

## A Tale of 'synne and harlotries'? The *Miller's Tale* as Social Ideology

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This article provides a detailed discussion of how romance tropes are parodied in the *Miller's Tale* in order to pose a social challenge to the *Knight's Tale* and in order to reject the vertical view of social relations which romance tales traditionally uphold. Through a comprehensive investigation of this issue, the article illustrates Paul Strohm's argument that the clash between the romance genre of the *Knight's Tale* and the fabliau genre of the *Miller's Tale* symbolically reflects the tension between two different ideologies simultaneously present within Chaucer's society. The *Miller's* fabliau tale is shown to express a mercantile outlook of calculation in one's own interest that was becoming more prominent in the increasingly commercial world of late fourteenth-century England, as opposed to the feudal view of social relations which is found in the *Knight's Tale*.

THIS ARTICLE considers how the *Miller's Tale* in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* represents a social challenge to dominant power structures within the medieval period by parodying romance tropes in order to reject the vertical view of social relations which romance tales traditionally uphold. It also illustrates how the *Miller's Tale* opposes the hierarchical worldview found in the *Knight's* aristocratic romance tale and embodies a new more individualist and commercial outlook that was developing in Chaucer's fourteenth-century context.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Several other critics have read the *Miller's Tale* as presenting a social challenge by subordinate classes to dominant ideology; see, for example, Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA/London, 1989), pp.130–143, Peggy A. Knapp, *Chaucer and*

The *Miller's Tale* comes directly after the *Knight's Tale*, which is told by an aristocratic member of society and upholds dominant power structures. The romance genre, which infuses the *Knight's Tale*, has a tendency to endorse a hierarchical worldview and aristocratic power. Krueger explains that '[r]omance's history is integrally tied up with the creation of elite lay culture in courts and wealthy households throughout the European Middle Ages, that 'the earliest romances . . . proudly proclaimed the superior culture of their makers and audiences over the villains, the uncourtly or uninstructed, and that '[f]or an elite minority, romances were a vehicle for the construction of a social code – chivalry – and a mode of sentimental refinement – which some have called "courtly love" – by which noble audiences defined their social identities and justified their privileges, thus reinforcing gender and class distinctions.'<sup>2</sup> According to Crane, '[t]here is a belief in medieval romances that hierarchy is natural, indeed that it derives from divine order.'<sup>3</sup> The *Knight's Tale* is a relatively late example of the medieval romance, but it certainly upholds such a hierarchical worldview. In the final episode of the tale, Theseus, the ruler of Athens, urges his subjects to be obedient to both divine and secular authority. In addition, the *Knight's Tale* continuously stresses the need for an aristocratic ruler to impose order on his subjects in the service of social harmony and the greater good. Thus, the *Knight's Tale* endorses the values of a traditional feudal society.

The *Miller's Tale*, on the other hand, belongs to the fabliau genre, which is fundamentally opposed in spirit to the romance. According to Furrow:

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*the Social Contest* (London, 1990), pp. 32–44, and Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, WI, 1991), pp. 244–79. However, these critics do not provide a sustained and comprehensive discussion specifically of how romance tropes are employed in the tale to serve this purpose. Ethelbert T. Donaldson, 'Idiom of Popular Poetry in the *Miller's Tale*', in *Speaking of Chaucer* (London, 1970), 13–29, does examine romance language closely, but does not focus on how romance tropes are employed in order to reject a feudal ethos and to support a commercial and individualist worldview. Furthermore, this article will provide a defence against the views of critics such as Phillips and Morgan, who have suggested that the *Miller's Tale* actually endorses dominant power through its debasement of its bourgeois victim, John the carpenter: Helen Phillips, *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales: Reading, Fiction, Context* (New York, 2000), p. 61, and Gerald Morgan, 'Obscenity and Fastidiousness in *The Miller's Tale*', *English Studies* 91 (2010): 492–518 (p. 514).

<sup>2</sup> Roberta L. Krueger (introd.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 1, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), pp. 98–99.

. . . romances take a deliberately high view of life, and the fabliaux, a determinedly low one. The very things that romance is careful to exclude are the things that are the joy of fabliaux: bodily functions, obscene words, lower-class people, upper-class people who act contrary to romance expectations, unadorned and unceremonialized lust and greed.<sup>4</sup>

'The point of the form,' according to Helen Cooper, 'is its amorality: the fabliau is the expression of the non-official culture of carnal irreverence, of all those feelings suppressed by courtly politeness or religious asceticism that break into joyous burlesque.'<sup>5</sup> Benson, in his introduction to the *Canterbury Tales* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, says that:

The fabliau, in short, is delightfully subversive—a light-hearted thumbing of the nose at the dictates of religion, the solid virtues of the citizenry, and the idealistic pretensions of the aristocracy and its courtly literature, which the fabliaux frequently parody, though just as frequently they parody lower-class attempts to adopt courtly behavior.<sup>6</sup>

The clash between the genres of the *Knight's* and *Miller's* tales seems to reflect symbolically the tension between two different ideologies simultaneously present within Chaucer's society. The critic R.J. Holton describes Chaucer's period as 'uneasily poised between feudalism and capitalism,' with a mercantile class that was becoming more powerful.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Strohm has argued that the tension between the ideologies of the two tales represents 'a clash between a fading, feudal hegemony and a rising, commercial counterhegemony.'<sup>8</sup> The romance genre, with its orderly assumptions about the world

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<sup>4</sup> Melissa Furrow, 'Middle English Fabliaux and Modern Myth', *ELH* 56 (1989): 1–18 (p. 7).

<sup>5</sup> Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford/New York, 1989), p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Larry D. Benson (introd.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1988), p.8.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, xi.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

and its tendency to endorse aristocratic power, is well suited to articulating a feudal ideology, while the fabliau, with its tendency to flout social rules and undermine romance, is suitable for articulating a 'mercantile or commercial attitude of calculation in one's own interest' that was becoming 'more prominent in the increasingly urban and commercial world of the later fourteenth century'.<sup>9</sup> This article will illustrate Strohm's argument through a thorough investigation of the tale, focusing specifically on how the tale parodies romance tropes, in order to highlight its rejection of hierarchical romance values.

Chaucer's choice of an aristocrat and a commoner to narrate a romance tale and a fabliau respectively does not mean that the romance genre was exclusively the genre of the second estate or that the fabliau genre belonged solely to the middle and lower classes. In fact, Nykrog, an authority on the fabliau genre, has corrected the earlier assumption that fabliaux were first written for a middle class audience, showing that they originated in aristocratic circles and tended to make jokes at the expense of the middle class; Nykrog does, however, believe that fabliaux were adapted to the interests of the rising middle class in the course of the thirteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Strohm explains that by the fourteenth century, audiences for English romance were diverse, consisting of the middle strata as well as the aristocracy, and that peasants, small entrepreneurs and lesser tradespeople were not the principal hearers of fabliaux at this time, in spite of the fact that they so regularly populate fabliaux as literary characters.<sup>11</sup> However, I agree with Strohm that the tension between the worldviews upheld by these two genres is highlighted in the first fragment of the *Canterbury Tales* by their association with an aristocrat and a commoner respectively, and that '[t]he effect of assigning the one narrative to the foremost of the *gentils* and the other to an egregious *cherl* is to intensify their social messages'.<sup>12</sup> I believe that this tension symbolically represents how social change within Chaucer's period resulted in tensions between the nobility and non-*gentil* classes. Strohm argues that 'the

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 139, 137.

<sup>10</sup> Robert E. Lewis, 'The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*', *Modern Philology* 79 (1982): 241–255 (p. 244).

<sup>11</sup> Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 140.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 141.

traditional view of vertical relations between the earthly and the heavenly hierarchies within the *Knight's Tale* is appropriate to a devout gentleperson in the service of his earthly and heavenly lords', while the opportunistic 'celebration of horizontal and self-interested relations in the *Miller's Tale* is appropriate to a lesser tradesman' like the Miller who is a small entrepreneur, situated between the bourgeoisie and the rural peasantry.<sup>13</sup>

In the *Miller's Prologue*, the Miller certainly seems to be offering a challenge to the dominant social hierarchy in his eagerness to 'quite' (A 3127) or retaliate against the Knight's tale. The Miller displays antagonism towards both the Knight and the Monk when he intrudes upon the game of storytelling to tell his story out of turn, in spite of the Host's suggestion that 'Som bettre man [meaning the Monk] shal telle us first another' (A 3130); this suggests a disregard for the medieval class system. I agree with Robert Miller's assessment that the Miller's dramatic confrontation with the Knight and the Monk signals the Miller's 'antagonism toward the estates of his temporal and spiritual lords'.<sup>14</sup> The Miller also mockingly suggests first that he will tell a 'noble tale' (A 3126) and then 'a legend and a lyf' (A 3141). However, we will receive neither a romance nor a saint's life from the Miller. The Miller's mention of these genres merely serves to emphasise his tale's ideological opposition to the kinds of tales which were most closely associated with the nobility and clergy respectively. The rebellion of the Miller against the order that the Host attempts to establish upon the tale-telling game, as well as his antagonism towards representatives of spiritual and secular authority, can be read as representative of the greater willingness of the middle and lower classes to challenge established authority during Chaucer's period – an attitude which had already resulted in the Peasants' Revolt in 1381.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> Robert P. Miller, 'The *Miller's Tale* as Complaint', *The Chaucer Review* 5 (1970): 147–160 (p. 157).

<sup>15</sup> The Black Death outbreak between 1348 and 1349, which reduced the English population by at least a third, created labour shortages which resulted in wage increases and more labour-mobility. In this post-plague economy some people of peasant origin became quite rich and successful. The attempts of aristocrats to reduce the wages and social mobility of peasants after the Black Plague by insisting on villeins' traditional services, as well as their general extortion of the non-aristocratic

In his discussion of the *Miller's Tale* as a tale which resists dominant order, Patterson points out that the 'millsok' or toll paid by the peasants to have their grain ground at the seigneurial mill was a significant source of income for landlords; it was bitterly resented by rural producers and a central focus of the peasant resistance. Patterson explains that it is not quite clear whether millers acted as agents for the upper classes, like bailiffs, or whether they were themselves underlings who had their own grievances with the dominant powers; however, what we do know from many records is that millers were participants in the Peasants' Revolt. Patterson goes on to state that it is most important to note that 'the peasants themselves seem to have seen the figure of the miller as capable of embodying both their grievances and their desire for an almost apocalyptic reckoning'. Two of the famous letters demanding social change during the Rising, written by John Ball, an English Lollard priest who took a prominent part in the Peasants' Revolt, refer to an allegorized miller.<sup>16</sup> The Miller is therefore a good choice as a narrator for a tale which provides a mockery of hierarchical power.

Interestingly, in the *Miller's Prologue*, Chaucer calls the tale about to be told a 'cherles tale' (A 3169) and immediately goes on to apologise for the nature of the tale. The word 'cherl' could refer to a freeman of the lowest rank or a rude and surly person; in this case, both meanings seem to be intended. With this word, Chaucer highlights the fact that the narrator is a commoner, underlining the lower class status of the Miller in relation to the Knight, and suggests at the same time that the tale is going to be rude and disruptive. The *Miller's Prologue* also starts by describing the reactions of the pilgrims to the Knight's story: we are told that everybody thought that the Knight's tale 'was a noble storie . . . / And namely the gentils everichon' (A 3111–13). In contrast, the prologue ends with an apology by Chaucer the pilgrim 'to every gentil wight' (A 3171) for the tale that is to come. This suggests that the Miller's tale is going to be a very different kind of tale to that of the Knight. While the frame narrator asks his readers not to 'maken

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classes, eventually led to the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 (which was widely supported by the bourgeoisie). This uprising lasted for only four days, but created a fear among the governing classes which ran through the next few decades. See Phillips, *Introduction to the Canterbury Tales*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 254–57.

ernest of game' (A 3186), or not to take the comic tale which will follow too seriously, the Miller's class antagonism in the prologue and the narrator's apology simultaneously suggest that the Miller's humorous tale will contain some subversive elements which could be interpreted as offensive by 'gentil' folk.

The subversive nature of the *Miller's Tale* is illuminated by Bakhtin's theory of the 'carnavalesque'. The *Miller's Tale* can be read as an example of carnivalesque literature because it creates a temporary liberated space which is free from external powers and in which the rules of ordinary society are suspended.<sup>17</sup> In typical carnival style, the tale tends to insist upon the material dimension of human existence, which is common to all humans, rather than on the differences and separations between them. There is a strong focus on the physical activities of the body, such as bodily elimination and copulation.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the equality of human beings is emphasised rather than the hierarchical social structures which separate them. By demonstrating how the *Miller's Tale* debases romance tropes by subjecting them to the bodily sphere, I would argue that the hierarchical assumptions about the world which are traditionally upheld in romances are undermined and an anti-hierarchical society is suggested instead. Bakhtin believes that carnivalesque traditions and literature function as 'an anti-authoritarian force that can be mobilized against the official culture of Church and State';<sup>19</sup> this is in line with my reading of the *Miller's Tale*. However, while Bakhtin maintains that carnivalesque traditions function to make individuals feel that they are a part of a collective – as social barriers between people are disregarded<sup>20</sup> – the *Miller's Tale* seems to use elements of the carnivalesque tradition in order to undercut a hierarchical social ideology, while simultaneously supporting an individualist attitude of clever calculation in one's own interest, as is typically found in fabliau stories.

It must be noted that some critics feel that the *Miller's Tale* does not offer any challenge to the aristocratic values of the *Knight's Tale*.

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<sup>17</sup> See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN, 1984), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (London, 1995), p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 9.

For example, Gerald Morgan reads the entire tale as a mockery of characters who attempt to emulate their social betters, rather than an actual mockery of the aristocracy. He argues that

... [t]here is no incongruity in the fact that Chaucer follows a romance, indeed a philosophical romance, with a series of fabliaux, for these fabliaux endorse and do not subvert aristocratic, courtly values ... This juxtaposition of romance and fabliaux ... is not at all to the disadvantage of the romance, and the values of *The Knight's Tale* are not put under any pressure by the proximity of *The Miller's Tale*. The love triangle of Arcite, Palamon and Emelye is mirrored and not parodied by that of Nicholas, Absolon and Alison, for it is the amorous student, the effeminate parish clerk and the flirtatious and pert young wife, not the young knights and the maiden, who are the true objects of ridicule.<sup>21</sup>

I contend that the rebellious attitude towards authority which the Miller displays in his prologue, as well as his mocking echoes of the *Knight's Tale* in his narrative (while endorsing a different set of values), suggests, at the very least, that the Miller is portrayed as attempting to tell a subversively humorous tale. I do, however, acknowledge that the fact that clerks and lower class characters are used in the place of actual courtly characters serves to limit the subversiveness of the Miller's rebellious tale. It must also be noted that the fact that the Miller is portrayed quite negatively in both his portrait in the *General Prologue* and the Prologue to his tale suggests that the views of this character should not be seen as a reflection of Chaucer's personal opinions. I aim only to show that Chaucer represents an alternative attitude to the one upheld by the *Knight's Tale*, not to suggest that the Miller's outlook is portrayed as preferable.

It is useful to mention here that almost all of Chaucer's pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales* belong either to the Church or to the rising middle class; only the Knight and his son, the Squire, represent courtly society and the Ploughman, who is the only true peasant in the group, does not even tell a tale.<sup>22</sup> This is very different from Boccaccio's *Decameron*,

<sup>21</sup> Morgan, 'Obscenity and Fastidiousness in *The Miller's Tale*', 500–01.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Strohm, 'The social and literary scene in England', in Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (eds), *Cambridge Companion to Chaucer* (Cambridge, 1986), 1–18.

which, as Morgan points out, has a similar structure to the *Canterbury Tales* and which may be where Chaucer found his inspiration for his collection of tales.<sup>23</sup> All of the *Decameron's* storytellers are nobles. That Chaucer has such a broad spectrum of characters belonging to the middle class amongst his pilgrims suggests that he was specifically interested in engaging with the new movements occurring in his society. Strohm also characterises Chaucer as a man of gentle rank, but insecurely so, because he was linked to the nobility less by sworn eternal ties than temporary contracts. Because Chaucer gained access to the gentility through performing administrative functions for the king, rather than by the traditional way of noble birth, he would have spent time in both aristocratic and middle class circles, which placed him in the ideal position to explore the ideas of different social groupings. According to Strohm, '[j]ust as Chaucer's life was intersected by contrary social experiences and competing systems of social explanation, so does his poetry provide an intersection for different, ideologically charged ideas about social relations.'<sup>24</sup> Through the *Miller's Tale*, Chaucer may thus be exploring an opposing view to that upheld in the *Knight's Tale*, without necessarily endorsing such a view.

The *Miller's Tale* offers a parody of the *Knight's Tale*, complete with romance language, a "courtly lover", two rival lovers contending over a "lady" and a mock battle. According to Peggy Knapp, 'the Miller's tale requites the Knight's by replicating its formula ... but debasing its tone and direction.'<sup>25</sup> This approach can be seen clearly in Alisoun's portrait: Alisoun is the desirable woman in the story who serves a similar purpose to that of Emelye in the *Knight's Tale*. She is the woman whom the two suitors, Nicholas and Absolon, both desire, causing a rivalry between the suitors which humorously parodies the rivalry between Palamon and Arcite in the *Knight's Tale*. Alisoun's portrait also reminds one of Emelye because it mentions Alisoun's singing and associates her with flowers. However, in the *Knight's Tale*, Emelye sings 'as an aungel hevenyshly' (1055), while Alisoun sings merely like 'any swalwe [swallow] sittyng on a berne [barn]' (A 3258). Also, Emelye

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, 'Obscenity and Fastidiousness in *The Miller's Tale*', 499.

<sup>24</sup> Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, xi.

<sup>25</sup> Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, 34.

is associated with lilies and roses, as is typical of romance heroines, while Alisoun is called a ‘prymerole [primrose]’ and a ‘piggesnye [pig’s eye]’ (A 3268).<sup>26</sup> While romance ladies, Emelye included, are generally described very tastefully, with emphasis placed on their inner virtues, in Alisoun, Chaucer gives us a parodic portrait of a romance heroine in which there is a strong emphasis on her body and her sexuality. Alisoun’s portrait is one of the instances in the *Miller’s Tale* in which the idealism of romance is undermined through an emphasis on the bodily sphere.

Cooper points out that in medieval literature the description of a person’s appearance involved starting at the head and working downwards; ‘Alisoun’s [description], by contrast, starts around her middle and keeps returning compulsively to that region, finishing by working up her legs.’<sup>27</sup> Morgan makes a similar argument and contends that this kind of description has the effect of emphasizing Alisoun’s sexuality.<sup>28</sup> Cooper has also pointed out that the portrait of Emelye, whose description is typical of a romance heroine, appeals to the higher senses of sight and sound (Palamon and Arcite see her and hear her beautiful voice), while Alisoun is perceived as much through the baser physical senses of smell, taste and touch:<sup>29</sup> she is compared to a pear tree (A 3248), she is ‘softer than the wolle is of a wether [sheep]’ (A 3249), and ‘Hir mouth [is] as sweete as bragot [country drink] or the meeth [mead], / Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth’ (A 3261–62). This description emphasises Alisoun’s materiality, her physical desirability and her accessibility; it has the opposite effect to the comparison of Emelye to an angel and a goddess, which serves to highlight Emelye’s ideal qualities and unattainability (which are normal attributes in a romance heroine). The discrepancy between Alisoun’s portrait and that of an ideal romance heroine suggests that Alisoun will not function in quite the same way as a romance heroine in this tale. She does not – as is usually the case with a romance heroine – represent an idealised form of love which is superior to ordinary

<sup>26</sup> Ian Bishop, *The Narrative Art of the Canterbury Tales: A Critical Study of the Major Poems* (London/Melbourne, 1987), p. 62.

<sup>27</sup> Cooper, *Oxford Guide*, 106.

<sup>28</sup> Morgan, ‘Obscenity and Fastidiousness in *The Miller’s Tale*’, 503.

<sup>29</sup> Cooper, *Oxford Guide*, 106.

love and more than mere physical desire, the kind of love which often inspires displays of prowess or virtue in a romance hero,<sup>30</sup> but a purely physical kind of love.<sup>31</sup>

With this description of Alisoun, the Miller mocks the tendency of romance to idealise the love of its aristocratic characters, letting it rise out of the physical sphere into something philosophical. By providing this parodic portrait of a romance heroine, the Miller undercuts aristocratic pretensions of superiority, demeaning love as it is usually presented in romance by exposing its ‘dependence on bodily needs’, thus ‘unmasking the physical demands lying behind the claim of mental love.’<sup>32</sup> What is highlighted in this mock portrait of a romance heroine is only her ability to inspire physical desire, not her ideal virtues or ability to inspire ideal behaviour. There is an egalitarian principle underlying this tendency of carnival literature, which reminds its readers continually that we are all creatures of the flesh and all subject to our bodily needs, in opposition to the elitist assumptions typically found in romances. With the Miller’s statement regarding Alisoun that ‘She was a prymerole, a piggesnye, / For any lord to leggen in his bedde, / Or yet for any good yeman to wedde (A 3268–70), the Miller purposely includes the aristocracy in his exposé of bodily needs, which strengthens the argument that Alisoun’s portrait functions to undermine aristocratic notions of superiority, thus undercutting a hierarchical worldview.

The same impulse can be seen when Nicholas’s wooing of Alisoun is described. The scene functions as a parody of courtly love:<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Preminger, Green and Abrams explain that romance love is usually portrayed as an ennobling passion which inspires virtue and chivalry in the courtly lover: Alex Preminger (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (New Jersey, 1965), p. 156, D.H. Green, *Irony in the Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 108, and Meyer H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 8th edn (Boston, MA, 2005), p. 49.

<sup>31</sup> Though the love of Palamon and Arcite for Emelye is somewhat problematic because it leads them to go against social order (this is discussed in more detail later on in the article), it still eventually leads to a proud aristocratic display of feats of arms in Theseus’s tournament. It is also described as a serious passion and is never depicted as mere physical desire. Furthermore, Emelye is depicted as an ideal and virtuous aristocratic lady.

<sup>32</sup> Freud, quoted in Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, 42.

<sup>33</sup> It must be noted that some critics object to the use of the term “courtly love”.

And prively he caughte hire by the queynte,  
 And seyde, 'Ywis, but if ich 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!'

(A 3276–81)

Stock phrases and images associated with romance are used in this description. Nicholas talks about his 'deerne love' for Alisoun, a common term in romance referring to secret love.<sup>34</sup> He also calls Alisoun his 'lemman [lover or paramour]', a word commonly used in older romances. In the typical style of a courtly lover, Nicholas claims that he will die if Alisoun does not return his love, and begs his lady for mercy. However, at the same time that he uses these words, he has caught her by the 'queynte [her genitals]' and later holds her by her 'haunchebones'. Bishop also reads a lewd double meaning into Nicholas's words: 'For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille'.<sup>35</sup> The juxtaposition between the language used and the physical situation mocks the romance genre, which is traditionally connected with the aristocracy. Courtly love, a mode of behaviour in romances which usually serves to display aristocratic refinement, is degraded and depicted as contrived, as the physical desire lying behind courtly love language is unmasked.

For example, Ethelbert T. Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (London, 1970), pp. 154–163 ('The Myth of Courtly Love'), and J.C. Moore "'Courtly Love": A Problem of Terminology', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (1979): 621–632, have famously argued that the term "courtly love" is more of a hindrance than a help when dealing with the theme of love in medieval texts; they maintain that the term is often used by different critics to mean different things, which results in confusion, and they object to the idea that love is portrayed in a consistent way in medieval romances. However, I find the term to be useful for describing a set of images and ideas which are regularly found in romances dealing with the theme of love, such as the ailing lover who must beg the haughty lady for mercy, while at the same time recognising that the theme of love is explored in diverse ways in different romance texts, that these texts will combine these motifs and ideas in various ways in order to create different effects, and that all of the motifs and ideas will not usually be present in a single text.

<sup>34</sup> Ian Bishop, *The Narrative Art of the Canterbury Tales: A Critical Study of the Major Poems* (London/Melbourne, 1987), p. 67.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

The "love" of Nicholas and Alisoun, unlike the love in courtly romances, is depicted as purely physical and selfish. Nicholas's desire to be with Alisoun leads to the thwarting of social rules. John, who is something of an authority figure because he is Alisoun's husband, is duped and mocked as a result of Nicholas's plan to sleep with Alisoun. Cooper explains that the romance knight is typically expected to uphold the values of his society even while alone on his quest. The knight should not abandon the social expectations of his society while seeking his personal goals, but should prove himself worthy of his powerful social position.<sup>36</sup> However, this parodic romance hero and heroine display a complete disregard for social rules. While adultery is not uncommon in romance tales, it is generally viewed as unacceptable in English romances.<sup>37</sup> Even in the French adulterous romances, such as the story of Lancelot and Guinevere and that of Tristan and Iseult, there exists a strong tension between personal desire and social order, which suggests that social order and authority are still important in these stories,<sup>38</sup> as opposed to the audacious and gleeful flouting of social rules which is found in the *Miller's Tale*. Farrell also highlights that 'many romances seek to over-ride the hero's indulgence in private emotion and to restore his sense of social responsibility', while fabliaux tend to prioritise the individual's desires above social good.<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, the story ends with Lancelot and Guinevere living out their days serving the Church as a kind of penitence for their infidelity.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford/New York, 2004), pp. 55–57.

<sup>37</sup> C. S. Lewis went as far as to make adultery part of his key definition of romance in his famous work *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford, 1936). However, this view has been problematized by Moore, "'Courtly Love": A Problem of Terminology', 623–24 and Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Bernard O'Donoghue, 'The Reality of Courtly Love', in Helen Cooney (ed.), *Writings of Love in the Middle Ages* (New York, 2006), 7–24, points out that the tales of Tristan and Iseult and Lancelot and Guinevere 'are concerned with the politically disastrous, and personally fatal, consequences of allowing passion to dominate over society' (p. 14).

<sup>39</sup> Thomas J. Farrell, 'Privacy and the Boundaries of Fabliau in the *Miller's Tale*', *ELH* 56 (1989): 773–795 (p. 774).

<sup>40</sup> Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Seventh and Eighth Tales*, ed. P. J. C. Field

In the *Knight's Tale*, however, Arcite and Palamon both go against social order, out of love for Emelye: Palamon breaks out of Theseus's prison and Arcite breaks his promise to Theseus not to return to Athens after his release. Theseus later happens upon them in the grove, fighting to the death over Emelye, 'Withouten juge or oother officere' (A 1712). Still, the *Knight's Tale* presents love as problematic when it interferes with the rules of society, and Theseus's function is to bring the desires of these knights into line with social order through his tournament – a space in which Palamon and Arcite have the opportunity to win Emelye's hand in marriage through a socially-sanctioned display of their prowess. In fact, the *Knight's Tale* allows its knights to go against social order specifically in order to emphasise the need for an aristocratic ruler to impose order. With the political marriage between Palamon and Emelye at the end of the *Knight's Tale*, Emelye is also required to marry Palamon to bring peace between Athens and Thebes, despite her wish to remain a virgin. Thus, the tale stresses that individual desire must be controlled and socialised for the greater good to be accomplished. The *Miller's Tale*, on the other hand, endorses a view that individual desire must be satisfied through personal agency, consequently flouting the social values of romance.

Bishop points out that, in the style typical of a fabliau, the characters in the *Miller's Tale* are liberated from the restraints of Christian morality and as well as rational and enlightened notions of human justice of the kind embodied by Theseus, stating that '[t]he cardinal sin [in the *Miller's Tale*] is not one of the Deadly Seven, but folly and gullibility'. Cleverness, on the other hand, is the value which is celebrated.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Siegel and Bishop point out that the complicated trick that Nicholas plays on John (in order to sleep with Alisoun) is completely unnecessary from a pragmatic point of view.<sup>42</sup> The reader finds out that John is often away from home overnight, when a cloisterer explains to Absolon that: 'he [John] is wont for tymber for to go, / And dwellen at the grange a day or two' (A 3667–68). So it is not necessary for Nicholas to convince John

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(London, 1978), pp. 149–158.

<sup>41</sup> Bishop, *Narrative Art of the Canterbury Tales*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> Marsha Siegel, 'What the Debate is and Why it Founders in Fragment A of *The Canterbury Tales*', *Studies in Philology* 82 (1985): 1–24 (p. 2), and Bishop, *The Narrative Art of the Canterbury Tales*, 60.

that a second flood is coming, nor to have him sleep in a tub in the rafters, just for an opportunity to sleep with Alisoun. The function of this trick is to display both Nicholas's cleverness in satisfying his personal desires and John's gullibility. When Nicholas and Alisoun finally have their night together, Nicholas is shown to be all the more clever because he is sleeping with John's wife while John is sleeping up in the rafters, right above them. John is played for a fool and shown as egregiously ignorant because he has obediently followed Nicholas's absurd instructions, believing it to be godly instruction, to his own detriment.

Many critics, including Bishop and Farrell, have noted that John's punishment seems to exceed his "crime".<sup>43</sup> John's "crime" is his foolish unequal marriage to a much younger woman, a fact which leads him to distrust his wife (A 3224). But we are also told that he loved her more than his life (A 3222). The "punishment" is that his wife has an affair and he falls from the rafters, breaking his arm. Additionally, John gets no justice when the townsfolk arrive upon the scene, because Nicholas and Alisoun tell everyone that he has gone mad and believes that the second flood has come. The townsfolk laugh at him and pay no heed to his words. The fact that John's first response when he hears about Nicholas's false flood is concern for his wife's safety makes his fate at the end seem even harsher; John says: 'Allas, my wyf! / And shal she drenche? Allas, myn Alisoun!' (A 3522–23). Paul Olsen has read John's willingness to take in Nicholas as a lodger as a sign of avarice, as John would already have had a good income from his carpentry; thus Olsen views John's avarice as the crime for which he is punished in the tale.<sup>44</sup> However, Farrell has pointed out that an equally good case can be made for taking this willingness to provide lodgings for Nicholas as a sign of generosity.<sup>45</sup> I believe that the tale does not adhere to normal expectations of poetic justice, but exemplifies "fabliau justice", which eschews morals and metaphysics: 'scheming pragmatism and immediate gratification define [its] operative ethic, labelled "hedonistic materialism" by Charles Muscatine'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Bishop, *Narrative Art of the Canterbury Tales*, 61, and Farrell, 'Privacy and the Boundaries of Fabliau in the *Miller's Tale*', 778.

<sup>44</sup> Olson, Paul A. 'Poetic Justice in the *Miller's Tale*', *MLQ* 24 (1963): 227–236.

<sup>45</sup> Farrell, 'Privacy and the Boundaries of Fabliau in the *Miller's Tale*', 778.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 773.



John's mishaps can perhaps be better understood in terms of the ritualised beatings that Bakhtin finds in carnivalesque literature. Bakhtin explains that figures that represent authority are often physically maimed in carnivalesque literature, and that this is symbolic of the impulse to kill the old world of authority and truth, and to accept in its place a world 'liberat[ed] from the prevailing truth and from the established order', where there is a 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions'.<sup>47</sup> John represents authority in that he is the home owner and the husband of Alisoun; he also exhibits a submissive attitude towards authority in his obedience to what he believes to be spiritual instruction. Nicholas, on the other hand, represents liberation from social rules and restrictions. His defeat of John is thus symbolic.<sup>48</sup>

It must be noted at this point that Morgan has said of this incident that '[i]n the figure of "[t]his sely carpenter" (A 3601 and A 3614) we see the outwitting of a bourgeois victim by someone of superior intelligence'.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Phillips argues that:

The *Miller's* and *Reeve's Prologues* and *Tales* may show the world of the prosperous, confident craftsman, which potentially challenges the aristocratic assumptions about order celebrated in the *Knight's Tale*, but they also show this class as crude, stupid and basely confident, and they celebrate its defeat . . .<sup>50</sup>

Phillips points out that in both tales the working man is mocked and defeated by the clever clerk. However, a reading of this tale as endorsing dominant ideology because a clerk triumphs over a bourgeois character is problematized by the fact that Nicholas breaks social rules in this tale and, as Knapp points out, appropriates the language of authority in order to further his personal interests, while John is attempting to follow what he believes to be divine instruction. Nicholas displays a belief that one must act in one's personal interests,

<sup>47</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 196–198, 212–213 and 10.

<sup>48</sup> It must be noted, however, that John is still a lower class character, which makes his abuse and degradation as an authority figure less subversive than it would have been had an aristocrat or high ranking ecclesiastic been used.

<sup>49</sup> Morgan, 'Obscenity and Fastidiousness in *The Miller's Tale*', 514.

<sup>50</sup> Phillips, *Introduction to the Canterbury Tales*, 61.

and disregards traditional power structures in his willingness to deploy the biblical story of Noah for his own lecherous purposes. It is ironic that Nicholas should employ a story about God's punishment of humanity for their sin and debauchery. This is indicative of the tale's irreverent attitude towards authority and rules and its defiant prioritising of physical desire. In the words of Knapp, 'Nicholas is not afraid of the consequences of diverting authorized discourses – biblical and astrological – to his own ends, and the Miller supports his recklessness through the outcome of the tale'.<sup>51</sup> Absolon, the other clerk in the *Miller's Tale*, is also much less successful in the tale, while Alisoun, who is lower down on the social scale, is allowed to get the better of him in a spectacular way. (See below.) Success or failure is not meted out according to social status in the tale but rather in accordance with how successful each character is at pursuing his or her personal goals through calculated action, with a correspondent disregard for social rules and niceties.

I agree with Siegel that the *Miller's Tale* upholds an ethic that '[h]uman beings must . . . actively contrive their success'; Nicholas's trick displays the tale's philosophy that the world is intelligible and manipulable.<sup>52</sup> People who are clever enough to shape the world in the image of their desires are approved of, while people who are gullible and follow rules are punished. Unlike the Boethian philosophy of the *Knight's Tale* – which urges patience in a world of superhuman forces that one cannot always predict or understand and consequently urges submission to both spiritual and earthly authority – the *Miller's Tale* sees the world as a place that can and should be moulded to the desires of the individual through personal agency and cleverness. While the knight in a romance is generally expected to uphold a certain code of conduct, even when alone, and to uphold social expectations so that he can be reincorporated into society at the end of his quest,<sup>53</sup> the hero in this tale does not exist in a universe which acknowledges the importance of outside forces like social rules and external authorities.

It is for this reason that I agree with Paul Strohm that, while the *Knight's Tale* endorses a traditional, hierarchical worldview (as is

<sup>51</sup> Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, 40.

<sup>52</sup> Siegel, 'What the Debate is', 8.

<sup>53</sup> Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 55.

most often the case with medieval romance tales), 'the *Miller's Tale* is essentially a celebration of the mercantile or commercial attitude of calculation in one's own interest'.<sup>54</sup> The emphasis on the class difference between the two narrators and the Miller's class antagonism in his prologue, as well as the juxtaposition of the romance and fabliau genres, serves to highlight a clash between a declining feudal worldview and a rising commercial ideology within Chaucer's society. The superficial echoes of the *Knight's Tale*, evoked by the similar plot structure as well as the allusions to courtly love in the *Miller's Tale*, serve to highlight its ideological opposition to the *Knight's Tale* and to traditional romance values. One could argue that the literary threat that this tale poses to the romance represents symbolically the threat of the rising middle class and peasantry to the upper classes and their desire to do away with the social ideals of the dominant hierarchy.

While John is punished because he is an authority figure over Alisoun, and because of his obedience to what he believes to be spiritual instruction, Absolon, Alisoun's other suitor, is punished because he attempts to emulate the idealised romance code of courtly love. Absolon's portrait in lines A 3311–38 echoes the portrait of the Squire – a courtly lover – in the *General Prologue*. Like the Squire, Absolon has 'crul . . . heer' (A 3313),<sup>55</sup> and he devotes a similar amount of care to his appearance. Like the Squire and the lover in the *Romance of the Rose* on whom the Squire is based, Absolon is an accomplished dancer who can sing and play a musical instrument. However, the reader is told that he dances 'After the scole of Oxenford' (A 3329) and that he entertains people in brewhouses and taverns (A 3334), reminding one of the tale's unaristocratic setting. The narrator ends off Absolon's portrait by saying that 'he was somdeel squaymous / Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous [fastidious]' (A 3337–38). The Miller seems to be presenting Absolon as a character who is rather ill-suited to his surroundings. Like John, Absolon is trying to follow a code contrary to the ethos of carnivalesque literature, which the fabliau draws upon heavily. Absolon attempts to view the world as ideal and to stay away from coarse speech and the messy material aspects of the body. The "courtship" scene of Alisoun and Nicholas embraces and stresses the material aspects of life, intimating that Absolon will be mocked and punished for his delicacy.

<sup>54</sup> Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 139.

<sup>55</sup> Morgan, 'Obscenity and Fastidiousness in *The Miller's Tale*', 505.

The code of courtly love which Absolon attempts to imitate, like Nicholas's supposed spiritual instructions, represents a form of authority and dominant discourse; this code is linked with secular authority because the romance tales which uphold it tend to represent aristocratic characters as superior to the rest of the world in their prowess and manners. Thus, this literary code usually serves to endorse aristocratic power and hierarchical assumptions about the world. The code of courtly love also regulates the behaviour of the knight in a romance, which is contrary to the carnal impulse of the fabliau. I agree with Robert Miller's assessment that Absolon's treatment in the tale signals the Miller's attitude towards courtly love and aristocratic decorum; Absolon's failure in the tale becomes a mockery of aristocratic decorum.<sup>56</sup>

The Miller undermines the tendency of romance to idealise love and remove it from the physical sphere by portraying Absolon as a naïve, bumbling and ineffectual fool. Absolon is portrayed as foolish and out of touch with reality when he makes a grand romantic gesture by singing of his love to Alisoun from beneath her window at night and, in typical courtly lover fashion, begging for her to have mercy on him, while her husband is in the same room with her. When Absolon attempts to court Alisoun from beneath her window for the second time, she is sleeping with Nicholas. All of Absolon's attempts to gain Alisoun's love, be it through sending her gifts or trying to impress her through his acting, fail. Success, in this tale, does not come from attempting to follow the idealised rules of courtly love, but from skilfully engineering a situation to one's own advantage.<sup>57</sup>

When Absolon arrives outside Alisoun's window for the second time, his speech combines courtly love language with animal and bodily imagery. He uses the language of the ailing lover:

What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,  
My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?  
Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!  
Wel litel thynken ye upon my wo . . .  
(A 3698–701)

<sup>56</sup> Miller, 'The *Miller's Tale* as Complaint', 152–53.

<sup>57</sup> Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, 38.

This speech comes across as hyperbolic and saccharine within its fabliau context, but it is fairly typical speech for a courtly lover. However, Absolon's next words plunge his speech into disaster when he says: 'No wonder is though that I swelte and swete;/I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete' (A 3703–04); this seems to be a slip in Absolon's courtly façade, revealing his sexual frustrations underneath his practised manners. This animal imagery once again subjects the idealism of courtly love to the bodily sphere, emphasising the corporeal desires of human beings.

In this tale, courtly mannerisms are mocked and people who embrace the "real" world are applauded. In the world of the fabliau, Nicholas is the better and more successful man. Alisoun emphasises this when she says to Absolon: 'Go fro the wyndow, Jakke fool . . . /I love another – and elles were to blame – / Wel bet than thee, by Jhesu, Absolon' (A 3708–11). A foolish and naïve man who attempts to follow idealised social rules cannot be rewarded in the fabliau world and thus it is for the same reason as John that Absolon is punished: he subscribes to a code associated with dominant authority rather than dismissing all rules and relying on his own cleverness for personal gain. Absolon is punished in a way which is fitting for his "crimes": he is tricked into kissing Alisoun's arse and Nicholas farts in his face – the perfect way to outrage his refined sensibilities.

When Alisoun's nether parts come together with Absolon's lips, we have a textbook instance of carnival literature transferring the high and ideal to the material sphere. Just as Absolon declares himself 'a lord at alle degrees' (A 3724) in anticipation of a romantic kiss, he comes into contact with her 'naked ers' (A 3734). According to Miller,

In Absolon's "misplaced kiss" the Miller subjects the code of courteous love (as he sees it) to the indecent exposure he feels it deserves. Like the mention of *fartyng*, it is designed to outrage genteel sensibilities. By confronting refinement with the naked truth he attempts to expose courtly behavior as an elaborate sham, a polite artifice to disguise a natural urge. The urge is the basis upon which all men are equal.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Miller, 'The Miller's Tale as Complaint', 153.

Thus, the impulse to undermine social hierarchies is again present here.<sup>59</sup>

After this, Absolon throws off courtly behaviour and returns to Alisoun's window with a hot coulter. He manages to get some revenge – a motive which the fabliau honours – and performs his first successful action in the tale. Absolon is attempting to burn Alisoun's buttocks and not Nicholas's, but Nicholas hears him asking Alisoun for another kiss from outside of the window when he has 'risen for to pisse' (A 3798) and thinks that he will 'amenden al the jape' (A 3799) by having Absolon kiss his backside as well. Nicholas opens the window, sticks out his bottom and 'leet fle a fart/ As greet as it had been a thonder-dent' (A 3806–07), but Absolon is 'redy with his iren hoot,/ And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot' (A 3809–10). Here we have Absolon exchanging his courtly code for the code of clever calculation; he can thus be rewarded with some success, because he has stopped following rules – serving only his selfish goal of revenge. The Miller humorously turns romance ideals into something that one must shake off in order to be successful in this tale – in opposition to scrupulous adherence to codes of chivalry and courtly love, as practised by the hero in romance tales. The Miller rejects social rules, mocking the romance genre. John is the only character who displays no cleverness in the tale. He is therefore the worst off and does not manage to get revenge or justice even when he discovers the truth about Nicholas and Alisoun's plot at the end of the tale.

Some critics suggest that the tale does uphold poetic justice and conventional morality in the end. According to Olsen, John is punished for his avarice, Nicholas for his lechery and Absolon for his vanity.<sup>60</sup> However, I have already pointed out the problem with interpreting John's sin as avarice; Olsen also does not account for the fact that Alisoun gets away with adultery. According to Farrell, Alisoun gets away with her crime because she is restricted to the world of the fabliau, but the *Miller's Tale* goes beyond the fabliau world and

<sup>59</sup> It must be noted, though, that a silly parish clerk who attempts to emulate the code of courtly love is mocked here rather than an actual courtier. This once again serves to limit the subversiveness of the *Miller's Tale*. While the tale does seem to be mocking aristocratic decorum, it simultaneously mocks Absolon who does not quite manage to live up to the courtly code.

<sup>60</sup> Olson, 'Poetic Justice in the *Miller's Tale*', 227–36.

enters a place of justice for actions after the misdirected kiss. Farrell argues that Nicholas's need to void his bladder is the point at which nature takes over and it is no longer the individual who is in control of events. This need of Nicholas sets in motion a sequence of events in which Absolon is punished with a fart, Nicholas with a hot coulter and, when Nicholas screams for water, John is punished for his foolishness as he cuts the cord keeping his tub in the rafters, thinking that the second flood has come, and falls to the floor, breaking his arm. Farrell argues that this situation 'enforces a recognizable form of moral law on the unsuspecting actors in what we all had thought was a simple fabliau' and that this undermines the Miller's insistence upon a world which is not organised according to moral laws, but one in which the individual's desires can be gratified through cleverness and calculated action, as nothing beyond the desires of the individual need be considered.<sup>61</sup>

However, Knapp points out that Nicholas does not suffer the 'scalded towte' because an orderly universe is meting out justice but 'because another willful young man had another scheme going, and was not so stupid as to be trickable in the same way twice.'<sup>62</sup> Once again, cleverness gets the upper hand, which is still in line with a fabliau ethos. Siegel also convincingly argues that the tale does not move outside of the world of fabliau ethics at this point.<sup>63</sup> She points out that 'though Nicholas is scalded by Absolon's coulter, the tale's concluding episode does not represent Nicholas's come-uppance but rather his victory.'<sup>64</sup> Nicholas and Alisoun are quick to react when John falls from the rafters and they are discovered. They immediately start calling the neighbours after John's fall and 'whan [John] spak, he was anon bore

<sup>61</sup> Farrell, 'Privacy and the Boundaries of Fabliau in the *Miller's Tale*', 780–90 (quotation at p. 786). This is in line with Alcuin Blamires's position, in Blamires, 'Philosophical Sleaze? The "strok of thought" in the *Miller's Tale* and Chaucerian Fabliau', *The Modern Language Review* 102 (2007): 621–640, that the *Miller's Tale* has a Boethian structure in that, like the First Mover in the *Consolation of Philosophy* who stands outside of time and comprehends how all events work towards the greater good, with this event, the reader can comprehend how all the actions in the poem have led up to this point.

<sup>62</sup> Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, 40.

<sup>63</sup> Siegel, 'What the Debate is', 1–24.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

doun/ With hende Nicholas and Alisoun./ They tolden every man that he was wood' (A 3831–33). Because the neighbours laugh at John and think that he has gone mad, they do not listen to anything he says. In this way, Nicholas and Alisoun manage to escape social censorship and get the better of John one last time. Thus, Nicholas and Alisoun use their cleverness to get themselves out of this tight situation, and intelligence is once again shown to be all that is necessary. Siegel states that '[w]hile the *Miller's Tale* concedes complexity, that people besides oneself are agents and must be accounted for, it is still the case that all one need ever know or do, human intelligence can achieve. If one has got it, it comes gloriously to the rescue.'<sup>65</sup> In this way, the tale continues to promote a commercial sentiment of calculation in one's own interest right up to the end.

Interestingly, the climactic event in which Absolon burns Nicholas's buttocks and John falls from the rafters serves as a parody of both an aristocratic tournament and of a prophecy of cosmic disaster, undermining secular and religious authority. Bakhtin explains that in carnival festivities there is a tendency to mock serious rituals.<sup>66</sup> Nicholas and Absolon's mock battle can be read as a parody of the tournaments depicted in courtly literature, such as the tournament of Palamon and Arcite in which they battle for the hand of Emelye. Such tournaments are mocked and degraded because of the absurd situation in which this battle takes place, with Nicholas hanging his buttocks out of the window and Absolon brandishing a farming instrument. Nicholas's wound in the 'ers' (A 3810) is typical of carnivalesque literature's use of reversal and degradation. With this parody, the rituals found in romance tales which tend to affirm aristocratic superiority are ridiculed and the tale declares its freedom from dominant ideology.

Bakhtin also explains that carnival literature tends to undermine world catastrophes and eschatological theories – which he believes were cultivated in official culture and philosophies as a means to create fear and keep people in line – by bringing them down to the bodily sphere.<sup>67</sup> Bakhtin believes that carnival parodies of tales of cosmic disaster as a result of divine retribution serve to generate humour and

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 90–91, 335–36.

to free man from mystic terror of God and 'the oppression and guilt related to all that was consecrated and forbidden'.<sup>68</sup> Such a mockery occurs in the *Miller's Tale* earlier on when Nicholas uses the tale of Noah's ark, a story of divine retribution for sin, for his own lecherous purposes.<sup>69</sup> This action asserts that Nicholas, not divine providence, is in control of his world. The story of Noah's ark is also humorously parodied and undercut at the end of the tale when the flood is reduced to Nicholas's fart which sounds like a 'thunder-dent' (A 3807), and his cry 'water!' when his buttocks are burning: John believes that the flood is upon him and he falls from the rafters.

This mocking attitude towards aristocratic ritual and divine power is the opposite of the respect for secular and divine authority and order which is found in the *Knight's Tale*. I mentioned Crane's argument earlier that '[t]here is a belief in medieval romances that hierarchy is natural, indeed that it derives from divine order'.<sup>70</sup> The *Miller's Tale*, however, attempts to undermine such a hierarchical conception of the world. This defiant attitude towards dominant ideology and anarchic spirit of a character situated between the peasantry and bourgeoisie could be interpreted as embodying the attitude of the lower and middle classes who had participated in the Peasants' Revolt and were disgruntled with medieval authorities. Rigby describes the *Miller's Tale* as a 'literary Peasants' Revolt in which the bawdy world-view of the fabliau is pitted against the high seriousness of the epic'.<sup>71</sup>

The Miller begins his tale by showing that he has a bone to pick with both secular and clerical authority in his defiant attitude towards the Knight and the Monk. He ends his tale by mocking both of these authorities and the characters who adhere to their rules, advancing a world free from rules and restrictions. However, one has to ask whether there is any reason that one should give the Miller's worldview

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas W. Craik, *Comic Tales of Chaucer* (London, 1964), p. 20.

<sup>70</sup> Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, 98–99.

<sup>71</sup> Stephen H. Rigby, *Chaucer in Context: Society, Allegory and Gender* (Manchester/New York, 1996), p. 39. Rigby classifies the *Knight's Tale* as an epic poem rather than a romance.

more weight than that of the Knight: Phillips, Rigby and Cooper do not believe so.<sup>72</sup> According to these critics, the unflattering portrait of the Miller in the *General Prologue* signals Chaucer's attitude towards him. Phillips argues that Chaucer purposely distances himself from the Miller in the *Miller's Prologue* when he apologises for the tale that is to come and that this, together with the fact that the Miller is portrayed as animalistic and drunk, defuses any serious challenge to dominant hierarchy that the tale might offer.<sup>73</sup> I concur that this negative portrayal serves to limit the force of Miller's argument. I also agree with Cooper's argument that

...[t]he fact that Chaucer ascribes this tale to a character like the Miller itself makes a statement about the nature of the story: it makes no claim to being a sufficient reading of the world, or even a particularly admirable one. The effect is remarkably liberating. One can enjoy the tale on its own terms all the more for the presence of counter-examples close to hand.<sup>74</sup>

Cooper and Phillips argue that the *Miller's Tale* is ultimately still just a joke: rules are temporarily suspended in the *Miller's Tale*, but it does not offer us a final say on the subject of social ideologies. This reading is supported by the narrator's apology in the *Miller's Prologue*, when he asks his readers not to 'maken ernest of game' (A 3186), and by the pilgrims' response to the Miller's tale in the *Reeve's Prologue*: 'Diverse folk diversely they seyde, / But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde' (A 3857–58). It is clear that the pilgrims do not take this tale or this character too seriously.

Nonetheless, I believe that with the fraught relationship between the *Knight's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*, as well as the highlighted clash between the values of the romance genre and the fabliau, Chaucer gives voice to the social and moral tensions present within his fourteenth-century context. There is a disjuncture between the fictional narrators of these tales, particularly with regard to their ideal social structures; this difference in worldviews is presented as a clash between classes,

<sup>72</sup> Phillips, *Introduction to the Canterbury Tales*, 61, Rigby, *Chaucer in Context*, 67, and Cooper, *Oxford Guide*, 102.

<sup>73</sup> Phillips, *Introduction to the Canterbury Tales*, 61.

<sup>74</sup> Cooper, *Oxford Guide*, 102.

a clash between aristocratic interests, and those of the middle and lower classes. While the aristocracy is presented as anxious to assert that individual desires must be suppressed in order to maintain law and order (and the *status quo*) in the *Knight's Tale*, in the *Miller's Tale* the middle and lower classes are represented as championing a more commercial ethos which allows them more freedom and equality and the ability to pursue their individual desires.

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