

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Characters in Chaucer

**NICHOLAS** (in Chaucer's Miller's Prologue and in his tale) Unconscientious

**Overview** The listeners to the Tales, in the Tabard Inn, have just heard the Knight's Tale, a classic version of Courtly Love, and they are ready for coarser meat. The host of the Inn calls for another tale, and is immediately besieged by the boisterous miller, who insists on telling his story, even though he is 'half-seas over with drink.' The miller prevails, and pulls out a story about a carpenter who is comically cuckolded, in the course of it becoming the point of dispute between two claimants for his beautiful young wife; and in the end finding himself befuddled and cuckolded by his unscrupulous lodger, Nicholas.

**Character** The carpenter is a 'rich old gaffer who took in paying guests,' and one of those guests, the most fully drawn figure in the tale, is a young lodger named Nicholas, who occupies a room in the carpenter's house. The carpenter's wife is fascinated with Nicholas, as is he with her, and the two make out, and make plans. Those **cynical** plans involve Nicholas' elaborate trick on the houseowner. Also at play is the ingenuity of the unkind lodger, who invents an elaborate Flood tale to win some time in the bed of the lady of the house, and who eventually makes the carpenter the butt of the humor of the whole town.

**Lover** Nicholas is a 'needy hard up scholar, learned in the liberal arts.' As a paying guest, he finds himself offered a room in the house of a carpenter—in this tale told by the miller of the Tabard Inn group. The lodger, Nicholas, calculatingly rents a room not far from the room of his host and hostess; who know nothing of Nicholas' widespread (and justified) reputation as a lover. 'For love sub rosa, he'd a great knack, although he looked demure as a maid.' He 'prettily furnished his room and bed with sweet delicious herbs.'

**Sharpster** Nicholas is not only a lover but a scholar—which throws him into the sharpest contrast with the carpenter. Nicholas was particularly skilled at astrology, and at predicting meteorological events; he was also fastidious about himself, as he was about his bed; he was 'as sweet as ginger,' thus makes another sharp contrast to the carpenter. Nicholas' astrolabe and other instruments were neatly stacked beside his bed, proving him a young guy who had his act exceptionally well put together—though with a gloss of the unconscientious rascal on him.

**Artistic** Nicholas is also gifted as a musician. At night he would play sweet melodies on a 'splendid psaltery' which hung over his bed. He would fill his room with such song as 'The Angel to the Virgin.' And so this genial student spent his time, living on his friends' money and his own, and presenting to the world the antithesis of the carpenter. The ingenuity of Nicholas' tricks is amply prepared by the care with which he arranges the furnishings of his own life. A dandy, an aesthete, and an unscrupulous trickster, godsent to plague the carpenter.

**Ardent** One day when the lady's husband is away, Nicholas hits up the carpenter's wife Alisoun, and 'on the quiet caught her by the cunt,' and 'held her by the haunches hard and tight,' with such obvious purpose that she wrenched herself away from him, protesting. He agrees to let her go—she does not really want to—if they can arrange a genuine rendez- vous. They plan for a day when the old guy will be absent. He 'strokes her loins' before leaving Alisoun, and then heads to his room to evolve his unscrupulous plot.

**Parallels** The cuckold and the cuckold—who of course fit together—are an immortal pair in world literature. Nicholas could not exceed, in ingenuity, the machinations of Zeus on the trot for Europa, or the passive shaming of Pentheus, in Euripides' *Bacchae* (405 B.C). Shakespeare's drama—that of the Renaissance altogether—is saturated with cuckolding and the fear of it: in *Othello* 1603, where the master fears Iago; in *Much Ado about Nothing*, 1598 (where horns dominate the conversation). The Restoration drama of Wycherley, as in *The Country Wife* (1675), is preoccupied with a simple trick: the protagonist fakes impotence, and finds his way to the beds of any number of charming, and married, city ladies.

Those who enjoy that line of joking may want to add Saint Joseph to their cuckold list, but there opinions differ.

**Discussion questions**

Does Nicholas feel any pity, or even sympathy, for the gulled carpenter? Or does that braggadocio deserve whatever he gets?

Does Nicholas devise his seduction plan from day one in his lodgings, or does the plan evolve? How calculatedly unconscientious is Nicholas?

Is Nicholas' learning and artistry a calculated put on, with which from the start he plans to win the carpenter's daughter?