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Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales, "The Miller's Tale"

The Miller's Tale: Question 4: Core Structure

It would be something of an understatement to suggest that "The Miller's Tale" and "The Knight's Tale" share aspects of core structure. In the Miller's own words, "I kan a noble tale for the nones,/With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale." Thus we are not only provided with a bawdy tale conforming to the characteristics of the fated fabliaux, but also, as the Miller would have it, a parody of "The Knight's Tale" in almost every particular.

First amongst these is the similarities of plot: both tales feature two main lines of actions concerning antagonists doing battle over the affections of a lady. Where "The Knight's Tale" provides a richness of detail in the plot's design, "The Miller's Tale" achieves a similar aesthetic effect by twists and turns and weaving weaves.

Thematically also the two tales are similar in their opposition. "The Knight's Tale" extols the virtues of courtly love--at least its literary representation. Accordingly, Emily prays to Diana for her continued chastity; and the love displayed by Palamon and Arcite is similarly chaste. The Miller instead offers Alison, similar in years though contrary in design: she plots hedonistic pleasures in deceit of her lawful husband; Nicholas the Gallant and Absalon display shallow

desires, seeking satisfaction and fun; attempting not to worship her purity but feast upon her depravity. The omnipresence of the thinly disguised gods--note the telling description: ". . . Juppiter, the kyng,/That is prince and cause of alle thyng"(3035)--is met by the Miller with the imaginary, materialised by utilisation of Biblical story of Noah. "The Knight's Tale" preaches a number of virtues, not least being patience. "The Miller's Tale," features two would be lovers out for a "quicky."

Although it might be argued that "character" is not absolutely pertinent to core structure, narrative style, particularly in first person, certainly is. Since the actual telling of tales is of undisputed importance in *The Canterbury Tales*, it can hardly be surprising that the characters of a particular tale are telling greatly of the narrator himself. Just then as "The Knight's Tale" presents characters in a sense "above" reality--epitomised by their noble suffering and noble deeds and association with the gods--so "The Miller's Tale" displays characters "below" reality. There is an earthy rough quality to Nicholas the Gallant and Absalon and company which seems to render them real; but their escapades negate this quality and show their lack of realism is a polarisation of Palamon and Arcite's. Naturally, this duality is therefore in accord with the description, in "The General Prologue," of the tale tellers themselves: the Knight described in honourable superlatives, the Miller as a hideous beast of corrupt flesh. The two tails are, of course, equally unrealistic, for they are representations of

imbalance in the dichotomy of Spirit and Flesh.

"The Reeve's Tale": Question 2: Several Departures From "The Miller's Tale"

Although superficially simple, "The Reeve's Tale" provides a structure and unity to this first fragment: just as the Miller sought to "quite" "The Knight's Tale," so the Reeve attempts to answer the Miller and return what he perceived as a person insult. But beyond this, Chaucer makes use of the Reeve to provide a middle ground between the previous mentioned dichotomy.

First though to the distinctive elements. "The Reeve's Tale," unlike "The Miller's Tale," presents a unique dialogue on the part of the two student northerners, featuring dialect and idiom. Without falling into the Deconstructualist's Pit--which grows darker and deeper with each century separating text from reader--we can safely say that the effect of this is to create an extra dimension to the narrator, the Reeve, bringing him further from the realm of stock characters and further into the realm of the real. He tells a tale much more true to life than those already told, and he tells it in a way that aurally dramatises that life.

If we recognise the justice of "The Miller's Tale" as being that special brand of fabliau justice, "The Reeve's Tale" tale instead provides poetic justice. The bold and thieving Simpkin, unlike the scally-wag lover, Nicholas the Gallant, gets precisely what he deserves. Indeed, it should be argued that the vileness of the dishonest Miller, Simpkin, is surpassed by Nicholas. The supposed moral of marrying like kind--young with

young, etc.--is nothing more than a red herring demonstrative of the narrator's moral decay. The fact is, Nicholas abuses his position and betrays a loving husband whose first response to the imminent flood is for the safety of his wife.

The reason justice is duly dished out in "The Reeve's Tale," has something to do with another point of distinction: realism. We have already seen how dialect and idiom play a part, but it also manifests itself in various other ways. Firstly, none of the characters are idealised. They are not puppets who dance a dance at their master's bidding, displaying immense stupidity and subservient to the "point" of the tale in which they appear. Neither are they caught up in an elaborate plot. Although "The Reeve's Tale" is essentially another fabliau, it is a fabliau that combines two vital elements of real life: good humour and bad humour: There is a certain sardonic quality to the manner of the tale's telling, to the manner of the Reeve, who has learned from a life of experience the experience of life; but balancing this is the humour of the situation, the hilarious moment, for example, when Alan climbs in bed with the miller. This balance then is not only another point of departure from the preceding yarn, but places "The Reeve's Tale" in the middle ground, providing a unity to the section and a more just picture of life.