

CHAUCER'S MILLER'S CURIOUS CHARACTERS

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Some time ago Christian K. Zacher in *Curiosity and Pilgrimage, The Literature of Discovery in Fourteenth-Century England* explored the medieval concept of curiosity as an unhealthy vice and related it to the contrary contemporary predilection for pilgrimages and to the pilgrimage in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in special.¹ Zacher documents how patristic authorities from St. Augustine to St. Benedict condemn an inordinate curiosity about the things of this world because it distracts the mind from the Christian goal of heaven in the next. While classical writers generally distinguished between good curiosity—a search for knowledge of the natural world—and bad curiosity—an inordinate interest in the affairs of one's neighbors—the Church fathers looked with suspicion on any search for knowledge that did not lead directly to salvation. Thus they condemned the *curiosus*, the idle seeker after knowledge for its own sake (21-36).

Zacher goes on to show how in spite of these patristic objections, fourteenth-century people were becoming more and more curious about their world, and that this curiosity was one of the reasons for the universal popularity of pilgrimages, journeys ostensibly undertaken for spiritual purposes but often merely sight-seeing expeditions (37ff. and Chapt. 2). Nevertheless, the figure of the *curiosus*, the wanderer, the seeker after useless knowledge, the chatterer, and the teller of bawdy tales, was still strong in the popular consciousness.

Zacher argues that many of Chaucer's pilgrims are really *curiosi*, and he makes some telling points especially in regard to the Wife of Bath. He does not, however, investigate in detail the tales the pilgrims tell. Yet in *The Miller's Tale*, at least, the unhealthy curiosity of the characters is in large extent responsible for the comic catastrophe, and the Miller attacks *curiositas* as the dangerous vice the patristic authorities warn against. This is not to argue, of course, that such an attack is Chaucer's only purpose in the story or that his views correspond exactly with those of his narrator. *The Miller's Tale* is a complex fiction combining a number of themes centering on concupiscence and the disorder it produces. *Curiositas*

is but one of the many weaknesses the Miller's characters display, it is, however, an element in the work that has to this point been generally overlooked.

Indeed, the Miller himself displays some traits of the *curiosus*. In the General Prologue we are told that he has a big mouth and is "a jangler and a goliardeys" (I, 560), a man who likes to talk and to tell dirty jokes. According to Zacher, the *curiosus* is a person who is not only curious about others, but one who desires that others notice him. Thus, frequent laughing and loud and constant talking about idle or trivial subjects were considered signs of the weakness. The Miller's physical appearance also links him to *curiositas*. "[B]yg...of brawn, and eek of bones,...short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre," with a red beard and a hairy nose, he has an ape-like appearance, and the ape was commonly used as a representation of the vice of curiosity in the Middle Ages.²

The Miller reinforces our suspicions in his own prologue when he demands that the other pilgrims listen to his funny and bawdy story. Some fourteenth-century critics maintained that the telling of stories in general on pilgrimages represented a dangerous intrusion of *curiositas* into what should be a spiritual occasion (Zacher, 98-99). The Miller not only agrees to the tale-telling as the other pilgrims do, but he is the only one of them to insist upon telling a tale rather than waiting to be called upon by Harry Bailey. The Reeve is, then, being theologically precise when in his effort to forestall Robin's tale he tells him,

It is a synne and eek a greet folye
To apepyren any man, or hym defame,
And eek to bryngen wyves in swich fame.

(I. 3146-48)³

The sin the Reeve mentions is *curiositas*.

Robin's rejoinder, "An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf," (I. 3163-64) is amusingly ironic. The Miller apparently intends the first part of the prohibition in the narrow sense that his tale demonstrates—people should not seek to pry into God's secrets such as the date for the destruction of the world—but in a larger sense a thirst for knowledge about God is the proper end of human curiosity rather than a concern for the private business of others, including wives (Zacher 19-20). On the other hand, one might argue that it

undoubtedly is a husband's business to determine whether or not his wife is cheating on him, and thus Robin is wrong on both counts.⁴

Whatever the case, the Miller's story itself can certainly be read at least on one level as a disquisition on the dangers of *curiositas*. Each of the male characters in the tale displays traits of the *curiosus*, and each suffers because of this vice. The clerk, Hende Nicholas, is perhaps the most advanced. As a student at Oxford, he is supposed to be preparing himself for the study of theology, that is, searching out the will of God. In fact, however, he studies astrology in order to forecast the weather and tell fortunes, and the implication is that he sells the knowledge he gains (I. 3191-98). Thus, he is guilty of the worst kind of scholarly curiosity according to St. Bernard. In a sermon on the Canticles this saint describes three improper motivations for study: there are those who study merely to know "*ut sciant*", basic *curiositas*, those who study to be known "*ut ipse sciant*", *curiositas* compounded by *vanitas*, and worst of all those who study to sell their knowledge, "*ut scientiam suam vendant*," *curiositas* stemming from avarice.⁵ The other subject in which Nicholas is majoring, "derne love," is hardly more respectable, for as E. T. Donaldson has argued, for Chaucer "derne" really means "adulterous."⁶

Indeed, Beryl Rowland has shown that Nicholas' university, Oxford, was especially associated with astrology and the prying into "Goddess pryvetee" for illicit purposes. After the great eclipse of 1345 various predictions were made by John Ashenden and other Oxford astrologers, and in 1388 an earthen head was supposedly made at this university which uttered obscure prophecies.⁷

If Nicholas shows himself to be a *curiosus* motivated by avarice, his counterpart Absolon indulges in the vice out of vanity.⁸ This parish clerk "studies" in order to be known. his preoccupation with his scent and his appearance, his skill in singing and playing the "rubible," and even the conceit of himself as a lover, all seem designed to cause men, and especially women, to notice him. Perhaps most telling is his fondness for playing Herod in the mystery plays "to shewe his lightness and maistreye," for performing in such plays was often condemned as evidence of *curiositas* in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Zacher 31).⁹

In addition to being a type of the vainglorious tyrant in the mystery plays Herod is also presented as a *curiosus* who attempts to pry into one of God's secrets through astrology. In Matthew 2: 3-4, after the arrival of the wisemen at his court seeking the Christ

Child, he assembles the scribes and chief priests and enquires where Christ is to be born. He then sends the wisemen out with instructions to search diligently for the child and report back to him, pretending that he wants to join them in worshipping Christ. In reality, of course, he intends to kill him. In the Wakefield play of the Magi Herod begins the drama by sending out a messenger, Nuntius, to seek out any who do not acknowledge Mohammed as God and himself as Lord of the earth and is filled with jealous curiosity when the servant brings back the Magi with their tale of the birth of the Christ.¹⁰ In both the Bible and the plays Herod thus becomes a type for the person who seeks knowledge of the divine not for worship but for private profit.

Since the portrait of Carpenter John is truncated, the evidence of his curiosity is not so apparent at first. Indeed, his long disquisition on the blessings of the "lewed man / That noight but oonly his bileve kan!" (I. 3455-56) seems to suggest that he is free of *curiositas*. Once the plot is set in motion, however, his weakness becomes plain. Indeed, the success of Nicholas' whole flood scheme turns upon John's interest in things that are not his business. When Nicholas supplies himself with food and drink and locks himself in his room, he shrewdly counts upon John's curiosity to spring the trap he is setting. The plan works to perfection for the Miller tells us, "This sely carpenter hath greet merveye / Of Nicholas, or what thyng myghte hym eyle" (I. 3423-24). To satisfy his desire to know about Nicholas' private affairs John sends his servant who peeks through the cat hole, accompanying this classic action of a *curiosus* with the classic question, "What, how! What do ye, maister Nicholay?" (I. 3437). "What are you doing and how are you doing it?"

Nicholas' staging of his flood revelation scene plays ironically upon the theme of *curiositas*. Sandra Pierson Prior has pointed out that Noah's original flood was popularly considered in the fourteenth century to have been God's "pryvetee" to the point that Noah was instructed to build the ark secretly.¹¹ According to the Bible, the date of the Second Coming is also known only to God. In Matthew 24: 36 Christ says, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." Thus, if Nicholas' claim to have discovered the date for a second flood were really true, it would mean that he has indeed pried into "Goddess pryvetee."¹² True to form, Nicholas dazzles John with the prospect of becoming "lordes al oure lyf / Of

al the world" (I. 3581-82).¹³ Clearly, the two men intend to use this secret knowledge he has gained not for the altruistic purpose of preserving life on earth but for their own private profit, an obvious case of *curiositas* compounded with avarice.

Nicholas' pretended trance at the beginning of the scene is itself filled with irony. Sitting "stille as stoon," gazing up at the sky, he personifies the *curiosus* prying into the secrets of the heavens. John Gardner has remarked upon the ironic appropriateness of John's initial cry, "What! Nicholay! What, how! What, looke adoun! / Awak, and thenk on Christes passioun!" (I. 3477-78) in that as a clerk Nicholas should be concerned with Christ rather than the astrological workings of the heavens.¹⁴ To this we might add that John's own words, "How! What, how!" are again the typical questions of the *curiosus*, and, of course, by so readily accepting the secret information that Nicholas offers him the carpenter reveals himself in spite of his long earlier disquisition on the virtues of ignorance to be as much a sufferer from curiosity as his lodger. Indeed, if he really knew his creed, he would be aware that Christ, another carpenter, has already beaten him to saving the world.

The irony may run even deeper here, for the carpenter goes on to call upon Christ and St. Benedict to protect his house from spells. *The Rule of St. Benedict*, still popular in the fourteenth century, contains some explicit warnings against *curiositas*. In his twelfth rule of humility the saint instructs his followers to keep their eyes on the ground rather than gaze about the earth or up into the heavens and cites two scriptural authorities, Luke 18: 13 and Psalms 38: 6.¹⁵ The first of these describes a publican praying for God's mercy as being unwilling to lift his eyes to the heavens because of his consciousness of sin, while the passage from Psalms reads, "I am unwilling to lift my eyes up to look into heaven; all the day I go about mourning," and continues in verse seven, "For my loins are filled with burning. . . ." It is, of course, precisely because Nicholas' loins are filled with burning that he sits staring at the heavens.

Having established his three characters as *curiosi*, the Miller continues the theme throughout the remainder of the tale. As curiosity—the desire to profit from illicit information—drives John to build his tubs, curiosity compounded by pride and lechery brings Absolon to Alisoun's shot window on the fatal night. Indeed, he selects this particular night because he pries into John's private affairs:

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This pariss clerk, this amorous Absolon . . .
Upon the Monday was at Oseneye
With compaignye, hym to disporte and pleye,
And axed upon cas a cloisterer
Ful prively after John the carpenter. (I. 3657, 3659-62)

When the cloisterer, who also apparently has taken some interest in John's comings and goings, tells Absolon that he thinks John is at Oseneye the parish clerk believes the coast will be clear for him to woo Alisoun.

Once at the shot window, Absolon continues in some measure to act like a *curiosus*. His first line to Alisoun echoes John's questions to Nicholas and betrays Absolon's character flaw: "What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun?" (I. 3698): "What are you doing, honey-comb, sweet Alisoun?" What Alisoun is doing is, of course, none of Absolon's business, and, indeed, the audience knows that she has good reasons for not wanting her activities revealed. In fact, Alisoun shows particular concern for the idle curiosity of others when she finally agrees to grant Absolon his kiss. "'Have do,' quod she, 'com of, and speed the faste, / Lest thatoure neighebores thee espie'" (I. 3728-29).¹⁶

In fact, the Miller seems to consider everyone a potential *curiosus*. Once Absolon had obtained his fatal kiss, he rushes to the house of Gervais the Smith, who also is not above curiosity about the private business of others and grills the clerk in fine reportorial style:

What, Absolon! for Christes sweete tree,
Why rise ye so rathe? Ey, benedicitee!
What eyleth yow? Som gay gerl, God it woot,
Hath broght yow thus upon the viritoot.
(I. 3766-3770)

Absolon, however, is not nearly so ready to disclose his affairs as he is to pry into those of others, or perhaps his experience has cured him as much of his curiosity as of his love longing: "This Absolon ne roghte nat a bene / Of al his pley; no word agayn he yaf" (I. 3772-73). He asks immediately to borrow Gervais' poker, to which the smith readily assents, but not without yet one more question: "Ey, Cristes foo! What wol ye do therwith?" (I. 3782). Once again the clerk declines to answer his friend, saying only that he will tell

him all about it the next day.

Appropriately, the final scene at Alisoun's window also begins with a reportorial question, this time from the lady herself: "[W]ho is ther / That knokketh so? I warante it a thief" (I. 3790-91). Ironically, however, the final comic catastrophe turns not so much on an over abundance of curiosity as upon the characters' *failure* to ask the right questions at the right time. Thus, Nicholas fails to question why Absolon would be foolish enough to return for another kiss after being humiliated the first time, Absolon fails to be certain that it is Alisoun that he is burning with his poker—he asks her to speak but does not wait for her to do so—and Carpenter John fails to take time to find out what is really going on before cutting his rope. Thus curiosity deserts our three *curiosi* just at the time they need it the most.

The ending of the tale, however, remains consistent with the *curiositas* theme, for all the neighbors rush in to satisfy their curiosity about the resulting uproar. While this is no doubt natural, the doings at the carpenter's house are really no more their business than any other of the "pryvetees" pried into in the course of the tale. It is perhaps fitting that they allow themselves to be deceived by the clever story of Nicholas and Alisoun into believing that John is "wood". The Miller seems to imply that sometimes not knowing too much about the pryvetee of others is more fun than knowing all. At least it yields better puns!

Thus, on one level The Miller's Tale does exactly what its teller claims it will do: it demonstrates the folly of seeking to pry into the private business of God and of wives. Carpenter John suffers because he presumes to have solved the mystery of a second Noah's flood; Absolon is humiliated because he is too inquisitive about Alisoun's actions. Nicholas is burned because he seeks to use his study of astrology for his private profit. The final irony is, however, that, as we have noted, the Miller himself is a *curiosus*. While he pokes fun at the foolishness of those who pry into forbidden matters, he fails to realize that some catastrophe such as those of his characters is surely waiting for him as well. Perhaps, this is also a message that Chaucer wished to convey to a royal court that almost certainly must have been a hot bed of gossip and concern about the "pryvetee" of others.

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Notes

1. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976).
2. H. W. Janson, *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Studies of the Warburg Institute, Vol. 20 (London: U of London P, 1952), 112-113 and Adolph Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art From Early Christen Times to the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Norton, 1964), 61, noted in Zacher (166, n. 66). Zacher also points out that the ape had other significances as well.
3. Italics mine. Notice the reinforcement of the ape motif.
4. Paula Neuss argues that Chaucer sets up a network of bawdy puns upon "pryvetee" throughout the Miller's Tale and that we come to understand the word as meaning both "private affairs" and "private (sexual) parts" ("Double Entendre in the Miller's Tale," *Essays in Crit.* 24 [1974]: 330-35). Both Nicholas and Absolon then become curious about Alisoun's "pryvetee".
5. In *Sermones in Cantica Cantorum*, PL 183, 968 described in Zacher (26).
6. "The Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's Tale," *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York: Norton, 1970), 19.
7. "Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl," in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honor of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974), 48-49. Rowland refers to John Gutch, ed., *The History and Antiquities of the University of Oxford in Two Books by Anthony á Wood*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1792), 481 and J. R. Lumby, ed., *Chronicon Henrici Knighton, Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores* 92 (1889-96) 2, 258.
8. That vanity is the key to Absolon's character was demonstrated long ago by Paul A. Olson, "Poetic Justice in

the Miller's Tale," *MLQ* 24 (1963): 234.

9. See also G. R. Oust, *Literature and the Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), 479-85.
10. This is not to argue that Chaucer was familiar specifically with the Wakefield Cycle. The example is typical.
11. "Parodying Typology and the Mystery Plays in the Miller's Tale," *JMRS* 16 (1986): 66-67. See also Rowland (49) who points out that according to popular legend, Noah revealed this secret to his wife who in turn blabbed it to the Devil. The wife and the Devil then conspired to trick Noah into allowing the Devil on the ark. Alisoun conspires not with the Devil but with Nicholas, who will join her not on her "arc" but in the bedroom.
12. Another fourteenth-century tradition had it that Noah was an astrologer who through his calculations had arrived at the knowledge of the flood independently of God's revelation. See Francis Utley, "One Hundred and Three Names of Noah's Wife," *Speculum* 16 (1941): 410-12.
13. Rowland points out that in this promise Nicholas echoes not God speaking to Noah, but the Devil tempting Christ in the wilderness (54, n. 29).
14. *The Poetry of Chaucer* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1977), 257.
15. *The Rule of St. Benet*, Northern Verse Version, 1091-99 in *The Rule of St. Benet and Two Contemporary Rituals for the Ordination of Nuns*, ed. Ernst A. Kock, EETS (o.s.) 120 (London, 1902), 78.
16. Neuss suggests, "[T]he various references to the 'neighebores' elsewhere in the tale make one suspect that they are all watching...round-eyed from nearby windows..." (333).