress, Chaucer portrays her as basically amiable and decent but proud and provincial. She prides herself on her French, but it is actually an inferior school French taught in provincial England and not the true Parisian variety. But the point is that Chaucer puts on the transparent mask of a person agreeing with the Prioress that her French is fair and elegant:

> And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,
> After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,

> For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe.... (25, as are subsequent quotes)

The key phrase here, supporting Chaucer's pretense of being on the Prioress's side, is "ful faire and fetisly" (very fair and elegantly).

Similarly, Chaucer describes the Prioress's table manners, detailing things that make her look like a country bumpkin, but always under the guise of praising her for her "curteisie." Without being at all clear about the table manners of the fourteenth century, I am sure that the greasy habits described were not the manners of the court that Chaucer, an important ambassador, was familiar with.

Chaucer also describes the Prioress's tenderheartedness towards animals: she even cries when she sees a mouse caught in a trap. This is all said sympathetically, as is the reference to her hounds (she is a dog-lover too). Without comment Chaucer mentions that she feeds her hounds "with roasted flessh" among other things. This particular bit of satire hits close to home. Perhaps most of us are the same: "pitous" of the mouse but not of the pig, say, whose meat we are devouring. The relevant fact is that Chaucer portrays *himself* as only noticing the "pitous" side of the Prioress. So this portrait is characterized by a form of apophasis: Chaucer is implicitly denying the evidence of his senses, which he nevertheless passes on dutifully to us, with the real intention of making the point he is denying.

The same technique is used with the Monk. The Monk spends his time riding, eating, and drinking, which are amiable habits enough, but hardly what a person who has ostensibly dedicated himself to a life of asceticism (the "reule of Seint Mure or of Seint Beneit") would be expected to do. Chaucer makes this clear by citing the text that the Monk

disregards:

> He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
> That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,
> Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees,
> Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees –
> This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.
> But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre.... (26, with quotes above and below)

And Chaucer's final comment on this is a nice example of apophasis:

> And I seyde his opinion was good.
> What sholde he studie and make hymselven wood,
> Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
> Or swynken with his handes, and laboore,
> As Austyn bit? How shal the world be served?
> Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!

Chaucer "seyd that his opinion was good," he tells us, then goes on to catalogue more areas in which the Monk violates his orders. So Chaucer affirms the Monk's rectitude as a means of implicitly denying it. The technique is hardly subtle, but it is an effective rhetorical device, and the same one employed with the Prioress.

Finally, let us take a brief look at a much worse example of the Deadly Sins: the Friar. It transpires that the Friar has impregnated many young women and then married them off to others, of which fact Chaucer evokes the bright side: he did so "at his owne cost." As usual,

Chaucer feigns ignorance of the facts behind the Friar's generosity, and ends by praising him:

> He hadde maad ful many a mariage
> Of yonge wommen at his owene cost.
> Unto his ordre he was a noble post. (26)

The rhyme of "cost" and "post" clinches the irony of the second line.

Bad as this may already seem, the catalogue of the Friar's vices mounts into something like positive evil. He ignores poor people (unlike the poor Parson) and cultivates the wealthy clientele, to whom he sells his absolutions. The list goes on, proving the Friar to be a complete mountebank, a worthy forerunner of the snake oil salesmen of the American West and present-day televangelists. And as with the Prioress and the Monk, Chaucer seems to rationalize on the Friar's behalf:

> He was an esy man to yeve penaunce,
> Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce.
> For unto a povre ordre for to yive
> Is signe that a man is wel yshryve.... (27, with subsequent quotes)

The word "povre" (poor) gives the game away. The Friar is supposed to be poor, since he took a vow of poverty, but of course he isn't. So this defense is a smoke screen and a nice example of apophasis, denying the vice that is being chronicled. Chaucer continues this rationalization by repeating the key word "povre":

> For many a man so hard is of his herte,

He may nat wepe, althogh hym soore smerte.
Therfore in stede of wepynge and preyeres
Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres.

One nuance of these references to poverty is that the "poor" object of the donation that is being solicited is not referred to in the singular. The money goes to "a povre ordre" and again to "the povre freres." To tell the truth, which Chaucer is doing via the devise of apophasis, the money goes to one rich friar, who is totally dedicated to himself, and not at all to his order or to the real poor, whom he despises:

For unto swich a worthy man as he
Acorded nat, as by hs facultee,
To have with sike lazars aqueyntaunce.
It is nat honest; it may nat avaunce....

Again, the rhyme stressing the word "avaunce" (advance) – playing the idea of *improve* off against the real meaning: to advance the Friar's self-interest – is the clincher. Chaucer shows the Friar to be not just avaricious and lazy but heartless towards the people he should really be helping.

In light of this, let us briefly examine Chaucer's justification in the Miller's Prologue for including a fabliau (indeed, two fabliaux)[14] among his *Tales*. As already mentioned, the Miller is drunk and insists on speaking out of turn. Here is all of Chaucer's culminating excuse for the story:

What shoulde I moore seyn, but this Millere
He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,

But tolde his cherles tale in his manere.
M'athynketh that I shal reherce it heere.
And therfore every gentil wight I preye,
For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
Or elles falssen som of my mateere.
And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere,
Turn over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.
The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe this.
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame;
And eek men shal not maken ernest of game. (67)

Comment is almost unnecessary at this point. Surely this is another example of apophasis. Chaucer is saying that he has to include this churlish tale because the Miller told it "in his manere," and accuracy requires writing down what he heard. The fact is that Chaucer made the story, and the Miller, up, and this, of course, is a joke. So, as with his comments on characters in the General Prologue, we have to turn Chaucer's protestations upside down to get at their real meaning, which is that however drunk he may be, the Miller is anything but stupid.

The story is a profoundly funny and moving picture of the life of the

times, rendered with great zest. In the Prologue to *The Reeve's Tale*, everyone in the company except, of course, the Reeve, laughs loudly at the Miller's great conclusion. Surely one of the laughers is the Knight himself, though his own story was parodied. Again, reminding ourselves that everyone including the Knight is Chaucer's creation, as is their laughter, the message is that the *Tale* is a great success; and the Miller, even when drunk, is a very clever storyteller and an uncanny observer of the speech and quirks of his characters. *The Canterbury Tales* is a great democracy, in which the churl can meet the gentleman on equal terms. The best statement of this point is made by the British critic John Speirs: "*The Miller's Tale* is not only Chaucer's comic art at its maturest – and this is only another way of saying the same thing – it is poetry at its richest" (55).

Notes

1 Added to this, the Reeve then tells an answering tale about a dishonest carpenter who suffers complete humilation at the hands of two students he tries to cheat.

2 The thesis that *The Miller's Tale* deserves to sit beside *The Knight's Tale* seems not to be universally accepted. A. C. Cawley, in the introduction to his edition, seems to really think *The Knight's Tale* incomparably superior: "It [i.e., putting *The Miller's Tale* right after *The Knight's Tale*] is rather like deliberately setting down a dish of caviare beside a platter of blood puddings; both are black, both come from a creature's inside, but there the resemblance ends" (xii).

3 To be more precise, without confusing the issue, John is even supposed to keep the secret from his wife. He violates this part of his oath of silence and tells Alison what, as the Miller observes, she really knows more about that he does.

4 Since the flood will subside in one day, the temptation is to say that the time table is forty times as fast. Nicholas explains to John, however, that the world will all be "dreynt" (drowned) "in lasse than an hour" (72). So apparently we can multiply 40 by 24 at least, and say that the time table is 960 times as fast. But even leaving aside the distinction between the forty days and nights in Genesis and the unspecified time it actually took to drown the world's sinners (and innocent animals), this is too literal. The point is that Nicholas casually speeds up the process because he *can*: John is too

simple to suspect anything.

5 John actually gets three different vessels: "a knedyng trogh," "a tubbe," and "a kym elyn" (74). The first is a trough for kneading dough; the second is an unspecified tub; and the third is "a large tub for brewing beer" (Benson, 73, along with the information about the kneading trough). While this kind of detail is the life of the story, I will simply refer to the three vessels as "tubs."

6 Much of this discussion of the other characters refers to the General Prologue, though not all of it. For instance, the Prioress's charming foible is established in the General Prologue, but the extent of the Pardoner's avarice only becomes clear in the combination of the Prologue and Epilogue to *The Pardoner's Tale*, the ironic text of which is "*Radix malorum est cupiditas*" (Avarice is the root of all evil).

7 There seems to be disagreement among scholars about whether or not Chaucer was really familiar with Boccaccio. David Brewer doesn't go so far as to say Chaucer based his fabliau on Boccaccio, only that they both wrote "folktales" (25). But he says plainly that Chaucer based his very long poem *Troilus and Criseyde* on Boccaccio's poem on the same subject (39). Yet David Daiches says plainly, "It is doubtful whether Chaucer knew Boccaccio's *Decameron*" (106). This doesn't necessarily mean that Chaucer was unfamiliar with Boccaccio's version of *Troilus*, though it would be very ironic if Chaucer knew the less famous work but not the work with which Boccaccio is universally associated.

8 This is not to disparage Boccaccio. D. H. Lawrence mentions Boccaccio appreciatively for this very quality of open, pre-Puritan bawdiness. The only point is that Chaucer's story is a careful work of art rather than a simple example of the *fabliau*.

9 It is customary, evidently, to call Emelye by the modern English name Emily. While the heroine's name is surely the ancestor of the modern name, I see no reason to use the latter. The rule observed in this paper is to modernize common terms of reference, such as *Knyght* (Knight), *Millere* (Miller), and even *Reve* (Reeve), though I have never come across the last term outside *The Canterbury Tales*; but not to alter proper names.

10 This pun owes much of its humor to the fact that *queynte* is the ancestor of the coarse modern word that begins with the letter *c*. Readers unfamiliar with the word referred to will not be enlightened here – it has its place in *The Dictionary of American Slang* (though it is much older than American English) but is often regarded as the crudest word in the language and I see no reason to teach it to anyone. The point is that the Miller is vulgarly direct, and this contrasts wonderfully with the gentle Knight's story of ultra-refined courtship. Incidentally, in his great poem "To His Coy Mistress," the seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell avails himself of such a similar pun, he might have been thinking of *The Miller's Tale*:

And your *quaint* Honour turn to dust;
And into ashes all my Lust. (Auden and Pearson, 533; italics mine)

11 This kind of blasphemy is contagious, and Absolon, who actually works for the parish church, indulges in it with the same shamelessness. In this scene he asks for a kiss, at least (assuming more will follow) "For Jhesus love, and for the love of me" (75).

12 I regret to say that I have not been able to locate the critic who claimed this. It has been years since I read this remark and only remember that the writer was a genuine Chaucerian scholar. In any case, I can think of no funnier line.

13 The Knight is constantly protesting that he intends to skip the irrelevancies and get to the point, but most of the time, this is a joke. Describing the funeral of Arcite, for instance, he begins a sentence, "But how the fyre was maked upon highte," and ends it (almost – a semicolon rather than a period is used in modern additions) five lines later, "shall nat be toold for me." The joke is that this *has been* told, and much more, by the time the sentence ends. The Knight proceeds with a series of clauses beginning with "Ne" (*Nor*), explaining all the other things that will not be told by the Knight, but are in fact being told. These clauses continue for more than forty lines, and they represent the general pace and tone of the story, which might have been written in refutation of Voltaire's advice about the *mot juste*, if Chaucer hadn't come five hundred years earlier.

14 Besides *The Miller's Tale* there is *The Reeve's Tale*. There is also *The Cook's Tale*, though Chaucer doesn't mention it in the Miller's Prologue. The Reeve tells his tale in retaliation for the Miller's satire on carpenters. The Cook has some other motive that is far from clear in what we have of his story because it is incomplete, breaking off almost as soon as it starts.

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