

The Miller's Tale

Protest, Complaint, and Uprising in the *Miller's Tale*

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At least since the time of the Anglo-Saxon king Alfred (849-99), a particular idea of social hierarchy and organization existed in England, that of the three estates or orders. Of uncertain origins, this system emerged during Anglo-Saxon times during a time of upheaval and was used by Alfred—and some 100 years later, by the Anglo-Saxon monk Ælfric (955-1010), to consolidate power and authority (Duby 100, 102). While Alfred introduces the three orders as a means of theorizing how to rule successfully, Ælfric elaborates upon the idea to defend the rights of churchmen (Duby 101). These early examples demonstrate how writings on the three estates don't so much describe a given or natural ordering of society but rather serve the interests of the authors of those tracts.

The *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* belongs to a category of writing on the three estates known as estates satire. While estates satire often portrays the ideals and failings associated with social groups in order to advocate for a smoothly working three estate system, Chaucer, as critics such as Jill Mann and H. Marshall Leicester have shown, calls into question that oppressive notion of social order and identity. In this chapter, I consider how the Miller and his tale participate in such querying of the estates; I particularly address how the Miller challenges the low or subordinate role allotted to the estate of the peasantry. I also discuss how the Miller's resistance to traditional thinking about peasants intersects with the claims made about the peasantry during the peasant rebellion of 1381.

Tools

CONTEXT: PEASANTS, THE THREE ESTATES, AND REBELLION

The term “estate” very loosely equates to what we now identify as class. A full two-thirds of this mode of conceptualizing society was devoted to a very small, yet clearly important, component of the medieval English population. The first estate was made up of the clergy (those who pray) and the second estate consisted of the aristocracy (those who fight); taken together, those two estates comprised around only four percent of the population of England. The third estate—the peasantry or commons (those who work)—thus referred to the vast majority of English citizens. Thanks to its writers' interest in clerical and secular authority, estates tracts don't dwell on the

third estate, but when they do, those texts closely identify peasants with their bodies, which labor to work the land, mill grain, and perform other agrarian roles.



Detail from Limbourg brothers, *Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry*, 15th century. Musée Condé, Chantilly, France. MS 65 fol. 6 v.

What did it mean to be so associated with one's body? Generally speaking, the linkage debased and disenfranchised the medieval peasant. While writers claimed that the peasant who "willingly bears/His anguish and suffering" as a physical laborer earned a spot among the saved in heaven (Duby 284, 160; Mann 69), such assertions aimed to maintain the subordinate status of commoners within a social hierarchy whose leaders were members of the first two estates (Duby 160). All too often in medieval literary and visual culture, the peasant, in Paul Freedman's words, "wallowed in an innate, gross embodiment and materiality" and was driven more by "appetite than honor" or piety (Freedman 159). That denigration of the body reflected the thinking of the medieval Christian church, which enjoyed tremendous influence and power during the period. The dualistic thinking of the church, which often understood worldly phenomena in terms of two opposing principles, separated the body from the mind. The body was associated with the base, animal, aspects of a human and is highly susceptible to sinful impulses. Christian writers contended that, due to its supposedly low and sinful nature, the body must be controlled by the "higher" part of a human—the seat of the mind—the head. Socially, this meant that peasants, due to their close association with the body, had to be controlled and ruled by the more pious and intellectual components of society, the members of the first and second estates, the clergy and the aristocracy. One of the clearest versions of this idea appears in medieval accounts of the body politic, which describe the proper political ordering of society through the metaphor of the human body. In such accounts of the body politic as English philosopher and bishop John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* (c. 1159) and the miniature illustrating an anonymous 14th-century guide for princes, the *Avis au roys*, the king or ruler is depicted as the head of the body politic, ruling over the rest of the body (Nederman 69).^[1] Peasants typically appear not merely as part of the body but as its literally lowest—closest to the ground—element: the feet (Nederman 67).

The writers of estate tracts and satires associated particular estates with certain ideals and flaws. As they saw it, ideal or "good" peasants accepted their low social role as ordained by God after

the Fall, submitted themselves before the authority of secular and spiritual leaders (like kings and priests), and happily labored to support the population. Flawed or “bad” peasants, on the other hand, resisted their subservient position in society.

Not long before Chaucer wrote the *Canterbury Tales*, the capacity of the peasantry to reject their social role became clear in almost revolutionary terms, via the 1381 Rebellion, also known as the Peasant’s Revolt. The backstory to this remarkable national event is yet another major historical occurrence during Chaucer’s life, the Black Death. It is estimated that, between 1348-9 the bubonic plague caused nearly half the population of England to die. This disaster, however, had a beneficial impact on surviving peasants: the resulting labor shortfall allowed workers to seek higher wages and leave their jobs in search of better employment. The king and other leaders responded to this trend by taxing laborers and, in 1351, enacting a law that rolled back wages to pre-plague rates (Dobson 63-8). Nevertheless, peasants continued to demand not only higher wages but also something even more vital—the freedom of peasants who were still “bond” men and women. Bondmen, also known as villeins, were legally subject to the lords of the feudal estates where their ancestors had labored for centuries. The peasants’ efforts both to assert their independence and to achieve higher standards of living exploded in 1381, when, throughout England, peasants engaged in a massive protest. Ultimately, the rebellion was put down by the king and other authorities. But before it was over, peasants engaged in many remarkable activities, including burning several important buildings in London, killing many leaders (such as the king’s treasurer and the Archbishop of Canterbury) and destroying a host of legal documents.

While the 1381 Rebellion was a remarkable event, historians in the middle ages played down its impact and avoided acknowledging any notable actions on the part of the rebels. Consider, for example, the monk Thomas Walsingham’s account in his chronicle of the peasants who attacked the Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Sudbury: “words could not be heard among their horrible shrieks but rather their throats sounded with the bleating of sheep, or, to be more accurate, with the devilish voices of peacocks” (Dobson 173). While Walsingham can’t hide the fact that the peasants killed Sudbury, he refuses to acknowledge them as thinking and purposeful human beings. Instead of speaking—a hallmark of humanity both during the middle ages and today—the peasants only bleat like sheep and shriek like peacocks. Reflecting the usual association of peasants with the body and beasts, Walsingham portrays the rebels as subhuman figures who are incapable of language and instead can only make animal noises.

However, as medievalist Steven Justice has shown, the rebels, in fact, were capable of not merely speech but language at its most developed: they had their own peasant “poetics.” Commoners created cultural forms—for example literary texts and ritual performances—that had distinctive themes and features. The primary theme of English peasant poetics, as Justice has shown, was the celebration of peasants and peasant life. By elevating what authorities put down, English peasant poetics radically overturned the hierarchies put forth by the three estates and church authorities.

A prime example of that peasant poetics is a short piece of poetry associated with one of the leaders of the rebellion, John Ball: “When Adam delved (dug) and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” (Dobson 394). This couplet celebrates the commons by pointing out how peasant labor hails back to the dawn of humanity, when Adam and Eve began to work for themselves to

survive after their ejection from Eden. Social authority during the middle ages had a lot to do with venerability, that is, the claim that a social group has ancient roots. Royals showcased their supposed venerability through mythic genealogies that traced an aristocratic family line back, for example, to Trojan heroes. John Ball's couplet resists such efforts by showing how there was a time when no nobles existed whatsoever. The short poem, like other aspects of peasant culture, turned the tables on received ideas of the peasantry. Here, the very body-based occupations that would seem to support the peasant's low role in the social order suggest the opposite: that peasants enjoy a genealogy that surpasses that of any aristocrat. While authorities put down peasants, rebel culture celebrated peasants and their agrarian world, even at the expense of the elites.

Text

CONCEPT: THE MILLER'S PEASANT POETICS

Millers occupied a uniquely liminal place within the three estates, a fact that perhaps explains why estates literature rarely discusses them (Mann 160). Technically peasants, millers were yoked to the agrarian world through their job of milling grain. Yet they also had a tie to the second estate, insofar as they enjoyed "a certain unpopular control over the lowest classes" (Lindahl 111). Thus the Miller, not unlike other Canterbury pilgrims such as the Man of Law, the Physician and the Merchant, reveals how the three-estate system failed to capture the complexity of medieval society during the late middle ages.

Chaucer's portrait of the Miller in the General Prologue at first glance may seem to support stereotypes about peasant identity, because it stresses his body. And yet Chaucer highlights the Miller's physique in a way that complicates estate theory. When Chaucer opens by telling us that, "Ful byg . . . of brawn" (l. 546), the Miller is a brawny guy, he challenges the usual denigration of the commoner's body by celebrating the Miller's strength. Chaucer further celebrates the Miller's body by telling us he is a champion wrestler ("At wrastlyng he would he have alwey the ram" 548). To be sure, while the Miller excels athletically, he does so at a "low class" sporting competition. While high-class knights wear armor and battle with swords and lances from the elevated position offered by their horses, peasants wrestle low to the ground using only their bodies, fighting not for high goals such as honor but for the base prize of food ("the ram"). And yet, as Gregory M. Colón Semenza stresses, wrestling was an activity associated with not only peasant sports but also knightly endeavor (Colón Semenza 74-75). Knights wrestled to prepare themselves for battle and even challenged peasants to wrestling matches. In associating the Miller with wrestling, Chaucer links the peasant to the one sport that allowed for rivalry between members of the third estate and second estates.

A bit later in the Miller's portrait, Chaucer provides a detail that might suggest that there is little more to the Miller than his body: the fact that "Ther was no dore that he nolde . . . breke it at a rennyng with his heed" (there isn't a door that the Miller wouldn't break down by ramming it with his head, l. 550-1). The Miller, it appears, is so body-oriented that he uses his head not to think, but as an extension of his body, a physical tool for busting open doors.

But at the same time that the spectacle of the Miller head-butting a door open seems to reduce him to his body, the image also suggests some aspiration on his part. During the middle ages, opening a door could imply obtaining opportunities, in the same way that today we discuss how, for example, a college diploma should “open doors” or create opportunities for a job seeker. The image, thus, might not so much affirm that the Miller is a mindless muscle-man but rather show how that peasant uses his attributes in some way to climb and rise. Such an interpretation of the Miller as a figure who seeks to “go places” beyond his given station complicates earlier word choices in the portrait. For example, the first word Chaucer uses to describe the Miller is “stout” an adjective that can indicate not only physical strength (supporting peasant stereotyping) but also bravery, boldness, fierceness and rebellion. All of those other definitions complement the prospect that the Miller isn’t satisfied with the usual idea of what a peasant is and how a peasant should live. Rather than accept received opinions about peasants, the Miller takes peasant attributes (that is, the idea that a peasant’s embodiment debases him) and puts them to new and empowering uses. The Miller, in other words, seems to engage in acts of peasant empowerment that resemble John Ball’s couplet.

The Prologue to the *Miller’s Tale*, where we learn that the Miller’s name is Robin, very much confirms this rebellious and aspirational aspect of the pilgrim. Most obviously, the Miller makes the outrageous claim that he, a peasant, can tell a tale that will “quite” or match the first tale of the tale-telling game, told by the highest-ranking member of the pilgrimage, the Knight (l. 3119). A less obvious component of the Prologue that demonstrates Robin’s celebration of his peasant identity are his words to Oswald the Reeve. During the middle ages, reeves (farm managers) and the millers were professional rivals, and when Robin states that he will tell a tale about a carpenter (carpentry was associated with reeves) being cheated on by his wife, Oswald understandably gets angry. It is the case that adultery was a rather common practice in the Middle Ages and that literary texts (such as Marie de France’s *Lais* and many Canterbury tales, including that of the Miller) at times sympathize with the plight of unhappy wives (especially young wives in loveless unions with older men [Karras, 94]). At the same time however, evidence from law courts demonstrates how brawls, spousal abuse and even murders arose from a man’s fear that his wife was an adulteress or from an accusation of cuckoldry being leveled by another man (Neal 31, 73-82, 96, 110). Female adultery proved so disturbing and disruptive partly due to medieval notions of masculinity. Since a proper man should control his wife, an adulterous woman—especially a woman like the Miller’s Alisoun, who cheats on her husband in his domain, his home—undermined the masculinity of her spouse. Another crucial reason why “adultery by women was far more serious than that by men” was the manner in which it queried the legitimacy of a man’s children. In response to the Reeve’s fury over the Miller’s inference that he is a cuckold, the Miller offers a philosophy of life that serves as a kind of interpretive key for the tale that follows. The Miller states that he, like the Reeve, has a wife, but he would not go so far as to believe that he was a cuckold (a man who is cheated on by his wife). Rather, he will believe with his whole heart that he is not, for:

“An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.
So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere” (MilT 3163-6).

If the Miller was outrageous in claiming he can tell a tale as good as the Knight, his message here is in some ways even more shocking. “Pryvetee” is a loaded term that can mean secrets, such as the unknowable workings of the Christian god, as well as something perceived as being far from holy: a human’s private parts. Women, along with peasants, were denigrated or put down in Chaucer’s culture for their physicality; like Eve and the apple, all women were attacked for their desiring, hungry bodies. But the Miller rejects such thinking as he puts a sexually active woman in the same category as God. In the same way that a good Christian man shouldn’t try to understand ways of God, the Miller claims, a Christian man shouldn’t pry into his wife’s actions with respect to her genitalia. The manner in which the Miller “blasphemously—and deliciously—elevates Alison’s private parts and their unknowability to the level of God’s” in the prologue gives us a hint at the gender politics of his tale (Bishop 240). The independence and freedom allotted woman here hints at a certain preference for that gender, which seems to receive further support in the treatment of Alisoun. A striking example of Alisoun’s favoring by the Miller is the fact that, by the end of the tale, she is the only figure who avoids some sort of punishment.

But in addition to its gender dynamic, the overall philosophy of this passage merits close attention for what it says about how the *Miller’s Tale* works. “Don’t try to know or discover,” the Miller urges, presenting to Oswald what we might call an ethos of ignorance, a philosophy of life that says it’s best to be uninformed about certain matters (Patterson 258). Informing this celebration of ignorance is a sensible or practical embrace of moderation, limits, and generally having “just enough.” As long as you are receiving “God’s plenty” (in other words, as long as you are ‘getting it’ from your wife), don’t worry about the rest. The Miller engages in a similar embrace of “enough” just before this passage, when he tells Oswald that he would not “take upon me moore than *ynogh*” (go so *far* as) to think he is a cuckold.

The approach to life the Miller offers here in the prologue, with its attack on forms of excess (going too far, being too curious, accepting just enough) and its embrace of limitations, presents us with a key to understanding how his tale responds to that of the Knight. Recall just how grand the *Knight’s Tale* is, on so many levels. From the “big” philosophical questions the tale asks (such as, “why do things happen?”), to its length, the amount of time it covers, and even the capacity of its two knights to long for—and wax poetic about—a woman for years (and years!) before ever having any sort of physical contact with her, the *Knight’s Tale* favors all sorts of grandeur. The *Miller’s Tale* replaces that greatness (or excess) with economy: his tale is short, its main action takes place in one evening, and heterosexual contact occurs nearly immediately, during Nicholas and Alisoun’s first encounter. Moreover, those characters within the Miller’s Tale who in some way recall the grandeur of the *Knight’s Tale* are punished for their ambitions. John the Carpenter’s curiosity about and fascination with Nicholas’s “knowledge” about a second flood recalls the big philosophical questions of the *Knight’s Tale*; while the Knight embraces such questions, John is punished for his inquisitiveness, when the entire town laughs at him at the end of the tale. And for approaching Alison with a “love longynge” akin to that of Arcite or Palamon (MilT 3349), Absolon the Clerk gets the last thing he wants: a kiss from Alisoun’s “nether ye” (3852).

Such moments in the tale when excesses are rejected overlap with the Miller’s stress on limits in the prologue. They also suggest how his tale presents readers and listeners with a “peasant

poetics” like that of the 1381 rebellion. Limits, practicality and ignorance are characteristics associated with peasants. The average peasant is unschooled and doesn’t have any time to spend either pursuing big philosophical questions or experiencing the lengthy period of unrequited love that a knight in romance typically experiences. While a member of the royalty would criticize a peasant for such limitations, the Miller criticizes his characters for their embrace of various forms of aristocratic grandeur.

Arguably, the aspect of the *Miller’s Tale* that best suggests its status as a peasant poetic is its description of John the carpenter’s wife, Alisoun. This description appears in lines 3233- 3270 and introduces to the tale a medieval rhetorical device known alternately as a *blazon* or *effictio*. A blazon is a moment when the action of a narrative stops, allowing the reader (or listener) to linger over a moment of imagined visual pleasure. Typically focused on a woman, a blazon catalogs—usually from head to toe or in a top-down manner—the physical features of its subject. The Miller offers in Alisoun’s blazon a gorgeous, beautifully-rendered presentation of that peasant woman, and he does so, crucially, through peasant imagery. Consider, for example, the Miller’s beautiful use of barnyard imagery to describe Alisoun’s singing voice, playful nature, and sensuous mouth:

But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne
As any swalwe sittyng on a berne.
Therto she koude skippe and make game,
As any kyde or calf folwyng his dame.
Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth,
Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth (l. 3257-62).

Passages like this merit comparison to the derogatory account of peasants offered by the monk Thomas Walsingham and other chroniclers of the 1381 rebellion. While Thomas used animal imagery to put down the peasants and even empty them of their humanity, the Miller’s animal imagery evokes Alisoun’s youthful beauty and attractiveness. In both cases, sound proves crucial to defining the peasant; but, while Thomas’s peasants emit a horrific yell, Alisoun voices a melody that is as beautiful as it is aspirational (consider how the Middle English “yerne” resonates with yearning). In contrast to Thomas’s evocation of the hideous cry of the peacock or the dumb bleating of the sheep is the Miller’s evocation of the beautiful birdsong of the sparrow, a reference that reminds us of the birdsong described in the brilliant opening line of the *General Prologue*, with its account of how “smale foweles maken melodye” in springtime (l. 9).

Importantly, the Miller’s blazon doesn’t simply use barnyard imagery to connote Alisoun’s loveliness; rather, it seems to celebrate the overall sights and sounds of peasant life as much as it celebrates the particular merits of the woman Alisoun. Our appreciation of the beauty of baby animals like calves and the fruits of the peasant harvest like apples (gorgeously pictured before the mind’s eye in hay or on wild plants) emerges in tandem with our admiration of Alisoun’s dancing body and her sensuous mouth. Like John Ball’s couplet about the agrarian activities of humanity’s first couple, Adam and Eve, the Miller’s blazon of Alisoun powerfully upends received thinking about the peasantry.

Transformation

1. The final four lines of the Miller's blazon of Alisoun are somewhat ambiguous (Leicester 486; Lochrie 296). In the penultimate or second-to-last line of the blazon he describes her basically as a sex object—a flower “For any lord to leggen in his bedde” (l. 3269). In some ways, this objectification of Alisoun complements the usual goal of a blazon, which allows the (presumably male) reader or listener to visually “take” the woman described. But does the last line of the blazon add to or complicate Alisoun's objectification, with its description of her as an appropriate bride for any “good yeman (yeoman)” (l. 3270)?
2. Generically, the *Miller's Tale* is a *fabliau*, a medieval literary genre famous for its strong sense of closure. In the *Miller's Tale*, as in subsequent *fabliaux* in the *Canterbury Tales*, we witness climactic, action-packed endings. Consider the positioning of each main character—John the Carpenter, Absalon the Clerk, the scholar Nicholas and Alisoun—by the end of the *Miller's Tale*. What has happened to each figure and why? What do you make of the gender politics of closure in this tale? What might it mean that a woman, Alisoun, the only figure who remains unscathed?
3. Not only is Alisoun unscathed by the close of the *Miller's Tale*, she exhibits a notable degree of agency. Consider what Alisoun does in the *Miller's Tale* and contrast her actions to those of Emilye in the *Knight's Tale*.
4. Alisoun's prime moment of power occurs during the notorious misdirected kiss sequence (l. 3687-3741). Compare and contrast the role of orifices in this episode to the account of Alisoun's mouth in her blazon. What do you make of the precise manner in which Alisoun exerts power here, by substituting her “nether eye” for her mouth? Do we know precisely what hole the Miller is referring to here? How can we interpret that ambiguity? Compare and contrast this episode with the Miller's dictum about divine and womanly secrets in the prologue. How does the episode—and the Miller's ambiguous reference to female private parts—intersect with the Miller's claim that one should not delve into the “pryvetee” of both God and woman?
5. The *Miller's Tale* may offer a kind of peasant poetics, but his celebration of the peasantry is incomplete. Notably, the peasant figure of John the Carpenter emerges as a laughing stock by the end of the tale. And, of course, the Reeve, due to his professional associations with carpentry, takes offense at this aspect of the tale and vows to “quite” or avenge himself on Robin the Miller. What might it indicate that Chaucer presents such a fraught or contradictory approach to the peasantry, by both endowing the Miller with a powerful peasant rhetoric and depicting the Miller and the Reeve at odds with one another?

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Notes:

[1] *Avis aus roys*, France, probably Paris, 1347-1350, Morgan Library MS M.456 fol. 5r. The French inscription streaming out from the left foot reads *laboureurs de terres* (laborers of the earth).



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