

An Atypical 'Fabliau': Genre and Expression in *The Miller's Tale*

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Like other stories from *The Canterbury Tales* (*TCanT*), *The Miller's Tale* (*TMillT*) belongs to a specific genre, the 'fabliau'. In other words, it is a narrative poem written for entertainment and characterized by vivid detail and realistic observation. The average modern reader may not find anything else of interest in the tale, but this was not the case for a medieval audience, well versed in a series of conventions inaccessible to the present-day reader. A close study of the tale will reveal, we hope, the distance between stereotype and what is offered by Chaucer or, in other words, between 'genre' and its 'expression'. To this end we shall analyze *TMillT* within the context of *TCanT* as a whole, its 'deep' structure and, finally, the various formal elements which give specific shape to its surface.

The Miller in *The General Prologue*

The Miller is placed within the last group of pilgrims in *The General Prologue* (*TGenP*), together with the figure of the author himself¹:

Ther was also a Reve, and a Millere,
A Sornnour, and a Pardoner also,
A Maunciple, and myself —ther were namo².
(542-4)

1 See H. F. Brooks, *Chaucer's Pilgrims*, London, Methuen, 1957, p. lff. for a study of the artistic order of the portraits in *TGenP*, and W. H. Clawson, «The Framework of *The Canterbury Tales*», in E. Wagenknecht (ed.), *Chaucer. Modern Essays in Criticism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 3 ff., on the importance of *TGenP* as a framework for the tales.

2 For quotations from the text I follow R. A. Pratt's edition of *The Tales of Canterbury*, Boston,

This is obviously the group of lowest social standing and, therefore, founder of *fabliaux*: we are thus prepared for the tales of their characters which, naturally enough, will tend to be of the coarser type.

In contrast with the descriptions of the Parson and the Ploughman, who embody Christian spirituality and close the preceding group, Chaucer begins this one with the Miller: he is a 'churl', representing physical strength and energy, and also moral unscrupulousness in business. His physique is so overpowering that it becomes grotesque—and therefore he can tell grotesque tales. Yet he is not an unattractive character: he combines a taste for ribaldry with his skill in playing the bagpipes³, and he stands in contrast with the slender figure of the Reeve, a character spiritually narrower than the Miller⁴. Yet what is important about the detailed physical description of the Miller is that a 14th century reader would be able to deduce his character from his physique, according to physiognomical principles⁵. His thick-set build would indicate that he was immodest and talkative, violent and easily angered. His flaring nostrils would be a sign of his being a lustful person. His large mouth would mean that he was a liar, and also somebody given to profanity. Thus we are again prepared for what follows: in this sense, Chaucer makes us pre-conceive, almost in a naturalistic way, what is to come.

Before going any further with this analysis, it will be worthwhile to remember that millers used to play a very important role in medieval economy⁶. As the tenants of manors were obliged to grind their corn in the lord's mill, the millers were in an excellent position to cheat them: there are constant allusions to millers' abuses in medieval literature. As an example, Chaucer's miller in *The Reeve's Tale (TReevT)* steals the flour and gets his fee for milling three times over. All this explains the Reeve's hatred of the Miller in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

The Miller's Tale within Group A of The Canterbury Tales

Group A or Fragment 1 of *TCantT* consists, as is well known, of the

Houghton Mifflin, 1974, which is an up-to-date revision of the standard edition by F. N. Robinson (*The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 1957).

3 A touch both realistic and symbolic. Skeat has recorded complaints about 15th century pilgrims because of «the sound of their piping». *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, W. W. Skeat, ed., vol. 5. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1900, p. 49. On the other hand, James Winny notes that bagpipes were instruments «which medieval pictures often show in the mouths of devils» (*The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, J. Winny, ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1966, p. 116).

4 See D. R. Howard, *The Idea of The Canterbury Tales*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976, p. 237 ff., for an analysis of the contrast between the Reeve and the Miller.

5 See W. C. Curry, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 1ff.

6 See L. K. Pearce (ed.), *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: The Prologue*, Toronto, Coles, 1973, p. 70.

AN ATYPICAL 'FABLIAU



The Miller: 'A whit cote and a blew hood wered he
A baggepipe wel koude he blowe and sowne' (564).

following poems: *Thr General Prologue*, *The Knight's Tult. The Miller's Tult. The Reeve's Tale*, and *The Cook's Tult*. The fact that *TMillT* is within this group conditions both the tale itself and those surrounding it.

First of all, *TMillT* stands in striking contrast with *The Knight's Tale* (*TKniT*), the noble history of chivalry and romance which precedes it⁷. The Miller's indecent and at the same time humorous tale offsets the seriousness of the preceding one. The parody is striking if we take into account that the situation is similar in both stories: two young men love the same lady. But whereas the love triangle serves a larger philosophical purpose in the former, we have a farcical situation of low-life adultery in the latter. *TKniT* takes place in Classical Greece, whereas the action of *TMillT* is set in contemporary Oxford. While spirituality pervades the first tale, physical nearness is all that counts in the second. In fact, all these contrasts in characterization, setting, tone, moral values, etc., are precisely what produce the comic effect: while reading *TMillT* one is amused both by the tale itself and by the constant echoes of the preceding one.

There are deliberate echoes of style which, being put out of context in *TMillT*, enhance the burlesque:

Who looketh lightly now but Palamoun?
 Who spryngeth up for joye but Arcite'?
 Who koude telle, or who koude it endite...
 (*TKniT*, 1870-2)

And:

Who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes
 With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes.
 But Absolon...
 (*TMillT*, 3747-9)

Or:

Now with his love, now in his colde grave
 Allone, withouten any compaignye...
 (*TKniT*, 2778-9)

And:

A chambre hadde he in that hostelrye
 Allone, withouten any compaignye...
 (*TMillT*, 3203-4)

⁷ See K. Neuse, «The Knight: The First Mover in Chaucer's Hurnan Comedy», in J. A. Burrow (ed.), *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Anthology*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1969, p. 252f. See further E. T. Donaldson, *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1958, pp. 906-9, for a discussion of the relationship between the two tales. For a totally different view of Chaucer's Knight, see Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*, London, Methuen, 1984².

As we can see, the Miller demolishes the civility of the previous tale: he has 'quitted' the Knight's story with his 'noble tale'—and the humour comes from the fact that, though the reader is aware of the parody, the drunken Miller is not: he believes that his own story is a counterpart to the Knight's.

As was said above, *TMillT* is not only influenced by the previous poem but, in its turn, it influences the following one (*TReeT*). In other words, although he parodies and holds up to ridicule some aspects of *TKniT*, the Miller does not have the last word: his tale, in its turn, is 'quitted' by the Keeve's⁸.

Although *TReeT* is also a *fabliau* of the coarser type, it is very dissimilar from *TMillT*. The distinctions between both stories are in accordance with the physical and psychological differences between both rustics: the Miller is in the prime of life, robust, sanguine and high-spirited, while the Keeve is old, thin and choleric. *TReeT*, therefore, is bitter where *TMillT* was funny: love-making is purely vengeance upon the miller in *TReeT*, contrary to the picaresque—and healthy—sense it had in *TMillT*. Moreover, the author himself seems to provide *TMillT* with an artistic richness that the Keeve's story lacks.

Finally, it will be worthwhile to note that the four tales in the sequence (Knight-Miller-Reeve-Cook) are united by a sort of degenerative movement: in fact we begin with something noble and magnificent and end up with something gross. From the high rhetoric of the Knight we pass to the plain talking of the Miller and to the Northern dialect of the students in the Keeve—and probably in *The Cook's Tale* (*TCooT*) we would have had the argot or the cant of the gutter if Chaucer had finished it. Likewise, the voice of the author also tends to disappear: the author's voice provides commentary in *TKniT*, whereas in *TMillT* the parody of love conventions is another authorial intrusion—but there is no other narrative voice in *TReeT* except the Reeve's, or in *TCooT* fragment except the Cook's. Also, the lovers in the tales become more opportunistic: we still have a scrupulousness and a sense of justice in *TKniT*, such as is set aside in *TMillT*; meanwhile, in *TReeT* there is only opportunism—the clerks go to the ladies' beds just because they are in the same room—and *TCooT* fragment ends precisely with the reference to 'a wyf' that 'swyed for hir sustenance' (4421-2); that is, a prostitute. Finally, *TKniT* ends with dignity and detachment and *TMillT* at least with a sense of largesse and general inerriment—except for the carpenter—, while *TReeT* has a moralistic and venomous ending that the others lack ('Thus have I quit the Miller in my tale'). This general 'degenerative movement' could be summarized in the following schema:

8 See Howard, *The Idea of The Canterbury Tales*, p. 239ff.

	TKniT	TMillT	TReeT	TCooT
language	rhetoric	plain talk	dialect	slang ?
ending	detachmanet	largesse	moralism	—
lovers	scruples	lack of scruples	opportunism	prostitution
authorial voice	commentary	parody	no authorial voice	no authorial voice

**The 'Words between the Host and the Miller':
their multiple functions**

The 'Wordes bitwene the Hoost and the Millere', which stand between *TKniT* and *TMillT*, accomplish several important functions which help us to a better understanding of the latter tale. As is well known, the dramatic structure of *TCanT* is provided by the devices of the pilgrimage and the tale-telling game. As is the case here, there is a series of interlinking conversations, prologues, etc., which lend great vividness to the action, and play a unifying role.

In this particular case, after *TKniT* has finished, the 'master of ceremonies' —the Host— turns to the Monk for the following tale, both trying to keep ordered ranks (the Knight, and then the Monk, were the characters of highest social standing in *TCanT*) and to select someone whose story would presumably be suitable to 'quitting' and equalling the Knight's tale in nobility. Yet the Miller, 'that for dronken was al pale' (3120), suddenly breaks into this ordered world of ranks and preferences, and nobody can prevent him from telling his tale⁹. He forecasts a 'noble tale' (3126); but the Reeve implies that it will be 'lewed dronken harlotrye' (3145). What emerges, in fact, is an ironic fusion of elegance and ribaldry, as will be seen below.

Just as the Miller blames the beer for his drunkenness, so Chaucer blames the Miller for his tale. He claims to have responsibilities as a historian and, although he is sorry to repeat a peasant's tale, he must, 'or elles falsen som my matere' (3175). Anyhow, he invites us to turn over the page if we find it too indecent, but at the end Chaucer finishes by establishing his right to tell comic tales for their own sake, wherever and however he pleases:

Blameth nat me if that ye cheese amys.
The Millere is a charl, ye knowe wel this;

⁹ An aspect emphasized by J. Winny (ed.), *The Miller's Prologue and Tale*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1964, p. If.

AN ATYPICAL 'FABLIAU'

So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
(3181-4)

In short, it is possible to see how these apparently unimportant introductory 'Wordes bitwene the Hoost and the Millere' accomplish two very specific functions: on the one hand, they underline the contrast between a 'noble storie' (3111) and a 'cherles tale' (3169) and hint at what is to come; on the other, they introduce one of the comic and dramatic dialogues between the pilgrims - dialogues which help connect the tales, as well as delineate the different personalities of the tellers.

The 'deep' structure of *The Miller's Tale*

The 'deep' structure of the tale (that is, the logic of the events which take place in it together with the syntax of the different behaviour patterns of the characters) reveals itself in a plot which is developed in three interlocking sequences (that is, series of sentences which constitute an independent whole). We can schematize these sequences as follows:

1st Sequence

Nicholas' sexual desire
Means for the action = He convinces Alison
↓
1 They discuss a plan = They beguile
↓
Desire achieved John
↓
They make love

2nd Sequence: foreseeable degradation

Absalon's sexual desire
Means for the action = He courts Alison
↓ 1
Fails Deceived by Alison

3rd Sequence: process of degradation

Absalon's revenge
Means for the action = He gets a hot coulter
↓
Partly fails He coulters Nicholas

4th Sequence: actual degradation

The carpenter's fear	=	Nicholas's yells
Means for the action		↓
↓		John cuts the ropes and falls
Fails		↓
		People think he is mad

As we have seen, the tale has four sequences with four different motivations which are interlinking: each of the four sequences could have been a tale by itself. This is what happens in less complex stories of the *fabliau* type. like, for instance, *The Merchant's Tale*, where we get a single sequence which would correspond roughly to sequence one here. This fact gives us an idea of how complicated the tale is structurally speaking and yet how perfectly interwoven its parts are. As will be seen more clearly below, nothing is left to chance in this story: there are always certain elements that foretell the course of the action, although a final *coup-de-theatre* is always preserved. Following Todorov's models ¹⁰, we can adopt the following symbols:

- X = Nicholas
- Y = Absalon
- Z = John
- A = Desire of making love with Alison
- B = Desire of saving from the deluge
- opt. = Optative Mood
- a = to falsify the action
- b = to provoke a punishment
- c = provoked by a misdeed

X, Y, Z being the protagonists of the narrative and A, B, C the predicates (information about the characters or the narrative). a, b, c represent the verbs which are significant to the action: a modifies the situation. b is to do a misdeed and, finally, c stands for punishment. Following this pattern, in *TMIIT* we have the following synthesis:

$$\begin{aligned}
 & X + (XA) \text{ opt. } X \rightarrow Xa \rightarrow XA \\
 & Y + (YA) \text{ opt. } Y \rightarrow Yb \rightarrow Y-A \\
 & \quad \rightarrow Yc \text{ opt. } Y \rightarrow Yc \\
 & \quad \rightarrow (ZB) \rightarrow (Z-B) + (Zc) + (Zc')
 \end{aligned}$$

That is: Nicholas (X), who desires Alison (A), modifies the situation and thereby satisfies his desire ($Xa \rightarrow XA$). Absalon (Y), for his part, also wants Alison (YA), but he does the wrong thing (Yb): as a consequence, he is

¹⁰ T. Todorov, *Grammaire du Décaméron*, The Hague, Mouton, 1969, *passim*

deprived of her (Y-A). He reacts and seeks vengeance (Yc), but the vengeance falls on Nicholas (Xc). As an unexpected consequence, John (Z), only concerned about the deluge (ZB), suffers all the misdeeds: his expectations are abruptly dashed (Z-B), he is physically wounded (Zc) and, of course, is cuckolded by his wife (Zc').

From this analysis we can deduce two clear facts that Chaucer seemed to have had in mind when writing *TMillT*. First, that the only female character in the story, Alison, is not an active agent but a predicate (A), that is, someone who while doing hardly anything, makes all the characters perform the most ridiculous actions. She is the only personage in the tale who gets complete satisfaction: all the others are either mentally or physically hurt. Second, that her husband, John the carpenter, suffers alone *all* kinds of misfortunes: he is deceived by the student, cuckolded by his wife and literally brought down to earth amid the general laughter. Between these two extreme poles, therefore, which give the story its farcical flavour, move the other characters and events of the tale.

Surface structure. Formal elements

The Miller's Tale as fabliau

The poems belonging to the *fabliau* genre in *TCanT* amount to a quarter of the collection¹¹. They were all in oral circulation —or, at least, belonged to the oral tradition. The stories of the Miller, the Reeve, the Cook, the Shipman, the Friar, the Summoner, and the Merchant are all *fabliaux*, while in other tales like the Pardoner's and the Manciple's a certain amount *offabliau* elements can be discerned.

All these stories have a simple basis: the middle-aged bourgeois husband is cuckolded by some young errand, normally representative of the classless intellectual élite. Both setting and behaviour are low, but the appeal of the tales is at once strong and sophisticated: morality is irrelevant to the *fabliau*, and its hero is the one who knows the most tricks to get the young woman. Cleverness and cunning are all that count in the *fabliau*. Moreover, the genre has its own literary conventions: lust is insatiable amongst young men and, in this sense, makes them behave like animals —even as an 'ideal' of conduct. All this is, obviously enough, particularly suitable for a dynamic and light-hearted kind of narrative.

In fact, what we have with *TMillT* is a *fabliau* «at the stage of the richest elaboration», as Muscatine has written¹², so that the genre is made to carry a

11 For a general discussion of the *fabliau* tales, see J. Speirs, *Chaucer the Maker*, London, Faber & Faber, 1964, p. 126ff.

12 C. Muscatine, «The Miller's Tale», in Burrow (ed.), *Geoffrey Chaucer; A Critical Anthology*, p. 179.

multiplicity of connotations that are normally absent from typical *fabliaux*. We have in *TMillT* a multiple sequentiality of events as opposed to the simple *fabliau* plot (*The Shipman's Tale* is a very characteristic *fabliau* in this sense). Moreover, the conventional imagery and physical action in normal *fabliaux* becomes a carefully-built dramatic whole in *TMillT*. Also, the formal economy of typical *fabliaux* is developed into a detailed account of everything which happens in *TMillT*.

As far as language is concerned, typical *fabliaux* tend to be straightforward: a simple, uncomplicated story is told in a plain, unsophisticated language. As will be seen in the following paragraphs, Chaucer parodies two different registers in *TMillT*: the stylistic code of courtly love, and biblical language. But this should not make us forget the fact that, on the whole, *TMillT* is written in a plain, colloquial and straightforward style which is in itself an expansion and an enrichment of conventional *fabliau* language. As James Winny remarks¹³, we find a host of domestic terms in the tale: 'barmclooth' (3236), 'kimelin' (3548), 'piggesnie' (3268), 'chiminee' (3776), 'viritoot' (3776); together with a number of proverbial remarks: 'sende the wise. and sey no thyng' (3598), 'alway the nye slye / Maketh the ferre levee to be looth' (3392-3), and a great many popular expressions: to 'blowe the bukkes horn' (3387), to care 'nat a bene' (3372), to sit 'ay as stille as stoon' (3472), a night 'derk ... as pich, or as the cole' (3731) which add to the energy and directness of the story.

Along the same lines, Ralph W. V. Elliott notes in the *TMillT* what he calls the 'cherles termes', an expression used by the Reeve in the prologue to his own tale (3917) to define the Miller's words¹⁴. Thus we find outspoken references to 'queyne' (3605) and 'haunchebones' (3279) and to Nicholas having 'thakked' Alison 'about the lendes' (3304), together with colloquial interjections such as Alison's suggestive 'tehee!' (3740) or Absalon's 'gnefstncken 'fy!, allas!' (3739), and a good many oaths like the carpenter's 'for his hooly blood!' (3508) and 'by Seint Thomas' (3425, 3461), Nicholas's 'by Goddes corpus' (3743) or even the blacksmith's 'by Seinte Note' (3771). All this also makes *TMillT* stand halfway between the high-flown rhetoric of *TKniT* and the plain, crude bawdy of many a line in *TReeT*.

The Parody of Courtly Love in The Miller's Tale

Perhaps the most distinctive quality of *TMillT* is the tremendous amount of parody which it carries¹⁵. The instance which first strikes the reader's attention is, as will be seen, the parody of the conventions of courtly love¹⁶.

¹³ Winny, *The Miller's Prologue and Tale*, p. 5f.

¹⁴ R. W. V. Elliott, *Chaucer's English*, London, André Deutsch, 1974, pp. 218f., 233f., 272, 277f.

¹⁵ This is what E. T. Donaldson (*Speaking of Chaucer*, London, Methuen, 1970, p. 28) has rightly called Chaucer's «genius for devaluation».

¹⁶ I am indebted for the following lines to Dr. Donaldson's admirable discussion on the Miller's

A great deal of the comic effect in the tale springs from the fact that the detailed descriptions of the character's physical appearance and social behaviour are systematically punctuated with clichés borrowed from the code of courtly love. They affect both the characterization and the conversations of the protagonists of the poem and, what is more, they never appear in Chaucer's serious works: they were already obsolete or, perhaps, their meaning was debased once they incorporated into the gross context of the Miller's story.

Nicholas, first of all, is always referred to with the epithet *hende* (meaning industrious, crafty, brave, etc.), which by then —14th century— had become so declassé as to be unusable in serious poetry, as the contemporary evidence confirms. Another case of degradation of an adjective is represented by Nicholas's *deerne love* (Alison): while 'deerne' (=secret) used to represent idealized platonic love in the courtly tradition, here it is only a device for getting away with adultery¹⁷.

Absolon is also affected by the same kind of degradation: the references to his *joyness* represent effeminate rather than masculine qualities, and the poet, in fact, uses in his description words normally applied to a pretty girl: for instance, we are told that he had 'eyen greye' (3317)—the colour of eyes normally applied to all medieval heroines. Finally, it is not his body, but his garments, which are described in conventional courtly terms.

The 'wench', Alison, is described as being 'gent and small' (3234), like all courtly heroines, and the description of her garments is sprinkled with courtly terms—like *goore*, 3237—which acquire a whole set of debased implications.

The courtly parody, finally, reaches its climax when Alison and Nicholas finally happen to spend the night together. A generalized convention of courtly romance was the description of a feast, often a metaphor for love, in which the poet talks about the 'myrthe' or 'solas' of the two lovers, quite frequently accompanied by 'melodye'. Here in *TMillT* the parodic degeneration is total. The feast is but the consummation of an adulterous love, and the carpenter, alternating groans and snores while sleeping uncomfortably in his tub, provides the 'melodye':

Ther was the revel and the melodye;
And thus lith Alison and Nicholas,
In bisynesse of myrthe and in solas.

(3652-4)

skill at devaluing courtly romantic diction. See E. T. Donaldson, «Idiom of Popular Poetry in The Miller's Tales», in J. J. Anderson (ed.), *The Canterbury Tales: A Selection of Critical Essays*, London, MacMillan, 1974, pp. 143-69.

¹⁷ The adjective is used three times in the tale: «of deerne love he koude and of solas. (3200), «for deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille» (3278), and «ye rnoste been ful deerne, as in this cas» (3297). The *Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, by J. S. P. Tatlock and A. G. Kennedy, Gloucester, Mass., Peter Srnith. 1963, p. 213 s. v., does not record this adjective anywhere else in Chaucer.

As has been seen by these examples, the irony produced by the use of poetic idiom in *TMillT* is an essential component of the story, and operates in many directions: first, it makes the tale a parody of the popular romance: then, equally important, it reinforces the connection between *TMillT* and *TKniT* —the latter being a truly courtly romance that the Miller intends to 'quit'. All this, as well as contributing to the direct humorous effect of the tale, accomplishes an essential structural function: the ideals of courtly love are utterly subjected to the harsh and realistic criticism of the *fabliau*, the 'tension' between poles being resolved in favour of the latter.

Biblical Parodies in The Miller's Tale

Chaucer's Miller has an interesting characteristic: *TMillT* is appropriate to him in a general way as a *fabliau*, and also because of its specific rustic tone, but the character, as a teller, is transcended by the quality of the telling itself. In other words, the Miller's story merely provides a framework within which the writer can choose directions and multiple connotations in a way subtler and more complex than if he had not operated through the 'eyes' of the Miller. In such a manner, the parodies implied in the tale —especially the Biblical parody that will be considered now— acquire both a living shape and great comic force.

TMillT has been considered as 'the wickedest mixing of the sacred and the obscene'¹⁸. In effect, we have a very strong Biblical parody sustained throughout the tale¹⁹. There is irreverence —more or less unveiled— in situation as much as in action. Yet this was not a novelty: it is the kind of humour which appears in popular miracle plays and, therefore, the most appropriate for a character like the Miller.

Thus the tale acquires an unexpected depth. The Miller says in his 'words to the Host' that he 'wol telle a legende and a lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and his wyf' (3141-3). This apparently innocent statement sets the parodic tone: *legend* is the regular title for the life of a saint in the Middle Ages. More concretely, the audience would immediately identify the saint with the carpenter St Joseph, and his wife with the Virgin Mary: this was the current convention in the miracle plays.

St. Joseph was frequently made an object of burlesque in such plays. There was even a traditional theme, the so-called 'Joseph's Trouble with Mary': St. Joseph is often presented as the caricature of an old man married to a young wife who betrays him —with the Holy Spirit! Likewise, in *TMillT* we find a sustained parody of the Annunciation, in which an angel is sent to Mary: as in the

18 E. M. W. Tillyard, *Poetry Direct and Oblique*, London, Methuen, 1948, p. 92.

19 Biblical parody in *TMillT* has been touched on by Beryl Rowland, «Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl: A New Interpretation of *The Miller's Tale*», in B. Rowland (ed.), *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1974, p. 43ff. My next paragraphs are indebted to this excellent study.

miracle plays. the angelic Nicholas sings to the Virgin (that is, Alison): his songs are. explicitly enough, the *Angelus and Virginem* and *The Kynges Noote*; not the celestial king, but the devil, in this case ²⁰.

Following the same imagery, Alison is described as a weasel (3234). According to medieval *bestiaires*, this animal presented a striking characteristic: it conceived by the ear, and gave birth through the mouth. so that the weasel was often presented as a symbol of chastity —in strong contrast with Alison, therefore. Moreover, it was a popular belief that the Virgin conceived in like manner. The statement that the Word was made flesh was literally interpreted: since the word entered the ear (by means of the Holy Spirit under the appearance of a Dove), it was understood that its incarnation was achieved in the same fashion (this is what explains the otherwise striking acknowledgement «Gaude Virgo. mater Chnsti / Quae *per aurem* concepisti»). Thus we are prepared for the action which follows: as in the mystery plays, the husband absents himself on account of his work, and Nicholas makes 'deeme love' to the wife: a love which is 'secret' not because of divine mysteries. but just because, as was said before, it is adulterous.

The character of Absolon falls utterly within the parody: his name signifies the excesses of the flesh, concupiscence of the eyes, and so on ²¹. But, more important, he is comically associated with the Bridegroom in the *Canticle of Canticles*, and Alison with the Bride, so that we have a broadly organized and irreverent profane allusion to one of the most famous books in the Bible ²². Absolon's plea before Alison's window parallels the Canticles. We get detailed correspondences like, for instance:

'What do ye, *hony-comb*, sweete Alisoun,
My faire *bryd*, my sweete *cynamone*?'
(3698-9)

Compare with:

Thy lips, my *bride*, [are] as dropping *honeycomb*;
honey and milk under thy tongue (...)
Spikenard and saffron. sweet *cane* and *cinnamon*...
(*Canticles*: 4, 11; 14)

The parallel (notice the words underlined) is really undeniable. But there are

²⁰ The status of «The Kynges Noote» still remains obscure: See F. Collins, «The Kinges Noten», *Speculum* 8, 1933, pp. 195-7; G. L. Frost, «The Music of *The Kinges Note*», *ibid.*, pp. 526-8, and, for more recent suggestions, J. M. Gellrich, «Nicholas' 'Kynges Noote' and 'Melodye'», *English Language Notes*, 8, 1971, pp. 249-52, and R. H. Nicholson, «*Sir Orfeo*: a 'Kynges Noote'», *The Review of English Studies*, 142, 1985, pp. 161-79.

²¹ Absolon's very hair (3314) constitutes another strain of biblical parody. See F. Beichner, «Absolon's Hair», *Medieval Studies*, 12, 1950, pp. 222-33.

²² See R. E. Kasre, «Patristic Exegesis: The Defence», in Burrow (ed.), *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Anthology*, pp. 233-39.

also a number of comic variations on the subject. For instance, the Bridegroom's moving love-song:

...rny head is full of dew
and my locks [are] full of the drops of the nights.
(Canticles: 5,2)

degenerates into Absolon's:

'That for youre love I swete ther I go'.
(3702)

In this sense, both portraits of Alison and Absolon are full of biblical reminiscences which quite frequently remind us of the Canticles. About Alison we are told that 'His mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth, / Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth' (3261-2), something which clearly echoes a description of the Bride in the Canticles: «...the odour of thy mouth [is] like apples... / Thy throat [is] like the best wine...» (7: 8-9). As far as Absolon is concerned, when we read his preparations before going to court Alison: «But first he cheweth greyn and lycorys, / To smellen sweete, er he ladde kernbd his heer. / Under his tongue a trewe-love he beer' (3690-2), the description of the Bridegroom in the Canticles again comes to mind: 'His cheeks [are] as beds of aromatic species, / set by the perfumers. / His lips [are] lilies, / dropping choice myrrh' (5: 13-16). Finally, Alison's exclamations 'by Jhesu, Absolon' (3711) and 'for Jhesus love, and for the love of me' (3717), seem to make an irreverent parody of the traditional Christian connection between the Bnde of the Canticles and the Church and, parallely, between the Bridegroom (= Absolon, in Chaucer's mock version) and the figure of Christ.

Yet the sustained parody does not stop here. On the contrary, as the plot develops, it extends its shape by producing a juxtaposition of the contemporary and the biblical. Oxford was noted for the activity of its astrologers, and Nicholas was one of them²³, but the student makes his astrological tale more convincing by acknowledging the biblical precedent of the Deluge:

'Hastow nat herd hou saved was Noe,
Whan that oure Lord hadde warned hym biforn
That al the world with water sholde de lorn?'
'Yis', quod this Carpenter, 'ful yoore ago'.
'Hastou nat herd'. quod Nicholas, 'also
The sorwe of Noe with his falaweshipe,
Er that he myghte gete his wyf to shipe?'
(3534-40)

²³ See J. J. O'Connor, «The Astrological Background of the *Miller's Tale*», *Speculum*, 31, 1956, pp. 120-5.

As Richard Axton points out, the episode of Noah and his wife ('that he myghte gete his wyf to shipe') was already a subject of comedy in the mystery drama²⁴. The incident is based on the Book of Noria, a lost apocrypha: according to this tradition, Noah revealed to his wife that he was building an ark and she disclosed the secret to the devil. Then she enabled the devil to enter the ark because she herself demurred until Noah exclaimed, 'Come in, you devil!' Everything is parodied in the Miller's 'version': John represents Noah (who was said to prefigure Christ), because he gives Nicholas, that is, the devil, the one thing he is seeking: the wife (Alison). But, what is even more ludicrous, Nicholas apes Noah-John, and even imposes on him the condition of chastity. Furthermore, just as Noah's wife, unbeknown to her husband, was plotting with the Devil, so Alison, unbeknown to her husband, is plotting with Nicholas.

Finally, the parody shifts to the other lover —Absolon— as the drama moves to its climax: when he addresses Alison in a parody of love songs from the *Canticle of Canticles* (as was seen above), she threatens him: 'Go forth thy wey, or I wol caste a ston, / And lat me slepe, a twenty devel wey!' (3712-13). The threat of her 'casting a stone' is significant: death by stoning was the traditional punishment for blasphemy —in other words, she seemingly understood Absolon's irreverent parody.

One would not suspect on a first reading of the tale that there is anything significant, apart from the comic force of the action itself, in the last part of the story (Absolon's misfortunes at his loved one's window). Yet the parody does not stop till the very end of the tale: the rite in which Absolon engages was traditionally associated with the worship of the Devil and the Black Mass (the final *osculum in tergo*). As in the previous case, Absolon seems to acknowledge the sacrilege when he exclaims, 'Allas! / My soule bitake I unto Sathanas' (3749-50; my italics). He then resorts to cauterization both of himself: 'who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes / With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes' (3747-48), and of Alison: he intends to purge her by fire (cauterization *in ano* was a common surgical operation and, furthermore, he was a barber-surgeon). According to the Christian tradition, fire symbolized the Holy Ghost, who impregnated the Virgin with inner fire and protected her from concupiscence: thus we get again the previous parallel between the Virgin and Alison.

Absolon now intends to purge Alison by fire with a poker from Gervais, the smith. Incidentally, let us point out that the purification of the Virgin was often done by blacksmiths in the mystery plays, and also that the blacksmith's oath 'by seinte Note' (3771) as a reaction to Absolon's unexpectedly early appearance, is not haphazard²⁵. But Absolon fails again: Nicholas, changing places with Ali-

24 R. Axton. «The Miracle Plays of Noah», in B. Ford (ed.), *Medieval Literature: Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition* (The New Pelican Guide to English Literature, vol. 1), Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1982, pp. 277-89.

25 According to an 11th century interpolation to Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, Alfred before his marriage used to combat his carnal desires by rising at the crack of dawn to visit the churches and

son, 'leet fle a fart, / As greet as it had been a thonder-dent, / That with the strook he was almoost yblent' (3806-8). The Holy Ghost could be symbolized by fire or breath, as we know: according to the same popular tradition, the Devil's base equivalent was the fart. With Nicholas's gesture, the 'blasphemy' is again acknowledged, and then everything dissolves in the general comedy: Nicholas's desperate cry for water reactivates a previous parody —the Deluge— and the tale ends in total laughter and humour²⁶. Through the sustained mood that has been referred to, the *fabliau* world of trivial lust is set against a transcendental background of blasphemous parody.

The Development of the Plot: Principal Semantic Values

TMillT is probably the most elaborate of Chaucer's comic stories²⁷. Everything is taken into account: Nicholas's interest in astrology, the carpenter's complacency, details like the height of the window in the bedroom, etc. The portraits of the characters are particularly rich, as has been seen, and the tale's morality is a crude one: jealous old husbands deserve everything they get. This morality is of a piece with the Miller's suggestion in the Prologue that husbands ought not to worry too much about their wives. All this background is sketched in a few strokes: the blacksmith at his forge, the carpenter's commissions from the local abbey, the references to miracle plays —in which Absolon used to play the part of Herod—, etc., everything gives an illusion of life going on continuously behind the story. Likewise, there is also a liking for plotting: the quadrangle of lovers and the two subplots converge suddenly, so that all the aspects and moods of the narrative are strongly interwoven at the finish.

The telling itself is everything in the story: its two opposite directions, the realism of the details of town life and characters on the one hand, and the fantasy of the narrative outline itself, become harmonized by Chaucer's style²⁸. The ten *fabliau* analogues of the tale found in English, Flemish, German and Italian, are normally the love-triangle and nothing else: they lack the humour, parody, force and subplots of Chaucer's version²⁹.

Perhaps the most striking quality of the tale is its overwhelming concreteness: every detail is precisely realized and, what is more important, a close

relics of the saints. St Neot was a 9th century Saxon saint whom Alfred is said to have visited and held in great esteem. Hence the ironic connections between St Neot / the blacksmith and Absolon / King Alfred. See further A. Macdonald, «Absolon and St Neot», *Neophilologus*, 48, 1964, pp. 235-7.

26 Elliott (*Chaucer's English*, p. 272) sees an ironic echo of John 19: 34 in Nicholas's last cry of agony. If this is so, the parody is actually carried on almost to the end of the tale.

27 See T. W. Craik, *The Comic Tales of Chaucer*, London, Methuen, 1967, p. 1ff.

28 This is an aspect rightly emphasized by N. Coghill, *The Poet Chaucer*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 40.

29 *Thefabliau* which bears a closer resemblance to *TMillT* is a 14th century story written in Flemish which deals with a heroine, the courtesan Heile of Bersele, and her three lovers: a miller, a priest, and a smith. See further S. Thompson, «The Miller's Tale», in W. F. Bray and G. Dempster (eds.), *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, London, Methuen, 1958, pp. 106-23.

reading of the poem makes us aware of the fact that *all* details in this carefully-built story are relevant. They are not merely there for the sake of the narrative itself: they all have *semantic values*, either to forestall something which is coming later; for instance, the surprising fact that Absolon was «somdeel squaymous of fartying» (3337), whose true significance we only apprehend at the end of the tale, or for the satire, parody or comic effect.

All circumstances are carefully accounted for³⁰: we are given the name of the town and of the neighbouring town, the names of all the characters (Nicholas, Absolon, Alison, John, Robin, Gille, Gerveys), a detailed picture of the house, etc. Likewise, we are afforded a scrupulous account of the days of the week and the hours of the crucial day. There is always the greatest specification in the description: John tells his 'knave' to knock at the door 'with a stoon' (3432), then takes Nicholas 'by the sholdres' (3475), etc. Moreover, all these details are given specific antecedents or consequences: an extraordinary solidity is the consequence of Chaucer's artistic intricacies.

At the beginning, Chaucer disposes of the carpenter in just three lines (in fact, the tale is not a satire on this concrete professional class, but rather on a jealous and superstitious old husband), as if suggesting that the interest of the story will lie elsewhere: Nicholas, 'a poure scoler, / Who hadde lerned art' (3190-1) will be the true protagonist. He is a debased version of the idealized Clerk of Oxford in *TGenP*³¹, and has an air of frivolous yet attractive gaiety.

Through the dynamic and, as has been seen, connotative description of Alison, one can notice that she is evidently illmatched with her husband—but not with Nicholas. Immediately after, the reference to the carpenter's usual place of work, 'Oseneve' (3274) adds to our feeling of familiarity with the characters' daily life. Alison, she says, fears for her life, and Nicholas, boastfully, scorns the danger: 'A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle, / But if he koude a carpenter bigyle' (3299-300), the scene ending with the scholar in his glory, making 'melodey' (3306).

Next we are presented Absolon: he is the counterpart of the Squire in *TGenP*, a 'lovere and a lusty bachelor' (80)—but yet commonplace and even effeminate³². As has been mentioned above, Absolon's description ends with an unexpected reference which helps foreshadow his later disgrace on the score. In preparing for future developments, Chaucer improves the present moment also: Absolon's first serenade before Alison's window, when she is with her husband,

30 The acuteness of the details of everyday life in the tale is given due emphasis by Muscatine, «*The Miller's Tale*», p. 179ff.

31 Compare the description of the Clerk of Oxford in *TGenP* (285-308) and the description of Nicholas in *TMillT* (3190-220). This is of course a new instance of the general 'degenerative' movement referred to above: Nicholas apes the Clerk of Oxford in the same way as the Miller parodies the Knight's story, etc.

32 Another instance of the degenerative movement I have been referring to (see previous footnote). Compare the description of the Squire in *TGenP* (80-100) and the description of Absolon in *TMillT* (3312-38).

accomplishes an important function: apart from presenting us with a kind of 'rehearsal' of what is to come, the scene allows the husband to ignore the real cause for jealousy, which is not Absolon but Nicholas —it is a scene full of dramatic irony.

Chaucer's technique of gradually and almost imperceptibly releasing information helps to give substance to settings and to characters, so that they appear to act spontaneously —though, in fact, everything is 'preconditioned' in the story, and nothing left to chance. The author does not let us into the lovers' plot: although everything is foreshadowed, it still preserves some elements of surprise when it comes.

A scene of action follows when the servant 'cried and knocked' (3435) at Nicholas's door: and, just as he boasted that a clerk could easily deceive a carpenter, the latter now claims that he always foresaw the lodger's downfall, making a virtue out of his own ignorance. But when he is told by Nicholas about the deluge, the carpenter instantly turns to his wife: the author does not mean thereby to arouse our sympathy for John's feelings, but rather to keep us in mind of Nicholas's intentions towards Alison.

After the previously quoted 'bisynesse of myrthe and of solas' between the two lovers and Absolon's second serenade at Alison's window, the dramatic situation is speedily resolved and, though we know that the parish clerk will be mocked, we are almost as completely taken by surprise as he is: one could not foresee Alison's trick, nor Nicholas's still coarser deed. Nicholas is a victim of his own vanity, and there follows the well-known sequel:

'Help! water! water! help, for Goddes herte!
 This carpenter out of his slomber sterte,
 And herde oon crie 'Water' as he were wood,
 And thoughte, 'Allas, now comth Nowelis flood!'
 (3815-18)

Then the final collapse comes about: the carpenter and the Food, both forgotten amid the dynamic story, are brought back and mixed up with the main action. The result is chaos. Lastly, we are invited to join in the final chorus of laughter, together with the pilgrims themselves:

This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!
 (3854)

* * *

We believe that the above has sufficiently demonstrated our case. On the one hand, both the form and the content of the story rely on the typical conventions of the 'fabliaux', and in that respect *TMillT* is one of them. On the other hand, however, genre is merely a point of departure in this case. First, the different devices which link the story with the rest of the work lend it a number of specific

features. Second, the 'deep' structure of the tale is particularly complex: up to four potential 'fabliaux' are to be found 'within' it. And third, the formal aspects of the narrative are equally rich: a variety of lexical registers, interconnected parodic systems, semantic complexity, etc. In short, *T Millt* can justifiably be called an *atypical 'fabliau'*.