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VENTORY

ON THE GENERAL PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES

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Revised and expanded edition,
with a new Preface by the author

THE MILLER, THE REEVE, AND A GENTLE
MANCIPLE

CHAPTER XVI

HAVING idealized the Parson and the Plowman, Chaucer writes next with engaging realism of two individuals.

Ther was also a Reve, and a Millere,

(l. 542)

and of these two, the Miller is the first to concern us.

In his authoritative work, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, Rogers asserts that the miller was the most important lay tenant of a medieval manor. "The mill was the lord's franchise and the use of the manor mill was an obligation on the tenants," he states, and calls attention to the fact that millers are prominent in the stories and ballads of the Middle Ages. The miller is "the opulent villager, who is keen after his gains, and not over honest in the collection of them."¹ Chaucer himself illustrates these statements. In the *Reeve's Tale*, the miller Symkyn has the right to take great toll "of al the land aboute,"² and the plot of the *Tale* turns on Symkyn's eagerness for gain, and his dishonesty in his attempts to achieve it. Langland, too, speaks of the miller, and incidentally of the reeve as well, as a thief,³ and as an ignorant rascal.⁴ Certainly the character of Chaucer's Canterbury-bound Miller, who is named for us by the Host as Robin,⁵ bears out the general conception.

He was a jangler and a goliardes,

And that was moost of synne and harlotries.

Wel koude he stelen corn and tollen thries;

And yet he hadde a thombe of gold, pardee.

(ll. 560-563)

Robin is an idle talker ("janglere") and a teller of indecent stories ("a goliardeys . . . that was moost of synne and harlot-

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ries");⁶ he well knows how to steal corn and take his toll three times, he is a perfect illustration of the proverb—"An honest miller has a golden thumb"⁷—or, in other words, he is honest as millers go, which means that he is not honest at all.⁷ Furthermore, if we follow the rules laid down by the medieval physiognomists as Professor Curry has done,⁸ we find that Robin's physical make-up is in accordance with his typical character as a miller.

The Millere was a stout carl for the nones *;
Ful byg he was of brawn, and eek of bones.

He was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre *;
Ther was no dore that he nolde heve of harre *;
Or breke it at a remnyng with his heed.

His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,
And therto brood, as though it were a spade.

Upon the cop * right of his nose he hadde
A werte, and theron stood a toft of herys,

Reed as the bristles of a sowes erys;
His noseherys * blake were and wyde.

His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys.

(ll. 545-546, 549-557, 559)

Professor Curry quotes from such authorities as Aristotle, Rhases, and the *Secreta Secretorum* to show that a strong fellow (a "stout carl"), big of brawn and of bone, with short forearms and high shoulders ("short-sholdred"),⁹ broad and thickset as to build, was expected to be "shameless, immodest, and loguacious" as well as "bold and easily angered."¹⁰ His broad spade beard, which is as red as a sow or a fox, makes him treacherous; ¹¹ his flaring black nostrils indicate lust and anger; ¹² the wart, surmounted by the tuft of red hairs which are like the bristles in a sow's ear, signifies a person given to "shameful fornication" and violence; ¹³ the Miller's mouth, as large as a great furnace,—a phrase which is perhaps reminiscent of the smelting districts of Kent,¹⁴—shows that he is a pro-

* for the nones: "exceedingly"
harre: "hinge"

cop: "tip"
knarre: "stout fellow"
noseherys: "nostrils"

digions babbler and liar who is given to swearing.¹⁵ Thus there is interesting correspondence between Robin's body and spirit, a medieval "scientific" correspondence which probably made for easy understanding of him on the part of Chaucer's contemporaries.

The Miller is exceedingly strong, for no door exists that he cannot heave off its hinge, or break down by using his head as a battering ram. That such feats are no gross exaggeration has been abundantly attested: even in the present day unusually thick skulls have been used by their proud possessors in butting through heavy doors. Professor Whiting tells us, for example, that a San Francisco prize-fighter about fifty years ago not only butted through doors with his head, once through a door of heavy oak, but also fought with his head; in 1933 a certain "clown" in a New York gymnasium entertained by breaking down doors with his head.¹⁶ Robin also shows his strength in other ways—

. . . for over al there he cam,
At wrasidynge he wolde have alwey the ram.

(ll. 547-548)

Wrestling, which requires that the participants be strong, was one of the favourite sports of the common people in Chaucer's time. In the *Tale of Gamelyn*, an anonymous work contemporary with the *Canterbury Tales*, a wrestling match is described in detail: it is a popular event evidently, in which the prize is both a ram and a ring;¹⁷ and in Chaucer's *Sir Thopas*, where the doughty knight is everything no knight should be, the hero is represented as winning the ram every time he wrestles.¹⁸ A ram was the most usual and appropriate prize given to the champion wrestler, although other prizes were sometimes awarded.¹⁹

The glimpse Chaucer gives us of the Miller's "array" is enough to prove that here is another element in the portrait that is consistent with character.

A swerd and bokeler bar he by his syde.

A whit cote and a blew hood wered he.

A baggepipe wel koude he blowe and sowne,
And therewithal he broghte us out of towne.

(ll. 558, 564-566)

The white coat, to be sure, is probably merely appropriate to the Miller's calling, and the blue hood only his fancy, as is also the wearing of a sword and buckler. It is fitting, however, that he plays the bagpipe,²⁰ as powerful lungs are needed for that instrument; the sounds Robin extracts from his bagpipe must be a perfect match for his coarse manners and his loud speech. Later on he is described as crying out "in Pilates voys,"²¹ that is, in a voice like that of the ranting Pilate of the mystery plays. No wonder the "piping," or stentorian trumpeting, of such a self-important fellow is employed to lead the cavalcade out of Southwark! We are reminded of Master William Thorpe's complaint that pilgrims were over-noisy with their bagpipes.²²

It is probable that the Miller comes from Norfolk, for he and the Reeve, who is stated to be a Norfolk man, are bound together by a long standing enmity. In the *Miller's Prologue* and in the *Reeve's Prologue* it is patent that these two rascals have known each other long before their meeting at the Tabard Inn. Robin, the Miller, addresses Oswald, the Reeve, by name, and he is aware that Oswald has a wife;²³ the Reeve vulgarly calls upon the drunken Robin to hold his tongue, as if he knew exactly what story Robin is going to tell. Is it accident which prompts the Miller to give his own name to the "knave" of the duped carpenter in his *Tale*, a knave who is also "a strong carl for the nones" and able to heave doors off their hinges?²⁴ Or is it slyness which supplies these details? As Professor Robert A. Pratt suggests,²⁵ Robin may be telling a story with considerable factual background, in which both he himself and the Reeve actually figured years before. This would certainly give added point to Oswald's anger when he hears the story, for he is now an important officer on a Norfolk estate, and to be personally ridiculed by someone from out of the past would be unbearably humiliating. For now he cannot be anyone's dupe—

Wel koude he kepe a gemer and a bynne;

Ther was noon auditor koude on him wyme.

Wel wiste he by the droghte and by the reyn

The yeldynge of his seed and of his greyn.

His lordes sheep, his neet, his dayerye,

His swyn, his hors, his stoor, and his pultrye

Was hoolly in this Reeves governyng,

And by his covenant yaf the rekenyng,

Syn that his lord was twenty year of age.
Ther koude no man brynge hym in arraage.
Ther nas bailif, ne hierde, nor oother hyme,
That he ne knew his sleighte and his covyne;
They were adrad of hym as of the deeth.

He koude bettre than his lord purchace.
Ful riche he was astored pryvely:
His lord wel koude he plesen subtilly,
To yeve and lene hym of his owene good,
And have a thank, and yet a cote and hood.

(ll. 593-605, 608-612)