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POETIC JUSTICE IN THE *MILLER'S TALE*

By PAUL A. OLSON

F. N. Robinson notes that critics have observed, in Chaucer's tales of the Miller and the Reeve, "a kind of moral quality... in the tendency to poetic justice."¹ If justice implies rules or guides for the administration of reward and pain, comic moral justice implies norms. Comic characters who are justly punished fall for a reason; otherwise, their discomfort is not just or particularly amusing. Nicholas, Absolon, and John are tumbled at the end of the *Miller's Tale*, and critics have seen them as getting their deserts and funny in their pain. However, the "rule of justice" which makes us feel that the clerks and good Carpenter John have violated norms, which allows us to view their affliction as becoming them, may be a more explicit, less "intuitive" rule than a casual reading and easy laughter would tempt us to assume it to be. The structure of the tale suggests that this is the case.

The narrative strategy of the *Miller's Tale* is carefully contrived to make us see the principals in the action for what they are from the beginning. Chaucer first presents the principals in static portraits, then displays them in a preliminary action, and, finally, in the main action. The plan is somewhat more complicated than this would suggest, since two sets of portraits and two sets of preliminary actions precede the main action. That is, we are first given portraits of John (admittedly a truncated one), Alysoun, and Nicholas (I, 3187-3270) and then a preliminary action involving Nicholas and Alysoun (I, 3271-3306). Next, we are given a formal portrait of Absolon, the only major character who is not a member of John's household (I, 3307-38) and then a preliminary action involving him (I, 3351-96). Finally we get the main action.

The formal portraits are almost as disjunct from the narrative movement of the story as are the portraits in the *General Prologue* from the narrative account of the pilgrims as they journey to Canterbury. Like the portraits in the *General Prologue*, each of the formal portraits describes the character's inner nature or, more properly, hints at it and exhibits it in his dress and his actions;² the preliminary

¹ *Poetical Works of Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Cambridge, 1957); cf. *Richard Brathwait's Comment in 1665 upon Chaucer's Tales of the Miller and the Wife of Bath*, ed. C. F. E. Spurgeon (London, 1901), p. 30 (comment on Nicholas).

² This conception of constructing character is provided for in the medieval rhetorics; inner moral paradigm is the rhetorical *notatio*, and outer appearance, the *efficio*. John's *notatio* is suggested by the phrases "riche gnof," "jalous he was," "his wit was rude" (I, 3188, 3224, 3227); Nicholas' is suggested by "Of deerne love he koude and of solas" (I, 3200); and Absolon's by his desire to show his "lightnesse" (brightness, agility) and "maistrye" (I, 3383). The *efficio* of Absolon is particularly full. In the case of John (I, 3229 ff.), Chaucer

action then displays this inner nature expressing itself in a characteristic action; the main action serves to echo the characteristic action but in a more individuated and comic form. Chaucer's use of static portraiture is neither accidental nor simply a matter of rhetorical convention. He uses such portraiture for good aesthetic reasons: action does not reveal character in this story as it might in a Jamesian novel; here, character is everything. Action arises from character, from the pattern of traits established in the static portraits; it arises from character traits precisely that it may return to punish character traits.

The first portrait, that of Carpenter John, displays a brand of rascal common enough in medieval literature: the rich stupid *jaloux* married to a young wife;³ the second, that of Nicholas, displays an equally common type: the student who is Venus' clerk and a master of the illiberal arts of astrology and seduction; and the third exhibits what may more fairly be called an archetype than many creatures so named in our time: the smooth, soft, shapely, and eminently lovable Alysoun. The root portraits of Alysoun and Nicholas are animated in the scene where Nicholas approaches Alysoun in a most direct way and begins to "maken melodye." The two characters do nothing here which is not strictly implied by their portraits; lechers love, pliant women are won.

The second section of the tale begins with the set portrait of the clerk Absolon with his wonderful hair and dandy's clothes. His character is expressed in the second set of preliminary actions in which he deigns to cense the village wives. Looking upon Alysoun, he finds that "a spirit in his 'feet' leads him, one knows how" to come softly to her bedroom window by night. Each of the two preliminary actions foreshadows a portion of the main action: Nicholas "pley[ing] faste, and mak[ing] melodye" (I, 3306) with Alysoun foreshadows the later scene of revel and melody between the two at night (I, 3652); Absolon's wake outside Alysoun's window (I, 3353-69) looks to the scenes in the main action where he twice more stands beneath the window to pay homage to his fair favorite (I, 3657-3741; I, 3783-3810).

The whole tale is thus an exfoliation of the portraits and particularly of the character patterns which lie at the center of the portraits. The presentation of each character, up to the beginning of the main action, tells us what he is as a man (his occupations, concerns, habitat) and what he is as a lover. It is only when one

depends more on a description of "what degree" (I, 40) than on the depicting of appearances. Chaucer's description of Nicholas gives both his status and an *efficio* which includes appearance and personal effects in general. For a discussion of *efficio* and *status* as defining *notatio*, see Ralph Baldwin, *Unity of the Canterbury Tales* (Copenhagen, 1955), pp. 37 ff.

³ For the tradition of this type in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, see my article, "Chaucer's Merchant and January's 'Hevene in Erthe Heere,'" *ELH*, XXVIII (1961), 206, n. 4.

contemplates these two aspects side by side that one gets at the central trait of each character and can then understand for what fault he is being punished in the main action. The sketchy portrait of John tells us that he is a jealous lover and a rich old man who makes money from two businesses: carpentry and keeping roomers. Both aspects of his character display a possessiveness which asserts itself first in the action when he tells his fear—that he may lose his precious Alysoun in the flood—and again when he demonstrates that he can be taken in by the prospect of having the whole world and Alysoun after the flood (I, 3521-82).

In the case of the two clerks, Chaucer creates a more formal relationship between portraiture and preliminary action: he first establishes, in the portrait, what the young men are as men, and he then displays, in the preliminary actions, how such men love. As lover, Nicholas is a professional lecher; as a man, he has surrounded himself with the emblems of his trade: "lycorys" which suggests lechery,⁴ music which suggests the revel and melody of his encounters with Alysoun,⁵ and a study of the stars which should give him insight into how to take advantage of women, especially those women who are Venus' daughters. In contrast, Absolon, as lover, is the professional courtier and delicate worldling (I, 3351-84); as a man (and despite the fact that he is a clergyman), he has developed the beauty of the courtly dandy (the fair yellow hair, blue kirtel, flower-white surplice, and decorated leather shoes), the crowd-pleasing talents of the man about town (I, 3326-84). Richard Brathwait observes that Absolon's description "glanceth at the pride of the Clergy." His observation is launched from a sensible response to the particulars of Absolon's presentation.⁶

That the postures of the lovers in the preliminary and main sections are simple extensions of the paradigm suggested by the set portraits is evident enough. John is a possessive *jaloux* from the first static portrait, and he acts like one until he goes to sleep. Nicholas is a lecher; he does strictly what lechery demands—all of his intellectual cleverness is put to its purposes. And Absolon does only what the fastidious vanity implicit in his portrait would suggest. In the main action, each character continues to act according to the laws of his character; but, in trying to succeed with his method of loving and of dealing with the world, he not only punishes one of his fellows, but also deceives himself and so makes himself vulnerable to the justice which he receives from his fellows. Thus, John is deceived by Nicholas precisely because he is so eager to possess the world after the flood that he forgets the biblical promise that the flood will not be

⁴ The pun is on "likerous."

⁵ For the music imagery in the *Miller's Tale*, see D. W. Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 127-33. Parts of my analysis of the *Miller's Tale* were first suggested to me by Robertson.

⁶ Brathwait, *Comment*, p. 13.

repeated.⁷ Absolon has to endure the humiliating kiss because of his self-assurance as a lover; he is befouled, at his second visit to Carpenter John's, because wounded vanity dictates his return to the place of his initial humiliation. Nicholas is burned only because he is abed with Alysoun and is willing to use his body as a tool in dealing first with Alysoun and then with Absolon.

The ending of the tale is just, in that its punishments are exactly suited to the moral paradigms of the characters punished. The possessive and stupid, the Carpenter Johns, deserve to lose what they have even as they are eyeing a bigger take; they deserve to be set down for mad even as they think they are getting a corner on God's secrets. The proud man deserves a flatulent humiliation; the lecher deserves to be burned in the flesh that burns him. Brathwait expresses the idea when he says of the burned Nicholas: "Lust must ever have a rue rub. He who even now, so lasciviously wantonned, and so freely tasted delights prohibited; he who surfetted in pleasures, and had hung up his abused Host for a Scare-crow, see how he is scarrified!"⁸ Brathwait laughed at Nicholas, and he knew why he laughed. The same logic applies to the undoing of John and Absolon. Folly gives to folly what folly earns.

Thus far this essay has been directed toward explaining the mechanism of the tale's construction as it relates to the raising of implicit demands for comic moral justice which the conclusion of the story satisfies. It is possible that the medieval reader, given exactly the comic response which I have described, would have perceived a more intellectual logic to the story. First, he may have perceived the imagery of the tale as defining rather more precisely than I have the norms according to which the characters are punished. The licorice which Nicholas chews and the melody which he plays, and plays at, amplify his character as a lecher. However, Nicholas' astrology probably carries more precise connotations than those I have mentioned. First of all, Chaucer, following a fairly general medieval tradition, calls judicial astrology "observaunces of judicial matere and rytes of payens, in whiche my spirit hath no faith" (*Astrolabe*, II, 4, 63 ff.).⁹ In addition, Nicholas is a student of the "pagan" art of "deerne love," and there is irony in this picture of a young man at Oxford who "hadde lerned art" (I, 3191)—the seven liberal arts—but whose mind has turned to the "fantasye" (3190) of pagan learning. Astrology would be a handy tool for a lecher and particularly for one who

⁷ Brathwait, *Comment*: Gen. 7:22; "The weakly-credulous Carpenter believes him; having never seen the *Bow* in the *Cloudes* or never heard for what *Token of Covenant* it was given" (p. 20).

⁸ Brathwait, *Comment*, p. 30.

⁹ The Miller's ostensible moral, "An housebonde shal not been inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvette, nor of his wyf..." (I, 3163-64), is a warning against judicial astrology and jealousy; for a parallel, see John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, ed. Clemens Webb (Oxford, 1909), I, 134.

was dealing with a daughter of Venus—this would appear to be Nicholas' situation in dealing with Alysoun.

The *Miller's Tale* contains at least two characters who are analogous to pilgrim characters: Carpenter John, to the Reeve; Robin, the ramrod servant of John, to Robin, the miller-pilgrim. It does not seem presumptuous to suggest that the Alysoun of the tale may be regarded as a younger version of the Alysoun who rides among the Canterbury pilgrims as the Wife of Bath. Both, as young women, married old husbands; both are notable for amorous propensities. The more aged Alysoun, who goes with the pilgrims, indicates that she is a daughter of Venus and that Venus governs all her amorous inclinations. In handling such a woman, a knowledge of astrology would be a convenience, whether or not one believed the science worth a straw. In order to strike at an opportune moment, one would need to know when the woman's inclinations were determined in the proper direction, or when she so regarded them. Nicholas' confident *coup de main* and Alysoun's amiable response make eminent sense in this context, as expressions of faith in the stars or faith in the strategic opportunities provided by such belief. The science of the stars also carries with it other conveniences. A belief in the force of "complexions" is, as Bromyard observes, a handy excuse for the lecher,¹⁰ and Nicholas employs the art, or his pretense at the art, in getting the husband out of the way. Thus the details of Nicholas' learning and of the way in which he uses it give particularity to the picture of him as the walking image of lechery.

Carpenter John is the traditional *jaloux*, but he is also rich, possessive, and desirous of gain. The relationship between these two sides of his character is clarified by Gower as he reminds his readers:

Men mai wel make a liklihiede
 Betwen him which is averous
 Of gold and him that is jelous
 Of love, for in on degre
 Thei stonde both, as semeth me.
 That oon wolde have his bagges stille,
 And noght departen with his wille,
 And dar noght for the thieves slepe,
 So fain he wolde his tresor kepe;
 That other mai noght wel be glad,
 For he is evere more adrad
 Of these lovers that gon aboute,
 In aunter if thei putte him oute.
 So have thei bothe litel joye
 As wel of love as of monoie.¹¹

¹⁰ John Bromyard, *Summa Praedicatorum* (Venice, 1586), I, 462. Almost all medieval accounts of astrology from Augustine down assert that man is free to resist the influence of the stars and hence cannot use this science to rationalize vice.

¹¹ *Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford, 1901), II, 418, *Confessio Amantis*, V, 595-610.

John has little joy in his wife; we have no evidence that he has any more joy in his money. He may have come by his possessiveness with little effort; for he is an old man, and in the Middle Ages avarice was thought to be a common disease of age.¹² If avarice, in a broad sense, is the center of the Carpenter's moral entelechy, it is not surprising that Nicholas is able to calm his host's disquietude about the flood by promising him "al the world" (I, 3581) after the waters of the deluge have subsided. According to medieval exegesis, the tempter tried to persuade a sterner subject to the same sin with a similar epic prospect: "Et ostendit omnia regia mundi. . ."¹³ No wonder that the old man is befuddled by the appeal. It touches a motive natural to him.

Absolon, although not the biblical character, could certainly be his brother. His golden hair, strutted like a fan, comes from the rhetorician's descriptions of the biblical character and from medieval biblical illuminations of him.¹⁴ The biblical Absolon stands in the market place appealing to the citizens with the cry, "O that I were made judge";¹⁵ Chaucer's counterpart appeals to the mob with the more delicate gestures of censuring the village wives on holy days and practicing the arts of lawyer, physician, and public entertainer for the Oxford folk on any day when he is asked. When Absolon comes to Alysoun's window, his vanity erects itself to a monumental brass; for his silly versions of the love songs in the *Song of Songs* cast him as the Bridegroom of that poem (essentially as God), and Alysoun as the Bride (as his Holy Virgin or Holy Church).¹⁶ The ancient poets apotheosized heroes and emperors; Absolon apotheosizes Absolon. The biblical Absolon is called by Pierre Bersuire a figure for "mundi pompam," by Nicholas de Lyra an emblem of "superbia," by Gower a representative of "surquidie" and "orguill," and by Broomyard a figure for those who rejoice in clothing and ornaments. He

¹² Cf. George R. Coffman, "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer: Some Literary Affinities and Adventures of an Idea," *Speculum*, IX (1934), 249-77.

¹³ See Paul A. Olson, "The World: The Pattern of Meaning and the Tradition," *Comparative Literature*, XIII (1961), 28, n. 4.

¹⁴ Paul Beichner, "Absolon's Hair," *Medieval Studies*, XII (1950), 222-33. The conventional late medieval illuminations of Absolon included in the *Index of Christian Art* file at Princeton University portray Absolon as blond, somewhat dandyish; one illumination shows the boy's hair "strutted like a fan" in the tree.

¹⁵ Cf. II Reg. XV; the picture of Absalom as a rather demagogic crowd pleaser takes on more serious overtones in Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel."

¹⁶ Cf. R. E. Kaske, "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Defense," *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature*, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York, 1960), pp. 55-60. Kaske and I noticed the *Song of Songs* allusions independently. Alysoun in her swink becomes Absolon's honeycomb (*Canticum*, IV, 11), his cinnamon (*Canticum*, IV, 14), turtle's mate (*Canticum*, II, 12), and ewe (*Canticum*, IV, 2), etc. Many of these epithets come from a portion of the *Song of Songs* which immediately precedes the Bridegroom's calling to the bride from outside her window (*Canticum*, V, 2-8), a detail for which Chaucer constructs an obvious parallel. Cf. my 1957 Princeton University dissertation (*"La Jaloux and History,"* pp. 198-99).

sometimes appears in the *Ubi Sunt* poems as a representative for vainglory.¹⁷ Chaucer seems to have known the tradition.

Finally, Alysoun, the woman whom each of the three men loves according to the pattern of his folly, also has a history. She originates in France as a pseudohistorical woman said to have been murdered for lechery. Jacques de Vitry tells us that she went to hell for spending so much time dressing that she missed Mass. In the Provençal romance, *Flamenca*, her sister (the maid Alis) is the coöperative servant of a woman who inspires not only passion but heresy in her lovers.¹⁸ Chaucer's Alysoun reappears as the servant of the Wife of Bath and as the Wife of Bath herself. Age can wither her and custom stale her infinite variety. In the *Miller's Tale*, Alysoun becomes what each of her lovers wants her to be: to the lecher, she is mere animal satisfaction, and she springs as a colt for him (I, 3282); for the proud Absolon, she is elevated to celestial regions as the Bride of the *Canticum*; for the greedy John, she is what he hopes to save from the flood. Pierre Bersuire remarks that a man may have three "wives": carnality, avarice, and pomposity.¹⁹ Alysoun serves for all three.

If each of the three male characters might have elicited a more precise response in the Middle Ages, so might the triad of vices displayed by them. When Robin explains how Absolon tried to corrupt Alysoun, he notes that the lover tried three kinds of appeals since, basically, people can be corrupted by three things: "Som folk wol ben wonne for riches; / And somme for strokes, and some for gentillesse" (I, 3381-82). Wealth, carnal satisfaction, status—these three corrupt, as Robin knows; and although Robin is far from being a philosopher, he has good authority for his statement, both in the works of Chaucer and in those of others.²⁰ Dame Prudence speaks of the intoxications of riches, delights, and honors as the poisons which slay the soul (VII, 1410); Chaucer's Parson mentions that honors, delights, and riches are the possessions which lead to dam-

¹⁷ Pierre Bersuire, "Moralitates," *Opera Omnia* (Cologne, 1730-31), I, 99-100; Nicholas de Lyra, *Biblia Latina* (n.p., 1502), II, sig. [p8]-[p8v]; *Miroir de l'Omme*, II, 12985-87, in *Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford, 1901); cf. *Miroir de l'Omme*, II, 1468-70; John Bromyard, *Summa Praedicatorum* (Venice, 1586), II, 159v. Cf. Bromyard, I, 90v; Beichner, "Absolon's Hair," pp. 222-33; Kelsie B. Harder, "Chaucer's Use of the Mystery Plays in the *Miller's Tale*," *MLQ*, XVII (1956), 194-95.

¹⁸ "En Monclaroy deshonnoree / Fu la bele Aalis, puis tuee. / Qui de ce vieut savoir l'estoire / A Choisi voit savoir la voir." A. Langförs, "Notice du MS Français 12483," *Notices et extraits des manuscrits*, XXXIX (1916), 655; Jacques de Vitry, "De Mulierum van Ornatu," ed. J. B. C. Pitra, *Analecta Novissima* (Paris, 1885-88), II, 460. For *Flamenca's* connotations, cf. Paul A. Olson, "La Roman de *Flamenca*: History and Literary Convention," *SP*, LV (1958), 12.

¹⁹ Pierre Bersuire, "Dictionarium," *Opera*, VI, 255.

²⁰ "Strokes" and striking probably have to do with the sexual act; cf. the mill-carol "Sing Dyllum, Dyllum": "Leyde she was upon a sache / 'Stryke softe,' she sayde, 'hurt not my back / And spare not; let the mill clack," in Richard L. Green, *Early English Carols* (Oxford, 1935), p. 31; cf. "The firy strokes of the deserynge" (*KT*, I, 1922).

nation (X, 185). Outside the works of Chaucer, these three—lechery, avarice, and pride—were conventionally regarded as the three intoxications which overcame Adam in the garden and which Christ overcame in the wilderness.²¹ The displaying of the nature and limitations of these temptations and their consequent vices, considered in the abstract or as they were embodied in human behavior, became the theme of an extensive tradition of medieval and Renaissance literature.²²

Lechery, avarice, and pride take a human form and act out their respective impulses in Nicholas, John, and Absolon. The Parson, when he preaches of these three, mentions that honor (or pride) will lead the person who improperly seeks it to be "defouled in helle" (X, 191), that wealth will lead its servant to the "slepyng of deeth; and nothyng ne shal they fynden in hir handes of al hir tresor" (X, 193), and that fleshly delights will lead to torments where the "touchyng of al [the] body" shall be "Ycovered with 'fir that never shal quenche . . ." (X, 210). The drunken Miller cannot restrain the impulse to place the comic forms of these hellish punishments in this world. Absolon is deftly "defouled"; John sleeps and finds in his hands none of his treasure; Nicholas knows the touching of the body with fire. In telling his little epic "By armes, and by blood and bones" (X, 3125),²³ Robin willy-nilly dramatizes not only the impulses which have corrupted man from the beginning, but also the kinds of justice appropriate to such corruption. He makes of the world a little comic hell where little people give one another what they invite from a moral universe. While the Knight's world knows the meaning of both Providence and justice, Robin's knows only justice.

That Robin should tell a tale of three brilliantly corrupt and brilliantly punished characters is proper. He intends the plot as a joke on the Reeve, but he has in himself enough of that which he embodies and punishes in his own characters. His is the lechery suggested by his physiognomy and bagpipes.²⁴ His is also the vainglory which makes him insist that he go before the monk, a pilgrim placed higher in the hierarchy of society, and brings him to tell a fabliau of arms, blood, and bones and to regard it as quitting the Knight's epic. Finally, his is the avarice embodied in his stealing from his clients to win for himself a golden thumb. The *Miller's Tale* is his tale; he tells it; but, more than this, he is its world and its characters. He is

²¹ Cf. my "*The World*," n. 4-5; cf. Bromyard, *Summa Praedicatorum*, II, 388.

²² "*The World*," *passim*.

²³ Dryden speaks of "the noble poem of Palamon and Arcite, which is of the epic kind." *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1926), II, 270. The Miller's "By armes, and by blood and bones" (X, 3125) is a comic echo of Virgil's "Arma virumque cano . . ." (I.i), and a comic "quitting" of the Knight's Statian. "Iamque domos patrias . . ."

²⁴ Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (New York, 1926), pp. 82, 84.

lechery, pride, and avarice, walking in blue coat and white hood and carrying a protective sword and buckler.²⁵ The Miller's folly does not stop with him. As he tells a narrative about corruption, he corrupts. He brings Oswald down to his level and inspires a train of churlish narrative. Ironically, as his corrupt characters give justice to one another, Oswald gives more than justice to him.

In a medieval illumination of the fall, comic tempters are shown playing comic bagpipes.²⁶ In a mural in the fourteenth-century chapel of Santa Maria Novella, a tempter who plays bagpipes leads a band of wanderers away from the heavenly paradise.²⁷ Similarly, Robin leads a group of wanderers (the Canterbury pilgrims) with the music of his bagpipes; but his temptation, his real musical instrument, is his tale. Although the tale can be seen as concerned with the embodiment and punishment of folly, it is not so intended by Robin, and it is not so taken by the pilgrims, who react to it, as Chaucer says, diversely (I, 3857).

The tale can be viewed (as it is by Oswald) simply as a bawdy entertainment which allows one to indulge in a vicarious vindictiveness; the majority of the pilgrims seem to regard it as a harmless joke: "for the moore part they loughed and pleyde" (I, 3857). Robin's genius does make folly funny without making it disgusting and punishes it humorously without making one feel that its nonfictional counterpart is liable to real justice; in his drunken unwariness, he has the gift of leading other churls, the Reeve and the Cook, to imitate his brutishness and belligerence. But one need not follow Robin's piping when one enjoys his tale. Chaucer's genius is to endow the tale with thoroughly civilized overtones for the disengaged reader, to make him sense that folly is both disgusting and funny, that it has its punishments in and out of time.

The fictive Chaucer warns before the *Miller's Tale* that he must tell his "churlish" tale or be false to his matter, that is, to history or to autobiography. The poet, however, knows better than this; he knows that he is not writing history—and so does the audience. With a fictive work, there is no history to which one must be faithful save the history of what man is and what his actions imply. To this history Chaucer is faithful, and, although he implies that his tale requires a strong stomach, he was willing to risk giving offense to the fastidious among his contemporaries to get at his kind of truth. His boldness

²⁵ Cf. Paul A. Olson, "The Reeve's Tale: Chaucer's Measure for Measure," *SP*, LIX (1962), 1-17.

²⁶ St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, New York Hofer Collection, MS 17, fol. xl.

²⁷ For "Triumph of the Church," cf. Piero Bargellini, *I Chiostrì di Santa Maria Novella e il Cappellone Degli Spagnoli* (Florence, 1954), *passim*. Cf. Edward A. Block, "Chaucer's Millers and Their Bagpipes," *Speculum*, XXIX (1954), 239-43; Folke Nordström, *Virtues and Vices on the 14th Century Corbels in the Choir of Uppsala Cathedral* (Uppsala, 1956), p. 95. The bagpipe appears as the devil's instrument in folk tradition; cf. Oskar Dahnhardt, *Natursagen* (Leipzig, 1909-12), I, 189.

has nothing to do with the desire to give frivolous entertainment. The humor which we see, and which the pilgrims see, is rooted in the same magnificently comic situation. But this humor, viewed from outside the fictive world of the pilgrimage, carries a different and deeper burden of meaning from that which it has for the pilgrims. When Chaucer retracted "the tales of Canterbury, thilke that sownen into synne," he may have had the *Miller's Tale* in mind. Apparently in his old age, he thought the risks of such a tale too great. They need not be so for the discriminating reader. Chaucer's John, Absolon, and Nicholas and the justice which they meet give one at least as clear a picture of the nature of avarice, pride, and lechery as do the more melodramatic beasts whom Dante encounters at the beginning of his journey down from the woods of error.

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