

The Reeve's Tale

Wages, Work, Wealth, and Economic Inequality in the *Reeve's Tale*

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Introduction

Jill Mann famously described the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales* as “a poem about work” (202), while another recent article describes *The Canterbury Tales* as “a game of food” – after all, the prize for the best tale is a free meal (Archer et al. 3)! For most of the population in medieval England, these went hand in hand; working meant growing, harvesting, transporting, processing, selling, buying, and preparing food. For no other tale is this fact more central than the *Reeve's Tale*. A conflict between two kinds of agrarian workers provokes the tale, and it is framed as an exchange that is at once moral and economic: Oswald the Reeve wants to “quite” Robyn the Miller for telling a story that he finds insulting (RvT 3864). They are involved in an exchange of tales, where Oswald's story, while different from Robyn's, is nevertheless supposed to be an equivalent response. In this way, the whole prologue and tale can be seen as an attempt to figure out what it means to “get even” in a stratified society defined by divisions of class and occupation, or “estates.” These divisions were not nearly as stable as they wanted to be, in part because they are based on various kinds of reciprocity and exchange, and the *Reeve's Tale* shows just how unstable and destabilizing exchange can be. In Oswald's violent *fabliau*, we are shown how potentially arbitrary it is to make one thing (a story or a bag of flour) stand for another thing (a rival story or a blow to the head). Chaucer suggests that both poetry and economic exchange depend upon an easily disrupted process of making unlike things equivalent. For example, when Oswald “quites” Robyn with a tale similar to the Miller's *fabliau*, even the comic subject of sexual attraction that defined Robyn's tale becomes, in the *Reeve's Tale*, a brute economy of coercion and revenge, where women's bodies are treated as commodities like any other. In Oswald's world, nothing is safe from the corrosive uncertainties of the logic of requital and exchange.

Tools

Context: Reeves, Millers, and Colleges in the Agrarian Economy

Reeves and millers work to make England's bread and ale – the first by managing the production of wheat and barley, the latter by grinding it into flour and malt – but they confront each other as

potential enemies from their respective positions in the agrarian economy. A reeve oversees all aspects of the agrarian activity of a manorial estate; Oswald, for example is responsible for keeping accounts, managing the planting and harvesting of grain, and keeping track of all the landlord's livestock. A reeve might also see to the marketing of an estate's produce, while supervising the milling of grain for the manor household's own consumption. Millers, meanwhile, extract a livelihood by charging as much as they can for processing that grain. Mills were usually built and owned by landlords and leased to a miller who would operate it for a profitable fee taken from the mill's customers. A portion of that fee would be paid to the mill's owner, and the rest would be the miller's profit. Since mills were a specialized and expensive piece of infrastructure that couldn't be built just anywhere, millers could find themselves in a strong position to take a heavy fee from local users, including peasants and reeves from neighboring estates, much to the chagrin of a penny-pinching manager like Oswald. This fraught economic relationship should be kept in mind when we consider the Reeve's promise to "quite" the Miller with his tale. These two men occupy a similar niche in the agrarian ecosystem, which gives rise to their mutual antagonism.

The colleges of Oxford and Cambridge were just as embedded in the agrarian economy as you would expect of landholding institutions responsible for feeding their members. In the *Reeve's Tale*, the illness of the manciple of Soler Hall means that two young students, John and Alleyn, have to take over the role of getting provisions for their college. Whatever heady intellectual pursuits the two scholars might pursue when they aren't doing chores for Soler Hall, we are given little detail. What matters in the *Reeve's Tale* is the continuity of "hir philosophye," as Simkin puts it, with the complicated and antagonistic market relations that make the life of the college possible (RvT 4050). Like universities today, the serenity of a mythical ivory tower cannot be separated from broader economic pressures. Scholarly labor in the *Reeve's Tale* blends with the everyday work of getting food so the school can function. The "life of the mind" does not exist in some contemplative redoubt in this tale, but is instead exercised in the quotidian struggles of the agricultural economy – wit and wheat are both matters to be tested, measured, and exchanged.

Concept: The Mystery of Exchange

In the aftermath of the Black Plague (ca. 1348), workers found themselves in a newly empowered position. Due to the catastrophic loss of life, all of a sudden demand for labor exceeded its supply, giving workers a chance to push for better compensation or to seek better terms of employment. While the Ordinance and Statutes of Laborers attempted to address this problem for landowners and employers by fixing a limit to wages, the effects of the population crash nevertheless changed the circumstances of a number of common workers. By the time Chaucer was writing the *Canterbury Tales*, many workers labored for wages or worked on small, independent farms on long-term leases for their own sustenance and to sell their produce at market. This was not a world of traditional, feudal relationships between king, lord, and worker. Rather, production and trade were well advanced in Chaucer's England and wealth circulated in many forms, tying together society's estates in mutually dependent economic relationships that were not always compatible with the stable ideals of a hierarchical society. After all, as the *Reeve's Tale* shows, the world of work and commerce invites – or indeed requires – error, deception, play, and conflict.

The *Reeve's Tale*, with its emphasis on requital and payback, reminds us that exchange is a stranger process than it seems. It means taking one thing and getting another thing from it that is qualitatively different, but in some sense quantitatively equal. That is to say, if you have a bale of wool, and you want a pair of nice shoes, then you must find some way to equate those two different things in order to make an exchange. But what establishes the equivalence that allows these two things to be exchanged? How is it, really, that one thing can substitute itself for something else? This mysterious quality of exchange helps explain the significance of Oswald's intention to "quite" Robyn. "Quite" is a rich verb. It means to pay for something, to reward someone, to pay back or discharge a debt, to legally acquit someone, or to get revenge. It's a word that crosses lines between the moral and the economic. This multiplicity of meaning makes Oswald's intent to pay back Robyn with another tale much more than a case of jocular vengeance. It shows Chaucer toying with the idea of exchange by making poetry the medium of exchange between Robyn and Oswald. What better illustration of the fact that exchange, even wages for work, carries with it a strong sense of the incommensurable and the arbitrary than to make one ridiculous and violent story "pay" for another?

Karl Marx's insight about the strange way exchange works casts some light on Chaucer's merging of work, play, and "quitting" in the *Reeve's Tale*. According to Marx (1818-1883), commodities have qualities that make them useful, but they also have a value, which, though itself invisible, abstractly expresses the quantitative relationship between a given commodity and its different, equivalent commodity^[1]. What makes this quantitative comparison possible is the average amount of labor time it takes to produce the commodities in question. The two items might appear different, but they share an underlying value that allows them to change places, to be endlessly replaceable with anything else of the same value. This means that in order to exchange something, you're really engaging in a process of abstraction and substitution, where something that you can't see (average labor time) forms the real equivalence between visible things, underneath the masquerade of diverse commodities. If all that sounds unnecessarily confusing, that's kind of Marx's point: when you look hard enough at a simple exchange and try to describe its every aspect, you can't avoid verbal and conceptual complexity. Marx defamiliarizes the day-to-day fact of exchange, and makes us aware again of how weird it is. Chaucer achieves much the same effect with the material and moral economies of the *Reeve's Tale*, which seem to involve a simple comedy of tit-for-tat pranking that nevertheless unfolds in a dizzying escalation of substitution and subterfuge. Chaucer gets a lot of mileage out of the insight that exchange invites, even requires, a certain kind of error. Oswald knows this well, as we learn in the *General Prologue*, for he is adept at selling his master goods from the master's own stores (608-611). The circulation of wealth between owners and workers plunges all parties involved into a bewildering play of substitution and false appearance. It is little wonder, then, that Chaucer's tale of "quitting" ends in a violent farce of mistaken identity. This dynamic informs the tale's sexual politics at its conclusion, which expresses the kind of casual misogyny that substitutes women's bodies for objects to be used in exchanges among men.

Text

Oswald takes the Miller's tale personally; he thinks Robyn made a carpenter the fool of his story because he wanted to insult Oswald. The testy, choleric reeve can't let this stand. "I shal hym quite anon," Oswald promises: "Right in his cherles terms wol I speke" (RvT 3916-17). He

intends to get Robyn back in the very same terms in which the Miller insulted carpenters, but the legal reciprocity he invokes to justify his tale – “leveful is with force force of-showve” (RvT 3912) – will prove to be much more elusive and complicated than that once his tale begins.

Since the Miller told a *fabliau*, or a scurrilous comic tale, Oswald follows with one of his own about a miller operating near Cambridge. Simkin, the miller in *The Reeve’s Tale*, is a non-noble, independent man of some means – a “yeoman” – who, as the narrator tells us, has “Greet sokene,” meaning a local monopoly to process “whete and malt of al the land aboute” (RvT 3987-88). Simkin presides over a chokepoint in the agrarian economy, a literal manifestation of structural inequality, where the means of producing edible flour are alienated from those who grow or buy the wheat. He abuses this position tyrannically, skimming extra grain off the top and bullying anyone who tries to defy him. Where else could they go to get their grain ground, anyway?

Simkin the miller bristles with potential violence. Tellingly, Oswald’s description of Simkin echoes both the description of Oswald himself in the *General Prologue* and that of Robyn the Miller, insofar as each man carries a weapon and seems up for a fight. This similarity shows Oswald perhaps projecting the unsavory aspects of his own personality that he shares with Robyn onto the figure of Simkin. Simkin carries not just a sword, but a dagger and a knife as well, and is known for his belligerence. He is a figure of “extra-economic” coercion who nevertheless occupies a position of economic privilege. In other words, his ownership of the mill entitles him to lucrative rewards for holding a monopoly on grain processing (his “economic” privilege), but he also supplements this with outright theft backed up by intimidation (his “extra-economic” coercion). Simkin’s wife matches his domineering manner with her own haughty demeanor as they go about on holidays dressed in red like aristocrats. Oswald mocks their pretensions to nobility, but his emphasis on their clothing and performance of high status also suggests that occupying the noble estate is just a matter of dressing and acting a certain way – a mere show. Chaucer hints that material prosperity is not the same thing as cultural capital, but neither is nobility exempt from the deceptive, disruptive world of commerce and performance.

Simkin’s wife and daughter are central to this tale’s economy: they are bluntly described in terms of their value on the marriage market. Simkin must have “a mayde, / To saven his estaat of yomanrye” (RvT 3948-49); in other words, marrying a virgin is important to his material wealth and class identity, so he chose his wife for her chaste and mannered upbringing in a nunnery (even though she was raised there because she is the illegitimate daughter of a priest). Similarly, Malyne, Simkin’s daughter, is selected by the feckless parson who fathered Simkin’s wife as the heir of his property, and so he seeks to find an advantageous marriage for her. Her person has become a bearer for the parson’s desire for worldly wealth and lineage, and thus she too must remain “a mayde” to preserve her marriageable value. The *Reeve’s Tale*’s troubling sexual politics and the rape culture it assumes are inseparable from the tale’s material economy and the patriarchal familial structures that upheld it. A woman’s body is not her own, but is yet another thing to be tested and exchanged among men on the marriage market.

This overlap of sex, wealth, and work is aptly suggested by the motivation of “yonge povre scolers two” (RvT 4002) to mill their college’s grain. Since Simkin takes advantage of the Hall Manciple’s illness to steal “bothe mele and corn / An hundred tyme moore than biforn” (RvT

3995-96), the two scholars, “Testif . . . and lusty for to pleye . . ., oonly for hire myrthe and revelrye, / Upon the wardeyn bisily they crye / To yeve hem leve, but a litel stounde, / To goon to mille and seen hir corn ygrounde” (RvT 4004-8). These two young men are eager to take this job not because they are shrewd negotiators seeking to get a better deal for the college, or because they need to get paid for the work, even though they are “povre scolers.” They do it for pleasure, like their horse, who runs off in search of wild mares when Simkin sets him free (RvT 4059-4066). Their work is “pleye,” which naturalizes their behavior as two young men seeking adventure. This whiff of a “boys will be boys” mindset conveyed by the parallels between the horse’s behavior and that of the students exhibits the kinds of assumptions that enable sexual aggression as an expected or even natural act – an aspect of Chaucer’s depiction of college culture that is still depressingly familiar today.

Upon reaching the mill, the scholars want to see if they can outsmart the thieving miller. When they announce their intention to watch closely both the ingoing grain and the outgoing flour under the guise of satisfying their curiosity about how the milling process works, Simkin sniffs out their plan and joins the game eagerly. He will “quite” their cleverness with his own wiles, making stolen wheat the wage of their trickery: “The moore queynte creakes that they make, / The moore wol I stele whan I take” (RvT 4051-52).

At first, the more practiced thief defeats his young challengers with his trick of freeing the scholars’ horse. While John and Aleyn desperately search for it, the miller has ample opportunity to take a half a bushel of flour from them, which he instructs his wife to knead into a loaf for later baking (RvT 4093-94). Simkin boasts, “Yet kan a millere make a clerkes berd, / For al his art; now lat hem goon hir weye! / Lo, wher he gooth! Ye, lat the children pleye” (RvT 4096-98). For the crowing miller, this contest is as much about pleasure as it is about business. The fact that the *Reeve’s Tale* is framed as a-tale-for-a-tale exchange between the Miller and the Reeve (part of the broader game to pass the time that is the *Canterbury Tales*) mirrors how the economy of requital in the tale itself becomes inseparable from “play,” broadly defined and with all the potential for disorder that it implies.

Simkin makes the mistake of assuming that the game has ended. He complacently believes that he’s the victor, and his reward for winning this contest of wits is a pilfered loaf of bread. But the night offers John and Aleyn a chance to further the exchange. They will “quite” the miller for his thievery. Aleyn has his own idea about how this requital should work, and it depends upon making non-consensual sex into compensation for the lost grain. As he declares to John, “ther is a lawe that says thus: / That gif a man in a point be agreved, / That in another he sal be releved. / Oure corn is stoln, sothly, it is na nay, / And we han had an il fit al this day; / And syn I sal have neen amendement / Agayn my los, I will have esement” (RvT 4180-86). He invokes a legal principle of requital in order to justify, under cover of dark, his plan to get even with Simkin by raping Malyne. Malyne’s consent is beside the point for Aleyn, just as it is for John when he pulls off the bedtrick with Simkin’s wife. At this decisive moment, these women only seem to matter to Aleyn and John as a medium of exchange that somehow allows them to “quite” Simkin for the seemingly dissimilar, but mysteriously equivalent, matter of stolen flour. But perhaps this isn’t so mysterious in a culture where a woman’s virtue, i.e. her virginity, is directly translated into the frankly material economy of the marriage market – a fact that Chaucer emphasizes with the play on words in Aleyn’s threat that Simkin and his family will have the “flour of il ending”

(RvT 4174) for their trickery, where the “flower” (or reward) of bad deeds also stands for both the pilfered flour and the “flower” of Malyne’s virginity.

John’s bed trick, by which he deceives Simkin’s wife into thinking she is having sex with her husband when she is in fact having sex with John, continues the prologue’s theme of substitution and exchange. By pretending to be Simkin, John also “gets back” in another form the wheat that he lost. In this way, the daytime world of exchange and deceit continues after nightfall in the tale’s sexual economy, where Aleyn’s “swynk,” or his labor in bed, compensates him for his “los” of flour (RvT 4253, 4186). Malyne tells him where to find the stolen loaf as he leaves her bed; he and John are doubly compensated for their labor. Chaucer seems to be deliberately parodying the idea of the “just price,” which figured so prominently in medieval scholastic discussions of ethics, by making an amoral plot of revenge through rape into a travesty of what getting a fair wage looks like, as the women in the tale are reduced to mere counters in a world of competitive exchange among men.

In this welter of substitutions, exchanges, and excess, the requital of sex for flour only gives way to more farcical errors. Aleyn falls for John’s bedtrick too, and mistakes Simkin for his companion, initiating the slapstick conclusion of the tale. In the brawl that follows once Aleyn mistakenly awakens Simkin instead of John, Simkin’s wife wakes up, finds a staff, and strikes one of the fighting men she thinks is Aleyn. But no – in another case of mistaken identity, she wallops Simkin, giving the two scholars the upper hand. Seizing their chance, they beat up Simkin and take back the loaf made from their stolen flour as they leave. The finished loaf contains not just the raw flour Simkin had stolen, but also the labor it took to make it into bread. With this added value that the scholars now take back, the loaf symbolizes the excessive quality of their revenge. For John and Aleyn, getting even means getting more.

Now Oswald tries to wrap up this grim chaos with a nice and tidy moral, as if everything were even: “Thus is the proude millere wel ybete, / And hath ylost the gryndynge of the whete, / And payed for the soper everideel / Of Aleyn and of John, that bette hym weel. / His wyfe is swyved, and his doghter als. / Lo, swich it is a millere to be fals! / And therefore this proverbe is seyde full sooth, / ‘Hym thar nat wene wel that yvele dooth.’ / A gylour shal hymself bigyled be” (RvT 4313-4321). Well, that’s a nice attempt to make things seem equal: the miller is beaten, loses whatever he gained from the milling of the wheat, “payed for” the supper of his two guests (even though they had given him silver for their food and lodging), who also slept with his wife and daughter. How are all these incommensurable items and actions able to be tallied up and declared equivalent to Simkin’s previous thefts and moral failings? If anything, Oswald’s attempt to settle accounts with a sturdy cliché only calls attention to the fact that his tale has demonstrated the opposite: in a world of exchange and endless substitution, the idea of a final and commensurate “requital” for one’s actions is absurd. Oswald’s concluding boast, “Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale” (RvT 4324), reads like an overstatement of his achievement, if not an outright taunt directed at Robyn. Like the two students from his tale, Oswald does not equalize, but escalates. Any reader might wonder, after the preceding series of tricks, sleights, and attacks, whether Oswald’s promise (a kind of debt) to “quite” Robyn, much like any promise of a completely fair and equal exchange, could ever have been met in the first place.

Transformations

1. Does Oswald “quite” the Miller? What other instances of “quitting” occur in the *Tale*?
2. Compare the *Miller’s Tale* and the *Reeve’s Tale*. Is there a different tone? How might this relate to the characterization of Robyn and Oswald, respectively? How does Oswald’s representation of town life and rural economies differ from Robyn’s? What about their respective depictions of sex and desire?
3. Are any of the “wages” paid in the story just, fair, or commensurate? Or is this an amoral game of winners and losers?
4. Who are the workers in the tale? What kind of work do they do?
5. How would you characterize the relationship between the work of running the mill and the domestic work of maintaining the miller’s household?
6. What kinds of inequality exist in this tale?
7. How do you interpret Malyne’s and Simkin’s wife’s roles in the tale? Is it possible that Simkin’s wife knows that she is having sex with someone other than her husband (as is the case in a French source of the *Reeve’s Tale*)?
8. Why does Malyne tell Aleyn where to find the stolen loaf?
9. How does the *Reeve’s Tale* demystify or darken the economic and sexual dynamics of the *Miller’s Tale*?
10. If we consider the *Knight’s Tale*, the *Miller’s Tale*, and the *Reeve’s Tale* as an interlocked sequence, how do each of these tales treat social class, wealth, violence, and sex?

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Notes:

[1] For Marx's discussion, see *Capital*, translated by Ben Fowkes, Volume 1, chapter "The Commodity," pp. 125-77, especially pages 125-31. Also see, in the same volume, "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret," pp. 163-77.



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