

## THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

Until now, everything has gone according to the Host's plan for a storytelling game. The Knight (by luck or clever management on the Host's part) told the first, appropriately 'noble', story, particularly enjoyed by the 'gentil' folk. According to rules governing social etiquette, the Monk, as highest-ranking churchman, should speak next. But, apparently upsetting a convention which had been adhered to quite closely in *The General Prologue*, the Miller, clearly a rogue, and almost at the end of that introductory list of pilgrims, riotously disrupts the orderly procedure. See The Miller's Contribution.

- Working in a group, discuss how other pilgrims might have reacted to the events described in these lines (e.g. the Knight and his son, the Squire, the ladylike Prioress, the Monk or the Friar). You could give a dramatic presentation, illustrating the contrast between the Host's behaviour, as master of ceremonies, and that of the Miller.
- Discuss with a partner how Chaucer emphasises the difference in status between the Knight and the Miller in lines 1–24. Make a list of the aspects of the Miller's behaviour which already label him as common and ignoble.



▲ 'he was dronke of ale'

- 2–3 **nas ther . . . storie** neither young nor old could deny it was a noble story
- 5 **namely . . . everichon** particularly all the well-bred people
- 6 **so moot I gon** as I live and prosper
- 7 **unbokeled is the male** the bag is opened [the game has begun]
- 11 **to quite with** to equal, or pay back [requite]
- 12 **for dronken . . . pale** pale with drunkenness
- 13 **unnethe** could scarcely
- 14 **noide avalen . . . ne hat** would not remove hood nor hat as a courtesy to anyone
- 16 **Pilates vois** Pilate's voice [In the mystery plays, Pilate was traditionally played as a ranting tyrant.]
- 17 **By armes, and by blood and bones** a violent, irreverent oath, referring to Christ's body
- 18 **I kan . . . for the nones** I know a noble tale for the occasion [We already suspect it will be far from noble.]
- 21 **Abyd . . . brother** wait, dear brother [or good friend] Robin
- 23 **werken thriftily** do things in an appropriate manner
- 25 **go my wey** go off on my own
- 26 **a devel wey** in the Devil's name

## THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



*All the pilgrims admired The Knight's Tale, and the Host invites the Monk to tell something equally entertaining. However, the drunken Miller interrupts, insisting he will speak next.*

When that the Knight had thus his tale ytold,  
 In al the route nas ther yong ne oold  
 That he ne seide it was a noble storie,  
 And worthy for to drawn to memorie;  
 And namely the gentils everichon. 5  
 Oure Hooste lough and swoor, 'So moot I gon,  
 This gooth aright; unboked is the male.  
 Lat se now who shal telle another tale;  
 For trewely the game is wel bigonne.  
 Now telleth ye, sir Monk, if that ye konne 10  
 Somwhat to quite with the Knightes tale.'  
 The Millere, that for dronken was al pale,  
 So that unnethe upon his hors he sat,  
 He nolde avalen neither hood ne hat,  
 Ne abide no man for his curteisie, 15  
 But in Pilates vois he gan to crie,  
 And swoor, 'By armes, and by blood and bones,  
 I kan a noble tale for the nones,  
 With which I wol now quite the Knightes tale'.  
 Oure Hooste saugh that he was dronke of ale, 20  
 And seide, 'Abyd, Robin, my leeve brother;  
 Som bettre man shal telle us first, another.  
 Abyd, and lat us werken thriftily.'  
 'By Goddes soule,' quod he, 'that wol nat I;  
 For I wol speke, or elles go my wey.' 25  
 Oure Hooste answerde, 'Tel on, a devel wey!  
 Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome.'

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The disagreement between the Reeve and the Miller begins before the Miller has even started to tell his story. Certainly a reeve, as an estate manager, would feel deep-rooted suspicions towards a cheating miller, but their antipathy seems more personal than this.

- Look carefully at the exchange between the Reeve and the Miller and see how their mutual dislike is revealed, and how much you can discover about the characters of both men and the possible reasons for their enmity. It will help to know that the Reeve is also a carpenter by trade.
- It seems very likely that Chaucer planned that *The Canterbury Tales* should begin with the Knight's, Miller's and Reeve's tales following one another, even though he pretends not to be responsible. When you have finished reading this tale, look again at these early pages and discuss why he may have made this decision.



▲ The Miller as depicted in the Ellesmere manuscript. This was written and decorated in the fifteenth century but reproduced the styles of dress of the 1380s.

- 28 **alle and some** all of you  
 30 **soun** sound  
 31 **if that I misspeke or seye** if I  
 speak or say anything improper  
 32 **wite it** put it down to, blame it on  
 33 **legende** story [usually used of  
 Bible stories]  
 35 **how that a clerk hath set the**  
**wrightes cappe** how a university  
 student made a fool of the  
 carpenter  
 36 **stint thy clappe** shut your mouth  
 37 **lat be** leave off  
**harlotrie** filthy talk  
 39 **apeyren** victimise  
 40–1 **eek to bringen . . . thinges seyn**  
 and also to speak so slanderously  
 about wives. You can say plenty  
 about other matters. [The  
 question of whether a 'good wife'  
 can be found will appear in many  
 other tales.]  
 44 **Who hath . . . cokewold** only the  
 man without a wife is never a  
 cuckold [deceived husband]  
 47 **ayeyns** against  
 48 **but if thou madde** unless you're  
 insane  
 51 **noIde I** I would not wish  
 [negative form of 'wolde']  
 52–3 **Take upon me . . . that I were**  
**oon** assume too much as to  
 whether I might be one [a  
 cuckold]  
 55–8 **An housbonde . . . nedeth nat**  
**enquere** A husband shouldn't  
 look too closely into God's  
 secrets, or his wife's. As long as  
 he has sufficient of God's bounty  
 for himself, there's no reason  
 to look too closely for the rest.  
 [This theme of being content  
 to accept God's divine purpose  
 without too much questioning  
 recurs more than once in this  
 tale, purportedly told by a simple  
 man uninterested in philosophy  
 or theological questioning. In  
 these lines the Miller seems to  
 suggest that God and women  
 are both a mystery to an honest  
 fellow.]

## THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



*The Miller blames the crudeness of his tale on the Southwark ale he's drunk. The Reeve objects to a story about wives, which he fears may be insulting; the Miller replies that lots of wives are faithful (i.e. some aren't), and husbands should not pry too closely into their wives' secrets.*

'Now herkneth,' quod the Millere, 'alle and some!  
 But first I make a protestacioun  
 That I am dronke, I knowe it by my soun; 30  
 And therfore if that I misspeke or seye,  
 Wite it the ale of Southwerk, I you preye.  
 For I wol telle a legende and a lyf  
 Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf,  
 How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe.' 35  
 The Reve answerde and seide, 'Stint thy clappe!  
 Lat be thy lewed dronken harlotrie.  
 It is a sinne and eek a greet folie  
 To apeyren any man, or him defame,  
 And eek to bringen wives in swich fame. 40  
 Thou mayst ynogh of othere thinges seyn.'  
 This dronke Millere spak ful soone ageyn  
 And seide, 'Leve brother Osewold,  
 Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold.  
 But I sey nat therfore that thou art oon; 45  
 Ther been ful goode wives many oon,  
 And evere a thousand goode ayeyns oon badde.  
 That knowestow wel thyself, but if thou madde.  
 Why artow angry with my tale now?  
 I have a wyf, pardee, as wel as thow; 50  
 Yet nolde I, for the oxen in my plogh,  
 Take upon me moore than ynogh,  
 As demen of myself that I were oon;  
 I wol bileve wel that I am noon.  
 An housbonde shal nat been inquisitif 55  
 Of Goddes privetee, nor of his wyf.  
 So he may finde Goddes foison there,  
 Of the remenant nedeth nat enquire.'



## THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

*The Miller's Tale* was most likely written after many of the other tales, and chosen to fit precisely where it comes in the sequence – after *The Knight's Tale* and before *The Reeve's Tale*. Chaucer's pretence that the voice of this common lout is an unstoppable interruption is in fact part of the careful design that embraces *The Canterbury Tales* in their entirety.

- As the tale progresses, make a note of examples of the Miller's influence on what is told and the language used.
- Consider whose 'voice' you hear in lines 59–78. Is it Chaucer the poet or Chaucer the pilgrim and reporter of the journey to Canterbury? What would you expect the likely differences to be between a story told by a Knight and that told by a Miller? (You might find it helpful to read the description of the Knight on p. 17 of *The General Prologue* before you answer.)

60	<b>noIde his wordes for no man forbere</b> would not stop talking for anyone [The double negative 'noIde' – 'no man' – emphasises the Miller's determination to speak and the author's determination to take no responsibility for his character's tale.]	68–9	<b>whoso list it . . . chese another tale</b> whoever doesn't want to hear it, let him turn the page and choose another tale [The author is fully aware that this tale has a far wider reading audience than the fictional pilgrims who listen to it on their way to Canterbury.]
61	<b>cherles tale</b> a low story – told by a churl, the lowest social class in medieval England. [In fact the story is a fabliau – popular with all classes. See the What are the Canterbury Tales? section for further details.]	71–2	<b>gentillesse . . . hoolinesse</b> true nobility, and also moral lessons and saintly behaviour
62	<b>M'athinketh that . . . heere</b> it pains me that I must repeat it here [Not true, of course: Chaucer and his audience enjoyed a good bawdy story.]	73	<b>chese amis</b> choose wrongly
64–5	<b>demeth nat that I . . . ivel intente</b> don't think that I speak with evil intent	75	<b>othere mo</b> others too
65	<b>moot reherce</b> must repeat	76	<b>harlotrie</b> crude and uncouth stories
67	<b>elles falsen som of my mateere</b> or else falsify my reported account	77	<b>aviseth yow</b> be warned
		78	<b>eek men shal nat maken ernest of game</b> don't take a game too seriously [Chaucer reminds his audience that the tales are supposedly a lighthearted competition designed to make the journey to Canterbury pass speedily.]

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*Chaucer says he will retell the tale in the Miller's own words, and therefore begs 'gentlefolk' not to take offence. If they don't wish to hear it they should choose another story, for there are plenty to choose from.*

What sholde I moore seyn, but this Millere	
He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,	60
But tolde his cherles tale in his manere.	
M'athinketh that I shal reherce it heere.	
And therfore every gentil wight I preye,	
For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye	
Of ivel entente, but for I moot reherce	65
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,	
Or elles falsen som of my mateere.	
And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere,	
Turne over the leef and chese another tale;	
For he shal finde ynowe, grete and smale,	70
Of storial thing that toucheth gentillesse,	
And eek moralitee and hoolinesse.	
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amis.	
The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this;	
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,	75
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.	
Aviseth yow, and put me out of blame;	
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.	



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- We are given very little information about the carpenter here, but a vivid impression of Nicholas is carefully built up from factual details. Much of what we are told is concerned with outward impressions. Does he seem 'poor'? Is this picture entirely favourable? Compare this description with the Clerk of Oxenforde from *The General Prologue*.
- 'Hende' is an adjective so frequently applied to Nicholas that the reader quickly suspects it is used ironically. Make a note of when and where it appears in the tale. How much of what we learn about Nicholas, even at this early stage, is purely superficial, suggesting there may be hidden aspects to his character?
- Chaucer stresses that the carpenter is a 'gnof' (a word to be spoken aloud for full effect). What would you expect his reaction to be towards his lodger? You might need to revise this initial response after reading the story.
- Although his reputation as an astrologer will prove to be important, the account of Nicholas's astrological skills is deliberately vague; he seems able to forecast weather and predict the future. See the end of the book for an account of astrology and astronomy in the fourteenth century.

79	<b>whilom</b> once upon a time		
80	<b>riche gnof</b> wealthy lout [you can be rich, but still low]		
	<b>gestes heeld to bord</b> rented rooms to lodgers		
82	<b>poure scoler</b> impoverished student	92	<b>deerne love ... solas</b> he knew plenty about secret love affairs and such games
83	<b>hadde lerned art</b> had studied the university curriculum in arts [grammar, logic, rhetoric: the trivium]	93	<b>sleigh ... privee</b> sly and very secretive
84	<b>fantasie ... astrologie</b> passion was directed to studying astrology [Merton College was a centre for this.]	94	<b>lyk a maiden ... for to see</b> outwardly modest as a girl
85–90	<b>And koude a certain ... rekene hem alle</b> And he knew some practical experiments by which he could work out through his enquiries at what particular time men might expect drought or showery weather. Furthermore, if asked, he could predict the outcome in any sort of situation – I can't tell all his talents	97	<b>fetisly ydight</b> pleasantly decorated
		98–9	<b>as sweete ... cetewale</b> fresh as liquorice or ginger root
		100	<b>Almageste</b> Ptolemy's work on astrology [widely used in Chaucer's time]
		101	<b>astrelabie</b> astrolabe – astronomical instrument
			<b>longinge for</b> belonging to
		102	<b>augrim stones</b> counting stones [used with an abacus]
91	<b>hende</b> an all-embracing term of approval – near at hand, but also		<b>layen faire apart</b> carefully set out
		104	<b>falding reed</b> coarse red cloth

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*John, a wealthy Oxford carpenter, rents a room in his house to a poor scholar, Nicholas, passionately interested in astrology and secret love affairs. He and his room are delightfully and carefully presented.*

Whilom ther was dwellinge at Oxenford  
 A riche gnof, that gestes heeld to bord, 80  
 And of his craft he was a carpenter.  
 With him ther was dwellinge a poure scoler,  
 Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasie  
 Was turned for to lerne astrologie,  
 And koude a certain of conclusiouns, 85  
 To demen by interrogaciouns,  
 If that men asked him in certain houres  
 Whan that men sholde have droghte or elles shoures,  
 Or if men asked him what sholde bifalle  
 Of every thing; I may nat rekene hem alle. 90  
 This clerk was cleped hende Nicholas.  
 Of deerne love he koude and of solas;  
 And therto he was sleigh and ful privee,  
 And lyk a maiden meke for to see.  
 A chambre hadde he in that hostelrie 95  
 Allone, withouten any compaignie,  
 Ful fetisly ydight with herbes swoote;  
 And he himself as sweete as is the roote  
 Of licoris, or any cetewale.  
 His Almageste, and bookes grete and smale, 100  
 His astrelabie, longinge for his art,  
 His augrim stones, layen faire apart  
 On shelves couched at his beddes heed;  
 His presse ycovered with a falding reed;





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- Music played an important part in fourteenth-century life. Those who could play and sing well were always popular members of society. Young Nicholas with his 'sautrie' and his fine voice would have been much in demand. Start to make notes on when and where singing and music-making are referred to in this tale, and how they are important.
- The theme of old husband and frivolous young wife recurs in many of the tales. Marrying for love was less common than marrying for financial gain, or the need to produce heirs. As this tale progresses, decide whether Chaucer reveals either sympathy or moral disapproval for his characters.

105	<b>gay sautrie</b> merry psaltery [A flattish, wooden stringed instrument, similar to a dulcimer, but plucked with fingernails or plectrum, with a light, cheerful sound – more refined than the Miller's uncouth bagpipes.]	116	<b>heeld hire narwe in cage</b> kept her most closely confined
108	<b>Angelus ad virginem</b> 'The Angel Appeared to the Virgin' – a hymn, with a very jolly tune, on the annunciation [Nicholas will confront this carpenter's wife in a similar manner to the angel, but with rather different intentions.]	118	<b>demed himself . . . a cokewold</b> considered himself likely to be cuckolded
109	<b>Kinges Noote</b> another [unidentified] song	119–20	<b>He knew nat . . . similitude</b> because he was ignorant he didn't know Cato's advice that a man should marry someone of similar age and status. [Chaucer frequently refers to a collection of pithy wise sayings, attributed to the Latin poet Cato, and well known to literate men, but not to millers.]
110	<b>ful often . . . mirie throte</b> he was often heard joyfully singing [possibly he found it profitable]	121	<b>after hire estaat</b> like themselves
112	<b>after his freendes finding and his rente</b> living on the generosity of friends and his own income	122	<b>at debaat</b> in conflict
		123	<b>sith that</b> since
			<b>snare</b> the trap [of taking a young wife]
		124	<b>he moste endure . . . his care</b> he had to put up with his trouble, as other folk do

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*Nicholas passes his evenings playing the psaltery and singing, living off money given by friends and his own income. The old carpenter has a beautiful, headstrong young wife, Alison, whom he guards jealously, fearful that she might be unfaithful.*

And al above ther lay a gay sautrie, 105  
 On which he mad a-nightes melodie  
 So swetely that all the chambre rong;  
 And *Angelus ad virginem* he song;  
 And after that he song the Kinges Noote.  
 Ful often blessed was his mirie throte. 110  
 And thus this sweete clerk his time spente  
 After his freendes finding and his rente.  
 This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf,  
 Which that he lovede moore than his lyf;  
 Of eighteteene yeer she was of age. 115  
 Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage,  
 For she was wilde and yong, and he was old,  
 And demed himself been lik a cokewold.  
 He knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude,  
 That bad man sholde wedde his similitude. 120  
 Men sholde wedden after hire estaat,  
 For youthe and elde is often at debaat.  
 But sith that he was fallen in the snare,  
 He moste endure, as oother folk, his care.