

The miller's tale: a parody of courtly love

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Throughout the Middle Ages, courtly love was a common practice used by knights and noble men. It was considered a noble way for them to idealize and make a woman an object of worship. These men would partake in heroic deeds and declare a passionate devotion to a woman to show their affection. The representation of courtly love in "The Miller's Tale" is parodied through Absolon, Alison, and Nicholas.

The story illustrates how courtly love is essentially the same thing as lust. It also portrays the loss of distinction between courtly love and physical desire because the elements used in courtly love are now being used to seduce the once unattainable woman. In the story Absolon partially represents what a courtly lover should be while Alisoun and Nicholas parody courtly love through their ongoing affair. In the story, Absolon was a parish clerk who at times portrayed how a courtly lover should behave. As shown by Chaucer, Absolon speaks as if he would literally die without Alisoun's attention when he says, "Believe me, darling, I'm so deep in love/I croon with longing like a turtle-dove/I eat as little as a girl at school," (Chaucer 102)

This is one of the elements of courtly love because Absolon implies that he will suffer from anorexia if he does not receive the attention he longs for from Alison. Another element of courtly love is shown through the ways in which he attempts to woo Alison. He does this by serenading her and sending "sweet wine and mead and spicy ale/And Wafers piping hot and jars of honey." (Chaucer 93) At first, he simply shows his admiration at a distance but slowly begins to crave more than that. Although Absolon showed various

elements of courtly love, he also parodies it by obsessively pursuing a married woman. As a pillar of the church he should have loved and respected Alisoun in a holy way. Instead, he constantly seeks her out and tries to seduce her despite knowing that she is married. Chaucer shows this when he says " And I dare say if she had been a mouse/And he a cat, she'd have been pounced upon." (Chaucer 92)

This indicates that had Alisoun given Absalon the opportunity to indulge in an affair with her he would have done it in a heartbeat. This shows that his courtly love has evolved into a desire for physical lust which goes against the teaching of the church. Absolon even goes to the extent to ask Alison for a kiss which is something that should not be done by a courtly lover because it would bring dishonor to the both of them. Courtly lover is meant to woo a woman at a distance but he is no longer satisfied by just seeing her or proclaiming his love for her. Chaucer demonstrates this change from courtly love to physical lust when he says " I shall see Alison and tell her all/My love-longing, and I can hardly miss/Some favor from her at least a kiss." (Chaucer 101).

Here we see how courtly love is no longer enough satisfaction for an individual. The now desire to physically represent one person's affection toward another is beginning to replace the idea of courtly love. Another character from " The Millers Tale" that parodies courtly love is Nicholas. He does this through his affair with Alison who is a married woman. She should have been an unattainable woman who he wooed at a distance and idealized. Nicholas however acts on his earthly desire and says to her, "

Unless I have my will of you/ I'll die of secret love - O, darling do!" (Chaucer 91).

Nicholas uses an element of courtly love to persuade her into sleeping with him. He insists that if she doesn't sleep with him he'll die. This parodies courtly love because instead of loving her at a distance he pleads that she let him be as close to her as physically possible. Nicholas' actions towards Alison parody the idea of courtly love because he inappropriately touches her and convinces her to have an affair with him. By doing this he illustrates how the love he has for Alison is based on a strong sexual desire as opposed to the adoring love taught in the church. Had Nicholas truly loved Alison he would have treated her with more respect and preserved her honor. Instead he is the complete opposite of a courtly lover because he is not noble or decent towards her but he uses elements of courtly love to entice her. The third character that parodies courtly love is Alison because she personifies moral perversion through her infidelity with Nicholas.

Chaucer shows this during their first encounter, " In the end she promised him she would/swearing she'd love him with a solemn promise/ To be at his disposal by St Thomas/When she could spy an opportunity." (Chaucer 91) Alison indulges in sin despite being a woman of God. The fact that she consistently attends church and does the work of Christ but is still willing to indulge in an affair that brings her dishonor shows a parody of courtly love. If she had truly been in a courtly relationship with John she would not have agreed to having an affair with him, instead she should have admired his worship of her at a distance. Their relationship should have never been consummated it should have remained a fantasy that was discussed but <https://assignbuster.com/the-millers-tale-a-parody-of-courtly-love/>

never acted upon. However, Nicholas and Alison declared their passionate devotion for one another through an intimate relationship which parodies the very meaning of courtly love.

The characters in "The Millers Tale" lack a sense of morality. Each one of them parodies courtly love through their actions. Absalon's obsessive need to gain affection and physical interaction with Alison parodies the ideal courtly lover. Since he is a member of the church he should love Alison worshipfully but instead he lusts over her. He even implies that he would risk his position and way of life as a parish clerk if Alison ever became physically attracted to him. Nicholas also lusts for Alison in an unholy manner, and acts upon his earthly desires by having her indulge in an adulterous relationship with him. He uses courtly love to seduce her which parodies the idea because it was initially meant to be used to show worship and admiration.

As a courtly lover she should have done everything in his power to protect her honor. Instead he continuously gropes her and treats her as an object that satisfies his sexual needs. Although Alison is being used by Nicholas as a means to his ends she is also using him to fulfil her own desires. She is unsatisfied with the marriage she is in and indulges in an adulterous relationship with Nicholas. This action personifies her moral perversion, she knows that she shouldn't be having an affair because she is a married woman. She is also aware of this because of the teachings of the church to which she attends regularly. Alison however continues her affair with Nicholas with no remorse. She also proves to continue these patterns when she agrees to let Absalon kiss her.

As a courtly lover she should have continued to reject his physical advances and reminded him to respect and admire her at a distance. Instead she tricked him into kissing her butt knowing that it would bring him shame and a sense of dishonor. Courtly love was an ideal form of flattery and admiration between a noble men and unattainable women during the middle ages. However, Chaucer brings into perspective how unrealistic this form of love is because at some point the very elements of courtly love can be used to parody the very idea. Throughout the story Chaucer makes it known that courtly love and lust are one in the same. He proves this by showing us how easily it is for an individual to indulge in their desires without any regard for what it morally correct.