

Trinity of the miller: aggression, iconoclasm, and drinking

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There is something special about *The Canterbury Tales*; it is not limited to a particular bias or a perspective, providing a diverse range of values and beliefs just in one book.

Many writers use their books to voice an opinion; it is like a message on a bulletin board, sending a message to the people. In contrast, Chaucer opens a forum, becoming advocates for different types of people and speaking in many different tones with many different intentions. By achieving this, Chaucer highlights an important social phenomenon in our world—the fact that our world is not a solution with coherent individuals dissolved in unity, but rather, a heterogeneous mixture with clashing components that often combust in interaction. The Miller, second storyteller of *The Canterbury Tales*, undermines the previous tale told by the knight, providing examples that directly contradict the points that the knight has already established in his tale. In order to build this counterexample of the Knight, Chaucer constructs Miller on a triangular foundation—each vertex based on his distorted morals.

Miller is a trinity—the three foundations of hostility, Iconoclasm, and alcoholism define his existence. *The Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's demonstration of our insoluble society—the clash of the millers and the knights. In the Knight's tale, the characters transcend beyond human and become gods. Knight's Humanistic philosophy is shown in each of his character's grandiose and godly traits. On the other hand, the Miller's characters are below human, each with different vices that are antonyms of the descriptions of the Knight's characters.

In the Knight's tale, Palamon is the personification allegory of Venus, becoming the representative of goddess of love. His prayer demonstrated his emphasis and importance in pursuit of love; " I neither beg nor borrow Vainglorious praise, nor do I make profession of prowess—but would fully have possession of Emily, and die thy worshipper" (Chaucer 63). In Miller's tale, Absalon serves the role of anti-Palamon. " From day to day this jolly Absalon, Wooing away, became quite woe-begone; He lay awake all night, and all the day...However Absalon might blow his horn His labour won him nothing but her scorn"(93-94). Absalon, despite his continuous attempts to win Alison's love, fails and is depicted in the tale as a loser who is constantly rejected by Alison, which contrasts sharply with Palamon's skillful dealings with women and love. In knight's tale, Theseus is the personification allegory of Jupiter; he is the archetype for the king of the gods.

Marked with his ability to maintain order in his kingdom, he can even place order and restriction on brawls— " And a year later, neither less or more, Each shall return, bringing hundred knights, Armed for the lists and everything to rights, Ready by battle to decide his claim to Emily" (52). In contrast, the carpenter of the Miller's tale, John, is tricked and fooled by Nicholas the scholar who has rented a room in John's house, believing Nicholas' words that God will bring the second Great Flood—" This silly Carpenter began to quake, Before his eyes there verily seemed to be The Floods of Noah, wallowing like the sea And drowning Alison his honey-pet" (100). Despite him having the role of patriarch and the householder, the carpenter is incapable of exercising his authority and power in his house. The carpenter is thrown into confusion and loses control over his wife Alison who

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would be unfaithful to her husband for Nicholas. Unlike Theseus who was able to promote justice and order in his kingdom, John is too foolish to even rule over his house.

Allison, the wife of the carpenter John, is also used as Miller's tool to contrast with one of Knight's character. In the knight's tale, Emily is presented as the archetype for the goddess Diana, who is the goddess of chastity. Emily opposes in engaging in sexual activity and believes in the sacredness of virginity. This aspect of Emily is answered by Miller in his presentation of the exact opposite. The Miller's Allison is an unfaithful wife who is young and filled with lust—" she was a daisy, O a lollypop For any nobleman to take to bed Or some good man of yeoman stock to wed" (90).

Miller's description of Allison is the antithesis of description of Emily the virgin. What does the Miller gain by doing this? Both the Miller's and the Knight's characters have defining traits that are extreme and out of ordinary. The juxtaposition of the motifs of godly perfection and the motifs of human imperfection highlights a truth that undermines the Knight's tale in general—its lack of realism. The Knight's tale is too romantic; it is a fantasy filled with ideal characters and mythological gods. The Miller's intention is to poke fun at the Knight's dream in perfectionism.

The Miller questions the realism of the Knight's characters, mocking the knight by presenting an unrealistic tale with characters whose vices are magnified but are more real than the knight's manifestation of the gods. This is Miller's way of attacking the Knight, his aggressiveness against the Knight, the first cornerstone of Miller. Contradictions of the Knight's ideology don't

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end with the Miller's criticism on the characters. Miller even challenges the theme of the Knight's story. After accusing the Knight's tale for being overly idealized and romanticized, the Miller now attacks on the Knight's philosophy, the backbone of his tale. In his tale, the Knight ends his story with a theme of Divine Providence and its omnipotence in the universe.

Knight demonstrates that even godly people are incapable of escaping Providence (Fate/Fortune), God's care for the universe and his foresight on its future. On the other hand, the Miller questions the definition of Providence and how unclear it can be. The Miller manages to undermine Divine Providence itself, questioning its power and cheapening the overall aura of it. The Miller belittles God's power, a dangerous and absurd move for a pilgrim on a religious venture to Canterbury. The Knight had glorified Fortune in his tale (Divine Providence is substituted with Fortune to correspond with the Greek setting). All the characters acknowledge and fear the mysterious and powerful work of Saturn, who is a symbol for Fortune in the tale; even the mythological gods in the story are subservient to Saturn — "My heavenly orbit marks so wide a pattern It has more power than anyone can know" (68-69).

In the same way he idealizes the characters, the Knight's personified Fortune (Saturn) is glorified to a great degree, becoming the most mysterious and powerful being of the universe. What the Miller does to counter this is unthinkable. The Miller does the exact opposite of the Knight; instead of glorifying the ideal of Providence and God's plan, the Providence becomes an inferior character's tool to achieve his sinful goal. In the story, Nicholas the

Scholar devises a plan to trick Allison's husband, John, in order to spend the night with Allison. He decides to manipulate John by telling him that the second Great Flood is coming. Nicholas the Scholar persuades John, explaining to him that he read God's plan by studying the stars in the sky.

Nicholas' claim degrades Divine Providence and its majesty in many levels. First, by using it as a tool to deceive others, the holy and meaningful purpose of God's plan is eradicated. Second, an immoral character easily "reading" the Providence, put omnipotence of God to question; easy accessibility of God's plans to the sinner is a paradox since God is good and all powerful and will not allow the devil to get ahead of Him. Third, the manner in which Nicholas treats the ideal of Providence and not fearing it, undermines the general aura of Providence, bringing the effect opposite of the characters of Knight's tale that glorified and feared the power of Providence. This challenge in God's authority and plan is an example of iconoclasm.

This is the second cornerstone that erects Miller—the mind filled with heresy and controversy. Miller's tale is his reply to the Knight, an argument against the Knight's tale. Miller introduces characters who are antithesis to the characters of the Knight's tale and presents a theme that conflicts with that of the Knight's. However, there is a problem. Miller, who would boldly contradict and oppose every aspect of Knight's tale, stating controversial and provocative ideas, is highly unlikely in reality. The presentation of Miller does emphasize the theme of diversity in our world, but also highlights Chaucer's influence in the story.

In other words, the Canterbury Tales is too artificial. Miller just becomes Chaucer's tool in demonstrating this theme and nothing more; the realism of Miller is dissipated, making him a person who can only be found in books. Fortunately, Chaucer fixes this problem; he turns Miller into a drunkard. Alcohol is actually a dominant motif in The Canterbury Tales, appearing in the General Prologue—"The veins are bathed in liquor of such power As brings about the engendering of the flower" (3), in the prologue of the characters—"The Miller, very drunk and rather pale" (86), and even in the tales themselves—"Wine is a lecherous thing and drunkenness A squalor of contention and distress" (247). These motifs are not just themes; they are often used by Chaucer as supportive buttresses for his writing.

For Miller's case, the motif of alcoholism acts as justification for his excessive boldness in his action of undermining the Knight's tale with controversial ideas. There is a good reason why the Miller is "very drunk and rather pale, Was straddled on his horse half-on half-off And in no mood for manners or to doff" (86). His drunkenness justifies his rudeness since he was "in no mood for manners". "Arrogance is inflamed by drink" (Habakkuk 2: 5). Miller's self-egotism and expressiveness is multiplied to such a degree that Miller becomes a firebrand in putting down the Knight.

His boldness goes over-board and degrades the air of enlightening righteousness that was established by the Knight. Alcohol shapes Miller's perverse story of sex, betrayal, and stupidity, and eventually leads to heresy (though went unnoticed by the pilgrims). Miller challenges the established belief of God's omnipotence and his all-powerful plan for the universe. As

stated in Daniel 5: 3, “ Drinking leads to profaning sacred things”; the Miller devalues the idea of Divine Providence, transforming it to a tool of sinful mankind, all under influence of alcohol. The motif of alcoholism is the final cornerstone for the Miller; final piece that complements the other two and stabilizes the whole structure. Instead of getting mad, the audience is delighted, laughing loudly at Miller’s entertaining jokes, not taking anything seriously.

Miller’s intoxication triggers the audience to expect a corrupted tale; it allows the people to shut out all the controversial and rude elements of the tale, since he is not having “ some common sense” (87) and his “ wits have gone beyond recall” (87). If Miller was sober and had told this story with full consciousness, he would’ve been stoned. His presentation of sinful characters, his mockery of the Divine Providence, and his servitude to liquor, form a filthy trinity of evil. Chaucer, through the character Miller, speaks in multiple points of views; He is a disagreeable arguer, but also an iconoclast, and also a drunkard. The Canterbury Tales is a Parliament of all people, an Athenian forum for all kinds. Chaucer’s experiment here is revolutionary; it is an accurate portrayal of society with no missing pieces.

The Canterbury Tales’ boldness in depicting everyone makes this piece of work appalling to not just literary critics, but to historians as well; it is an accurate depiction of European society in the 14th Century. Geoffrey Chaucer is not a magician, but he is a human rights activist, an architect, a historian, and the Father of English literature.