

The Miller's Prologue and Tale

THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE

The Words between the Host and the Miller
Now when the knight had thus his story told,
In all the rout there was nor young nor old
But said it was a noble story, well
Worthy to be kept in mind to tell;
And specially the gentle folk, each one.
Our host, he laughed and swore, "So may I run,
But this goes well; unbuckled is the mail;
Let's see now who can tell another tale:
For certainly the game is well begun.
Now shall you tell, sir monk, if't can be done,
Something with which to pay for the knight's tale."
The miller, who with drinking was all pale,
So that unsteadily on his horse he sat,
He would not take off either hood or hat,
Nor wait for any man, in courtesy,
But all in Pilate's voice began to cry,
And by the Arms and Blood and Bones he swore,
"I have a noble story in my store,
With which I will requite the good knight's tale."
Our host saw, then, that he was drunk with ale,
And said to him: "Wait, Robin, my dear brother,
Some better man shall tell us first another:
Submit and let us work on profitably."
"Now by God's soul," cried he, "that will not I!
For I will speak, or else I'll go my way."
Our host replied: "Tell on, then, till doomsday!
You are a fool, your wit is overcome."
"Now hear me," said the miller, "all and some!
But first I make a protestation round
That I'm quite drunk, I know it by my sound:
And therefore, if I slander or mis-say,
Blame it on ale of Southwark, so I pray;
For I will tell a legend and a life
Both of a carpenter and of his wife,
And how a scholar set the good wright's cap."
The reeve replied and said: "Oh, shut your trap,
Let be your ignorant drunken ribaldry!
It is a sin, and further, great folly

To asperse any man, or him defame,
And, too, to bring upon a man's wife shame.
There are enough of other things to say."
This drunken miller spoke on in his way,
And said: "Oh, but my dear brother Oswald,
The man who has no wife is no cuckold.
But I say not, thereby, that you are one:
Many good wives there are, as women run,
And ever a thousand good to one that's bad,
As well you know yourself, unless you're mad.
Why are you angry with my story's cue?
I have a wife, begad, as well as you,
Yet I'd not, for the oxen of my plow,
Take on my shoulders more than is enow,
By judging of myself that I am one;
I will believe full well that I am none.
A husband must not be inquisitive
Of God, nor of his wife, while she's alive.
So long as he may find God's plenty there,
For all the rest he need not greatly care."
What should I say, except this miller rare
He would forgo his talk for no man there,
But told his churlish tale in his own way:
I think I'll here re-tell it, if I may.
And therefore, every gentle soul, I pray
That for God's love you'll hold not what I say
Evilly meant, but that I must rehearse,
All of their tales, the better and the worse,
Or else prove false to some of my design.
Therefore, who likes not this, let him, in fine,
Turn over page and choose another tale:
For he shall find enough, both great and small,
Of stories touching on gentility,
And holiness, and on morality;
And blame not me if you do choose amiss.
The miller was a churl, you well know this;
So was the reeve, and many another more,
And ribaldry they told from plenteous store.
Be then advised, and hold me free from blame;
Men should not be too serious at a game.

HERE ENDS THE PROLOGUE

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THE MILLER'S TALE

Once on a time was dwelling in Oxford
A wealthy lout who took in guests to board,
And of his craft he was a carpenter.
A poor scholar was lodging with him there,
Who'd learned the arts, but all his phantasy
Was turned to study of astrology;
And knew a certain set of theorems
And could find out by various stratagems,
If men but asked of him in certain hours
When they should have a drought or else have showers,
Or if men asked of him what should befall
To anything— I cannot reckon them all.
This clerk was called the clever Nicholas;
Of secret loves he knew and their solace;
And he kept counsel, too, for he was sly
And meek as any maiden passing by.
He had a chamber in that hostelry,
And lived alone there, without company,
All garnished with sweet herbs of good repute
And he himself sweet-smelling as the root
Of licorice, valerian, or setwall.
His Almagest, and books both great and small,
His astrolabe, belonging to his art,
His algorism stones— all laid apart
On shelves that ranged beside his lone bed's head;
His press was covered with a cloth of red.
And over all there lay a psaltery
Whereon he made an evening's melody,
Playing so sweetly that the chamber rang;
And Angelus ad virginem he sang;
And after that he warbled the King's Note:
Often in good voice was his merry throat.
And thus this gentle clerk his leisure spends
Supported by some income and his friends.
This carpenter had lately wed a wife
Whom lie loved better than he loved his life;
And she was come to eighteen years of age.
Jealous he was and held her close in cage.
For she was wild and young, and he was old,
And deemed himself as like to be cuckold.
He knew not Cato, for his lore was rude:
That vulgar man should wed similitude.
A man should wed according to estate,
For youth and age are often in debate.
But now, since he had fallen in the snare,
He must endure, like other folk, his care.
Fair was this youthful wife, and therewithal
As weasel's was her body slim and small.
A girdle wore she, barred and striped, of silk.
An apron, too, as white as morning milk
About her loins, and full of many a gore;

White was her smock, embroidered all before
And even behind, her collar round about,
Of coal-black silk, on both sides, in and out;
The strings of the white cap upon her head
Were, like her collar, black silk worked with thread,
Her fillet was of wide silk worn full high:
And certainly she had a lickerish eye.
She'd thinned out carefully her eyebrows two,
And they were arched and black as any sloe.
She was a far more pleasant thing to see
Than is the newly budded young pear-tree;
And softer than the wool is on a wether.
Down from her girdle hung a purse of leather,
Tasselled with silk, with latten beading sown.
In all this world, searching it up and down,
So gay a little doll, I well believe,
Or such a wench, there's no man can conceive.
Far brighter was the brilliance of her hue
Than in the Tower the gold coins minted new.
And songs came shrilling from her pretty head
As from a swallow's sitting on a shed.
Therewith she'd dance too, and could play and sham
Like any kid or calf about its dam.
Her mouth was sweet as bragget or as mead
Or hoard of apples laid in hay or weed.
Skittish she was as is a pretty colt,
Tall as a staff and straight as cross-bow bolt.
A brooch she wore upon her collar low,
As broad as boss of buckler did it show;
Her shoes laced up to where a girl's legs thicken.
She was a primrose, and a tender chicken
For any lord to lay upon his bed,
Or yet for any good yeoman to wed.
Now, sir, and then, sir, go befell the case,
That on a day this clever Nicholas
Fell in with this young wife to toy and play,
The while her husband was down Osney way,
Clerks being as crafty as the best of us;
And unperceived he caught her by the puss,
Saying: "Indeed, unless I have my will,
For secret love of you, sweetheart, I'll spill."
And held her hard about the hips, and how!
And said: "O darling, love me, love me now,
Or I shall die, and pray you God may save!"
And she leaped as a colt does in the trave,
And with her head she twisted fast away,
And said: "I will not kiss you, by my fay!
Why, let go," cried she, "let go, Nicholas!
Or I will call for help and cry 'alas!'
Do take your hands away, for courtesy!"
This Nicholas for mercy then did cry,

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And spoke so well, importuned her so fast
That she her love did grant him at the last,
And swore her oath, by Saint Thomas of Kent,
That she would be at his command, content,
As soon as opportunity she could spy.
"My husband is so full of jealousy,
Unless you will await me secretly,
I know I'm just as good as dead," said she.
"You must keep all quite hidden in this case."
"Nay, thereof worry not," said Nicholas,
"A clerk has lazily employed his while
If he cannot a carpenter beguile."
And thus they were agreed, and then they swore
To wait a while, as I have said before.
When Nicholas had done thus every whit
And patted her about the loins a bit,
He kissed her sweetly, took his psaltery,
And played it fast and made a melody.
Then fell it thus, that to the parish kirk,
The Lord Christ Jesus' own works for to work,
This good wife went, upon a holy day;
Her forehead shone as bright as does the May,
So well she'd washed it when she left off work.
Now there was of that church a parish clerk
Whose name was (as folk called him) Absalom.
Curled was his hair, shining like gold, and from
His head spread fanwise in a thick bright mop;
'Twas parted straight and even on the top;
His cheek was red, his eyes grey as a goose;
With Saint Paul's windows cut upon his shoes,
He stood in red hose fitting famously.
And he was clothed full well and properly
All in a coat of blue, in which were let
Holes for the lacings, which were fairly set.
And over all he wore a fine surplice
As white as ever hawthorn spray, and nice.
A merry lad he was, so God me save,
And well could he let blood, cut hair, and shave,
And draw a deed or quitclaim, as might chance.
In twenty manners could he trip and dance,
After the school that reigned in Oxford, though,
And with his two legs swinging to and fro;
And he could play upon a violin;
Thereto he sang in treble voice and thin;
And as well could he play on his guitar.
In all the town no inn was, and no bar,
That he'd not visited to make good cheer,
Especially were lively barmaids there.
But, truth to tell, he was a bit squeamish
Of farting and of language haughtyish.
This Absalom, who was so light and gay,
Went with a censer on the holy day,
Censing the wives like an enthusiast;

And on them many a loving look he cast,
Especially on this carpenter's goodwife.
To look at her he thought a merry life,
She was so pretty, sweet, and lickerous.
I dare well say, if she had been a mouse
And he a cat, he would have mauled her some.
This parish clerk, this lively Absalom
Had in his heart, now, such a love-longing
That from no wife took he an offering;
For courtesy, he said, he would take none.
The moon, when it was night, full brightly shone,
And his guitar did Absalom then take,
For in love-watching he'd intent to wake.
And forth he went, jolly and amorous,
Until he came unto the carpenter's house
A little after cocks began to crow;
And took his stand beneath a shot-window
That was let into the good wood-wright's wall.
He sang then, in his pleasant voice and small,
"Oh now, dear lady, if your will it be,
I pray that you will have some ruth on me,"
The words in harmony with his string-plucking.
This carpenter awoke and heard him sing,
And called unto his wife and said, in sum:
"What, Alison! Do you hear Absalom,
Who plays and sings beneath our bedroom wall?"
And she said to her husband, therewithal:
"Yes, God knows, John, I bear it, truth to tell."
So this went on; what is there better than well?
From day to day this pretty Absalom
So wooed her he was woebegone therefrom.
He lay awake all night and all the day;
He combed his spreading hair and dressed him gay;
By go-betweens and agents, too, wooed he,
And swore her loyal page he'd ever be.
He sang as tremulously as nightingale;
He sent her sweetened wine and well-spiced ale
And waffles piping hot out of the fire,
And, she being town-bred, mead for her desire.
For some are won by means of money spent,
And some by tricks, and some by long descent.
Once, to display his versatility,
He acted Herod on a scaffold high.
But what availed it him in any case?
She was enamoured so of Nicholas
That Absalom might go and blow his horn;
He got naught for his labour but her scorn.
And thus she made of Absalom her ape,
And all his earnestness she made a jape.
For truth is in this proverb, and no lie,
Men say well thus: It's always he that's nigh
That makes the absent lover seem a sloth.
For now, though Absalom be wildly wroth,

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Because he is so far out of her sight,
This handy Nicholas stands in his light.
Now bear you well, you clever Nicholas!
For Absalom may wail and sing "Alas!"
And so it chanced that on a Saturday
This carpenter departed to Osney;
And clever Nicholas and Alison
Were well agreed to this effect: anon
This Nicholas should put in play a wile
The simple, jealous husband to beguile;
And if it chanced the game should go a-right,
She was to sleep within his arms all night,
For this was his desire, and hers also.
Presently then, and without more ado,
This Nicholas, no longer did he tarry,
But softly to his chamber did he carry
Both food and drink to last at least a day,
Saying that to her husband she should say—
If he should come to ask for Nicholas—
Why, she should say she knew not where he was,
For all day she'd not seen him, far or nigh;
She thought he must have got some malady,
Because in vain her maid would knock and call;
He'd answer not, whatever might befall.
And so it was that all that Saturday
This Nicholas quietly in chamber lay,
And ate and slept, or did what pleased him best,
Till Sunday when the sun had gone to rest.
This simple man with wonder heard the tale,
And marvelled what their Nicholas might ail,
And said: "I am afraid, by Saint Thomas,
That everything's not well with Nicholas.
God send he be not dead so suddenly!
This world is most unstable, certainly;
I saw, today, the corpse being borne to kirk
Of one who, but last Monday, was at work.
Go up," said he unto his boy anon,
"Call at his door, or knock there with a stone,
Learn how it is and boldly come tell me."
The servant went up, then, right sturdily,
And at the chamber door, the while he stood,
He cried and knocked as any madman would—
"What! How! What do you, Master Nicholay?
How can you sleep through all the livelong day?"
But all for naught, he never heard a word;
A hole he found, low down upon a board,
Through which the house cat had been wont to creep;
And to that hole he stooped, and through did peep,
And finally he ranged him in his sight.
This Nicholas sat gaping there, upright,
As if he'd looked too long at the new moon.
Downstairs he went and told his master soon
In what array he'd found this self-same man.

This carpenter to cross himself began,
And said: "Now help us, holy Frideswide!
Little a man can know what shall betide.
This man is fallen, with his astrology,
Into some madness or some agony;
I always feared that somehow this would be!
Men should not meddle in God's privy.
Aye, blessed always be the ignorant man,
Whose creed is, all he ever has to scan!
So fared another clerk with astrology;
He walked into the meadows for to pry
Into the stars, to learn what should befall
He saw not that. But yet, by Saint Thomas,
I'm sorry for this clever Nicholas.
He shall be scolded for his studying,
If not too late, by Jesus, Heaven's King!
"Get me a staff, that I may pry before,
The while you, Robin, heave against the door.
We'll take him from this studying, I guess."
And on the chamber door, then, he did press.
His servant was a stout lad, if a dunce,
And by the hasp he heaved it up at once;
Upon the floor that portal fell anon.
This Nicholas sat there as still as stone,
Gazing, with gaping mouth, straight up in air.
This carpenter thought he was in despair,
And took him by the shoulders, mightily,
And shook him hard, and cried out, vehemently:
"What! Nicholay! Why how now! Come, look down!
Awake, and think on Jesus' death and crown!
I cross you from all elves and magic wights!"
And then the night-spell said he out, by rights,
At the four corners of the house about,
And at the threshold of the door, without:—
"O Jesus Christ and good Saint Benedict,
Protect this house from all that may afflict,
For the night hag the white Paternoster!—
Where hast thou gone, Saint Peter's sister?"
And at the last this clever Nicholas
Began to sigh full sore, and said: "Alas!
Shall all the world be lost so soon again?"
This carpenter replied: "What say you, then?
What! Think on God, as we do, men that swink."
This Nicholas replied: "Go fetch me drink;
And afterward I'll tell you privately
A certain thing concerning you and me;
I'll tell it to no other man or men."
This carpenter went down and came again,
And brought of potent ale a brimming quart;
And when each one of them had drunk his part,
Nicholas shut the door fast, and with that
He drew a seat and near the carpenter sat.
He said: "Now, John, my good host, lief and dear,

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You must upon your true faith swear, right here,
That to no man will you this word betray;
For it is Christ's own word that I will say,
And if you tell a man, you're ruined quite;
This punishment shall come to you, of right,
That if you're traitor you'll go mad— and should!"
"Nay, Christ forbid it, for His holy blood!"
Said then this simple man: "I am no blab,
Nor, though I say it, am I fond of gab.
Say what you will, I never will it tell
To child or wife, by Him that harried Hell!"
"Now, John," said Nicholas, "I will not lie;
But I've found out, from my astrology,
As I have looked upon the moon so bright,
That now, come Monday next, at nine of night,
Shall fall a rain so wildly mad as would
Have been, by half, greater than Noah's flood.
This world," he said, "in less time than an hour,
Shall all be drowned, so terrible is this shower;
Thus shall all mankind drown and lose all life."
This carpenter replied: "Alas, my wife!
And shall she drown? Alas, my Alison!"
For grief of this he almost fell. Anon
He said: "Is there no remedy in this case?"
"Why yes, good luck," said clever Nicholas,
"If you will work by counsel of the wise;
You must not act on what your wits advise.
For so says Solomon, and it's all true,
'Work by advice and thou shalt never rue.'
And if you'll act as counselled and not fail,
I undertake, without a mast or sail,
To save us all, aye you and her and me.
Haven't you heard of, Noah, how saved was he,
Because Our Lord had warned him how to keep
Out of the flood that covered earth so deep?"
"Yes," said this carpenter, "long years ago."
"Have you not heard," asked Nicholas, "also
The sorrows of Noah and his fellowship
In getting his wife to go aboard the ship?
He would have rather, I dare undertake,
At that time, and for all the weather black,
That she had one ship for herself alone.
Therefore, do you know what would best be done?
This thing needs haste, and of a hasty thing
Men must not preach nor do long tarrying.
"Presently go, and fetch here to this inn
A kneading-tub, or brewing vat, and win
One each for us, but see that they are large,
Wherein we may swim out as in a barge,
And have therein sufficient food and drink
For one day only; that's enough, I think.
The water will dry up and flow away
About the prime of the succeeding day.

But Robin must not know of this, your knave,
And even Jill, your maid, I may not save;
Ask me not why, for though you do ask me,
I will not tell you of God's privity.
Suffice you, then, unless your wits are mad,
To have as great a grace as Noah had.
Your wife I shall not lose, there is no doubt,
Go, now, your way, and speedily about,
But when you have, for you and her and me,
Procured these kneading-tubs, or beer-vats, three,
Then you shall hang them near the roof-tree high,
That no man our purveyance may espy.
And when you thus have done, as I have said,
And have put in our drink and meat and bread,
Also an axe to cut the ropes in two
When the flood comes, that we may float and go,
And cut a hole, high up, upon the gable,
Upon the garden side, over the stable,
That we may freely pass forth on our way
When the great rain and flood are gone that day—
Then shall you float as merrily, I'll stake,
As does the white duck after the white drake.
Then I will call, 'Ho, Alison! Ho, John!
Be cheery, for the flood will pass anon.'
And you will say, 'Hail. Master Nicholay!
Good morrow, I see you well, for it is day!'
And then shall we be barons all our life
Of all the world, like Noah and his wife.
"But of one thing I warn you now, outright.
Be well advised, that on that very night
When we have reached our ships and got aboard,
Not one of us must speak or whisper word,
Nor call, nor cry, but sit in silent prayer;
For this is God's own bidding, hence— don't dare!
"Your wife and you must hang apart, that in
The night shall come no chance for you to sin
Either in looking or in carnal deed.
These orders I have told you, go, God speed!
Tomorrow night, when all men are asleep,
Into our kneading-tubs will we three creep
And sit there, still, awaiting God's high grace.
Go, now, your way, I have no longer space
Of time to make a longer sermoning.
Men say thus: 'Send the wise and say no thing.'
You are so wise it needs not that I teach;
Go, save our lives, and that I do beseech."
This silly carpenter went on his way.
Often he cried "Alas!" and "Welaway!"
And to his wife he told all, privately;
But she was better taught thereof than he
How all this rigmarole was to apply.
Nevertheless she acted as she'd die,
And said: "Alas! Go on your way anon,

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Help us escape, or we are lost, each one;
I am your true and lawfully wedded wife;
Go, my dear spouse, and help to save our life."
Lo, what a great thing is affection found!
Men die of imagination, I'll be bound,
So deep an imprint may the spirit take.
This hapless carpenter began to quake;
He thought now, verily, that he could see
Old Noah's flood come wallowing like the sea
To drown his Alison, his honey dear.
He wept, he wailed, he made but sorry cheer,
He sighed and made full many a sob and sigh.
He went and got himself a kneading-trough
And, after that, two tubs he somewhere found
And to his dwelling privately sent round,
And hung them near the roof, all secretly.
With his own hand, then, made he ladders three,
To climb up by the rungs thereof, it seems,
And reach the tubs left hanging to the beams;
And those he victualled, tubs and kneading-trough,
With bread and cheese and good jugged ale, enough
To satisfy the needs of one full day.
But ere he'd put all this in such array,
He sent his servants, boy and maid, right down
Upon some errand into London town.
And on the Monday, when it came on night,
He shut his door, without a candle-light,
And ordered everything as it should be.
And shortly after up they climbed, all three;
They sat while one might plow a furlong-way.
"Now, by Our Father, hush!" said Nicholay,
And "Hush!" said John, and "Hush!" said Alison.
This carpenter, his loud devotions done,
Sat silent, saying mentally a prayer,
And waiting for the rain, to hear it there.
The deathlike sleep of utter weariness
Fell on this wood-wright even. (as I guess)
About the curfew time, or little more;
For travail of his spirit he groaned sore,
And soon he snored, for badly his head lay.
Down by the ladder crept this Nicholay,
And Alison, right softly down she sped.
Without more words they went and got in bed
Even where the carpenter was wont to lie.
There was the revel and the melody!
And thus lie Alison and Nicholas,
In joy that goes by many an alias,
Until the bells for lauds began to ring
And friars to the chancel went to sing.
This parish clerk, this amorous Absalom,
Whom love has made so woebegone and dumb,
Upon the Monday was down Osney way,
With company, to find some sport and play;

And there he chanced to ask a cloisterer,
Privately, after John the carpenter.
This monk drew him apart, out of the kirk,
And said: "I have not seen him here at work.
Since Saturday; I think well that he went
For timber, that the abbot has him sent;
For he is wont for timber thus to go,
Remaining at the grange a day or so;
Or else he's surely at his house today;
But which it is I cannot truly say."
This Absalom right happy was and light,
And thought: "Now is the time to wake all night;
For certainly I saw him not stirring
About his door since day began to spring.
So may I thrive, as I shall, at cock's crow,
Knock cautiously upon that window low
Which is so placed upon his bedroom wall.
To Alison then will I tell of all
My love-longing, and thus I shall not miss
That at the least I'll have her lips to kiss.
Some sort of comfort shall I have, I say,
My mouth's been itching all this livelong day;
That is a sign of kissing at the least.
All night I dreamed, too, I was at a feast.
Therefore I'll go and sleep two hours away
And all this night then will I wake and play."
And so when time of first cock-crow was come,
Up rose this merry lover, Absalom,
And dressed him gay and all at point-device,
But first he chewed some licorice and spice
So he'd smell sweet, ere he had combed his hair.
Under his tongue some bits of true-love rare,
For thereby thought he to be more gracious.
He went, then, to the carpenter's dark house.
And silent stood beneath the shot-window;
Unto his breast it reached, it was so low;
And he coughed softly, in a low half tone:
"What do you, honeycomb, sweet Alison?
My cinnamon, my fair bird, my sweetie,
Awake, O darling mine, and speak to me!
It's little thought you give me and my woe,
Who for your love do sweat where'er I go.
Yet it's no wonder that I faint and sweat;
I long as does the lamb for mother's teat.
Truly, sweetheart, I have such love-longing
That like a turtle-dove's my true yearning;
And I can eat no more than can a maid."
"Go from the window, Jack-a-napes," she said,
"For, s'help me God, it is not 'come kiss me.'
I love another, or to blame I'd be,
Better than you, by Jesus, Absalom!
Go on your way, or I'll stone you therefrom,
And let me sleep, the fiends take you away!"

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"Alas," quoth Absalom, "and welaway!
That true love ever was so ill beset!
But kiss me, since you'll do no more, my pet,
For Jesus' love and for the love of me."
"And will you go, then, on your way?" asked she,
"Yes truly, darling," said this Absalom.
"Then make you ready," said she, "and I'll come!"
And unto Nicholas said she, low and still:
"Be silent now, and you shall laugh your fill."
This Absalom plumped down upon his knees,
And said: "I am a lord in all degrees;
For after this there may be better still
Darling, my sweetest bird, I wait your will."
The window she unbarred, and that in haste.
"Have done," said she, "come on, and do it fast,
Before we're seen by any neighbour's eye."
This Absalom did wipe his mouth all dry;
Dark was the night as pitch, aye dark as coal,
And through the window she put out her hole.
And Absalom no better felt nor worse,
But with his mouth he kissed her naked arse
Right greedily, before he knew of this.
Aback he leapt— it seemed somehow amiss,
For well he knew a woman has no beard;
He'd felt a thing all rough and longish haired,
And said, "Oh fie, alas! What did I do?"
"Teehee!" she laughed, and clapped the, window to;
And Absalom went forth a sorry pace.
"A beard! A beard!" cried clever Nicholas,
"Now by God's corpus, this goes fair and well!"
This hapless Absalom, he heard that yell,
And on his lip, for anger, he did bite;
And to himself he said, "I will requite!"
Who vigorously rubbed and scrubbed his lips
With dust, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with chips,
But Absalom, and often cried "Alas!
My soul I give now unto Sathanas,
For rather far than own this town," said he,
"For this despite, it's well revenged I'd be.
Alas," said he, "from her I never blenched!"
His hot love was grown cold, aye and all quenched;
For, from the moment that he'd kissed her arse,
For paramours he didn't care a curse,
For he was healed of all his malady;
Indeed all paramours he did defy,
And wept as does a child that has been beat.
With silent step he went across the street
Unto a smith whom men called Dan Jarvis,
Who in his smithy forged plow parts, that is
He sharpened shares and coulter's busily.
This Absalom he knocked all easily,
And said: "Unbar here, Jarvis, for I come."
"What! Who are you?" "It's I, it's Absalom."

"What! Absalom! For Jesus Christ's sweet tree,
Why are you up so early? Ben'cite!
What ails you now, man? Some gay girl, God knows,
Has brought you on the jump to my bellows;
By Saint Neot, you know well what I mean."
This Absalom cared not a single bean
For all this play, nor one word back he gave;
He'd more tow on his distaff, had this knave,
Than Jarvis knew, and said he: "Friend so dear,
This red-hot coulter in the fireplace here,
Lend it to me, I have a need for it,
And I'll return it after just a bit."
Jarvis replied: "Certainly, were it gold
Or a purse filled with yellow coins untold,
Yet should you have it, as I am true smith;
But eh, Christ's foe! What will you do therewith?"
"Let that," said Absalom, "be as it may;
I'll tell you all tomorrow, when it's day"—
And caught the coulter then by the cold steel
And softly from the smithy door did steal
And went again up to the wood-wright's wall.
He coughed at first, and then he knocked withal
Upon the window, as before, with care.
This Alison replied: "Now who is there?
And who knocks so? I'll warrant it's a thief."
"Why no," quoth he, "God knows, my sweet roseleaf,
I am your Absalom, my own darling!
Of gold," quoth he, "I have brought you a ring;
My mother gave it me, as I'll be saved;
Fine gold it is, and it is well engraved;
This will I give you for another kiss."
This Nicholas had risen for a piss,
And thought that it would carry on the jape
To have his arse kissed by this jack-a-nape.
And so he opened window hastily,
And put his arse out thereat, quietly,
Over the buttocks, showing the whole bum;
And thereto said this clerk, this Absalom,
"O speak, sweet bird, I know not where thou art."
This Nicholas just then let fly a fart
As loud as it had been a thunder-clap,
And well-nigh blinded Absalom, poor chap;
But he was ready with his iron hot
And Nicholas right in the arse he got.
Off went the skin a hand's-breadth broad, about,
The coulter burned his bottom so, throughout,
That for the pain he thought that he should die.
And like one mad he started in to cry,
"Help! Water! Water! For God's dear heart!"
This carpenter out of his sleep did start,
Hearing that "Water!" cried as madman would,
And thought, "Alas, now comes down Noel's flood!"
He struggled up without another word

The Miller's Prologue and Tale

And with his axe he cut in two the cord,
And down went all; he did not stop to trade
In bread or ale till he'd the journey made,
And there upon the floor he swooning lay.
Up started Alison and Nicholay
And shouted "Help!" and "Hello!" down the street.
The neighbours, great and small, with hastening feet
Swarmed in the house to stare upon this man,
Who lay yet swooning, and all pale and wan;
For in the falling he had smashed his arm.
He had to suffer, too, another harm,
For when he spoke he was at once borne down
By clever Nicholas and Alison.
For they told everyone that he was odd;
He was so much afraid of "Noel's" flood,
Through fantasy, that out of vanity
He'd gone and bought these kneading-tubs, all three,
And that he'd hung them near the roof above;

And that he had prayed them, for God's dear love,
To sit with him and bear him company.
The people laughed at all this fantasy;
Up to the roof they looked, and there did gape,
And so turned all his injury to a jape.
For when this carpenter got in a word,
'Twas all in vain, no man his reasons heard;
With oaths imprenive he was so sworn down,
That he was held for mad by all the town;
For every clerk did side with every other.
They said: "The man is crazy, my dear brother."
And everyone did laugh at all this strife.
Thus fluttered was the carpenter's goodwife,
For all his watching and his jealousy;
And Absalom has kissed her nether eye;
And Nicholas is branded on the butt.
This tale is done, and God save all the rout!

HERE ENDS THE MILLER'S TALE

SparkNotes Summary

The pilgrims applaud the Knight's Tale, and the pleased Host asks the Monk to match it. Before the Monk can utter a word, however, the Miller interrupts. Drunk and belligerent, he promises that he has a "noble" tale that will repay the Knight's (3126). The Host tries to persuade the Miller to let some "bette" man tell the next tale (3130). When the Miller threatens to leave, however, the Host acquiesces. After the Miller reminds everyone that he is drunk and therefore shouldn't be held accountable for anything he says, he introduces his tale as a legend and a life of a carpenter and of his wife, and of how a clerk made a fool of the carpenter, which everyone understands to mean that the clerk slept with the carpenter's wife (3141–3143). The Reeve shouts out his immediate objection to such ridicule, but the Miller insists on proceeding with his tale. He points out that he is married himself, but doesn't worry whether some other man is sleeping with his wife, because it is none of his business. The narrator apologizes to us in advance for the tale's bawdiness, and warns that those who are easily offended should skip to another tale.

The Miller's Prologue and Tale

The Miller begins his story: there was once an Oxford student named Nicholas, who studied astrology and was well acquainted with the art of love. Nicholas boarded with a wealthy but ignorant old carpenter named John, who was jealous and highly possessive of his sexy eighteen-year-old wife, Alisoun. One day, the carpenter leaves, and Nicholas and Alisoun begin flirting. Nicholas grabs Alisoun, and she threatens to cry for help. He then begins to cry, and after a few sweet words, she agrees to sleep with him when it is safe to do so. She is worried that John will find out, but Nicholas is confident he can outwit the carpenter.

Nicholas is not alone in desiring Alisoun. A merry, vain parish clerk named Absolon also fancies Alisoun. He serenades her every night, buys her gifts, and gives her money, but to no avail—Alisoun loves Nicholas. Nicholas devises a plan that will allow him and Alisoun to spend an entire night together. He has Alisoun tell John that Nicholas is ill. John sends a servant to check on his boarder, who arrives to find Nicholas immobile, staring at the ceiling. When the servant reports back to John, John is not surprised, saying that madness is what one gets for inquiring into “Goddes pryvetee,” which is what he believes Nicholas’s astronomy studies amount to. Nevertheless, he feels sorry for the student and goes to check on him.

Nicholas tells John he has had a vision from God and offers to tell John about it. He explains that he has foreseen a terrible event. The next Monday, waters twice as great as Noah’s flood will cover the land, exterminating all life. The carpenter believes him and fears for his wife, just what Nicholas had hoped would occur. Nicholas instructs John to fasten three tubs, each loaded with provisions and an ax, to the roof of the barn. On Monday night, they will sleep in the tubs, so that when the flood comes, they can release the tubs, hack through the roof, and float until the water subsides. Nicholas also warns John that it is God’s commandment that they may do nothing but pray once they are in the tubs—no one is to speak a word.

Monday night arrives, and Nicholas, John, and Alisoun ascend by ladder into the hanging tubs. As soon as the carpenter begins to snore, Nicholas and Alisoun climb down, run back to the house, and sleep together in the carpenter’s bed. In the early dawn, Absolon passes by. Hoping to stop in for a kiss, or perhaps more, from Alisoun, Absolon sidles up to the window and calls to her. She harshly replies that she loves another. Absolon persists, and Alisoun offers him one quick kiss in the dark.

The Miller's Prologue and Tale

Absolon leaps forward eagerly, offering a lingering kiss. But it is not her lips he finds at the window, but her “naked ers [arse]” (3734). She and Nicholas collapse with laughter, while Absolon blindly tries to wipe his mouth. Determined to avenge Alisoun's prank, Absolon hurries back into town to the blacksmith and obtains a red-hot iron poker. He returns with it to the window and knocks again, asking for a kiss and promising Alisoun a golden ring. This time, Nicholas, having gotten up to relieve himself anyway, sticks his rear out the window and farts thunderously in Absolon's face. Absolon brands Nicholas's buttocks with the poker. Nicholas leaps up and cries out, “Help! Water! Water!” (3815). John, still hanging from the roof, wakes up and assumes Nicholas's cries mean that the flood has come. He grabs the ax, cuts free the tub, and comes crashing to the ground, breaking his arm. The noise and commotion attract many of the townspeople. The carpenter tells the story of the predicted flood, but Nicholas and Alisoun pretend ignorance, telling everyone that the carpenter is mad. The townspeople laugh that all have received their dues, and the Miller merrily asks that God save the company.

SparkNotes Analysis

*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.*

In the Miller's Prologue, we perceive tension between social classes for the first time in *The Canterbury Tales*. The Host clearly wants the Monk to tell the second tale, so that the storytelling proceeds according to social rank. By butting in, the Miller upsets the Host's plan. Like the Knight's Tale, which fits his honorable and virtuous personality, the Miller's Tale is stereotypical of the Miller's bawdy character and low station. However, nothing about the drunken, immoral, and brutal Miller could possibly prepare the reader for the Miller's elegant verse and beautiful imagery. The Miller's description of Alisoun draws on a completely different stock of images from the Knight's depiction of Emelye, but it is no less effective. Whereas Emelye is compared to a rose, a lily, the spring, and an angel, Alisoun's body is delicate and slender like a weasel, her apron is as white as morning milk, and her features are compared to

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plums and pear trees. The Miller's imagery is less conventional and less elevated than the Knight's, drawn instead from the details of village or farm life.

Although the narrator is unforgiving in his depiction of the drunk, rowdy Miller, whom he presents according to the stereotypes of the Miller's class and profession, there are a few intriguing points of similarity between the narrator and the Miller. For instance, the Miller apologizes for the tale he is about to tell, and transfers all blame to the "ale of Southwerk"—in effect, to the Host himself (3140). Thirty lines later, the narrator himself makes a similar apology, and reminds his audience to blame the Miller if it finds the tale offensive. Also, the Miller begins his story by giving little portraits of each of his characters, just as the narrator begins his story of the pilgrimage by outlining each of its members.

The Host asks the Monk to "quite," or repay, the Knight's Tale (3119). But when the Miller interrupts and cries out that he can "quite the Knyghtes [Knight's] tale," he changes the word somewhat to mean "revenge" (3127). Indeed, the Miller does take "revenge" upon the Knight to an extent. Just as he transforms the meaning of the word "quite," the Miller takes several of the themes from the Knight's Tale and alters them. For instance, the Knight's Tale suggested that human suffering is part of a divine plan that mortals cannot hope to know. In a completely different tone and context, the Miller, too, cautions against prying into "God's pryvetee," meaning God's secrets (3164). He first raises this idea in his Prologue, arguing that a man shouldn't take it upon himself to assume that his wife is unfaithful. In the Miller's Tale, John repeats the caution against prying into "God's pryvetee." Several times, John scolds Nicholas for trying to know "God's pryvetee," but when Nicholas actually offers to let John in on his secret, John jumps at the chance. John also jealously tries to control his young wife, reminding us that the Miller equated an attempt to know God's "pryvetee" with a husband's attempt to know about his wife's "private parts." The two round tubs that the foolish carpenter hangs from the roof of his barn, one on either side of a long trough, suggest an obscene visual pun on this vulgar meaning of "God's pryvetee."

The Miller's Tale also responds to the Knight's by turning the Knight's courtly love into a burlesque farce. The Miller places his lovers' intrigues in a lower-class context, satirizing the pretensions of long-suffering courtly lovers by portraying Nicholas and Alisoun in a frank and sexually graphic manner—Nicholas seduces Alisoun by grabbing her by the pudendum, or

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“queynte” (3276). Absolon, the parish clerk, represents a parody of the conventional courtly lover. He stays awake at night, patiently woos his lady by means of go-betweens, sings and plays guitar, and aspires to be Alisoun's page or servant. For his pains, all he gets is the chance to kiss Alisoun's anus and to be farted on by Nicholas.

In addition to parodying tales of courtly love, the Miller's Tale also plays with the medieval genres of fabliaux and of mystery plays. Fabliaux are bawdy, comic tales that build to a ridiculous and complex climax usually hinging on some joke or trick. Nicholas is parody of the traditional clever cleric in a fabliau. As the deviser of the scheme to trick John, he seems to be attempting to write his own fabliau, although Absolon foils his plan. Yet, John is still the big loser in the end. The moral of the play is that John should not have married someone so young: “Men sholde wedden after hire estaat [their estate], / For youthe and elde [old age] is often at debaat” (3229–3230). Justice is served in the Miller's eyes when Alisoun commits adultery, because she revenges her husband “[f]or . . . his jalousye” (3851). Despite their differences, the two clerics ally at the story's end to dupe the carpenter, and so nobody believes John's story about Nicholas's trick.

The Miller's Tale also includes references to different scenes acted out in medieval mystery plays. Mystery plays, which typically enacted stories of God, Jesus, and the saints, were the main source of biblical education for lay folk in the Middle Ages. As John's gullibility shows, his education through mystery plays means that he has only a slight understanding of the Bible. The Miller begins his biblical puns in his Prologue, when he says that he will speak in “[Pontius] Pilates” place. His statement that he will tell “a legende and a lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf” is a reference to the story of Joseph and Mary. “Legends and lives” were written and told of the saints, and the story in which Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant (and the many jokes that could be made about Mary being unfaithful) was a common subject of mystery plays. The stories of Noah's flood, and of Noah's wife, are also obviously twisted around by the Miller. These biblical puns work up to the climax of the tale. When he says that Nicholas's fart was as great as a “thonder-dent,” the Miller aligns Nicholas—the creator of the action—with God (3807). Absolon, who cries out, “My soule bitake I unto Sathanas [Satan]” (3750), becomes a version of the devil, who damns God by sticking him with his red-hot poker. The result of Absolon's actions is that John falls from the roof in a pun on the fall of humanity.