

Correlation of the knight's tale and miller's tale by g. chaucer

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The Knight, as the highest ranking member of the train of pilgrims, is chosen “whether by chance, luck, or destiny” (844) to tell the first of the Canterbury tales. When he finishes, the intoxicated Miller demands to go next, despite the Host having asked the Monk, as the next-highest ranking male pilgrim, if he knows “Somewhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale” (3119). The host tells the Miller to wait until “Som bettre man shal telle us first anothe,” because they ought to “work” the telling of the stories “properly,” (3130-31) but the Miller insists on violating the social order and telling his tale second. He wants to ‘match’ the Knight’s tale, or one-up it.

Both the Knight’s Tale and the tale that the Miller tells are love stories, but they could not be more dissimilar. The Knight’s tale is long and overall, serious. He self-consciously intrudes into his narrative with clumsy transitions between time and place, and editorializes his censorship of the events. The gentlefolk of the train say it is a ‘noble story’ and worthy of being memorized (3111-2). The Miller’s tale is short and funny; he is a brisk, straightforward, and impersonal narrator; telling his tale as though it were a long joke, and it’s so rude that the narrator apologizes for repeating it (3170-3181).

The two tales were constructed as perfect opposites in setting, plot, and the moral constitution of their characters. The Knight’s tale is set far away and long ago, in ancient Thebes. The Miller’s tale is set in contemporary England. The Knight’s tale is a tale of courtly love. The Miller’s tale is about carnal desire. The high point in the action in the Knight’s tale is a tournament between two deserving knights and their armies of a hundred knights each,

for the hand in marriage of a distant and pure lady. The high point in the action of the Miller's tale could be said to be when Nicholas, having cuckolded the carpenter, farts in Absalom's face, and Absalom burns his nether regions with a branding iron.

The characters in the two tales could not possibly be more different from one another. They were intentionally placed at the far ends of the bell-curve of humanity. Those in the Knight's tale take themselves very seriously, and are taken seriously by the Knight. The characters in the Miller's tale were constructed without dignity, and the Miller attempts to give them none. The characters in the Knight's tale are bound by the laws of duty and chivalry, while those in the Miller's tale don't even respect the sacrament of marriage.

In both tales two men compete for the attentions of a woman. The women in the two tales are perfect foils for one another. Emelye, of the Knight's tale, is a pure maiden. Allison, of the Miller's tale, is a married woman. Emelye showed no favour to either of her two knights, Palamon and Arcite, until the laws of courtly love allowed. She gracefully accepted Arcite after he won her hand in a tournament and cried over his death, but lovingly wed Palamon when 'Duc' Theseus told her to. Allison allowed herself to be seduced by one extramarital suitor early in the story, and first repulses, and then plays a practical joke on, the other. When Emelye marries, she loves her husband Palamon " So tenderly, / And he her serves so nobly, / That never was there a word between them / Of jealousy or any other vexation" (3103-6). Allison, on the other hand, makes a cuckold of her husband and never shows any affection, sympathy, or respect for him.

The men in the two tales are also carefully constructed opposites. In the Knight's tale, the two men are equally deserving, honest, respectful, and chivalrous. In the Miller's Tale, Nicholas and Absolom are both rascals. They are both clerks, they study theology and mean to enter the clergy, but they want to tempt Allison away from her husband. They are both flatterers who try to convince her to give them sexual favours; Nicholas even tells her husband an elaborate falsehood to get his way with her. Nicholas has none of the courtly respect for Allison which the knights do for Emelye. He propositions her by grabbing her crotch and fondling her thighs, despite her protests. Absolom at first seems to love Allison from a distance, in the style of courtly love, but if she had put her ' hole' out the window a second time he would have branded her with a hot iron.

In the Miller's tale it is Nicholas, the most sneaky and devious man, who wins Allison in the end. When Absolom brands his rear-end, justice seems to have been served, but then the tale goes on just long enough for the wronged husband to become the laughingstock of the village. With that ending, there is no justice in the Miller's Tale. The Knight's tale, by contrast, serves justice to all: Arcite wins the battle, Emelye gives him his due, Palamon wins her love, Palamon and Emelye get married and live happily ever after. Perhaps there is even too much justice in the Knight's tale: the two knights get exactly what they prayed for, though this means that Palamon loses the tournament, and Arcite dies in his moment of triumph, without having enjoyed the favour of his lady.

By juxtaposing these two tales, Chaucer uses the extremes in each to emphasize elements of style and content in the other. He creates a spectrum of morality, love, and justice and places these two stories at either end. One: a fairy tale of courtly love with a perfect ending, told by a soldier both genteel and battle-hardened, aspires to nobility but touches the edge of absurdity with its self-conscious dignity and scrupulous conformity to the genre. The other: a crass and bawdy joke of a story narrated by a drunken commoner with aspirations of one-upping the upper class, in which no one gets as they deserve, and which is so rude as to be amusing by dint of its complete coarseness.