

# Genre analysis of the canterbury tales: the reeve and the miller

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The Miller and Reeve's Tales of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, while being intricately crafted examples of the French genre *fabliaux*, differ significantly in both progression, resolution, as well as the tales' overall connotation and voice. While the Miller's tale seems to follow the more traditional, "good humored" nature of the *fabliaux*, the Reeve creates a raunchy tale with a darker, more sardonic twist at the end. The source of this difference can be found not only in the character differences of the narrators but also in the chronological placement of the tales in Chaucer's text. Not only does the Reeve's tale reflect the tale of the Miller, it houses dark humor aimed specifically towards the Miller himself.

The Miller's tale begins, as a reader would expect, like a good, raunchy story would. The Host immediately notices, "that he [the Miller] was dronke of ale" (line 3128, Miller's Prologue) and while the Host attempts to find another storyteller, the jocular Miller insists on telling a story. Already the warning flags go up on the Miller's Tale. What kind of story can the listener expect from a drunk commoner? Like the Miller is described, the story is disruptive and humorous, especially following the noble tale of the Knight that came before it. This contrast makes the Miller's story unexpected as well as a disruption to the style that the Knight's tale was asserting. This festive attitude follows into the tale itself. The Miller's Tale quickly offers the reader a comic paradise of a setting, one where a miserly commoner has a nubile young wife. Furthermore, the Miller uses a more sensate, pleasing style of description for his characters. Unlike the characters described in the Reeve's Tale, the Miller's characters are young and attractive.

The Miller gives the reader characters ripe to be exploring sexual misadventures, Nicholas and Alisoun, and characters perfect for taking the fall, such as the carpenter or Absolon. This sets up the audience for the scandalous action later on. It comes as no surprise that Nicholas and Alisoun have sordid sexual encounters, nor is it unexpected that the prim and proper Absolon becomes the “butt” of the humor in the story when his advances towards Alisoun are rejected. Likewise, nothing life threatening occurs in the Miller’s Tale with the exception of Absolon’s revenge. Even the red-hot poker applied to Nicholas’ rear fails to show any lasting harm. The carpenter, who plummets nearly two stories, seems relatively unharmed. Even Alisoun gets away with her adultery with little consequence for her actions. Essentially, the Miller’s story is without consequence of ill feeling apart from the anger Absolon feels, which becomes critical for the comedic climax of the tale. Furthermore, not a single character is singled out in the narrative. As one looks at the small list of characters, everyone is accounted for properly. Absolon, though humiliated, has satisfied his honor. Nicholas found himself well “comforted” by Alisoun. The carpenter finds himself dumbfounded by the lack of a flood and the wife is well satisfied. The completion of the story, where all the dangling elements of each character come together, brings about the climax of humor found in the tale. While the reader is focused entirely on Absolon seeking his revenge with a red-hot poker, the reader forgets about the carpenter sleeping in his suspended tubs up near the rafters. Only after Nicholas calls out for water does the full gravity and delight of the situation hit home. While this is the resolution of the story, the text continues with the Miller’s words. The Miller goes as far as blessing the

entire company of pilgrims in a fashion similar to the end of the Knight's tale, reflecting the Miller's generally friendly disposition towards his fellow travelers.

This pattern of festive comedy does not follow when drawing a comparison with the Reeve's tale. The Reeve begins by singling out the profession of a miller. While this establishes the low nature of the story, the Reeve specifically targets the Miller as a source of ridicule. In the Miller's Tale, the carpenter's profession was not of critical importance. A carpenter could have easily been replaced by any other profession of a somewhat wealthy commoner. The Reeve's tale is a different matter. The profession of a miller is critical to the story. The source of conflict in the story is not youthful sexuality or a humorous spin on courtly love, but rather the use of sexuality as a tool to get even. The story itself begins with the description of a rather unpleasant miller, who's gross ugliness seems to be harshly exaggerated by the Reeve narrating the story. Whereas the Miller seems to hide his playfulness behind rosy metaphors such as the description of Alisoun's lips as "bragot or the meeth" (line 3261, Miller's Tale), the Reeve is very open with his words, noting the miller's skull as being as "piled [bald] as an ape" (line 3935, Reeve's Tale). So effectively, where the Miller has characters fit for a twisted courtly tale, the Reeve has created ghoulish humans ripe to be mocked and ridiculed. By adding two youthful clerks along with a wife and virgin daughter, it becomes clear that the Reeve intends to give a similar tale of sexual permissiveness. What differs in this case is the lack of attraction and "courtly" behavior in the beginning of the story. Whereas the

Miller made clear the efforts that Nicholas used to obtain Alisoun's "solas", the Reeve's characters start off focused on getting the better of one another. At first the clerks Aleyn and John think they have outsmarted the miller, Symkyn, but then Symkyn outsmarts them. It is easy for the reader to understand that the upcoming resolution will involve the clerks getting the last laugh.

The Reeve's resolution does not have the same sort of nature as the Miller's, however. Instead, the Reeve sets up a series of harsh sexual encounters that ultimately ends in a violent brawl. The language used describing the act of intercourse lends itself to the idea that these sexual encounters are not the same as the Miller's. "He priketh harde and depe as he were mad," (line 4231, Reeve's Tale) describing John having sex with the miller's wife, seems to suggest a more violent act of sex, one spurred by anger rather than the lust found in the prior story. Similarly, John's companion Aleyn goes to bed with the miller's daughter in order to deflower her virginity as a way of getting back at the miller's tricks and thievery. Whether or not this is justified, all of the revenge centers entirely on the miller himself. It is because he is a disgusting, immoral character, that these harsh punishments are befalling him. Clearly the Reeve's Tale is less a story focused on sexual lust but one built up in order to heap unpleasant things onto one character in particular, the miller. The Reeve, when finally drawing an end to his story, copies the example of the Knight and Miller by blessing the company of pilgrims but his final words are much different. "Thus have I quyt [paid back] the Millere in my tale," (line 4324, Reeve's Tale) the Reeve states on his last

line, explicitly stating the purpose of his story. The genre of fabliaux is twisted to cause harm to a specific individual rather than to bring “ low brow” humor to the audience.

The Reeve’s tale seems to reflect a strong dislike that the Reeve holds against the Miller. Not only does the Reeve seem to hold himself on a higher station than the Miller, but also his story seems to relate the fact that all millers are crooked to some extent. This seems hypocritical when considering the Reeve’s own success in plundering his lord’s estates as is noted in the General Prologue. Likewise, the Reeve describes the miller in his story as carrying a sword and acting similar to someone of noble station when Symkyn worries about marrying off his daughter in order to pass on the “ estate” of his holdings. It is strange that the Reeve would find such a statement ironic when he himself carries a “ rusty sword” at his side and has holdings far nicer than those of the lord he works for. The fabliaux stories are meant to reveal the raunchy, baser side of commoners, but it is ironic that in the case of the Miller and the Reeve commoners also tell the stories as opposed to starring in them. The Reeve represents a commoner who places himself too high on the social ladder and the Miller typifies the drunk commoner with a bit of success to his name. When viewing the Prologues and Tales from the perspective that individuals of high birth were probably reading them, the interactions between the Miller and Reeve become a story in their own right. This conflict not only amuses the reader but also spurs interaction between the two stories, allowing for a contrast to be made between the two.

The Miller's tale essentially becomes a story about ignorant commoners doing the forbidden, raunchy acts that probably titillated a well-bred reader. The Reeve takes a stab at commoners who think themselves too smart while still keeping within the tradition of fabliaux. From a festive story to a mocking one, the two stories clearly show the range in which the fabliaux genre can be stretched to include both a general, jollier story and a tale filled with scathing, hidden insults. Regardless of the intent, however, both stories succeed in amusing the company of pilgrims and the modern reader as well.