Introduction

To all appearances *The Miller's Tale* is thrust upon the Canterbury pilgrims uninvited, against the Host's intention to present the tales in an orderly sequence determined by the social standing of each narrator. The company has just heard and applauded the first of the tales, told by the Knight after the oddly fortunate outcome of the Host's lottery; and when the Monk is invited to take his turn next, it seems that the 'gentils' are to be given precedence over their humbler companions. But the Miller disputes this arrangement and is undeterred when the Host reminds him of his lowly status:

> Abyd, Robin, my leeve brother;
> Som bettre man shal telle us first another.
> Abyd, and lat us werken thriftily. (21–3)

Fortunately for the design of *The Canterbury Tales*, the Miller is both too surly and too drunk to accept this amiable rebuke. He refuses to give way, frustrating a plan which seemed likely to segregate one genre of tale from another; and at last the Host ungraciously allows him to tell his scandalous tale. When the Reeve replies to the Miller's gibe against carpenters in a third tale, a random order of storytelling has been established; and the other pilgrims play their parts without much regard for social precedence.

Evidently the Host's reluctance to let the Miller tell his tale was not shared by Chaucer, for otherwise the Monk would have followed the Knight. Nonetheless, the narrating poet does show some embarrassment at admitting such a tale to his collection, and tries to make it clear that he is not responsible for the offence which this scurrilous story may cause. His defence is that he is obliged to repeat the tales verbatim, whether decorous or not; and readers who prefer to avoid coarse language and vulgarity are

advised to choose some other story, 'that toucheth gentillesse'. This disclaiming of responsibility is a joke typical of Chaucer, who pretends on other occasions to be nothing more than a peripheral figure reporting other people's stories and conversation; but the joke has its serious aspects. One reason why *The Miller's Tale* might require an apologetic preface is that it deliberately affronts the code of manners and the courtly standards respected throughout *The Knight's Tale*. So long as we accepted the make-believe situation that assigns one to the gentlemanly Knight and the other to the boorish Miller, the incompatibility of the two stories offers no difficulty; but when we reflect that in fact both tales are Chaucer's, we appreciate why he might have felt some awkwardness in making one follow the other. Yet clearly his purposes required this – to an extent which is perhaps suggested by the Miller's aggressive determination to be heard, whatever objections are raised. In *The Miller's Prologue*, a masterful impulse is seen elbowing its way to the front, and silencing the poet's misgivings by the kind of thrusting energy described in the portrait of the Miller, which speaks of his ability to break down doors 'at a renning with his heed'. An imaginative impulse of the same force appears to be driving Chaucer from the closed world of courtly ideals towards the lively informality of middle-class affairs and their graphically expressive language.

This development might have been foreseen from the beginning of Chaucer's poetic career, for even in the dream poems of that early period he shows a wide-awake concern with the realities of common life, and makes some experiments with vernacular speech. These interests eventually found an important place in the design of *The Canterbury Tales*, where the master of ceremonies is a man of the people who judges the stories and their narrators from the standpoint of his own broad experience and commonsense. His comments in the links between the tales, as he praises one pilgrim or demands a story from another, keep us in touch with the unsophisticated terms of everyday life, and

bring as contrast to the literary style adopted by some pilgrims a rough-textured idiom of spoken English. His rebuke to the Reeve, who seems disposed to ruminate and moralise instead of starting his tale, is characteristic of his vigorous forthrightness:

> Whan that oure Hoost hadde herd this sermoning,
> He gan to speke as lordly as a king,
> And seide, 'What amounteth al this wit?
> What shul we speke alday of hooly writ? . . .
> Sey forth thy tale, and tarie nat the time;
> Lo, Depeford! and it is half-wey prime.
> Lo, Grenewich, ther many a shrewe is inne!
> It were al time thy tale to biginne.' (3899–908)

The references to Deptford, Greenwich and the time of day – half-past seven in the morning – show Chaucer's imagination working inside the field of actual experience: a setting markedly at odds with the idealised background of courtly romance. A lively interest in the figures and happenings of the workaday world dominates Chaucer's poetry during the final phase of his career, superseding the absorption in courtly behaviour and literary conventions which had previously held him. The churlish Miller's insistence on being heard, and the challenge which his fabliau presents to the lofty assumptions of *The Knight's Tale*, symbolise the change of imaginative outlook so strongly registered in the earthy directness of the story which follows.

This final development of Chaucer's art does not involve a complete repudiation of courtly romance tradition. Some of its conventions are recognised in *The Miller's Tale*, most obviously in Absolon's affected wooing of Alison. But now the familiar conventions are being used satirically, partly to make Absolon more ridiculous and partly to show the comic incongruity of his genteel manners in the rough-and-tumble world of carpenters and cuckolds. Chaucer does not dissolve his long-standing attachment

to courtly literature simply in the greater interest of describing common life, but in order to realise his remarkable gift as a comic writer. As we recognise from *The Knight's Tale*, the ideal of gentillesse, constancy and devoted service which courtly romance holds up invites serious respect from poet and audience alike. In such a rarefied atmosphere, laughter would be out of place. That response is encouraged by the popular tales and anecdotes which propose no ideal standards, but describe life and human behaviour from a realistic viewpoint which accepts the indignities, farcical accidents and shameful misdemeanours which are part of common experience. When Chaucer's dreamer describes the elaborately figured gates of *The House of Fame*, refusing to give any detailed account of the beauty 'of this yates florisshinges',

> Ne of compasses, ne of kervinges,
> Ne how they hatte in masoneries,
> As corbetz, ful of imageries (*The House of Fame*, iii, 1302–4)

the reader must feel awed and astonished; but the mention of the pop-hole for the cat in *The Miller's Tale*,

> ful lowe upon a bord,
> Ther as the cat was wont in for to crepe, (332–3)

rouses amusement by its homely familiarity, and by the intrusion of something so everyday into the supposedly reserved enclosure of art. Before Chaucer's comic genius could fulfil itself, he had to part company with the courtly world and its unique, unearthly figures, and move to the plane of humdrum actuality represented by such commonplace objects as ladders, coulters and kneading-tubs; where 'breed and chese, and good ale in a jubbe' stand on the tables, and where women – no longer etherealised and remote – are as physically tangible and appetising as a hoard of apples, 'leyd in hey or heeth'. A glance at some of the domestic terms used in

The Miller's Tale – *barmclooth*, *kimelin*, *piggesnie*, *chiminee*, *viritoot* – suggests how far Chaucer has moved from the literary tradition of his courtly poems to give the world of plebeian affairs its appropriate language.

This interest carries Chaucer much further. At several points of the story he brings in proverbial remarks, sometimes through the mouths of his characters. 'Men seyn thus', Nicholas reminds the carpenter as he concludes his instructions,

> 'Sende the wise, and sey no thing.' (490)

Another proverb, quoted with the same prefatory comment, explains how Absolon's hopes of winning Alison are dashed by the fact that Nicholas lives under the same roof as she:

> Men seyn right thus, 'Alwey the nie slie
> Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth.' (284–5)

These proverbial sayings do not in themselves indicate the growth of a new interest in Chaucer, for sayings of this kind can be found in most of his earlier poems.[1] Like the comic tendency in the work of the same early period, this use of proverbs shows how the courtly Chaucer was drawn towards their pithy colloquial phrases and to a practical wisdom which bears little relevance to the outlook of high life. In the fabliaux of *The Canterbury Tales*, this long-standing interest is given free rein, to be realised not only in proverbial sayings but in a much greater number of popular idioms and expressions, which give Chaucer's writing a particular energy and directness. So, in the futility of his efforts to win Alison, Absolon 'may blowe the bukkes horn'. He refuses to

[1] Studies of Chaucer's proverbs have been made by W. Haeckel, 1890, Skeat, 1910, and B. J. Whiting, 1934.

answer the smith's enquiry because he has 'moore tow on his distaf' than Gervase can guess; and he cares 'nat a bene' for the smith's teasing. The carpenter breaks into Nicholas's room to find his lodger sitting 'ay as stille as stoon', and gaping upwards

> As he had kiked on the newe moone. (337)

In his tub 'the dede sleep' falls on the carpenter: when he wakes and cuts the rope holding him in mid-air, 'doun gooth al'. We hear of wafers 'piping hoot out of the gleede', and of a night 'derk as pich, or as the cole'. Alison makes Absolon 'hire ape', and when she hears of the threatened flood, she acts 'as she wolde deye'. The humiliated Absolon weeps 'as dooth a child that is ybete', and his rival Nicholas promises himself a night of love 'if so be that the game wente alright'. Such idiomatic phrases and comparisons are a prominent feature of Chaucer's style in *The Miller's Tale*. We cannot be certain that they are all taken from popular speech, though it seems unlikely that such expressions as 'what wol ye bet than weel?', 'be as be may' and or 'him fil ne bet ne wers' were not in common use. Where Chaucer did not use proverbial or traditional forms of speech, he appears to have improvised phrases and idioms in keeping with their terseness and pungency. There is nothing patronising in the concern with common life which the tale requires of Chaucer, but to the contrary an enthusiastic adoption of a vernacular style which gives his work its final achievement.

But Chaucer does not abandon the serious and thoughtful interests which appear in his poetry from the first. It is clear that he was an enthusiastic reader, for few of his poems do not digress from the story to summarise or discuss another book or learned topic. *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is repeatedly interrupted by such digressions, and the Wife of Bath's racy anecdotes about her married life are mixed with arguments about religious doctrine, and accounts of her fifth husband's nightly readings from a 'book

of wikked wives'. However deeply Chaucer becomes involved in the comedy of ordinary life, he does not forget the reserved and scholarly part of himself dedicated to the world of books – a figure whom he himself satirises more than once. It should not surprise us to discover that the setting of *The Miller's Tale* is a university town, and that one of its main characters is – like the Wife of Bath's fifth husband – a scholar. We are told that Nicholas's studies have taken a turn towards astrology, a subject of considerable interest to Chaucer, several of whose tales contain long references to astrological lore. This feature of the hero's character allows Chaucer to comment on Nicholas's astrolabe, his augrim stones and his copy of the *Almagest*, and to describe the kind of astrological forecast which Nicholas is able to provide. But these scholarly abilities also play an important part in the story. The outwitting of the simple carpenter, who considers himself a more discerning person than the study-crazed Nicholas, represents the triumph of scholarly subtlety over bourgeois native wit, and in this respect offsets Chaucer's imaginative commitment to common life. Moreover, the idea of foretelling the future is a vital comic theme of the tale, hinted at in the Miller's prefatory remarks about being 'inquisitif of Goddes privetee' and most immediately taken up in the account of Nicholas's powers as an astrologer.

Oxford, the amorous scholar and the theme of astrological forecasting are elements of *The Miller's Tale* which Chaucer added to the fabliau whose main idea he followed. Stith Thompson lists ten analogues of the tale, in German, Italian, Flemish and English, and concludes that the story was part of an oral tradition during Chaucer's lifetime.[1] One of the most suggestive of the written analogues, dating from the fourteenth century, is told of Heile of

1 *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. Bryan and Dempster (London, 1958), pp. 106–23.

Bersele. Unlike Alison in *The Miller's Tale*, the heroine is a courtesan whose favours are sought by three men; a miller, a priest, and a smith. She arranges for each of them to visit her at a different time during the same night: the miller first, followed by the priest at the ringing of the sleep-bell, and by the smith as soon as the thief-bell is rung – divisions of the night which perhaps correspond in Chaucer's story to curfew-time (l. 537), lauds (l. 547), and first cock (l. 579). The first client duly arrives, and later in the night is disturbed by the priest's plea to be admitted. The miller wishes to hide, and Heile advises him to conceal himself in a trough suspended from the rafters by a rope. When he is hidden, Heile lets in the priest, who also proceeds to enjoy himself; though subsequently he lapses into remorse and begins to quote from the scriptures, foretelling God's punishment of man by fire and water, and concluding that all mankind will be drowned. Sitting above in his trough, the miller reflects that this may well be. Now the smith arrives, but Heile pleads indisposition and refuses to admit him. As he begs for a kiss, Heile persuades the priest to put his buttocks out of the window to be kissed in mistake for her mouth. The trick works all too successfully, and realising how grossly he has been abused, the smith runs back to his forge, heats an iron and returns to Heile's window. There he implores her for a second kiss, and when the priest repeats his trick he receives a shocking burn from the smith's red-hot iron. Hearing him screaming for water, the miller supposes that the great flood must already have come and decides to launch himself in his wooden vessel. He cuts the rope by which the trough is suspended, and crashes to the floor, where he breaks an arm and a thigh. The priest thinks that the Devil has burst in upon him, and in his frenzy he falls into the privy. He returns home painfully burned and befouled from his night's adventure, to be put to scorn and shamed.

The family resemblance of *The Miller's Tale* to this Flemish fabliau is obvious enough. The trough hanging from the rafters,

with its occupant fearing the flood; the rejected lover's misplaced kiss, and the revenge he takes with the red-hot iron, are major features of both. But in his handling of the tale, Chaucer has reshaped the material to his own design, sharpening the comedy of the story by a much subtler treatment of its situations, and refining some of its coarser elements out of existence. The heroine of his tale, described in one of the most evocative of his many character portraits, is an eighteen-year-old wife whose eager vitality and freshness associate her with the lively young animals of an English countryside. Her husband, a stock figure of ridicule in taking a wife so much younger than himself, forfeits more sympathy by attempting to confine her wild beauty; and when Alison surrenders herself to a lover of her own age and spirit, she invites no moral censure. Rather, it is her husband the carpenter who continues to attract ridicule, by the fear and credulity which lead him so easily into Nicholas's snare, and which lead to his uncomfortable night in the kneading-tub while Nicholas occupies his bed. The carpenter, who corresponds to the first of Heile's clients in the Flemish analogue, is transformed by Chaucer into a much more comic figure; who is tricked into taking refuge in the wooden tub not to avoid being seen by the priest, but to escape the second flood forecast by Nicholas, and who is cuckolded into the bargain.

None of the three clients of Heile reappears in Chaucer's version of the tale. The miller is no longer a character in the story, but its narrator. His counterpart, the credulous carpenter, duplicates his experience in respect of the kneading-tub episode, and like him is left at the end with a broken arm; but he could only be considered the first of the heroine's three lovers by virtue of being her husband – in his case an unrewarding relationship. For the priest whom Heile prefers not to exchange for her third customer, Chaucer substitutes the clerk Nicholas. He too remains with the heroine despite the arrival of another lover, and like the priest is 'scalded in the towte' when he offers his buttocks to be

kissed by his rival; though unlike his counterpart, Nicholas is not required to play the same trick twice. The stroke of genius in Chaucer's transformation of this character lies in making Nicholas an astrologer. Heile's priest does not himself prophesy, but repeats vague predictions about the destruction of mankind found in the scriptures, without any obvious motive. It is not his intention that these gloomy remarks shall be overheard by the miller, whose presence in the room is, of course, unknown to him. In *The Miller's Tale* the prediction of a great flood is a piece of nonsense devised by Nicholas with the object of getting the carpenter into the tub for a night so that Nicholas can enjoy the carpenter's attractive young wife. The prophecy is taken seriously partly because the carpenter is too naive to realise how cunningly he is being foxed, but also because Nicholas has the reputation of an astrologer able to predict future events in every kind of circumstance. The opening lines of *The Miller's Tale*, which explain how Nicholas had

> lerned art, but al his fantasie
> Was turned for to lerne astrologie (83–4)

are the first step in a process leading through a solemn astrological prediction to the carpenter's ridiculous situation in a makeshift ark, awaiting the coming of a second deluge.

Much of the immediate comedy of *The Miller's Tale* lies in the central episode, lines 315–502, to which nothing in the Flemish analogue corresponds. The passage describes how, when the carpenter has broken into Nicholas's chamber to rescue him from his petrified 'agonie', he is gradually prepared for the disclosure of the great secret discovered by Nicholas; and then brainwashed to the point where he can be persuaded to regard a domestic tub as a seagoing vessel in which he may embark 'as into shippes bord'. Few things in Chaucer have the sustained ironic comedy of this impudent hoaxing of a suspicious husband, who is so distracted by