

Sympathy and Revolt in *The Miller's Prologue and Tale*

The Black Death and the Peasant's Revolt were two major crises of the fourteenth century that drastically altered the socioeconomic structure of England. Because most of those who died from the Black Death were members of the lowest ranking, third estate, the vast labor shortage during this time enabled workers to increase the price of their own labor in order to offset the devastating labor scarcity; consequently, members of the third estate assumed unprecedented power—and with it, the potential for social mobility—for never before had laborers been in such scarce supply and high demand as they were in the aftermath of the Black Death (Dobson 4). Though members of any modern, capitalistic society would recognize these price increases as simply the workings of the free economic market, those living during the Middle Ages—particularly members of the upper class—saw this apparent manipulation of market prices by the lower class as a threat to the traditional estate system. It is against this politically charged atmosphere of social and economic upheaval that Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*. Stories in *The Canterbury Tales* both told by and in reference to members of the third estate, thus, come to bear important insight into the vacillating power and class dynamics during this time.

The Miller's Tale, in particular, reveals the way in which common laborers—as embodied through the character of John the carpenter—were negatively depicted as ignorant, foolish, and submissive people in order to appease elitist fears of the lower class. Chaucer's portrayal of John as an unenlightened and acquiescent member of the third estate, thus, conforms to stereotypes of the lower class that would have been appealing to members of the social elite in the aftermath of the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt. By using the boisterous, demanding, and violent character of the Miller as the medium through which he tells John's tale, however,

Chaucer brings attention to the growing class-consciousness of the third estate and its struggle for social justice. Thus, when read in conjunction with *The Miller's Prologue*, I will argue that *The Miller's Tale* actually critiques common misconceptions of the lower class, and, in so doing, portrays members of the third estate as victims justified in their retaliation against a corrupt and exploitive social elite.

In order to see the way in which Chaucer the poet uses the Miller as a means through which he critiques the medieval estate system, one must first read through Chaucer the pilgrim's stereotypical and condescending portrayal of the Miller—a portrayal that Chaucer the poet subtly satirizes as an inaccurate image of the lower class shaped by elitist imaginations. Chaucer the pilgrim clearly despises the Miller. In both *The General Prologue* and *The Miller's Prologue*, he characterizes the Miller as a loathsome creature. His depiction of the Miller as both physically repulsive and morally reprehensible—as a drunken, disheveled, and devious man who dangerously attempts to breach social hierarchy—thus affirms negative stereotypes associated with the third estate.

One such stereotype was that of the physical violence associated with the lower class. In *The General Prologue*, for instance, Chaucer the pilgrim describes the Miller as a strong man whose propensity for violence and brute force make him a threatening figure:

At wrastlynge he woulde have alwey the ram.
He was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre;
Ther was no dore that he nolde heve of harre,
Or breke it at a rennyng with his heed. (548-51)

By describing the Miller as a “broad” and “thick” man who possesses the physical strength both to lift doors off of their hinges and to break them with his head, Chaucer alludes to the growing strength of the lower class as they gained social and economic power in the aftermath of Black Death. In addition to this threatening portrayal of the Miller, he also depicts the Miller as

animal-like and physically grotesque:

His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,
And therto brood, as though it were a spade.
Upon the copy right of his nose he hade
A werte, and theron stood a toft of herys,
Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys;
His nosethriles blake were and wyde. (552-57)

Chaucer's description associates the Miller with both a "sowe" and a "fox"—animals commonly considered to be filthy and sly, respectively—in order to emphasize both the physical and mental crudeness, as well as the general chicanery and treachery, linked to members of the third estate. The description also portrays the Miller as an unattractive figure: a man with a hairy wart on his nose and nostrils that are black and wide. Chaucer further expounds upon the Miller's uncomely appearance in *The Miller's Prologue* when he depicts the Miller as drunken and disheveled: "The Millere, that for drunken was al pale,/ So that unnethe upon is hors he sat/ He nolde avalen neither hood ne hat" (3120-22). The Miller, who is so inebriated that he can barely sit on his horse, let alone take off his hood or hat, does not present himself in a respectable manner. This emphasis on the Miller's unattractive physical appearance illustrates the negative way in which the upper class stereotyped members of the third estate as lowly and repulsive beings.

Chaucer the pilgrim also stereotypes the third estate as an untrustworthy and deceitful class. He characterizes the Miller as a bawdy man prone to dishonesty, theft and obscenity when he says, "He was a janglere and a gloiardeys,/ And that was moost of synne and harlotires./ Wel koude he stelen corn and tollen thries" (560-63). By portraying the Miller as a dirty storyteller, a buffoon, and a man who both steals and takes more than his fair share of pay, Chaucer once again casts the third estate in an unfavorable light. This portrayal of the Miller as a drunken, lewd, deceitful, and potentially dangerous man supports negative perceptions of the third estate prevalent during the years following the Black Death and leading up to the Peasants' Revolt. In

an excerpt from the London Regulations of 1350, for instance, one can see the way in which the elite class—driven by their fear of the third estate—imposed rigid restrictions “[t]o amend and redress the damages and grievances which the good folks of the city, rich and poor, have suffered and received...by reasons of masons, carpenters, plasterers, tillers, and all manner of laborers, who take immeasurably more than they have been wont to take.” Chaucer the pilgrim’s description of the Miller—particularly as a greedy man who takes payments thrice (562)—thus upholds negative stereotypes about the lower class that would have been common at the time. When reading *The General Prologue* and *The Miller’s Prologue*, therefore, one can see the way in which Chaucer’s description of the Miller seems to reify well-known stereotypes of the third estate.

Upon closer examination of *The Miller’s Prologue* and *Tale*, however, one can see the way in which Chaucer the poet attempts to paint members of the third estate in a sympathetic light, thus forcing readers to question both the stereotypes of the third estate and the morality of the social elite. He questions the exploitive power structure of the estate system by addressing issues of social justice. From the beginning of *The Miller’s Prologue*, for instance, the need to maintain social hierarchy and order emerges as an important issue. After the Knight finishes his story, the Host asks the Monk, a member of the second estate, to tell the next tale. At this point, however, the drunken Miller interrupts and claims that he can tell a noble tale to match the Knight’s tale, to which the Host responds, “Abyd, Robyn, my leeve brother;/Some bettre man shal telle us first another./Abyd, and lat us werken thriftily” (3129-31). By telling the Miller that he should wait to tell his tale because there are better men who both deserve to go before him and *must* go before him in order to maintain proper hierarchal order, the Host attempts to enforce the traditional estate system and maintain proper class distinctions similar to the way in which

members of the elite class attempted to impose rules to regulate the third estate in the aftermath of the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt.

Rather than simply acquiesce to the Host's request that the Monk go next, however, the Miller threatens to leave the pilgrimage if he is not allowed to tell his story. The fact that, despite his initial opposition to the Miller's breach of social hierarchy, the Host eventually allows the Miller to tell his story seems to reflect the fluctuating social dynamics during the fourteenth century. Although Chaucer the pilgrim's portrayal of the Miller as a defiant and unruly member of the third estate enforces negative stereotypes about the lower class, when read in conjunction with the sympathetic portrayal of the carpenter in *The Miller's Tale*—as well as with the unfavorable portrayals of the clerical elite in the same tale—one can argue that Chaucer the poet actually presents the Miller's breach of social hierarchy as a justified reaction to the oppressive and exploitive structure of the estate system.

In addition to using the Miller as a means through which he critiques the estate system, Chaucer also uses *The Miller's Prologue* and *Tale* to challenge stereotypes of the lower class. He illustrates that the Miller's story, though crude and simple in comparison to that of the Knight's, serves as a social criticism against the corrupt, clerical elite and their exploitive religious teachings. The Miller's breach of hierarchy in *The Miller's Prologue*, therefore, reflects the increased demand for social justice as members of the third estate became more aware of their social exploitation. In an excerpt from Jean Froissart's account of a sermon by John Ball, for instance, John Ball states:

What have we deserved, or why should we be kept thus in serfdom? We be all come from one father and one mother, Adam and eve; whereby can they say or show that they be greater lords than we be, except that they cause us to earn and labor for what they spend? (Dobson 55)

Though the Miller never explicitly makes this claim, one can see the way in which his demand

that he be able to tell his tale before the Monk embodies the idea of social justice and equality evoked in Ball's sermon.

In addition to challenging stereotypes about the lower class, *The Miller's Tale* also portrays members of the third estate in a sympathetic light. The Miller often uses the term "sely" in reference to John—a term which implies a sort of innocence and simplemindedness (3509). Thus, the Miller portrays John as a simple and ignorant man who, due to his lack of specific Biblical knowledge, falls victim to the exploitation of a corrupt, clerical elite embodied through the deceitful, Oxford student Nicholas and the lustful, parish priest Absolon. Because John is unaware of the covenant that God established with Noah at the end of the Biblical flood story, Nicholas devises an elaborate scheme to sleep with John's wife and successfully dupes John into believing that, in order to save themselves from an impending flood, they must all sleep in separate tubs upon the roof the night before the flood begins. Because John trusts Nicholas, he readily heeds Nicholas' advice and labors diligently to ensure that he gathers all of the necessary materials to save them from the flood:

He gooth and geteth hym a knedyn trogh,
And after that a tube and a kymelyn,
And pryvely he sente hem to his in,
And heng hem in the roof in pryvette.
His owne hand he made ladders thre,
To clymen by the ronges and the stalkes
Unto the tubes hangynge in the balkes (3620-25)

John, who is described as an old man, gathers the tubs and the necessary provisions by himself. Additionally, he places the tubs on the roof by himself and also makes a ladder with his "owne hand." This emphasis on John's physical labor indicates his willingness to perform labor-intensive tasks in order to save Alisoun, Nicholas, and himself from the impending flood. The fact that John is so easily manipulated by Nicholas and works so diligently (completely unaided

by Nicholas) to prepare for the flood compels readers to view John as a sympathetic character.

Although John is said to be an extremely “jealous” man who is very possessive of his wife Alisoun, nowhere in the story do we see any actual instances of John’s jealous or possessive behavior; we are only informed of it by others. When John does say or do things in the story, therefore, it is important to note how he is characterized not as a controlling husband, but as a loving man who genuinely cares about his wife. After hearing about the flood Nicholas foresees, John’s first reaction is not of fear for himself, but of concern for his wife. He says, “Allas, my wyf! /And shal she drenche? Allas, myn Alisoun!” (3522-23). The thought of losing Alisoun grieves him so much that he almost falls down as a result of his sorrow (3524). Additionally, he begins to “quake,” “wepeth,” and “weyleth” when he thinks of Noah’s flood coming to drench his dear wife (3614-19). Although one may argue that John’s reactions stem from jealousy, rather than genuine concern, the fact that he labors diligently to “save” not only himself and his wife, but Nicholas as well, indicates that he is not as possessive of his wife we are initially led to believe. Because a significant portion of John’s scenes demonstrate him as either frightened and concerned for his wife, or as working tirelessly to prepare for the flood (3620-35), one can see how John’s characterization as an old, frightened, and weak man laboring to save his wife’s life makes him a sympathetic character. By portraying John as an innocent, hardworking, and sincerely concerned individual who naively falls prey to Nicholas’ chicanery, Chaucer depicts John as a victim with whom readers should empathize.

In order to portray John as a convincing victim, Chaucer vilifies members of the clerical elite, such as Nicholas, as enemies of the third estate. To demonstrate this, he depicts Nicholas as a secretive and deceitful young man who actively conspires against John. When reciting the Flood story to John, rather than refer to the actual Biblical text, Nicholas refers to one of the

mystery plays in which Noah's wife is depicted as a stubborn character whom initially refuses to board the ark. Because Nicholas knows that John possesses limited Biblical knowledge, he refers to a play about Noah with which John would have been familiar even if he had never learned about Noah's story in a formal, church setting (Benson 376). By asking John, "Hastou nat herd...The sorwe of Noe with his felaweshipe./ Er that he myghte gete his wyf to shipe? (3538-40), Nicholas manipulates John's limited Biblical knowledge in order to dupe him. Although John claims to know of the mystery play to which Nicholas refers, his lack of familiarity with covenant theology—namely God's promise to Noah that there will never be a second Flood—ultimately leaves him unable to see through Nicholas's false claims of a second Flood. Just as *The Miller's Tale* criticizes the way in which Nicholas exploits John's lack of Biblical knowledge to achieve his own, selfish ends, an account by a peasant named Jakke Trewman similarly critiques the way in which the clerical elite exploited the third estate by preaching false truths:

Jakke Trewman doth yow to understand that falsnes and gyle havith regned to longe, and threwhe hat bene sette under a lokke and falsnes regneth in everylk flokke. (382)

Therefore, one can see the way in which *The Miller's Tale* embodies actual social criticisms that were used by the third estate against members of the social elite.

The Miller's Tale also paints John the carpenter and other members of the third estate in a sympathetic manner through the way in which it deals with issues of social justice. While Nicholas makes a cuckold of John, John ignorantly sleeps in his tub upon the roof, completely oblivious to what is happening right below him. The next morning, upon hearing Nicholas shout, "water," John cuts his tub loose and crashes to the ground, breaking his arm. Alisoun and Nicholas then tell their neighbors and other members of the town that John is mad, and so John ends the story not only physically injured, but also mentally ridiculed by those closest to him.

Nicholas and Absolon, however, get off virtually unscathed in comparison to John—the former of which is branded on the butt for sleeping with John’s wife, and the latter of which is forced to live with the memory of kissing Alisoun’s “naked ers” (3734) and of also being farted upon by Nicholas (3806). Although the way in which social justice is administered in *The Miller’s Tale* seems to uphold the traditional estate system—as the severity of each male character’s punishment is based on his social standing—it ultimately undermines the estate system by portraying John as a sympathetic character who readers identify as an exploited victim of the clerical elite.

The breach of social hierarchy in *The Miller’s Prologue*, coupled with the sympathetic portrayal of the third estate in *The Miller’s Tale*, clearly undermines traditional power dynamics among the different classes. Though Chaucer the pilgrim goes through great lengths to depict the Miller and other members of the third estate as bawdy, unruly threats to the prevailing social hierarchy, one can see how Chaucer the poet actually uses both the Miller and his tale to critique elitist exploitations of the third estate, and, in so doing, portrays the lower class as justified in their desires to retaliate against the social injustices of the estate system.

Works Cited

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