

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Characters in Chaucer

## THE MILLER (in *The Reeve's Tale*) (Unconscientious)

**Overview** *The Reeve's Tale* is the third story in the *Canterbury Tales*, and takes us into both the economic nitty-gritty and the bawdy of Chaucer's world. The reeve himself is the local administrator of a large estate, who uses dirty tricks to win profit for his boss—and who is therefore well placed to appreciate the chicaneries of a local miller, who is the butt of the tale which follows. The tale itself links closely into one of the tales in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353), and perfectly illustrates the rowdy of the *fabliau* tradition.

**Character** The miller himself was a key figure in Chaucer's culture, standing between the agricultural producer and the consumer of ground wheat and corn, of flour. Much money was to be made in this profession, and the miller of the present tale is a master of every kind of cheating, including simply stealing considerable amounts of the grain brought to him. With his pompous wife and his 'elitely' educated 20-year old daughter, he cuts a pretentious local figure, and will probably seem to us to deserve what he gets. He is at worst unscrupulous, at best naïve.

**Ludicrous** The miller lives in a prototypical mill-house setting. 'There runs a brook, and over it a bridge,' says the reeve, preparing us for the rural context in which this pretentious miller conducts his career. Since the whole tale will be concerned with revenge on the miller, it is practical to establish him, from the start, as a good subject for ridicule. 'Round was his face, and flattened was his nose; he had a skull as hairless as an ape's...' The reeve is leaning hard against this figure, so we will feel gratified by the bitter conclusion of the tale.

**Braggart** While at first we see the gifts of the miller—'he was as proud and gay as any peacock'—who is good at music and fishing, and can 'turn cups upon a lathe,' we also learn that he is a 'market braggart,' and 'never missed a chance to steal.' He is, in other words, gifted and cunning enough that he will be a plausible candidate for our delight in his downfall at the end of the tale. It adds to this delight that the miller has planfully married the daughter of a priest, who is therefore illegitimate—and who would have had to be married off with a large dowry.

**Possessive** The miller was crazy about his wife, and possessive of her, and as he was well armed with a dirk, a blade, and a sword it was not likely that anyone would make a pass at this lady. He was also in love with his two children, a robust 20-year old girl—'her buttocks broad, her bosom round and high'—and a baby of 6 months. His lady, happy to be so desired, 'stank with pride, like water in a ditch,' and the miller basked in the charming status of upright family man, forming, with his brood, a 14-th century version of a pretentious nouveau riche family.

**Plunderer** The miller has one client, Solar Hall at Cambridge University, 'whose wheat and malt were always ground by him.' It had long been the miller's custom to cheat the Hall, by stealing from the supplies he prepared for them, but in the sick-leave absence of the Hall's manciple, the miller saw an opportunity to dip even deeper into the foodstuffs he prepared for the University. He becomes 'a barefaced plunderer,' eager to multiply his own wealth, and the power and dignity of his family. The Warden of the Hall 'makes a great to do,' but the miller pays no attention.

**Parallels** In Homer's *Odyssey* Menelaus's cuckolding by Paris, who steals his wife and ignites the epic, is itself mocked by the various scenes in which we see Menelaus and Helen sitting at home at their ase after Helen has been returned to her marital hearth. Agamemnon, to stick with antiquity, may be said to have been cuckolded by Clytemnestra, not to mention having been avenged by his son. In the Renaissance, the theme of horns and cuckolding is amply clear: Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598) deals constantly with the horns Beatrice is placing on the head of Benedick; the protagonist of Molière's *L'école des femmes* (1622) mocks cuckolds, then becomes one himself; Rabelais' *Gargantua* (1546) abounds to tedium in the acquisition of horns. Indeed the pleasure imagining

others or even yourself cuckolded is of such general fascination that it has a name, *Candaulism*, borrowed from a famous scene in Herodotus' *Histories*.

### **Discussion questions**

Is there any sympathy for the miller, when we see his whole household turned upside down sexually? Do we feel bad that the 'miller's lass' has been screwed three times during the night? We should feel bad, no? Or do we want to share in the action?

Does the bad behavior of the miller, as Chaucer presents it—the man is a cheat, a robber—justify the behavior of the University lads? Or are they painted with the same dirty brush the miller is painted with? Do we even care about the bad treatment of the miller's wife?

We drub the miller with the word 'unconscientious.' Are you satisfied with that header word? What should the miller have done, to protect himself, that would have saved him from the indignities of this tale?