

## The Portrait, Prologue and Tale of the Reeve

## THE REEVE'S TALE

### Introduction

The Reeve's story is, as he himself says, a retaliatory response to the tale of the Miller. Suspicious mind that he is, he always brings up the rear of the procession of pilgrims so that he can see all the others. Not surprisingly, he suspects that the Miller's tale, in which an old carpenter has been made to look foolish, is directed against himself. He is probably right; for although he is not an old carpenter, he *is* old and has been a carpenter in his earlier years.

The Reeve's bawdy tale follows his sermonizing response to *The Miller's Tale*. The substance of that sermon is in part that old men who are past doing naughty deeds have an ineradicable urge to tell naughty tales. And they have other vices: boastfulness, lying, anger, greed. These are also the vices of the miller and his wife in the tale he is about to tell, a naughty fabliau like the pilgrim Miller's, and told with some of the same "churl's terms," that is, coarse words. The Reeve's tale tells of two young Cambridge students with marked provincial accents who set out to see that the arrogant and dishonest miller who grinds the college wheat does not cheat them. They plan to watch everything he does, but he quietly lets their horse loose, and while they chase it, he and his wife steal part of their flour. Because the students do not catch the horse until near dark, they have to ask the miller for lodging for the night. He agrees (for a fee), and celebrates his victory by getting tipsy. In the course of the night the sleepless students get their revenge on the miller by entertaining his wife and daughter in bed.

Critics have busied themselves in finding differences between these first two tales, mostly to the greater or lesser derogation of the Reeve's. Some even profess to find the Reeve's yarn "darker," "more corrosive," "destructive," making too much earnest of game again, as is the wont of scholars who fail to notice that in the sexual couplings or "swivings" of the tale a good time seems to be had by all. Charges of rape move the story out of the region of bedroom farce where it belongs and into that of realistic crime where it does not. The main victim is the burly miller, whose only physical "punishment" is to miss the fun, and get a bloody nose and a lump on his thick head. The carpenter in *The Miller's Tale* falls two floors and breaks his arm. If one wants to be "realistic" about which tale is "darker" or "more destructive," one might ask a carpenter how he would ply his trade with a broken arm.

But one should not get too realistic. "How many children had Malin McMiller?" is not an appropriate question to ask of a fabliau. All the pilgrims, Chaucer tells us, laughed at the pilgrim Miller's yarn. At the end of the Reeve's tale, we are told, the Cook cannot contain his

glee, and we assume that the Cook's hearer-response represents that of most of the pilgrims as it does ours, except the most delicately sensitive.

I have said that the Miller's story seems to be a parody of the tale of the Knight which precedes it. There is no question that in its turn, it provokes the response of the Reeve, which in turn induces the unfinished tale of the Cook. In this, the first four-tale Fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer makes a very successful effort to relate each tale after the first to what has gone before it, something he does again more than once in the later tales. And very satisfying this narrative architecture can be.

The tales of the Miller and the Reeve illustrate what wonderful variations can be wrought on essentially the same material by a crafty artist. In each case a jealous husband is cuckolded by students ("clerks") whom he has let into his house, and he gets physically hurt as well. Both husbands are jealous, but John the carpenter's jealousy is simply stated as the inevitable feeling of a "senex amans," a silly old man who has married a much younger woman. By contrast, the possessiveness of Simon the Miller, which is dwelt on at humorous length, threatens not the happiness of his wife, but the life and limb of would-be flirts, as he struts before his "lady" on Sundays with an armory of swords and knives to protect her "honor" and his. She is proudly the possession of the proud miller, unlike Alison, the unwilling captive of an old carpenter.

The miller's pride is comic, of course, especially for what it consists in — the wife's "noble" lineage: she is the bastard daughter of the local priest! And parents and grandparent have no end of ambition for their (grand)daughter whose agricultural charms are painted in a few swift strokes; she is "beef to the heels," as James Joyce would put it, but she has nice hair! There is small-time, small-town snobbery in 14th-century Trumpington as later in turn-of-the-century Dublin: always tuppence-halfpenny looking down on tuppence. But Chaucer makes it a source of outright humor rather than pity, pathos or scalding satire. The miller and his clerk-begotten wife think themselves and their child so much superior to their neighbors that they have plans to marry the girl into the aristocracy, as is appropriate for a daughter of Holy Church and the exalted House of Simkin!

In some ways the student-clerks would be considered their social superiors (the priest who fathered the miller's wife is superior because he *is* a clerk), but the miller and his wife think themselves superior in some ways to *these* clerks who are from an obscure town in the north of England and who betray their origins in a provincial rustic accent and usage—features of speech which Chaucer takes pains to depict as he does nowhere else in the Tales. (The details of the students' dialect speech will be pointed out in the glosses to the text).

These unsophisticated clerks may have heard lectures on philosophy or law, but Simon and his wife have studied Applied Economics: How to Take Friends and Fleece the People; How to Divert the Attention of the Client; How to Conceal the Skim off the Top; How to make the Client pay for his Fleecing, etc. But they were absent for the lecture on Keeping Sober until the Deal is Complete. Hence the failure to realize that if you get drunk on a combination of ale and victory over the book-learned, you will have no control of the two-legged stallions who will behave like the four-legged stallion which you released earlier to run after the mares in the fen. (It is not accidental that the stallion is an old symbol of unbridled lust). How ironically true the wife's words to the students at that point will prove to be later:

*She said "Alas! Your horse goes to the fen  
 With wildē mares as fast as he may go.  
 Unthank [bad luck] come on his hand that bound  
           him so  
 And he that better should have knit the rein.*

Indeed.

And if either of these lusty young males knows how to compose a rustic aubade (a poem of farewell after a night of love) it will not matter that it is spoken in the accents of Northumbria not of Provence. The grateful female will respond by helping to recoup material losses. One of the clerks does know how, and so they both return to Cambridge qualified to give lectures on "Using your knowledge of literary conventions to best the rustic aristocracy for fun and profit."

Their knowledge of natural philosophy does not allow them to take up the Miller's taunting challenge to expand the size of the bedroom in order to avoid proximity with the Miller's more private and prized possessions, his wife and daughter; but when that very proximity expands their erotic imaginings, the knowledge of the philosophy of law comes in useful; it provides for Alan a legal theory to justify his urge for sexual relief. No matter if it is a real legal maxim or just a maxim for the moment; it is convincing, if you want to be convinced:

*For, John, there is a lawē that says thus:  
 That if a man in one point be aggrieved,  
 That in another he shall be relieve  
 . . . . .  
 And since I shall have no amendement  
 Against my loss, I will have easement.*

The delicious melding of the legal and sexual meanings of "relieved" and "easement" is like the coupling of Alan and Malin, and shows the value of a university education when one needs a law to justify one's lust. A nice goliardic joke.

The Miller's humiliation at the end is directly related to his absurd pride set out at such length at the beginning, and his reaction is correspondingly grotesque when he finds out what Alan and his daughter have been doing all night: he lets out a howl of rage that his daughter, this highly-descended girl, has been swived by an uplandish clerk with an uncouth accent and no brains; now she is spoiled goods. His delusion of marrying her into "blood of ancestry" is shattered. *Her* ancestral blood is that of her grandmother who has bequeathed to her only a weakness for sweet-talking clerks with a lot of brass.

*Here is the portrait of the Reeve from the General Prologue*

	The REEVÉ was a slender, choleric man. <sup>1</sup>	<i>irritable</i>
	His beard was shaved as nigh as ever he can.	<i>as close</i>
	His hair was by his ears full round y-shorn,	<i>shorn, cut</i>
590	His top was dockéd like a priest befor.	<i>shaved ... in front</i>
	Full longé were his leggés and full lean	
	Y-like a staff; there was no calf y-seen.	
	Well could he keep a garner and a bin;	<i>granary</i>
	There was no auditor could on him win.	<i>fault him</i>
595	Well wist he by the drought and by the rain	<i>knew</i>
	The yielding of his seed and of his grain.	
	His lordé's sheep, his neat, his dairy,	<i>cattle</i>
	His swine, his horse, his store and his poultry	<i>"horse" is plur</i>
	Was wholly in this Reeve's governing,	
600	And by his covenant gave the reckoning	<i>contract / account</i>
	Since that his lord was twenty years of age.	
	There could no man bring him in árrearáge.	<i>find him in arrears</i>
	There was no bailiff, herd nor other hine	<i>herdsman / worker</i>
	That he ne knew his sleight and his covine.	<i>tricks &amp; deceit</i>
605	They were adread of him as of the death.	<i>the plague</i>

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<sup>1</sup> A reeve was a manager of a country estate.

	His woning was full fair upon a heath:	<i>His dwelling</i>
	With greenè trees y-shadowed was his place.	
	He couldè better than his lord purchase.	
	Full rich he was astoréd privily. <sup>1</sup>	<i>secretly</i>
610	His lord well could he pleasèn subtly	
	To give and lend him of his ownè good, <sup>2</sup>	
	And have a thank and yet a coat and hood.	<i>get thanks</i>
	In youth he learnéd had a good mystér:	<i>trade</i>
	He was a well good wright, a carpentér.	<i>very good craftsman</i>
615	This Reeve sat upon a well good stot	<i>very good horse</i>
	That was a pomely grey, and hightè Scot.	<i>dappled / &amp; called</i>
	A long surcoat of perse upon he had	<i>overcoat of blue</i>
	And by his side he bore a rusty blade.	
	Of Norfolk was this Reeve of which I tell	
620	Beside a town men clepèn Baldèswell.	<i>call</i>
	Tuckéd he was, as is a friar, about,	<i>Rope-belted</i>
	And ever he rode the hindrest of our rout.	<i>hindmost / group</i>

*The Reeve is the only one with a grumpy response to the Miller's Tale*

3855	When folk had laughèd at this nicè case	
	Of Absalom and handy Nicholas,	
	Diversè folk diversèly they said,	<i>Different</i>
	But for the mostè part they laughed and played,	<i>joked</i>
	Nor at this tale I saw no man him grieve	
3860	But it were only Osèwald the Reeve;	<i>Except for</i>
	Because he was of carpenterè's craft,	<i>trade</i>
	A little ire is in his heart y-left.	<i>anger</i>
	He gan to grouch, and blaméd it a lite.	<i>a little</i>
	"So theek," quod he, "full well could I thee quite" <sup>3</sup>	

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<sup>1</sup> "He had hoarded a lot secretly."

<sup>2</sup> It is not clear whether the Reeve sometimes lends money to his master from his (i.e. the Reeve's) resources or from his lord's own resources but giving the impression that the Reeve is the lender.

- 3865 With blearing of a proud miller's eye  
 If that me list to speak of ribaldry;  
 But I am old. Me list not play for age.
- blinding*  
*If I chose / vulgarity*  
*I don't wish*
- He bemoans the physical and moral frailties of old age*
- Grass time is done; my fodder is now forage.  
 This whitè top writeth my old years.
- 3870 My heart is also mowlèd as my hairs  
 But if I fare as doth an open erse,  
 That ilkè fruit is ever the longer the worse  
 Till it be rotten in mullock or in stree.  
 We oldè men, I dread, so farè we—
- is as withered*  
*Unless / medlar*  
*in compost or straw*
- 3875 Till we be rotten can we not be ripe.  
 We hop always while that the world will pipe,  
 For in our will there sticketh ever a nail  
 To have a hoar head and a greenè tail  
 As hath a leek. For though our might be gone
- play a tune*  
*whit hair*  
*our virility*
- 3880 Our will desireth folly ever in one;  
 For when we may not **do**, then will we **speak**.  
 Yet in our ashes old is fire y-reak.  
 Four gleadès have we that I shall devise:  
 Avaunting, anger, lying, covetise;
- always*  
*raked*  
*hot coals*  
*Boasting / greed*
- 3885 These fourè sparkles 'longen unto Eld.  
 Our oldè limbs may well be un wield,  
 But Will ne shall not failè—that is sooth.  
 And yet I have always a coltè's tooth  
 As many a year as it is passèd hence
- sparks / old age*  
*unwieldy*  
*Desire / truth*  
*youthful taste*
- 3890 Since that my tap of life began to run;  
 For sikerly when I was born, anon  
 Death drew the tap of Life and let it go  
 And ever since has so the tap y-run  
 Till that almost all empty is the tun.
- For, certainly*  
*barrel*
- 3895 The stream of life now droppeth on the chimb,  
 The silly tonguè may well ring and chime  
 Of wretchedness that passèd is full yore.  
 With oldè folk, save dotage is no more."
- rim*  
*long ago*  
*senility*

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*So theek ... forage:* "I declare that I could easily get even with you, and wipe a miller's eye if I chose to tell a coarse tale (*ribaldry*), but I am old, and because of my age I don't care to (*me list not*) jest; green-grass time is over, and all that is left is dying hay (*forage*)."

*The Host's annoyed response to the Reeve's moralizing*

When that our Host had heard this sermoning,  
 3900 He gan to speak as lordly as a king.  
 He said: "What amounteth all this wit?  
 What! Shall we speak all day of Holy Writ! *Scripture*  
 The devil made a Reeve for to preach,  
 Or of a souter, a shipman or a leech! *shoemaker / doctor*  
 3905 Say forth thy tale, and tarry not the time.  
 Lo Deptford, and it is halfway prime. *nearly 9 a.m.*  
 Lo Greenewich, where many a shrew is in. *rogue*  
 It were all time thy talé to begin."

*In response to the Miller's tale the Reeve will tell a tale about a miller*

"Now sirès," quod this Osèwald the Reeve,  
 3910 "I pray you allè that you not you grieve  
 Though I answér and somedeal set his hove, *repay him*  
 For lawful is with forcè force off-shove.  
 This drunken Miller hath y-told us here  
 How that beguilèd was a carpenter,  
 3915 Peráventure in scorn for I am one. *Perhaps*  
 But by your leave, I shall him quit anon. *repay*  
 Right in his churlè's termès will I speak. *coarse language*  
 I pray to God his neckè may to-break.  
 He can well in my eyè see a stalk,  
 3920 But in his own he cannot see a balk. *beam*

**THE REEVE'S TALE***Portrait of a miller: a proud, well-armed thief*

At Trumpington, not far from Cantèbridge, *Cambridge*  
 There goes a brook, and over that a bridge,  
 Upon the whichè brook there stands a mill  
 And this is very sooth that I you tell. *truth*  
 3925 A miller was there dwelling many a day.  
 As any peacock he was proud and gay; *gaudy*  
 Pipen he could, and fish, and nettès beat, *Play bagpipes*  
 And turnè cups and well wrestle and shoot. *And drink (?)*

	And by his belt he bore a long panade,	<i>dagger</i>
3930	And of a sword full trenchant was the blade;	<i>v. sharp</i>
	A jolly popper bore he in his pouch;	<i>short dagger</i>
	There was no man for peril durst him touch.	<i>dared</i>
	A Sheffield thwitel bore he in his hose.	<i>knife</i>
	Round was his face, and camus was his nose;	<i>snub</i>
3935	As piled as an apè was his skull.	<i>As hairless</i>
	He was a market-beater at the full.	<i>a bully indeed</i>
	There durst no wightè hand upon him lay	<i>nobody dared</i>
	That he ne swore he should anon abey. <sup>1</sup>	
	A thief he was forsooth of corn and meal,	<i>indeed</i>
3940	And that a sly, and usant for to steal.	<i>and accustomed</i>
	His name was hoten Deinous Simkin. <sup>2</sup>	<i>was called</i>

*His wife, equally proud*

	A wife he had, y-comen of noble kin:	
	The parson of the town her father was!	<i>parish priest</i>
	With her he gave full many a pan of brass, <sup>3</sup>	
3945	For that Simkin should in his blood ally;	
	She was y-fostered in a nunnery,	<i>reared / convent</i>
	For Simkin wouldè no wife, as he said,	<i>wanted</i>
	But she were well y-nourished and a maid,	<i>Unless / well-bred</i>
	To saven his estate of yeomanry. <sup>4</sup>	
3950	And she was proud and pert as is a pie.	<i>magpie</i>
	A full fair sight was it upon them two:	<i>(to look) upon</i>
	On holy days before her would he go	
	With his tippet wound about his head,	<i>hood tip</i>
	And she came after in a gite of red,	<i>a gown</i>
3955	And Simkin haddè hosen of the same.	<i>stockings</i>

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<sup>1</sup>

"He swore that nobody would lay a hand on him without paying for it promptly."

<sup>2</sup> *His name ...*: "He was called Proud Simkin" (a form of Simon). Both forms of the name are used the tale.

<sup>3</sup> *With her ...*: He gave as her dowry a lot of money so that Simkin would marry her (an illegitimate).

<sup>4</sup> *For Simkin ...*: "He wanted no woman as a wife who was not well brought up (*y-nourished*) and virgin (*a maid*)--to accord with his social standing as a freeman."

There durst no wightè clepen her but "dame." <sup>1</sup>  
 Was none so hardy that wentè by the way *so bold*  
 That with her durstè rage or oncè play *dared flirt / joke*  
 But if he would be slain of Simkin, *Unless he wanted*  
 3960 With panade, or with knife, or bodèkin, *dagger / blade*  
 For jealous folk been perilous evermo' *dangerous*  
 (Algate they would their wivès wenden so).<sup>2</sup> *At least / think*  
 And eke, for she was somedeal smoterlich, *also / soiled*  
 She was as digne as water in a ditch, *as proud*  
 3965 And full of hoker and of bisèmare.<sup>3</sup>  
 Her thoughtè that "a lady" should her spare, *be exclusive(?)*  
 What for her kindred, and her nortelry *manners*  
 That she had learnèd in the nunnery.

*Their daughter*

A daughter haddè they bitwixt them two  
 3970 Of twenty years, withouten any more,  
 Saving a child that was of half year age:  
 In cradle it lay and was a proper page. *fine boy*  
 This wenchè thick and well y-grown was, *well developed*  
 With camus nose, and eyen grey as glass, *snub nose*  
 3975 With buttocks broad, and breastès round and high,  
 But right fair was her hair, I will not lie.  
 The parson of the town, for she was fair, *because / pretty*  
 In purpose was to maken her his heir *Intended*  
 Both of his chattel and his messuage, *goods / property*  
 3980 And strange he made it of her marriage.<sup>4</sup>  
 His purpose was for to bestow her high

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<sup>1</sup> *There durst ...*: "Nobody dared call her anything but 'My lady,'" a designation generally reserved for women well above her social rank.

<sup>2</sup> *Algate*: "At least they would like their wives to think so."

<sup>3</sup> *for she was ... bisemare*: These lines seem to mean: "For one who was somewhat soiled (she was a bastard) she was inordinately proud and full of scorn and haughtiness. She thought that a lady should hold herself exclusive."

<sup>4</sup> *And strange...*: "He made the conditions for marrying her very demanding." In the following lines the sarcasm of the author is evident at the absurd ambitions of the priest for the granddaughter that he should not have had, and his willingness to misappropriate church funds for her.

Into some worthy blood of ancestry,  
 For Holy Church's goods must be despended *spent*  
 On Holy Church's blood that is descended;  
 3985 Therefore he would his holy blood honoúr,  
 Though that he Holy Churchè should devour.

*The miller grinds corn for a Cambridge college*

Great soken has this miller out of doubt *Total monopoly*  
 With wheat and malt of all the land about;  
 And namely there was a great college,  
 3990 Men clepe the Soler Hall of Cantebridge.  
 There was their wheat and eke their malt y-ground.  
 And on a day it happened in a stound, *suddenly*  
 Sick lay the manciple in a malady; *steward*  
 Men wenden wisly that he shouldè die, *thought for sure*  
 3995 For which this miller stole both meal and corn  
 A hundred timès more than beforne,  
 For therebefore he stole but courteously,  
 But now he was a thief outrageously.  
 For which the warden chid and madè fare, <sup>1</sup>  
 4000 But thereof set the miller not a tare; *not a straw*  
 He crackèd boast, and swore it was not so. *made boasts*

*Two students think they are a match for the cheating miller*

Then were there youngè poorè scholars two  
 That dwelten in the hall of which I say.  
 Testive they were and lusty for to play, *Headstrong / eager*  
 4005 And only for their mirth and revelry *to amuse themselves*  
 Upon the warden busily they cry *college head*  
 To give them leavè but a little stound *little time*  
 To go to mill and see their corn y-ground,  
 And hardily they durstè lay their neck *surely / dared bet*  
 4010 The miller should not steal them half a peck *a measure*  
 Of corn by sleightè, nor by force them rieve;  
 And at the last the warden gave them leave. *trickery / rob*  
 John hight that one, and Alan hight that other; *one was called J.*

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<sup>1</sup> "For which reason the head of the college complained and made a fuss."

Of one town were they born that hightè Strother, *same town / called*  
 4015 Far in the north I can not tellè where.  
 This Alan maketh ready all his gear,  
 And on a horse the sack he casts anon;  
 Forth goes Alan the clerk and also John,  
 With good sword and with buckler by his side. *shield*  
 4020 John knew the way; he needede no guide;  
 And at the mill the sack adown he layeth.

*Their Northern accents and their naive plan*

Alan spoke first: "All hail, Simon, in faith.  
 How fares thy fairè daughter and thy wife?"<sup>1</sup> *fares = fareth*  
 "Alan, welcome!" quod Simkin, "by my life!  
 4025 And John also! How now, what do you here?"  
 "By God," quod John, "Simon, need has na peer:  
 Him boes serve himself that has na swain, *no equal*  
*boes = behoves / servant*  
 Or else he is a fool, as clerkès sayn.  
 Our manciple, I hope he will be dead, *steward*  
 4030 Swa workès aye the wanges in his head.<sup>2</sup>  
 And therefore is I come, and eke Alain, *= am I / & also*  
 To grind our corn and carry it hame again. *= home*  
 I pray you, speed us hethen that you may." *= hence*  
 "It shall be done," quod Simkin, "by my fay. *faith*  
 4035 What will you do while that it is in hand?"  
 "By God, right by the hopper will I stand,"  
 Quod John, "and see how the corn gaas in. *= goth (goes)*  
 Yet saw I never, by my father kin,  
 How that the hopper waggès til and fra." *= waggeth to & fro*  
 4040 Alan answered, "John, and wilt thou swa? *= so*  
 Then will I be beneathè, by my crown, *my head*  
 And see how that the mealè fallès down *= falleth*  
 Into the trough; that sall be my desport. *= shall*  
 For John, in faith, I may be of your sort:  
 4045 I is as ill a miller as are ye." *= I am as bad*

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<sup>1</sup> 4023 ff: The speech of the North-of-England students is the first attempt in English to represent dialect. In the marginal glosses that follow, the words that come after the equals sign are southern English equivalents of the dialect forms in the text. Curiously, some of the dialect forms have become the standard: "has, fares, falls," etc.

<sup>2</sup>: "The teeth (*wanges*) in his head ache so constantly."

*The miller outwits the students with a trick*

	This miller smilèd of their nicety,	<i>simplicity</i>
	And thought, "All this is done but for a wile.	<i>ruse</i>
	They weenè that no man may them beguile	<i>they think / fool</i>
	But by my thrift, yet shall I blear their eye,	<i>skill / blind</i>
4050	For all the sleight in their philosophy.	<i>cleverness</i>
	The morè quaintè crekès that they make,	<i>clever ruses</i>
	The morè will I stealè when I take.	
	Instead of flour yet will I give them bran.	
	The greatest clerks been not the wisest men,	
4055	As whilom to the wolf thus spoke the mare. <sup>1</sup>	<i>As once</i>
	Of all their artè count I not a tare."	<i>their cleverness</i>
	Out at the door he goes full privily,	<i>secretly</i>
	When that he saw his timè softèly.	<i>quietly</i>
	He looketh up and down till he hath found	
4060	The clerkès' horse there as it stood y-bound	<i>tied</i>
	Behind the mill, under a leafèsel,	<i>leafy shade</i>
	And to the horse he goes him fair and well.	
	He strippeth off the bridle right anon,	
	And when the horse was loose, he 'ginneth gone	<i>started to go</i>
4065	Toward the fen where wildè marès run,	<i>marsh</i>
	And forth with "Weehee," through thick and thin.	
	The miller goes again; no word he said,	<i>goes (back)</i>
	But does his note and with the clerks he played,	<i>job / joked</i>
	Till that their corn was fair and well y-ground.	<i>well &amp; truly</i>

*The students spend hours trying to catch their horse*

4070	And when the meal is sackèd and y-bound,	
	This John goes out and finds his horse away,	
	And gan to cry "Harrow!" and "Welaway!	<i>(cries of dismay)</i>
	Our horse is lost! Alan, for Godè's banes,	<i>= bones</i>
	Step on thy feet! Come off, man, all atanes!	<i>= at once</i>
4075	Alas, our warden has his palfrey lorn!"	<i>has lost h. horse</i>
	This Alan all forgot both meal and corn;	

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<sup>1</sup> *As whilom ...*: "As the mare said to the wolf once (*whilom*)."<sup>1</sup> The hungry wolf, saying he wanted to buy the mare's foal, was told that the price was written on its back leg. Trying to read it he was kicked hard, and the mare made the remark cited.

- All was out of his mind his husbandry.  
 "What, whilk way is he gaan?" he gan to cry.  
 The wife came leaping inward with a run;  
 4080 She said, "Alas, your horse goes to the fen  
 With wildè mares, as fast as he may go.  
 Unthank come on his hand that bound him so,  
 And he that better should have knit the rein!"  
 "Alas," quod John, "Alan, for Christè's pain,  
 4085 Lay down thy sword, and I will mine alsua.  
 I is full wight, God wat, as is a raa.<sup>1</sup>  
 By Godè's heart, he sal not scape us bathe.  
 Why n'ad thou put the capil in the lathe?  
 Ill hail, by God, Alan, thou is a fonn."  
 4090 These silly clerkès have full fast y-run  
 Toward the fen, both Alan and eke John;

*vigilance*  
 = *which way / gone*

*Bad luck*

= *also*  
 = *fast as a deer*  
 = *shall / both*  
 = *horse in barn*  
 = *Bad luck / fool*

*The miller uses their absence fruitfully*

- And when the miller saw that they were gone,  
 He half a bushel of their flour hath take  
 And bade his wife go knead it in a cake.  
 4095 He said: "I trow the clerkès were afeard.  
 Yet can a miller make a clerkè's beard  
 For all his art. Yea, let them go their way.  
 Lo, where he goes! Yea, let the children play.  
 They get him not so lightly, by my crown."  
 4100 These silly clerkès runnen up and down  
 With "Keep! Keep! Stand! Stand! Jossa! Warderer!  
 Ga whistle thou, and I sall keep him here."  
 But shortly, till that it was very night,  
 They couldè not, though they did all their might,  
 4105 Their capil catch, he ran always so fast,  
 Till in a ditch they caught him at the last.

*also*

*I guess / suspicious*  
*outwit a clerk*  
*his learning*

*head*

*Here! Behind!*  
 = *Go / shall*

= *horse*

*The outwitted students have to stay the night*

Weary and wet as beast is in the rain,

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<sup>1</sup> "I am as fast, God knows (wat) as a roe [deer]."

- Comes silly John, and with him comes Alain.  
 "Alas," quod John, "the day that I was born!  
 4110 Now are we driven til hething and til scorn = *to contempt*  
 Our corn is stolen; men will us foolès call,  
 Both the warden and our fellows all,  
 And namèly the miller. Welaway!" *especially / Alas*  
 Thus 'plaineth John as he goes by the way *complains*  
 4115 Toward the mill, and Bayard in his hand. *B: horse's name*  
 The miller sitting by the fire he found,  
 For it was night, and further might they not; *not (go)*  
 But for the love of God they him besought  
 Of harbour and of ease, as for their penny. *lodging / payment*  
 4120 The miller said again: "If there be any,  
 Such as it is, yet shall you have your part.  
 My house is strait, but you have learnèd art, *small / liberal arts*  
 You can by argumentès make a place *out of*  
 4125 Let's see now if this placè may suffice,  
 Or make it room with speech, as is your guise." *roomy / custom*  
 "Now Simon," said this John, "by Saint Cuthbert,  
 Ay is thou merry, and that is fair answèred. *You're always joking*  
 I have heard say men sal taa of twa things, *= take 1 of 2*  
 4130 Swilk as he finds, or taa swilk as he brings; *= Such as / take such*  
 But specially I pray thee, hostè dear,  
 Get us some meat and drink and make us cheer, *welcome*  
 And we will payen truly at the full.  
 With empty hand men may na hawkès tulle. *= lure no hawks*  
 4135 Lo, here our silver, ready for to spend."

*Supper and bed*

- This miller into town his daughter sends *to village*  
 For ale and bread, and roasted them a goose,  
 And bound their horse; it should no more go loose.  
 And in his ownè chamber them made a bed  
 4140 With sheetès and with chalons fair y-spread *blankets*  
 Not from his ownè bed ten foot or twelve.  
 His daughter had a bed all by herself  
 Right in the samè chamber by and by. *side by side*  
 It mightè be no bet, and cause why? *better*  
 4145 There was no roomier harbour in the place. *lodging*

	They suppen and they speak them to solace, And drinken ever strong ale at the best. Aboutè midnight wenten they to rest.	<i>&amp; t. chat pleasantly</i>
4150	Well has this miller varnishèd his head; Full pale he was fordrunken, and not red. He yexeth and he speaketh through the nose As he were on the quakk or on the pose. To bed he goes, and with him goes his wife. As any jay she light was and jolife,	<i>slang: drunk deep quite drunk belches hoarse or had a cold bird / jolly</i>
4155	So was her jolly whistle well y-wet. The cradle at her beddè's feet is set To rocken, and to give the child to suck. And when that drunken all was in the crock, To beddè went the daughter right anon.	<i>all that was</i>
4160	To beddè goes Alain and also John. There was no more; them neededè no dwale. This miller hath so wisly bibbèd ale That as a horse he snorteth in his sleep; Nor of his tail behind he took no keep.	<i>sleeping draught drunk so much no heed</i>
4165	His wife him bore a burden, a full strong. Men might her routing hearen a furlong. The wenchè routeth eke, par company.	<i>kept harmony snoring / 1/8 mile in counterpoint</i>

*Alan plans to get some satisfaction*

	Alan the clerk, that heard this melody, He pokèd John and saidè: "Sleepest thou? Heardest thou ever slik a sang ere now? Lo, swilk a compline is ymel them all. <sup>1</sup> A wildè fire upon their bodies fall! Wha hearkened ever swilk a ferly thing? <sup>2</sup> Yea, they sal have the flower of ill ending!	<i>= such a song such a = Who / amazing come to bad end</i>
4175	This langè night there tidès me na rest. But yet, na force, all sal be for the best;	<i>= no rest for me = no matter / shall</i>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Heardest* ....: "Did you ever before hear such a song? Listen, what a compline (they are singing) among them all." Compline is the last part of the Divine Office for the day, sung in monastic houses just before retiring to bed. The general tenor of the readings is to urge Christians to be sober and vigilant, "to have compunction in your beds" (Ps. 4); and the prayers are for chaste thoughts!

<sup>2</sup> *Wha hearkened* ....: "Who ever heard such an amazing thing"?

	For John," said he, "as ever mote I thrive, If that I may, yon wenchè will I swive. Some easement has law y-shapen us;	<i>so help me! that girl / tumble provided for us</i>
4180	For John, there is a lawè that says thus: That if a man in one point be aggrieved, That in another he sal be relieved. Our corn is stolen soothly, 'tis na nay, And we have had an ill fitt today,	<i>= shall truly / no denying bad time</i>
4185	And since I sal have naan amendement Against my loss, I will have easement. By Godè's soul, it sal naan other be." This John answered, "Alan, avisè thee! The miller is a perilous man," he said,	<i>= shall have no relief = shall no be careful</i>
4190	"And if that he out of his sleep abraid, He mightè do us both a villainy." Alan answered, "I count him not a fly," And up he rist, and by the wench he crept.	<i>wakes injury</i>
4195	This wenchè lay upright and fastè slept, Till he so nigh was ere she might espy That it had been too latè for to cry; And shortly for to say, they were at one. Now play, Alain, for I will speak of John.	<i>rose on her back so near</i>
<i>John decides to follow Alan's example.</i>		
4200	This John lies still a furlong way or two, And to himself he maketh ruth and woe. "Alas," quod he, "this is a wicked jape. Now may I say that I is but an ape. Yet has my fellow somewhat for his harm: He has the miller's daughter in his arm.	<i>a few minutes complaint &amp; lament joke I am</i>
4205	He auntered him, and has his needès sped, And I lie as a draf-sack in my bed. And when this jape is told another day, I sal be held a daff, a cokenay.	<i>ventured / satisfied bran sack</i>
4210	I will arise and aunter it, by my faith! Unhardy is unsely, thus men saith." <sup>1</sup> And up he rose, and softèly he went	<i>nitwit, a coward risk it unlucky</i>

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<sup>1</sup> *Unhardy* ...: "Gutless is luckless ..." i.e. fortune favors the brave.

- Unto the cradle, and in his hand it hent, *took*  
 And bore it soft unto his bedde's feet.  
 Soon after this the wife her routing leet, *stopped snoring*  
 4215 And gan awake, and went her out to piss, *woke up*  
 And came again, and gan her cradle miss,<sup>1</sup> *missed h. cradle*  
 And gropèd here and there, but she found none.  
 "Alas," quod she, "I had almost misgone; *gone astray*  
 I had almost gone to the clerkè's bed.  
 4220 Eh! bencitee, then had I foul y-sped!"<sup>2</sup>  
 And forth she goes till she the cradle found.  
 She gropeth always further with her hand,  
 And found the bed, and thoughtè nought but good,  
 Because that the cradle by it stood;  
 4225 And n'istè where she was, for it was dark, *didn't know*  
 But fair and well she crept into the clerk,  
 And lies full still, and would have caught asleep.  
 Within a while this John the clerk up leaps *After a while*  
 And on this goodè wife he lays on sore. *vigorously*  
 4230 So merry a fitt ne had she not full yore: *time / in a long while*  
 He pricketh hard and deep as he were mad.  
 This jolly life have these two clerkès led  
 Till that the thirdè cock began to sing.<sup>3</sup>

*A dawn parting duet by Alan and Malyn*

- Alan waxed weary in the dawèning, *grew weary*  
 4235 For he had swonken all the longè night, *labored*  
 And saidè: "Farewell, Malin, sweetè wight. *creature*  
 The day is come, I may no longer bide.  
 But evermore, whereso I go or ride, *walk or ride*  
 I is thyn ownè clerk, swa have I seel."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *and gan*: *gan* here is probably just a past tense marker like "did", rather than a short form of "began."

<sup>2</sup> *Eh, ...*: "Bless me! Then I **would** have made a mistake!"

<sup>3</sup> The "third cock" probably refers to the third crowing of the rooster around daybreak.

<sup>4</sup> *whereso ...*: "Wherever I walk or ride (i.e. wherever I go) I am forever your devoted clerk, as sure as I hope for heaven." Alan's farewell (in dialect) and Malin's response are parodies of the *aube*, *aubade*, or *tagelied*, the genre poem of the dawn parting of aristocratic lovers. But the aristocrat would not refer to his lady as *wight*, and neither one would ever use *lemman*, a very plebeian word for "lover." Also the *aube* rarely dealt with the details of

4240 "Now, dearè lemman," quod she, "go, farewell. dear lover  
 But ere thou go, one thing I will thee tell:  
 When that thou wendest homeward by the mill, as you go home  
 Right at the entry of the door behind  
 Thou shalt a cake of half a bushel find,  
 4245 That was y-makèd of thine ownè meal,  
 Which that I helped my sirè for to steal. my father  
 And, goodè lemman, God thee save and keep."  
 And with that word almost she 'gan to weep.

*Alan returns to his own bed -- he thinks*

Alan up rist and thought, "Ere that it daw[n], rose up  
 4250 I will go creep in by my fellow."  
 And found the cradle with his hand anon.  
 "By God," thought he, "all wrong I have misgone.  
 Mine head is toty of my swink tonight, dizzy from my work  
 That maketh me that I go not aright.  
 4255 I wot well by the cradle I have misgo; know / lost my way  
 Here lies the miller and his wife also."  
 And forth he goes (a twenty devil way!) damn it!  
 Unto the bed there as the miller lay.  
 He weened have creepen by his fellow John, He thought  
 4260 And by the miller in he crept anon,  
 And caught him by the neck and soft he spake.  
 He said: "Thou John, thou swinè's-head, awake,  
 For Christè's soul, and hear a noble game:  
 For by that lord that callèd is Saint Jame,  
 4265 As I have thricè in this shortè night three times  
 Swivèd the miller's daughter bolt upright, laid / on her back  
 While thou hast as a coward been aghast." scared  
 "Yea, falsè harlot," quod the miller, "hast? wretch / have you?  
 Ah, falsè traitor, falsè clerk," quod he,  
 4270 "Thou shalt be dead, by Godè's dignity.  
 Who durstè be so bold to disparáge dares / dishonor  
 My daughter, that is come of such lineáge?" noble line

*A melee follows his mistake*

---

recovering stolen property.

- And by the throaté-bowl [?] he caught Alain,  
 And he hent him despitously again,<sup>1</sup> *he = Alan*  
 4275 And on the nose he smote him with his fist.  
 Down ran the bloody stream upon his breast.  
 And on the floor, with nose and mouth to-broke,  
 They wallow as do two piggès in a poke,  
 And up they go and down again anon,  
 4280 Till that the miller spurnéd at a stone, *tripped on*  
 And down he fell backward upon his wife  
 That wisté nothing of this nicè strife, *knew / violent*  
 For she was fall asleep a little wight *shortly before*  
 With John the clerk that wakéd had all night.  
 4285 And with the fall out of her sleep she braid. *woke*  
 "Help, holy cross of Broméholm!" she said.  
 "In manus tuas, Lord, to thee I call!  
 Awake, Simon, the fiend is on me fall!  
 My heart is broken. Help! I n'am but dead!  
 4290 There lies one on my womb and on my head!<sup>2</sup>  
 Help, Simkin, for the falsè clerkès fight!"  
 This John starts up as fast as ever he might,  
 And graspeth by the wallès to and fro  
 To find a staff; and she starts up also,  
 4295 And knew the estres bet than did this John, *corners better*

*The wife joins the fight with unfortunate results*

- And by the wall a staff she found anon,  
 And saw a little shimmering of a light,  
 For at a hole in shone the moonè bright  
 And by that light she saw them bothè two,  
 4300 But sikerly she n'istè who was who, *didn't know*  
 But as she saw a white thing in her eye,  
 And when she gan this whitè thing espy,  
 She weened the clerk had weared a voluper, *thought / nightcap*  
 And with the staff she drew ay near and near, *nearer & nearer*

---

<sup>1</sup> "And he (Alan) in turn seized (*hent*) Simkin fiercely."

<sup>2</sup> The wife thinks she is being assailed by at least one incubus, a wicked spirit (*fiend*) that supposedly came upon women at night and impregnated them. Hence her prayer to the cross to repel this devil. Her use of the compline prayer: *In manus tuas: Into thy hands, O Lord ...*, is definitely too late.

- 4305 And weened have hit this Alan at the full *intended to hit*  
 But smote the miller on the piléd skull *bare skull*  
 That down he goes and cried: "Harrow! I die!" *Help!*  
 These clerkès beat him well and let him lie,  
 And greythen them, and took their horse anon, *got ready*  
 4310 And eke their meal, and on their way they go[n], *And also*  
 And at the millè yet they took their cake,  
 Of half a bushel flour full well y-bake.

*Summary and "moral"*

- Thus is this proudè miller well y-beat,  
 And has y-lost the grinding of the wheat,  
 4315 And paid for the supper everydeal *every bit*  
 Of Alan and of John that beat him well;  
 His wife is swivèd and his daughter als. *laid / also*  
 Lo, such it is a miller to be false! *So much for*  
 And therefore this provérb is said full sooth: *truly*  
 4320 Him thar not weenè well that evil doth;<sup>1</sup>  
 A guiler shall himself beguiléd be.  
 And God, that sitteth high in majesty,  
 Save all this companiè, great and small.  
 Thus have I quit the Miller in my tale. *repaid*

*The Cook's Response*

- 4325 The Cook of London, while the Reevè spake  
 For joy he thought he clawed him on the back.  
 "Ha! Ha!" quod he, "for Christè's passion,  
 This miller had a sharp conclusion  
 Upon his argument of herbergage.<sup>2</sup> *lodging*  
 4330 Well said Solomon in his language:  
 Ne bring not every man into thy house,  
 For harbouring by night is perilous.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Him that ...*: "He who does evil should not expect good; a deceiver shall be deceived himself."

<sup>2</sup> *This miller ...*: This miller got the worst of his own "argument" about lodging. This is probably a reference back to the miller's would-be clever response to the clerks' request for lodging: My house is small, but you are book-learned, and so you can turn a small space into a large one by philosophical reasoning.

Well ought a man avisèd for to be *careful*  
 Whom that he brought into his privity. *privacy*  
 4335 I pray to God, so give me sorrow and care,  
 If ever since I hightè Hodge of Ware,<sup>1</sup> *was named*  
 Heard I a miller better set a-work.  
 He had a jape of malice in the dark. *jest*  
 But God forbiddè that we stintè here *stop*  
 4340 And therefore if you vouchèsafe to hear *if you care to*  
 A tale of me that am a poorè man,  
 I will you tell, as well as ever I can  
 A little jape that 'fell in our city.'" *joke / befell*

*The Host cheerfully insults the Cook*

Our Host answered and said "I grant it thee.  
 4345 Now tell on, Roger. Look that it be good,  
 For many a pasty hast thou letten blood *drained?*  
 And many a Jack of Dover hast thou sold *pie (Dover = do over)*  
 That has been twicè hot and twicè cold. *reheated*  
 Of many a pilgrim hast thou Christè's curse,  
 4350 For of thy parsley fare they yet the worse  
 That they have eaten with thy stubble goose,  
 For in thy shop is many a flyè loose.  
 Now tell on gentle Roger, by thy name,  
 But yet I pray thee be not wrath for game. *angry at a joke*  
 4355 A man may say full sooth in game and play." *truth*

*The Cook responds with the promise of a tale about an innkeeper*

"Thou sayst full sooth," quod Roger, "by my fay, *faith*  
 But `Sooth play, quad play,' as the Fleming sayth. <sup>2</sup>  
 And therefore, Harry Bailly, by thy faith,  
 Be thou not wroth ere we departen here *Don't be angry*  
 4360 Though that my tale be of a hosteler. *innkeeper*  
 But natheless I will not tell it yet,

---

<sup>1</sup> *If ever ...*: "Ever since I was christened Hodge of Ware." Hodge or Hogg seems to be a diminutive of Roger.

<sup>2</sup> *Sooth play, quad play ...*: "A true jest is no jest" meaning "A joke that is really a home truth is not very funny" or "If you can tell a joke with an edge to it, so can I." Why the proverb is attributed to a Fleming is not clear.

But ere we part, y-wis, thou shalt be quit."  
And therewithal he laughed and madé cheer  
And said his tale as you shall after hear.

*indeed*

*The Cook starts his tale of Perkin Reveller, an apprentice more fond of dancing, dicing and general revelry than of trade. The tale has all the appearance of yet another fabliau, but it stops after about sixty lines and Chaucer apparently never finished it. As the marginal note in the Hengwrt MS put it: "Of this Cook's tale maked Chaucer no more."*