

ZEST AND NATURALNESS VERSUS BITTERNESS
IN SOME OF CHAUCER'S BANDY TALES

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The Miller's Tale has celebrated the vigorous enjoyments of the flesh. Pain or sickness or age are mocked at or ignored, affectations scorned, and life is portrayed with zest and praised for its naturalness. The Reeve's Tale now gives the other side of the picture. Bitterness frustration and ugliness.¹

Trevor Whittock's statement strikes me as being quite valid. Additionally, I believe his perspective could be extended to the actual personae of the Miller and the Reeve. I think the conflict between perceiving life as being full of zest and naturalness and perceiving life as being full of bitterness, frustration, and ugliness is also apparent in other somewhat bawdy tales by the Wife of Bath and the Merchant and in those personae. The conflict is quite obvious in respect to the Miller and the Reeve and their tales, and I shall begin with them.

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Approved
10/24/77
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There is an obvious conflict throughout the Prologues and the Tales of the Reeve and the Miller, which exists along several fronts, including possibly a personal front, but they all contribute essentially to the basic idea that the Miller knows how to enjoy life with a sense of humor, whereas the Reeve "can't take a joke," and is instead bitter and revengeful, perhaps paranoid--certainly not zestful and appreciative.

¹ Trevor Whittock, A Reading of the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1968) pp. 96-97.

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One of the "fronts" of this conflict between the two personae is an occupational rivalry. The Miller "wel koude stellen corn and tullen thries." (General Prologue, 562) The Reeve, because he is an overseer and an embezzler, would have been very cautious about being cheated by one such as the Miller. The rivalry is probably also a personal one. This is suggested by the fact that the Miller seems to readily know the Reeve's name (3151, Miller's Prologue), that he knows the Reeve has a wife² (Miller's Prologue, 3158)--and to a lesser extent, in that the Reeve seems to take very personally the Miller's statement that he will tell a story about a cuckolded carpenter. (Miller's Prologue, 3144-48) This contrasts to the fact that the London Carpenter seemed to take no offense as did the Reeve.³

Thus, there is a strong antagonism between these two men.⁴ The battlefield where this conflict centers is in the interplay of their respective tales and prologues to those tales. The following quote from the Reeve's Prologue sums up the dimensions of the battle:

² Allan H. MacLaine, The Student's Guide to The Canterbury Tales (Woodbury, New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1964), p. 67. This source is a quick gloss of the tales and of some criticism. MacLaine attributes this idea to Robert M. Lumiansky, Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle of the Canterbury Tales (Austin, 1955). My use of the MacLaine guide here and elsewhere in this paper is primarily as an idea source. In no instance have I referred to the original source mentioned by MacLaine.

³ MacLaine, p. 66. Attributed to John Matthews Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer, (New York, 1926).

⁴ Another instance that suggests this is to be found in the General Prologue where the Miller rides in front of the group of Pilgrims (566), and the Reeve rides at the back (622). Note in F.N. Robinson (ed.) The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (2nd ed.) (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1957), p. 666.

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This dronke Millere hath ytoold us heer
 How that bigyled was a carpenteer,
 Peradventure in scorn, for I am oon.
 And, by youre leve, I shall hym quite anon;
 Right in his cherles termes wol I speke.
 I pray to God his nekke mote to-breke. (3913 - 17)

The earliest signs of this reaction of the Reeve to the Miller's tale are in the Miller's Prologue! The Miller says, "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 c-appe." (3141-43) At this point, the Reeve interrupts and tells the Miller, "Stynt thy Clappe!" (3144) The Miller then tells the Reeve to relax. His message is that the Reeve should not take all of this personally or seriously. (3151-56) It can be argued that the Miller is using an ironical tone of voice here and means just the opposite--that the Reeve should take this story of the cuckolded carpenter personally, but later statements in the passage provide greater evidence for thinking the Miller is being straightforward here. For example, he mentions that he too has a wife, (and by implication, is also eligible to be cuckolded). (3158) Then the Miller states, almost playfully, that he would not be "inquistyf of Goddes pryvete, nor of his wyf" as long as he finds enjoyment and plenty there. (3163-65) He would not worry about his wife cheating on him (3166) as long as she serves him well. The point is that the Miller leaves himself defenseless to a counter-charge of having a faithless wife himself--something that it would be unlikely for him to do if he was seriously attacking the Reeve. Furthermore, he has put the whole story into a playful context. The evidence suggests that the Reeve should not be as offended as he seems to be.

Likewise, the Reeve should not be so defensive about the Miller's Tale itself. The Reeve's personal identification with the carpenter

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In the Miller's Tale is unwarranted. Granted, there is the similarity of occupation and of age between the Reeve and John, but there the similarity ends. In The General Prologue, the Reeve is described as follows: "Wel koude he keep a gerner and a bynne; / There was noon auditor koude on hym wyne." (593-94) Later in the same passage, the Reeve is described as one who strikes fear in those around him. By contrast, John in the Miller's Tale seems rather innocuous and stupid, at least in his willing assent to Nicholas' wild plan. If the Reeve were as shrewd as he was described in The General Prologue, then it could only be a feeling of insecurity that would prompt him to identify with the bumpkin in the Miller's Tale. It is the Reeve's insecurity that causes him to construe that the Miller is directly attacking him through the portrayal of John the carpenter. In fact, there are logical reasons why the Miller could have spoken of a carpenter completely aside from any desire to attack the Reeve. For purposes of the tale itself, for example, it would be much more plausible to ask a carpenter to think of himself as a type of Noah than it would be to ask a tapestry-maker. After all, the carpenter already knows how to build little boats, and cut holes in roofs. This is simply to say that the Miller's selection of a carpenter for the cuckold in his tale was not necessarily an attack on the Reeve. If it is, it is at least subtle, and does not carry the clear intention of belittling the Reeve.

On the other hand, the portrayal of the Miller in the Reeve's Tale (the first 20 lines) is quite obviously a portrayal of the Miller, Robyn. Once again, in using the General Prologue description of Robyn, one can easily see that it is Robyn the Reeve is portraying

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in his tale (or at least a miller so like Robyn, that there is little doubt that he is someone else.) For example, both the General Prologue and the Reeve describe the respective millers as thieves, both speak of the knives, both speak of the respective millers as wrestlers, both make mention of the playing of a bagpipe. Thus, although the carpenter in the Miller's Tale is not clearly the Reeve--the miller in the Reeve's Tale is quite clearly Robyn. The Reeve carries his threat of requital quite specifically into the telling of his tale.

Emerging from this interplay between the Reeve and the Miller is a sense of the Reeve's insecurity, perhaps even paranoia, which causes him to feel defensive and seek vengeance which contrasts to the Miller's attitude of cheer and playfulness. The Reeve's Tale, though functionally a good one, is too full of the Reeve's sense of requital to have the lighthearted fun of the Miller's Tale. This is quite evident in the comparison of the last lines of the two tales. The Miller's Tale ends thus:

Thus swyved was this carpenterie wyf,
For al his keyping and his jealousy;
And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye;
And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!

The quick rhythm, the physical details of the seduced wife, the burned towte, particularly in conjunction with "God save all the rowte," provide a humorous and light-hearted ending, which contrasts sharply with the ending of the Reeve's Tale.

A gyLOUR shal hymself bigyled be.
And God, that sitteth heighe in mageste,
Save al this compaignye, grete and smale!
Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale.

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Here, the rhythm is more ponderous. "Compaignye" certainly evokes a different response than "rowte." But most significant is that last line, where the purpose of revenge once more is illustrated. The Reeve's desire for vengeance is even more drastically present in the line from his Prologue about the Miller: "I pray to God his nekke mote to-breke." This was a serious thing to say in an age when oaths and curses were taken much more seriously than they are today. What exists here then, is the Reeve exhibiting something about himself that he may not have cared to reveal if he had only known he was revealing it.⁵ That something is a strong feeling of defensiveness and insecurity.

Another fault that the Reeve exhibits which may be traced to his feeling of insecurity is distortion of perception. For example, the case has already been stated that the Reeve was amiss in thinking that the Miller's Tale applied specifically to him. However, even if the assumption is made that the Miller is attacking the Reeve, the Reeve over-reacts, and illustrates paranoiac distorted perception. This distorted perception is evident in the Reeve's description of the knives of the miller in his tale. It has already been stated that the miller in the Reeve's Tale is Robyn the Miller. (see page 5, this paper.) Now, The General Prologue mentions that the Miller has one knife openly in view. (557) By contrast, the Reeve's miller has three knives. One is a sword, and in view as in The General Prologue, but the others are hidden, one in Symkyn's pouch, the other in his hose. It seems doubtful that the omniscient narrator in The

⁵ The propensity of the Reeve to conceal himself can be seen in his generally defensive nature. More specifically, he is described in The General Prologue as riding with his clothes "tukked...about" (621), which implies a certain closeness of personality. Also it would be logical to expect a man who is an embezzler to be rather secretly about himself.

(p. 7)

General Prologue would fail to comment on the hidden knives if they in fact existed. The explanation is that they probably do not exist. The Reeve imagines them out of his sense that everyone is sneaking around trying to "get him." To add one more twist to this argument, even if we change the assumption (that Symkyn is Robyn) and state that Symkyn is simply an isolated character, there still exists the Reeve's description of the hidden weapon. This is the way the Reeve thinks of people. He is suspicious of hidden weapons--he is always on the defensive. Throughout the Reeve's Tale in fact, it seems that the actions of his characters are more secret than the actions of the characters in the Miller's Tale. For example, the Reeve's clerk John moves the cradle in the dark to trick Symkyn's wife. (4212-27) On the other hand, Nicholas, in the Miller's Tale, brazenly grabs Alisoun "by the queynte," (3276)--and even the more refined Absolon comes courting without secrecy or slyness.

Just as he has an unhealthy feeling of paranoia, the Reeve also has an unhealthy and bitter attitude toward sex in comparison to the Miller. In the Reeve's Prologue, he describes himself as an old man who still has the "coltes tooth" (3088), but gives the impression of not really knowing what to do about it: "Oure olde lemes move wel been unweelde." (3886) Like an old man, Aleyn, in the story, becomes exhausted from sex (4234-35), and there is little sense of sex as being fun or refreshing. Furthermore, Aleyn's (and by implication, John's) whole attitude toward sex may be interpreted at least within this story as a form of revenge. (4176-86) His reason for seducing Symkyn's daughter is to get back at Symkyn. There is not even physical pleasure involved in his solicitations, let alone respect, tenderness, or love. The other clerk John literally rapes Symkyn's

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wife: "He priketh harde and depe as he were mad." (4231) The sexual episode in the Reeve's Tale contrasts significantly with what the Miller told of sex between Alisoun and Nicholas, for they layed together "In busynesses of myrthe and of soles." (3654) In his Prologue, the Miller himself speaks of sex as being "Goddess foyson." (3164) Of course, not all of the pilgrims approved of the Miller's attitude toward sex⁶ (namely that it was fun and should be pursued). It is clearly apparent, however, that sex for fun (Robyn's attitude) is much more healthy than the Reeve's attitude--sex for revenge. No one can deny that the Miller is a churl; however, even if he is a churl, he has been a person and told a tale that celebrated the vigorous enjoyments of the flesh, mocked pain, sickness and age, and portrayed life with zest and praised its naturalness.⁷ On the other hand, the Reeve, though perhaps a bit less churlish, a bit more sober, has nevertheless been a person and told a tale that was full of paranoia and vengeance, thus illustrating "Bitterness, frustration, and ugliness."⁸

Thus, the Miller wins the battle between himself and the Reeve in respect to the conflict of seatfullness and naturalness versus bitterness, frustration and ugliness. Ironically, the Reeve does far more significant damage to himself than he ever does to the Miller. He reveals an unhealthy persecution complex, distorted perceptions, unnatural sexual attitudes, and a consuming search for vengeance

⁶ See ll. 3855-57 in the Reeve's Prologue. i.e. 3857, "Diverse folk diversely they seyde."

⁷ The underlined words are a paraphrase of the Trevor Whittock statement with which this paper began -- Whittock, pp. 96-97

⁸ Again, a reference to the opening quote from Whittock -- Whittock, p. 98.

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which make him appear almost (or maybe completely) mentally ill. Behind it all, of course is Chaucer. The values that Chaucer deals with here are those of the Miller. Although not a paragon of virtue, the Miller at least has an optimistic fun-loving view of life. Ribaldry may not be the most important thing in life; in fact, it is probably a game, so why not enjoy it? The Reeve does not enjoy it. He is sick. He is too mean to deserve pity, too full of hate to be humorous. He is much too much locked up within himself, so concerned with himself, that he can not understand a joke. In this conflict, the Reeve is the loser, and with the Reeve, go his distorted values and perceptions. The Miller wins because he enjoys life and can play a good game. The Reeve loses because he violates one of Chaucer's rules: "men shal nat maken ernest of game." (3186, Miller's Prologue)

The next question seems to me to be--what is this game? Does Chaucer mean the game of seeing who can tell the best tale as established in the General Prologue? (790-810) Or does he mean the game of insult-trading between the Reeve and Miller? Or is the game perhaps a bit broader in scope than that--such as the game of human sexuality, the battle of the sexes, or cuckold versus adulteress?⁹ I think the answer to all my questions is "yes" but the most important question is the last, and it is the positive answer to that last question that leads me on to the Wife of Bath and the Merchant--two more personae, who, along with their tales, seem to be concerned with questions about human sexuality--whose answers emerge in fabliaux of a somewhat bawdy tradition, and who as characters, seem involved in "the game" of sexual rivalry and ribaldry.

⁹ I might add that the telling of a ribald tale is in itself an amusement, both for the story teller, and in most instances, his audience.

Unlike the Miller and the Reeve, there is very little direct conflict between the Wife of Bath and the Merchant. There is very little explicit evidence that she is telling her tale, or that he is telling his as an "answer" or a statement to the other.¹⁰ There is Kittredge's thought of course, that the Merchant is participating in a "debate" on marriage initiated earlier by the Wife of Bath,¹¹ however, the intensely personalized and direct interplay that had existed between the Miller and the Reeve does not exist between the Wife of Bath and the Merchant.¹² Indeed their tales are not even really about the same subjects, and do not really carry the same themes; whereas the Miller and Reeve had both told tales about cuckolding, and more or less traded the victims (the cuckold), the Wife tells a tale that illustrates that men should be submissive to women while the Merchant's Tale is another cuckolding story. The direct relationship and interplay is very weak between the Wife of Bath and the Merchant. Thus, it is not necessary to compare and contrast the Wife of Bath and the Merchant, or their tales at the same level of depth that was pursued with the Miller and the Reeve. Rather, I am more interested in following the strand of thought already seen in the Miller-Reeve conflict, namely zestfulness versus bitterness, along with "game" versus "earnestness."

10 Whittock (p. 160) suggests that lines 2227 ff. of the Merchant's Tale, which deal with Pluto and Prosperina are connected with the elves in the opening of the Wife of Bath's Tale and constitute a link. In my opinion, such a link is rather obscure.

11 George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," as found in Edward Wagenknecht (ed.), Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) pp. 188-215.

12 A much more direct interplay exists between the Friar and the Summoner--and between the Clerk and the Wife of Bath in terms of actual things said directly and implied by the nature of the tales. However, I am concerned here mainly with the Chaucer's attitudes about sexual ribaldry, and I find the Wife of Bath, more for her character than her tale, and the Merchant to be more relevant to my major concern.

Taking first the Wife of Bath, I think she must be put on the Miller's side of the conflict. Like the Miller, she is full of zest, she enjoys the flesh, and she praises life for its naturalness. Also, like the Miller she is open and honest about herself,¹³ which is perhaps another dimension of zestfulness, namely a lack of fear, a willingness to cheerfully forge ahead. To the Wife of Bath, life is a game to be enjoyed and one can't be too earnest about making and/or following the rules. These qualities are clearly revealed in the Wife's long Prologue to her tale.

The Wife's quality of enjoying sex is hinted at in many ways. Her gat-toothed appearance mentioned in the General Prologue (468) could, according to a note in the Robinson edition, be a "sign of boldness, falseness, gluttony, and lasciviousness." Robinson also suggests that the wife herself takes the gat-toothed appearance as a mark of her amorous nature.¹⁴ Also, if availability is any indication of enjoying sex, the Wife certainly seemed to be available: "In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument/ As frely as my Maker hath it sent." (Wife of Bath's Prologue 149-50) Thus, the Wife of Bath is a person who celebrates the joys of the flesh.¹⁵

13 The Wife of Bath's candidness needs no great proving. It is very evident throughout the Prologue to her tale. She makes no attempt to conceal what many would consider undesirable behaviors (such as demanding money from her husband in exchange for sex (409-413)) Even a subject that might be an extremely delicate subject for an aging sexually zealous woman (old age) is confessed by her: "But age alas! that al wole envynyme/ Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith." (474-75) Though his Prologue was very brief, I think the Miller also showed candidness. For instance, he openly admitted that he was drunk (3138) and openly discussed his personal sexual life and attitudes (3158-3166).

14 The lines Robinson referred to were 604-605 in the Wife's Prologue: "Gat-toothed I was, and that bicam me weel; I hadde the prente of seinte Venus seel."

15 The underlined words are again, a paraphrase of Trevor Whittock's statement with which this essay began. Whittock, p. 96-97

The wife of Bath is also aware that life is like a game, and she plays her role with a great deal of gamesmanship and enjoys doing so. In the "Battle of the Sexes" the Wife perceives herself as a winner, tells a tale in which the female is the winner, and seems to have a good time doing it. The following lines from her Prologue show this:

I shal seye sooth, tho housbondes that I hadde (1195)
As thre of hem were goode, and two were badde.
The thre were goode men, and riche, on olde;
Unnether myghte they the statut holde
In which that they were bounded unto me.
Ye woot wel what I meene of this pardee:
And help me God, I laughe when I thynke
How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!
And by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor.
They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor;
Me neded nat do lenger dilligence
To wynne hir love, or doon hem reverence.
They loved me so wel, by God above,
That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love!

This is not the only passage like this in her Prologue, but it's one of my favorites. Here, she confesses to what amounts to a form of prostitution (trading marital sex for the man's wealth)¹⁶--she accounts with mirth how she kept her older husbands sweating to "keep their statut up"--she echoes the old-man, young-unsatisfied-wife scenario of the Miller's Tale, the scenario itself a subject for bawdy amusement--and she shows a lack of reverence for her sweating, recently impoverished husbands. In those few lines she exhibits many of the Delilah-like characteristics that caused so many men of Chaucer's time to warn about the wiles of women. Indeed, she is in

¹⁶ Lines 409-413 in the Wife's Prologue show how she used "her instrument" as an economic tool:
I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde,
If that I felte his arm over my syde,
Til he had maad his raunson unto me!
Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nyctee.

many ways the deceitful woman; for example, early in her prologue, she provides many arguments loaded with scholarly references to "prove" that virginity is not necessary, and that having five husbands is not necessarily bad. However, medieval audiences, at least men, were not willing to believe that a woman could reason and argue sufficiently, though they might concede that she could reason to a degree. The Wife of Bath fulfills this expectation. Though she mentions references and sources, early in the Prologue she makes it apparent that they are more of a mental exercise than something to be looked at seriously:

Biside a wellie, Jhesus, God and man,
Spak in repreve of the Samaritan,
'Thou hast yhad fyve housbondes,' quod he,
'And that ilke man that now hath thee
Is noght thyn housbonde,' thus seyde he certyn.
What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn."

It seems quite funny. Arguing like a man, she brings up a source, and then says she doesn't know what it means! It casts a definite shadow over her future attempts at scholarly arguments--but that's okay, at least for the Wife of Bath--because I think Chaucer is portraying her arguing ability, as I stated earlier, as being in itself a game--a mental exercise to be enjoyed, not taken too much in earnest.

I think likewise, the Wife of Bath's Tale is told more in the spirit of playing a game, than as an attempt to achieve a deeply profound instruction. The tale itself is delicately told, and as Curry states, somewhat incongruous when compared to the raw bold woman who reveals so much about herself in the Prologue to her tale.¹⁷

¹⁷ Walter Clyde Curry, "The Wife of Bath," as found in Edward Wagenknecht (ed.), Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) p. 166.

But incongruity aside, the tale, in my opinion, is a "fun" one. It makes an interesting and provocative point, which certainly stimulates the Clerk as he tells his tale. I conceive of the Wife telling it for amusement, for a mental exercise believing it to a degree, but believing more in the amusement of the "battle" rather than in winning the battle. The Wife of Bath, as Curry states is an extremely confusing character of many dimensions.¹⁸ But the dimension I am most concerned with is that of her playful, lively, zestful appreciation of life. I don't think that dimension of the Wife is internally contradictory.

The Wife of Bath, like the Miller, is a character who believes in a happy sharing of "Goddess' foyson." At first glance, it appears that the Merchant, like the Reeve is a bitter man intent on seeking revenge. A literal interpretation of the following lines of the Merchant's Prologue seem to bear this thought out:

I have a wyf, the worste that may be; (1218)
 For though the feend to hire ycoupled were,
 She wolde hym overmache, I dar wel swere.

It would seem the Merchant's tale, another cuckold fabliau, should present a deceitful and malicious wife, and a rightfully righteous offended husband to be consistent with his bitterness which is literally expressed in his Prologue. However, his Tale does not present such a picture. As Whittock points out, it is really the poor May who at least is the first victim. January, old ugly, unshaved, "ful of ragerye" with loose skin shaking about his neck, more or less rapes the poor May on their wedding night¹⁹ (1821-1854) because as he conceives of married life, "Blessed be the yok that we been inne,/ For in oure actes we move do no sinne." (1837-38) Later,

18 Curry, p. 166.

19 Whittock, p. 157.

of course, perhaps the sympathies switch to January, but I wonder how much sympathy Chaucer would expect his audience to have for a man whose wife can cleverly make him believe that he has not seen himself being cuckolded, and even seems to be able to make him somewhat happy about it.

Thus, there seems to be a contradiction between the bitterness and frustration the Merchant expresses in his Prologue and the amount of bitterness and frustration he seems to imbibe in the tale itself. He is unlike the Reeve, whose bitterness is quite transparent, and quite the same throughout his Prologue and Tale. Whittock's answer to this apparent contradiction is that the Merchant's outburst in the Prologue to his tale is not sincere, but merely "humorous rhetoric.... The Merchant is certainly only pretending to be personally miserable: It gives him a stance from which to launch his bawdy, smoking-room story."²⁰ Whittock dismisses Kitteredge's thinking that the Merchant is suffering and emotional crisis and is in fact cynical.²¹ I agree with Whittock's interpretation, and consequently, see the Merchant not as being a man with an axe to grind, but more as a businessman, interesting in participating in the story telling game, interested in simply telling a story.

However, I do think the Merchant's story has several dimensions that tie it in with the other ribald tales and characters thus far discussed. First of all, I think January is guilty of trying too hard to "make an earnest of game." He has planned too much, and envisioned too much what his perfect wife shall be, and what their relationship will be. Furthermore, like Symkyn in the Reeve's tale,

20 Whittock, p. 153.

21 Whittock, p. 153. One example of Kitteredge's thinking about the Merchant is the following quote: "In a word, the tale is the perfect expression of the Merchant's angry disgust at his own evil and at his folly in bringing that fate upon himself." Kitteredge, p. 203

January keeps his wife almost in a cage. This contrasts sharply with the Miller, who is not concerned about what his wife does so much as long as he "gets his."

Another connection I think important is that between May and The Wife of Bath. I think they are quite similar in three respects: (1) they are both sexual creatures, (2) they are both able to "pull the wool" over their men's eyes, and (3) they are both capable of being rather raw and insensitive in a bawdy and humorous way.²²

These four bawdy tales and churlish bawdy characters (excepting to some degree the merchant) are perhaps difficult for some people to read. Kissing rear ends, grabbing women "by the queyente," having someone pass flatulence in one's face, joking about old men who can't keep their "statut" up, copulating in a pear tree--none of these are subjects of polite conversation at the finer restaurants. By current standards, they may not even seem to some to be appropriate academic endeavors. However, they are part of life: There are cuckolds, there are unique and interesting ways to make someone a cuckold, there are people who enjoy sex, and there are occasions when even the best of us must pass a little flatulence. Once again, I look to Trevor Whittock to find a comrade who seems to share my beliefs:

The reader who prudishly looks only for 'gentillesse', morality or holiness should not blame Chaucer if, from a squeamishness akin to Abolton's [the Tartee] in the Miller's Tale] he ignores the tale and chooses amiss. The earnest mind cannot face all the wonderful incongruities of life, and always attempts to diminish the gaiety of God's creation.

Yes, life is full of incongruities. Chaucer shows us this and shows us well in The Canterbury Tales. We see a variety of people

²² Whittock suggests that May's flushing Damyan's love-letter down the privy is a reflection of this, p. 150.

²³ Whittock, pp. 79-80.

holding a variety of beliefs and telling a variety of tales, many of whom (and which) are quite incongruous with each other. Chaucer affects an objective stand in respect to all of these various and incongruous people and tales at the end of the Miller's Prologue:

For Goddes love demeth nat that I seye (3172)
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hit tales alle, be they better or werse.

But I think Chaucer goes a bit beyond this stance. I think he presents us with "winners" in the characters the Miller and the Wife of Bath, and to a lesser extent, May, in the Merchant's Tale. I don't mean that he necessarily agrees with all of what they say and do. However I do believe he agrees with their perceiving life as being full of zest and praising it for its naturalness. Even though they are churlish, bawdy, perhaps even theologically and philosophically "out of whack," Chaucer gives them credit for graciously and gratefully sharing in "Goddes soyaun."

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