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THE *REEVE'S TALE*: CHAUCER'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

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That Oswald tells the *Reeve's Tale* to avenge himself on Robin is evident. However, the method by which he does so is not so evident.[1] His technique is to disguise revenge as justice: by cloaking personal retribution in the garment of objective moral comment, he is able to pretend that he is concerned not so much with retaliation as with evil itself. In doing this, he makes a mistake. The morality which he announces is more applicable to him than to his victim, and the opposition between what he says and what Chaucer says through him constitutes the real comic center of his tale's meaning. This meaning is most evident when the sections in the *General Prologue* and in the Miller's prologue and tale which treat of him are taken together with his own tale as a comic unit. Each of these sections dramatizes an aspect of his capacity to combine the roles of just man and avenger; each moves progressively toward a more complete revelation of his methods in combining the roles; and all concern themselves with the anomalous position of the judge who unwittingly judges himself by his own principles.

In the *General Prologue,* Chaucer begins his portrait of Oswald almost in the vein of caricature, introducing him as a "sclendre

[1] For some discussion along these lines, see Charles A. Owen Jr., "Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: Aesthetic Design in Stories of the First Day," *ES*, XXXV (1954), 54-56.

colerik man" (I, 587),[2] as one of those pinched and rigorous souls whose physical condition indicated a tendency toward hasty vengeance.[3] His moral qualities support the physical description and indicate the vehemence with which he has succumbed to his physical tendencies:

> Ther nas baillif, ne hierde, nor oother hyne,
> That he ne knew his sleighte and his covyne;
> They were adrad of hym as of the deeth. (I, 603-05)

Oswald's job required the opposite kind of person, the person of just and moderate temperament. The medieval reeve occupied a quasi-judicial position. He was the primary agent of the lord in the administering of economic and social justice to the peasants.[4] While Oswald lacks the objective spirit of the good reeve, he knows enough about handling the accounts and measuring out his lord's property to appear just before the lord and his auditors. For thievery and blackmail, he receives naive thanks from his superiors and silent fear from his inferiors. There is no justice in the world

[2] *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1957). All quotations and citations are from this edition.

[3] Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (New York, 1926), pp. 72-73.

[4] H. S. Bennett, "The Reeve and the Manor," *EHR*, XLI (1926), 362-65. The word "reeve" may refer either to the "praepositus" or to the "ballivus"; cf. *NED*, VIII, 333 [Reeve, 2, (1419 entry)] and F. H. Cripps-Day, *The Manor Farm* (London, 1931), p. 68, n. 2. Chaucer's Reeve has duties which closely correspond to those usually assigned to the "ballivus" in that he deals directly with the lord and has control over both the manor farm and its villeins; the "praepositus" seems to have had control of certain aspects of the care of the fields but his responsibility for handling the personal and social problems of the estate seems to have been rather limited. Cf. *Fleta*, ed. H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles (London, 1955), II, 244-47; 248-51; "Seneschaucie," *Walter of Henley's Husbandry*, ed. Elizabeth Lamond (London, 1890), 89-103; Robinson, 665. Oswald probably combines the duties of "praepositus" and "ballivus"; few estates had a full complement of officials. The judicial duties of the "ballivus" are described in the *Fleta* (II, 244-45) and "Seneschaucie" (pp. 91, 101). Interestingly, the *Fleta* asserts that the "ballivus" should not be a vindictive judge and that he should know the more common laws ["... qui de communioribus legibus pro tanto officio sufficienter se cognoscat et quod sit ita justus quod ob vindictam vel cupiditatem non querat versus tenentes domini vel aliquos sibi subditos occasiones iniustas per quas destrui debeant seu graviter amerciari." (*Fleta*, II, 244; cf. 245)]. Oswald indicates his knowledge "de communioribus legibus" by citing legal maxims on two occasions (I, 3919, 4181); cf. *infra* n. 15 and n. 19.

of which he is the real governor and no prospect of it. Usually, the medieval reeve could not live in such a realm beyond justice. Theoretically, he was restrained by a close, yearly, legalistic scrutiny in the form of an annual audit. The audit required that he give a complete accounting for his handling of his lord's goods, money, land, and work days. Every item in the account was closely scrutinized, and the "auditors cross question[ed] the Reeve concerning any item which seem[ed] unusual, and caus[ed] him to deliver up to them the evidences as detailed in the compotus."[5] If he had been dishonest or if he were found carelessly in arrears, he came in for the harshest penalties.[6] Oswald is subject to such an audit. He has managed to escape it; embezzlement has befuddled his auditors and blackmail intimidated those who might testify against him. Oswald's art is the art of escaping justice himself while imposing his version of it on his underlings. In the *General Prologue,* Chaucer does not tell exactly how his character manages this art, but he does hint at the genius of his success in it when he describes him as appearing like a *priest* with shaven head and friar-tucked coat (I, 590, 621).[7]

In the Miller's prologue and tale, the Reeve appears as both *just man* and *knave;* something of the method by which he combines the two is adumbrated. Oswald's first address to his fellow pilgrims is the just man's appeal to piety:

> . . . Stynt thy clappe!
> Lat be thy lewed dronken harlotrye.
> It is a synne and eek a greet folye
> To apeyren any man, or hym defame,
> And eek to bryngen wyves in swich fame.
> Thou mayst ynogh of othere thynges seyn. (I, 3144-49)

The situation is opportune. Robin, while drunk, has promised to tell a tale (probably a nasty one) about a carpenter, his wife, and a clerk; this is the proper place for his rival to call his priestly presence to the defense of decency, justice, and the good name of womanhood. Critics have suggested that Robin was Oswald's

[5] H. S. Bennett, pp. 364-65; cf. *Walter of Henley,* pp. 33, 63-67, 102-03, 107-09, 131; *Fleta,* 247.

[6] N. Denholm-Young, *Seignorial Administration in England* (Oxford, 1927), pp. 151 ff. *et passim*; cf. Bennett, p. 365.

[7] Cf. Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, 1957), p. 200.

servant in his less palmy carpentering days, that he has told his tale before, and that he would have his audience believe that there is in it a kernel of ribald biographical truth about his former employer. This interpretation may account for Robin's immediate hint as to the private *raison d'être* behind his rival's homiletic warning (I, 3151 ff.), a hint which also makes it quite clear that Oswald is the butt of the joke.[8] But Robin's answer also functions to demonstrate that the Reeve is a pilgrim whose moral exertions are not always entirely disinterested. They are no more disinterested when Oswald tells his tale.

A rather different aspect of the avenger-just man complex is explored in the *Miller's Tale.* Here Robin's joke on his rival—his insinuation that Oswald is a cuckold—has in it little enough of the unique; any drunk man might tell it of any husband. What individualizes the joke is Robin's picture of John as deceived *primarily* because he is naive enough to believe that a second flood can come in which he will be appointed second Noah. This part of the joke does appear to have some relevance to Oswald, even the aged Oswald who walks among the Canterbury pilgrims. Noah was a carpenter in the building of the ark and a farmer after the flood (so the Bible has it and so the medieval illuminations of the Noah story pictured him);[9] Oswald likewise was a carpenter for a time,

[8] Cf. Robert A. Pratt, "Was Robyn the Miller's Youth Misspent," *MLN*, LIX (1949), 47-49.

[9] This is, of course, obvious in the Biblical account, but Noah's two occupations were especially emphasized by the illustrations of Noah in the psalters and picture Bibles of the later middle ages, particularly those of France and England; for published examples of illuminations showing Noah as a carpenter, see L. Delisle and Paul Meyer, *L'Apocalypse en Francais au XIII^e Siècle* (Paris, 1901), plate XII; *Burlington Fine Arts Exhibition Manuscripts* (London, 1908), plate 45; *Walpole Society Annual*, XI (1922-23), plate IV; William Owen Hassall, *The Holkham Bible Picture Book* (London, 1954), plate fol. 7vo; Montague Rhodes James, *Illustrations of the book of Genesis* (Oxford, 1921) plate fol. 2b; George Warner, *Queen Mary's Psalter* (London, 1912), plates 9-10; Sydney Cockerell, *Old Testament Illustrations of the Middle of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1927), fol. 2b; Alexander de LaBorde, *La Bible Moralisée* (Paris, 1911), plate 9; Montague Rhodes James, *The Bohun Manuscripts* (Oxford, 1936), plate XXV(a), plate I(c); Henry Martin, *Les Principaux Manuscrits à Peintures de la Bibliotheque de l'Arsenal à Paris* (Paris, 1928), plate XXIV; cf. Louis Reau, *Iconographie de l'Art Chrétien* (Paris, 1956), II, 104, 106-107. Reau points out that Noah was also regarded as the patron

perhaps for the period before the "flood" which Robin describes, and afterward he became a farmer. Beyond this incidental relevance in the image, however, there may be the more serious suggestion that Carpenter John (or Oswald) is rather too ready to believe himself the agent of God's judgment,[10] and this image not only fills out the chain relating to the Reeve's priestly posture but also perhaps suggests a perspective from which the *Reeve's Tale* may be viewed.

The priestly attitude is even more fully developed in the prologue to the *Reeve's Tale* where one is offered the first good opportunity to see the old man acting simultaneously in both of his roles as just man and avenger. The dramatic situation at the beginning of the prologue is rather complicated. The Miller's tale has clearly made a hit with its audience; whether the success of its conclusion derives from its pure comic virtuosity or from its ridicule of Oswald, Chaucer does not make clear. In any case, Oswald clearly knows how to take an insult when one is in the offing. He has never been trumped by auditor, lord, or underling, his house on the green is well shaded, and he does not take indignity lightly. He immediately sets about building his rhetorical defenses for the reprisal. Calling again on the piety with which he endeavored to forestall the Miller's story, he begins by asserting that he will meet the challenge on the highest possible ground, foregoing both retaliation and bawdry:

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patriarch of carpenters. For Noah as a "farmer" or husbandman, see, Hassall, *op. cit.*, plate fol. 8v-9; Cockerell, *op. cit.*, fol. 3a; James, *Bohun Manuscripts*, plate XXV (a), plate I (i); Léopold Delisle, *Recherches sur la librairie de Charles V* (Paris, 1907), plate XXIII(2); Henri Omont, *Psautier illustré* . . . (Paris, 1906), plate 2; Herrade de Landsberg, *Hortus deliciarum* . . . (Strasbourg, 1901), plate IX (2); cf. Reau, II, 112-113. Robin's treatment of his rival, carpenter-turned-"husbandman," as a village Noah is firmly rooted in the conventions of medieval manuscript illumination. I am indebted to the *Index of Christian Art* and to Miss Rosalie Greene for assistance in locating the Noah illuminations cited above: further examples of illuminations in the same iconographic tradition may be found in the *Index* files. The above are all late medieval works from France and England. Cf. Kelsie B. Harder, "Chaucer's Use of the Mystery Plays in the *Miller's Tale*," *MLQ*, XVII (1956), 193-198.

[10] The Deluge is obviously a judgment of God upon a sinful world, but it had a particularly immediate appeal for medieval people insofar as it was regarded as a typological anticipation of God's final judgment. Cf. Reau, II, 106.

> "So theek," quod he, "ful well koude I yow quite
> With blerying of a proud milleres ye
> If that me liste speke of ribaudye." (I, 3864-66)

His succeeding remarks (I, 3864-3898) one can read in various ways; Harry Bailey reads them as a preachment (I, 3901-04), and they certainly are that, but they are a preachment with a personal purpose. Through them, Oswald intends to justify his refusal to meet the Miller on his own ground; at the same time, he wishes to communicate to his audience, with a kind of conspicuous piety, his humility and recognition of the liabilities of his condition. The rhetorical sense of the speech is as important as its strict logical sense; this sense, in paraphrase, might go as follows: "It hardly befits an old man, white of hair and withered of body, to prattle bawdry. Old men have either lost the desire for sexual satisfaction or, worse, retained the desire and lost their ability. When they engage in bawdy talk, they are only engaging in a kind of vicarious boasting which is unaccompanied by a real capacity to perform. Old age is an age beset with 'avauntyng, liyng, anger, covetise' (I, 3884). Implicitly, it is the period when a boasting retaliatory tale would come most naturally; but it is also a period characterized by chattering over past wretchedness and of looking forward to future senility. Bawdry would only add silliness to such natural wretchedness." As Oswald asserts, old men generally "hoppen alwey whil the world wol pipe" (I, 3876), surrendering to every temptation which the world places before their senescent desire; hence, their folly and evil. This liability Oswald insinuates that he wishes to avoid and so he refuses to lower himself to his opponent's level. His is the humble heart, like Uriah Heep's. His confession is, however, rather consistently a generic confession of the typical sins of old men [Oswald uses the collective "we" when talking about the moral evils of age (I, 3875-3887)];[11] the speech can in no sense be regarded as an act of personal contrition. For instance, when the speech says that old men hop while the world pipes, its speaker is proclaiming his desire not to hop while the

[11] (→ George R. Coffman, "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer. Some Literary Affinities and Adventures of an Idea," *Speculum*, IX (1934), 249-77. My interpretation of the Reeve's confession differs in some points from that suggested by Professor Coffman; however, it depends on his insistence that the confession dramatizes conventional Horatian conceptions of old age.

world pipes, particularly while the one sinful representative of the world who pipes the bagpipes at the head of the Canterbury pilgrims plays the tune.[12] And when he distinguishes himself from other old men by asserting his virility ["And yet ik have alwey a coltes tooth" (I, 3888)],[13] he not only denies that the heart of his confession is personally relevant to himself, but he also uses it to assert his immunity to that frailty of age which might make Robin's joke against him as a cuckold probable. All in all, the sermon develops a rhetoric of ingratiation which first calls the pilgrims' attention to the Miller's presumptuous and wildly aggressive animality and then directs their attention to the Reeve's own holiness and quiet sense of his own potential moral limitations and liabilities. Nowhere does the Reeve more subtly offer himself as one who is just and holy.

As it turns out, Oswald does speak of ribaldry and blear a proud miller's eye, but he does this in a way which suggests that he does so with a *difference*. First, Harry Bailey urges him to quit preaching and get on with his tale; he has a push behind him. Secondly, he bases his tale, as he would have his audience believe, not on frustration or the desire for retaliation but on sound legal

[12] Bagpipes are, in medieval art and poetry, associated with bestiality and *luxuria;* in some contexts, they are phallic symbols and their music is an incitement to concupiscence. Hence, they are sometimes played by figures who function as tempters. Cf. George Fenwick Jones, "Wittenweiler's *Becki and the Medieval Bagpipe*," *JEGP*, XLVIII (1949), 209-28; Folke Nordstrom, *Virtues and Vices on the Fourteenth Century Corbels in the Choir of Uppsala Cathedral* (Uppsala, 1956), p. 95. The devils play bagpipes while Adam and Eve fall in an illumination of the *City of God* (Hofer Collection, MS 17, fol. xlv^{r}). In the "Triumph of the Church" mural in Santa Maria Novella (14th. C.), a bagpiper leads the wanderers in the worldly pleasure garden away from the heavenly city and toward the temptations of luxury. Oswald would appear to be interpreting Robin's piping in this general tradition, as a temptation to worldliness and an incitement to prurient behavior. → Edward A. Block, "Chaucer's Millers and their Bagpipes," *Speculum*, XXIX (1954), 239-43.

[13] I interpret this passage as meaning, "In amorous matters, I'm still fairly frisky," not as saying that Oswald has a young man's desire and no ability: the entries cited by the *NED* tend to support my interpretation. "Coltes tooth" may here be a phallic pun though it is not such a pun in III, 602. The passage may amplify the Noah image since Noah exposed his nakedness when drunk in his vineyard; the conventional illuminations of the episode show Noah with a prominent phallus (*supra*, n. 9). Oswald figuratively bares his nakedness through his indirect bragging.

and moral principles; first, he announces, "Leveful is with force force of-showve" (I, 3912). This principle is one of those legal maxims which the Reeve might have learned in the exercise of the judicial responsibilities of his position.[14] However, the way in which it is used here exhibits something of Oswald's general attitude toward principles and something of his general technique in retaliation. The maxim is included for its persuasiveness and not for its actual relevance to the situation. It actually was never made part of English law; it applied on the Continent only to cases in which the victim defended his person against violent physical attack; and, furthermore, it was specific in its assertion that it could not be used to justify vengeance, particularly vengeance taken after the immediate danger of the assault was past.[15] Oswald uses the rule in a country in which it does not apply, in a figurative struggle to which it does not apply, to justify an "eye for an eye" private revenge which it forbade.

After announcing the rule which allows him to tell the same kind of tale which Robin has told without himself incurring his enemy's kind of moral blame, Oswald next sets before his audience the rule on which his criticism of his rival will be based. This is not a legal idea but one of the preachy moral commandments which Harry Bailey has just discouraged:

> He kan wel in myn eye seen a stalke,
> But in his owene he kan nat seen a balke. (I, 3919-20)

The text has, of course, a Biblical source:

Judge not that ye be not judged, for with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again, and with what judgment you judge, ye shall be

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→ Louis McCorry Myers, "A Line in the Reeve's Prologue," *MLN*, XLIX (1934), 222-26.

[15] The decretals of Gregory IX assert, "Quam-vis vim vi repellere omnes leges et omnia iura permittunt . . . tamen id debet fieri cum moderamine inculpatae tutelae, non ad sumendam vindictam, sed ad iniuriam propulsandam." Cited Myers, 224. Dame Prudence includes the maxim in her homily against vengeance: "And if ye seye that right axeth a man to defenden violence by violence, and fightyng by fightyng,/certes ye seye sooth, whan the defense is doon anon withouten intervalle or withouten tariyng or delay,/for to deffenden hym and nat for to vengen hym" (VII, 1532-34). Cited Myers, 225.

judged. And why sayst thou to thy brother, Brother, let me draw out the mote which is in thy eye and behold a beam is in thy own eye? (Matthew VII, 1-4) [16]

The story of the mote and the beam, understood at the simplest level, asks that one consider his own gross flaws before he indicts others for venial shortcomings,[17] and this, Oswald asserts, he will show that Robin has not done. Robin was in something of a state when he told his tale; since Oswald himself has so recently appeared to have confessed his own moral liabilities (thus fulfilling the Biblical dictum of Matthew VII requiring one to look to oneself first), he is in a very good position to show how his rival cannot see the "balke" in his eye. He has just plucked his own mote; now he can scratch out his enemy's beam. Robin's grosser sins, his vulgarity, pugnacity, drunkenness, thievery, and presumptuous faith in his wife, are all carefully collected in the *Reeve's Tale's* portrait of Simkin; these are all apparent constituents of Simkin's "beam." But an even bigger part of that beam, Oswald would have his hearers believe, is the arrogant lack of moral self-knowledge, the desire to show up others without seeing himself, which the drunkard who rides at the head of the pilgrims has just exhibited in telling his nasty piece about Carpenter John. The man who sees other motes and not his own beam can be a very comic fellow, and Oswald's characterization of Simkin is a real work of art; an embodiment of the kind of comic hybris and failure of self-knowledge which so often forms the core of great comic characterizations in the drama. Simkin sees offense in every man's address to himself or to his wife, yet sees nothing of the offensiveness of his forestalling insult with a knife. He steals outrageously and does not see that those who endeavor to stop his thievery are playing a respectable game; their effrontery enrages him. Ignorant as dirt, he judges two Cambridge clerks for fools without evidence or, perhaps, from the slight evidence furnished by their northern dialects:

> **Al this nys doon but for a wyle.**
> **They wene that no man may hem bigyle,**
> **But by my thrift, yet sal I blere hir ye,**
> **For al the sleighte in hir philosophye.**

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[16] I quote from the Douay version.

[17] St. Jerome, "Commentariorum in Evangelium Matthaei," XXVI, 46; Bruno Astensis, "Commentaria in Matthaeum," CLXV, 126.

> The more queynte crekes that they make,
> The moore wol I stele whan I take.
> In stide of flour yet wol I yeve hem bren.
> 'The gretteste clerkes been noght wisest men,'
> As whilom to the wolf thus spak the mare.
> Of al hir art I counte noght a tare.
> (I, 4047-56; cf. I, 4095 ff., I, 4120 ff.)

When he steals from the clerks, he sees his action as funny rather than evil; when his deceptions turn back on him, the game seems no longer comic (I. 4268 ff.). Medieval exegetes described the sin of the "beam" as involving arrogance on the part of the man who would judge his fellows, but they also described it as including malice, the malice of the bully who points out flaws in others to humiliate them rather than to reform them.[18] Simkin's judgments of the clerks proceed from a similar kind of unmotivated malice, a malice which expresses itself in his verbal attempts to humiliate them as well as in the trickery of his loosing their horses and stealing their grain. From every point of view, Simkin is an embodiment of the sin of the beam. One might argue that malice and vindictiveness are the rule of life in the *Reeve's Tale* since the clerks also avenge themselves on Simkin. However, the clerks judge the Miller as guilty only of those wrongs of which he is actually guilty (I, 4183-84); they plan their revenge after they have been wronged, not before. Moreover, Alain, like Oswald, bases his revenge on a legal principle, "Gif a man in a point be agreved, / . . . in another he sal be releved" (I, 4180-82), a principle which in its logic is very like that on which Oswald bases his tale (I, 3919-20).[19] Alain even pays the Miller's daughter, for her gracious-

[18] St. Jerome, "Commentariorum in Evangelium Matthaei," *PL*, XXVI, 46-47; St. Augustine, "De Sermone Domine in Monte," *PL*, XXXIV, 1298-99; Bede, "In Matthaei Evangelium Expositio," *PL*, XCII, 36; Rabanus Maurus, "Commentariorum in Matthaeum," *PL*, CVII, 841-42; "Glossa Ordinaria," *PL*, CXIV, 108; Bruno Astensis, "Commentaria in Matthaeum," *PL*, CLXV, 126; Anselm of Laon, "Enarrationes in Matthaeum," *PL*, CLXII, 1314.

[19] The other "point" in which a man should be relieved (I, 4182) probably implies a bawdy pun. The marginal gloss of MS. Ha notes the Latin maxim which is the source of Aleyn's phrase: "Qui in uno gravatur in alio debet relevari" (Robinson, II, 688). The tag occurs in the medieval glosses on sections of the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* which are concerned with suits for the recovery of stolen goods [*Corpus Iuris Civilis* (Leon, 1627), I, Sig. P2^{v}, Sig. Rr2^{v}; V, Sig. G3^{r}]. The maxim is used to explain passages

ness, with a "romantic" promise before he leaves her (I, 4236-39).[20] Thus, Oswald makes the justice of his opponent's fictive enemies look both as harmless and as much like his own as possible while the malice of his fictional opponent is utterly without redeeming qualities.

The *Reeve's Tale* not only exhibits Robin for what the Reeve would have his hearers believe that he is; it also punishes him vicariously. It makes use of a three part retaliatory technique: first, it catalogues Simkin's faults: his pride, jealousy, social pretensions, and thievery (I, 3920-4001); then, it systematically exhibits each of these faults in a dramatic action, the pride in the Miller's vindictive treatment of the clerks, the jealousy and social pretensions in his rage at the seduction of his wife and daughter (I, 4270-72), and the thievery in the complex plot through which he takes the half bushel of wheat. Finally, the ending of the tale carefully executes justice on Simkin for each fault (I, 4313-21): for his pride and pugilistic pretenses, he is "wel ybete"; for his thievery, he loses the grain and the payment for his hospitality; and for his jealousy and pretensions with respect to his wife and daughter, he is paid with their "swyving." An even-handed justice reigns in the tale, the kind of even-handed justice which is evoked in the balanced maxims which begin and end the work and which Alain uses to justify his administration of justice:

> "Leveful is with force force of-showve." (I, 3912)
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> "Gif a man in a point be agreved,
> . . . In another he sal be releved." (I, 4180-82)

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which require that a convicted robber return to the person he has injured either whatever goods he has stolen plus threefold their value or otherwise simply fourfold their value; cf. *Inst.*, IV, tit. ii. Aleyn is presumably getting his fourfold by "swyving" the Miller's daughter. However, Aleyn's application of the principle, though apparently both comically and legally appropriate, actually constitutes a perversion of principle similar to Oswald's handling of "vim vi repellere." Both Continental and English law prohibited Aleyn's kind of resort to private justice. The maxim may appear in other sources, but it probably has generally the same force which it has in the Justinian glosses. I am indebted to Professor Bowsky of Nebraska University for assistance in locating the "source" of Aleyn's maxim.

[20] → R. E. Kaske, "An Aube in the *Reeve's Tale*," *ELH*, XXVI (1959), 304 *et passim*, 295-310.

> "Hym thar nat wene wel that yvele dooth":
> A gylour shal hymself bigyled be. (I, 4320-21)

This even-handed justice may be summarized in a phrase which comes from the same Biblical context as the Reeve's text: "For with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again, and with what judgment ye judge ye shall be judged." Simkin gets the measure which he has meted and is judged with the judgment with which he has judged. His judgment is harsher than the specific crime which he has committed against the clerks, for he loses everything which gives him his sense of dignity and all for the stealing of a half bushel of grain. However, it should be remembered that the taking of the grain is but one in a series of crimes which he has committed and that he has no will to reform but rather to steal the more outrageously as time and circumstances allow (I, 3998 ff., 4050 ff.).[21] The point of the punishment is that Simkin is judged and punished at the end of his tale by the logic of events in exactly the way in which he has sought to judge and mistreat others: in a merciless way. He gets the kind of justice he metes, a merciless kind, and a quantity of this kind proportionate to his willing, not to his accomplishing. Exactly in this way did medieval exegetes understand the principle of "measure for measure." The principle was not felt to imply that a man would get from God what he had coming to him in the mechanical "eye for an eye" fashion of the Old Law, but that the rigor of God's judgment of man would be proportionate to the charity which motivated man's judgment of his fellows; the comment of the *Ordinary Gloss* on Matthew VII: 1-2 casts a good deal of light both on the logic of the action of the *Reeve's Tale* as well as on its setting:

> With the will in which you do good, with that will you will be forgiven; and with the will in which you do evil, with that will you will be punished. The passage is concerned with those cases in which we either judge rashly and offend or act rightly and are excused; and, therefore, it adds, "With what measure." Those persons who have willed to sin endlessly justly get an endless punishment even though their actual sins are limited; those who have been merciless judges will be judged mercilessly. "With what measure" refers to the principle that one can measure in the same measuring vessel two commodities, such as wheat and barley; moreover, one can also measure one quantity of this and another of that, for example, a

[21] Simkin may be guilty of obstinacy and impenitence, both fairly serious evils; cf. Peter Lombard, "Sententiarum," *PL*, CXCII, 754-55.

hundred units of the one and one unit of the other. God acts thus, and rightly so, when he deals with man for eternity. That wrong or evil which a man performs is the cause for his incurring the punishment which is the proper price. Consequently, he who eternally wishes to enjoy sinning justly causes his own eternal punishment; he who has a will to sin endlessly will have endless torment.[22]

Simkin's punishment is poetically proportioned to his will to do evil and not to his specific mistreatment of the clerks. The *Glossa* gives the principle of measure for measure a real embodiment in terms of measures of grain, and Oswald does much the same thing in his tale. When Simkin measures grain, he measures it as unjustly as he measures men. His punishment as a miller is to have the same measure of grain (a half bushel) exacted from him which he has exacted from the clerks but exacted in a more refined form; his punishment as a man is to have the same merciless "measure" of justice visited upon him which he has visited upon others; since his has been the greater will to evil, his is the greater price by far. Chaucer, and Oswald, have seen to it that the world in which the tale is set and the logic of its moral justice are inextricably related; the measure of grain suggests the measure of justice, and the mill setting itself suggests certain Biblical contexts where mills and judgment are related.[23] That the action of the tale is deliberately stylized to embody the principle of measure for measure can be more readily seen if one compares the tale with its probable French sources; the French sources include neither the Biblical nor the legal maxims which suggest the

[22] *Glossa Ordinaria,* CXIV, 107-108; The Reeve's own job, like the Miller's, required constant attention to the measuring of grain (I, 593-603; cf. *Fleta,* II, 255; *Walter of Henley,* pp. 17, 109).

[23] *Matthew* XXIV: 41 (cf. XXIV, 35-44). The mill which is visited with judgment is commonly taken as a symbol for the active life or for the life preoccupied with temporal matters. Cf. Anselm of Laon, "Enarrationes in Matthaeum," *PL,* CLXII, 1456; Bede, "In Matthaeii Evangelium Expositio," *PL,* XCII, 105; Rabanus Maurus, "Comment in Matthaeum," *PL,* CVII, 1007; "Glossa Ordinaria," *PL,* CXIV, 163; Ludolphus of Saxony, *Vita Jesu Christi,* ed. L. M. Rigollot (Paris, 1870), III, 336. The millstone of *Apoc.* XVIII: 21 was commonly associated with the judgment of God on those given over to *temporalia;* cf. Pseudo-Augustine, "In B. Joannis Apocalypsim Expositio," *PL,* XXXV, 2446; Rupert of Deutz, "Comment in Apocalypsim," *PL,* CLXIX, 1156; Pierre Bersuire, "Moralitates," *Opera Omnia* (Cologne, 1730-31), I, 243.

principle nor are they ordered in terms of such principles. They do not include the three part pattern of describing the miller's vices, exhibiting them, and then punishing them proportionately. Their miller is not pictured as vindictive; his upending at the end of these tales emphasizes the slapstick farce of his downfall rather than the justice which punishes him for his sins and judges him as he has judged.[24] Finally, the French tales do not emphasize *measures* of grain but sacks.

What the Reeve does is to preach a bawdy exemplum in which he displays Robin as a man who endeavors to pluck other's motes before his own beam and who, as a consequence, has doomed himself to be judged with his own kind of rigorous judgment. Through his fiction, he administers justice to Robin as if he had the monopoly over some species of absolute justice. Through it, he exhibits how he keeps down those underlings who might expose him. But, through it, ironically he also justifies his being portrayed as priest and Noah *manqueé*. He has identified his purposes with the purposes of God and persuaded himself that his causes, right or wrong, are right. Hence, he can bring down something like the "wrath of God" on his opponents, whatever their cause against him. This he does in his tale.

Though he manages to present the picture of a Robin who is cruelly vindictive and justly punished, the accuracy of that picture is not at all evident. It is not clear that Robin was judging Oswald for any moral fault when he told his tale; it seems more likely that he was only having a little drunken fun at the old fellow's expense. Yet, Oswald, by changing Christ's question in Matthew VII ("Why sayst thou . . . let me draw out the mote which is in thy eye and behold a beam is in thy own eye?") into an assertion (I, 3919-20), judges his rival for having made a judgment and so violates his premise in the asserting. Robin does have real flaws; Chaucer observes them, but one can perhaps best see how Oswald treats those flaws by laying Chaucer's portrait of Robin side by side with Oswald's fictional version of him:

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[24] Cf. W. F. Bryan and Germain Dempster, *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Chicago, 1941), pp. 124-47; Germaine Dempster, "On the Source of the *Reeve's Tale*," *JEGP*, XXIX (1930), 473- → Walter M. Hart, "The Reeve's Tale: A Comparative Study of Chaucer's Narrative Art," *PMLA*, XXIII (1908), 1-44.

The Millere was a stout carl for the nones;
Ful byg he was of brawn, and eek of bones.
That proved wel, for over al ther he cam
At wrastlynge he wolde have alwey the ram.
He was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre;
There was no dore that he nolde heve of harre,
Or breke it at a rennyng with his heed.
His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,
And therto brood, as though it were a spade.
Upon the cop right of his nose he hade
A werte, and theron stood a toft of herys,
Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys;
His nosethirles blake were and wyde.
A swerd and bokeler bar he by his syde.
His mouth as greet was as a great forneys.
He was an janglere and a goliardeys,
And that was moost of synne and harlotries.
Wel koude he stelen corn and tollen thries;
And yet he hadde a thombe of gold, pardee.
A whit cote and a blew hood wered he.
A baggepipe wel coude he blowe and sowne,
And therwithal he broghte us out of towne. (I, 545-66)

A millere was ther dwellynge many a day.
As any pecok he was proud and gay.
Pipen he koude and fisshe, and nettes beete,
And turne coppes, and wel wrastle and sheete;
Ay by his belt be baar a long panade,
And of a swerd ful trenchant was the blade.
A joly poppere baar he in his pouche;
Ther was no man, for peril, dorste hym touche.
A Sheffeld thwitel baar he in his hose.
Round was his face, and camus was his nose;
As piled as an ape was his skulle.
He was a market-betere atte fulle.
Ther dorste no wight hand upon hym legge
That he ne swoor he shold anon abegge.
A theef he was for sothe of corn and mele,
And that a sly, and usaunt for to stele. (I, 3925-40)

Chaucer's style is matter-of-fact, beginning with a description of Robin's appearance and proceding to a matter-of-fact picture of his character; the Reeve's is, as Charles Muscatine has aptly labelled it, naturalistic.[25] It alternates between reductive realism and abusive caricature. Simkin's ugliness is apelike and contemptible. The sword that Robin bears by his side is parodied grossly by

[25] Muscatine, 197 ff.

the armory of knives and swords that Simkin bears. Robin's physical prowess becomes, in the portrait of Simkin, a manifestation of boorishness; his confidence in his wife, the confidence of the fool. That the rest of the tale is an equally cruel exposure of all of Robin's real and imagined flaws, one can have little doubt. The exposure has no regenerative purpose. Its design is purely to destroy whatever integrity the drunken Miller may have in the eyes of his fellow pilgrims.

If Oswald indicts Robin primarily for a judgment which he does not make and if the rest of his satire is also merciless, then it is Oswald who is the merciless judge and not his rival. Unknowingly he parodies himself in parodying Simkin as the man whose comic flaw is his incapacity to see the beam in his own eye while he sees the mote in the eyes of others. And when, in the ending of the tale, he shows the merciless miller as, likewise, measured mercilessly, he sets forth the principles of his own doom by promising to himself as rigorous judge a judgment as merciless as that which he brings down on his victims. The Reeve has not really created for himself a realm beyond justice; he ends his tale by indicating his liability to final justice, if not in the temporal world then in the eternal. The true greatness of the comedy of the Reeve's tale is that the Reeve is the *guilor* who is ultimately beguiled and beguiled in the profound sense that he does not recognize his own liability to the justice which he asserts for others.[26] His is the kind of comedy which makes Troilus laugh his bitter laughter at the denouement of his tragedy. It is the comedy of utter moral self-deception.[27]

[26] Chaucer may be drawing on the connotations which the "gilor bigiled" maxim has in the *Romaunt of the Rose* (5759) where it is directed against hypocritical preachers who preach to gain honor, prestige, or wealth and so deceive themselves in that their preaching, though it profits others, destroys their own souls. The Reeve's exemplum has something of this quality.

[27] The serious moral implications of Chaucer's fabliaux have not been sufficiently studied, perhaps because Chaucer warns that one should not "maken ernest of game" (I, 3186). However, Chaucer is here speaking in the person of the pilgrim reporter who merely repeats what the Miller and the Reeve have said. This fictive Chaucer is a deliberately naive guide to the meaning of the pilgrimage and its tales. To accept his critical judgment here would be like determining on the basis of the *Thopas* that, since the pilgrim poet could only tell jingles, Chaucer was no poet; cf. → E. T. Donaldson, "Chaucer, the Pilgrim," *PMLA*, LXIX (1954), 928-36.

Chaucer's problem as a satirist is very like Oswald's. He has to hold the Reeve's kind of person responsible without sentimentality and without abuse. However, whereas the Reeve violates his premise in the asserting and illustrating of it, Chaucer does not. By allowing his character to expose himself, he escapes the necessity for direct authorial judgment. Chaucer does not say, "So-and-so is evil"; he rather implies, "This kind of moral stance leads to these vulnerabilities," and he implies this by creating a world where the principle operates, rather than by asserting it. If his tale is an exemplum, it is not exemplary in any pejorative sense. It does not coerce events to prove a point; rather it perceives the point in the logic of ordinary happenings, down in Breughel's world of village reality. Chaucer's critics pay him a very high compliment when they call the *Reeve's Tale* "realistic." The greatness of the tale lies not only in the realism of its technique but in the morality of that technique; it fulfills, in its very strategy, the moral imperatives which it affirms. It does not judge.

The Reeve is only one of a series of pilgrims who expose their fellows mercilessly; the Summoner, the Friar, the Manciple, all do the same thing. Each provisionally brings himself under the retributive economy which the Reeve so ably dramatizes. But the cruel judgment under which Oswald brings himself and them is not inevitable. His tale also promises, by implication, mercy to the merciful. The quarrel between the Reeve and the Miller comes immediately after the Knight's affirmation of a providential world bound together by love, and the Parson, in asserting that the pilgrimage is part of a pilgrimage to the celestial Jerusalem, presumably is urging the pilgrims toward the love in which that city dwells. By its condemnation of the vindictive man, the *Reeve's Tale* drives men toward a realization of the love to which the Kight and the Parson would draw them. The tale, more than a simple joke, thus takes its place in Chaucer's ordered view of man's moral experience.

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