

[Essays in Medieval Studies 2](#)

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**Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale":
Exemplum of *caritas***

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The medieval expression of *caritas* (love), that quality of generosity and creative grace exemplified by the Christian God when He created the heavens, the earth, and man, is shown in Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale." "The Miller's Tale," however, is a fabliau--coarse, obscene, an extended dirty joke likely intended for the titillation of upper-class minor nobility and court hangers-on. How can one reconcile Christian love and human bawdry? Without a belief deep enough to reconcile paradox or a sense of divine humor that supersedes all seeming contradictions one would find it impossible. Dante's *Divina Commedia* had to reconcile God's love with the pains of the hell He created. Chaucer resolves the dichotomy between body and spirit with a sense of humor also, the laughter of a man at ease with himself--sly, whimsical, puckish, bantering, deceptively teasing--the urbane qualities of one serene in his knowledge that every manner of thing will ultimately be well.

Chaucer's humor so fitly resolves the split between a spiritual God and His physical creation that one is tempted to make of Chaucer a profound and deep theologian for his uniting of the diverse elements. After all, Western thought, from Plato forward, has made much of the supposed antipathy between matter and spirit. Christianity furthered that dualism. St. Paul said, the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God:

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for they are foolishness to him: neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned (I Cor, 2:11-14). Paul insisted that the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7) and that "they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8).

Neoplatonists considered matter inherently evil: medieval man was born in peccatum originale *caritas*: the impulse toward the seven deadly sins was a result of physical nature. Man's body, it seemed, caused him to sin, while his spirit yearned for contact with God and a release from the chains of bodily desires--pride, wrath, envy, sloth, avarice, gluttony and lechery. The incorporation (Latin corpus--body) of a soul must have seemed a contradiction, an Oxymoronic combination of opposites, a dualism of antipathies to the medieval learned cleric or upper-class sophisticate who had learned the basic Christian philosophic framework that sundered the dissimilarities of matter and spirit into two separate and always opposing forms of reality.

The unlearned serf would likely be unaware of such differences. After all, his God had created both the heaven of spirit and the earth of matter. The unlearned could see the paradox, if he recognized it at all, as resolved by the power of the Creator, Whom Chaucer indirectly alludes to in the famous eighteen-line opening of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. The well-known passage begins with erotic physicality--the phallic images of roots that are prolific because of the sexual dampness of April showers--and continues with the images of mating

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behavior in birds ("Smale fowles maken melodye that slepen all night with open ye, So priketh hem natur in hir corages") and ends with human beings likewise "priked in hir corages" to worship God and the Saint who preserved their health through the winter. The passage exemplifies no division between a God of religion and a God of nature, or for that matter between roots, animals, birds, and men. All are equally God's creation.

Chaucer is more Augustine than Pauline in his outlook. Despite the almost Manichean dualism of Paul, inherited through the Western thought system of Plato's division of matter and spirit, St. Augustine decided that there was no evil, only greater and lesser goods, evil consisting in choosing a lesser good when one can achieve a greater one (Hutchins, 49).

Perhaps Chaucer is a tad more lenient than Augustine (after all, he had not been converted from Manichaeism to Christianity, as Augustine had), or perhaps he has the wit and humor to see things with a more benevolent eye. Certain it is that Chaucer could see good despite the seeming evils that afflicted his age. Likewise in many of his characters he could see the intent and desire to do good even when the characters lapsed into a lesser good when they could have achieved a greater one. One must assume that Chaucer's God was kindly and benevolent, as Chaucer himself seems to be. After all, one might argue, whatever man is--physical, spiritual or both--was God's creation through his *caritas*. "The Miller's Tale" thus reflects God's gift of love to man, since all gifts illustrate the *caritas* of Christianity and are

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either analogous to the gospel or mockeries of it that make the principle of *caritas* all the more a part of everyday medieval life. Since *caritas* is the foundation of Christian grace, even the bawdy exchange of pain for pain in "The Miller's Tale" shows the requital, however crude, that is the spiritual man a attempt to return the gift of love to his Creator. In a sense, the tale can be seen as a fabliau turned inside out, itself a mockery of coarseness and bawdry.

By using patristic exegesis, one can discern in the tale many of the levels of meaning inherent in Chaucer's well-plotted entertainment. The gifts exchanged between various characters may be for good or evil purpose. but patristic exegesis shows that they are all relevant to the principle of *caritas*.

One of the first gifts mentioned is Alisoun's promise to give Nicholas her love. On a literal level, it is an acquiescence to join him in adulterous enjoyment. As Beichner points out, Chaucer's imagery characterizes her as a rustic. She is small as a weasel, wears an apron white as morning milk, has eyes as black as a wild plum, is as blissful as a Jeannete pear, softer than wool, singing like a swallow, skipping like a kid or calf; she has a mouth sweet as honey and ale or mead or a hoard of apples in aromatic hay. Since she is rural, she is admittedly knowledgeable, uninhibited and

healthfully sexual in her directness, with none of the squeamishness and insipid pretense of the "citized" Absolon (123, 124). Her gift of love to Nicholas is literal. She knows what all animals, including

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human ones, do at the mating season of Spring.

But her promise is more than physically literal. Considered allegorically, one might say that her promise is the promise of all love to all men. Humans seek love as naturally as animals mate (or humans mate as naturally as animals seek love--in both instances the impulse, if not the expression describing it, is the same). When Alisoun offers love, the eternal female willingly enters into a pact with the eternal male, allegorically revealing, by both parties' tacit acknowledgment of their intent, that it is proper and enjoyable and has its rightful place between humans who are proper for each other, as Nicholas and Alisoun are by interest, similar age and like propensities, and as Alisoun and her husband John are not, nor are she and Absolon, since John is sexually selfish, a lecher, and Absolon a vapid child. He mourns for her "as doth a lamb after the tete," a line which shows Chaucer's humor in its ambiguity. Were one to put commas in the right place he would see that it is Absolon mourning as well as the lamb, "after the tete." Ambiguity is one of Chaucer's weapons in his satire against conformity, superficially orthodox Christianity, tradition and circumspect behavior. All these are qualities of the hypocrite, as shown in his portrait of the Prioress.

On a tropological or moral level, Alisoun's promise to fulfil Nicholas' request is the response of the universe to human needs. The tropological or moral level is meaning, the trope a symbolic gesture or physical signal that indicates the purpose behind the surface

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of any act. By her acquiescence, then, Alisoun becomes a symbolic earth-mother, the eternal female principle, just as "hende" Nicholas, by his request, represents the eternal male principle and the urge to mate--a joining of opposite genders to the fulfilment of each--an act that represents unity out of the diversity of the dual sexes, a completion that makes moral order out of the chaos of undirected and unfocused sexual urge.

Beichner says that Nicholas is "hende" in the way that he woos Alisoun (124). Obviously he has been fondling her ("Do wey your handes") and catching "hir by the queynte" and holding her "harde by the haunche-bones." Perhaps the chaotic and undirected sexual urge indicates that "hende" Nicholas' hands have been put to use before his encounter with Alisoun. Chaucer uses the adjective eleven times.

A tropological interpretation of Nicholas' plea and Alisoun's promise provides a link between the physical act and its spiritual completion. The generative organs, Chaucer has the Wife of Bath say, were made for each other. In addition to "purgacioun of urine," and "to knowe a femele from a male," they were made "for ese of engendrure, ther we nat god displese" (WoB Prol., 116-28). The organs were therefore good if they were used to fulfil the purpose of creation, in the Wife's words, "to wexe and multipleye." As we may be certain, and as patristic exegesis suggests, the Wife's understanding of waxing and multiplying means more than biological contact of egg and sperm in a petri dish.

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When one looks at the request and promise by the couple on an anagogic level, he may see that the event is comparable to prayer from man and answering blessing from God. It is no accident that in the practice of courtly love the female is adored as a goddess and the male is plaintively seeking her love. This "religion of nature," as it has been called, is, considered exegetically, a reflection of the religion of Christianity. Both are, in some form religions of love. Thus a patristic exegesis of the Song of Solomon usually expresses the idea that man's love for woman is an imitation of Christ's love for the Church, or divine love for the object of its creation.

What Nicholas and Alisoun contemplate is literally the highest bliss, the most perfect happiness, the most profound and complete enjoyment of which humans are physically capable. That their cuckoldry is ultimately spiritual in Chaucer's eyes is evident in his use of imagery to describe their erotic coupling. When

they goon to bedde
 Ther was the revel and the melodye;
 And lyth Alison and Nicholas,
 In bisnesse of mirthe and of solas,
 Til that the belle of laudes gan to ringe,
 And freres in the chauncel gonne singe. (465-470)

In these few lines Chaucer himself accomplishes the four levels of patristic exegesis. There is literally revel--pure fun and abandonment in bliss, just as on an

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allegorical level there is "melodye," entunement like that unsubstantial art of music, which is the most refined and least imitative of all man's arts, the most nearly spiritual, since music is not representative of anything in nature and is therefore symbolically pure and well serves as a distant descant on the lovers' literal level. On a tropological level, Chaucer gives the meaning of all this--both the revel and the melody--as the "bisnesse" of "mirthe and of solas." Why such a mundane word as "bisnesse"? Because it is the business or purpose of sexual mating to provide both fun and comfort, pleasure or "mirthe," and the comfort of "solas" of easing sexual tension. The union of Alisoun and Nicholas culminates in the highest level of interpretation, the anagogical--meaning pushed to its apotheosis, the extension of literal, allegorical, and tropological to contact with God. On the anagogical level Chaucer's imagery shows that the union of the lovers is spiritually blessed. They fornicate until the very instruments of the heavens rejoice: the bells of the church ring out and the friars begin to chant their orisons. Here they are humans touching God, as it were, and their activity is joined with the holy words of praise, the laudes, and the holy music of the friars, who, in their intensity of desire for God imitate the intensity of the lovers' passion, who in the "bisnesse" of their holy offices enjoy the "mirthe" of spiritual revel and the "solas" of piety and praise given expression to, and are therefore comforted and relaxed as verbal ejaculation reflects what is going on in carpenter John's bed.

Thus the scope of meaning for the sexual act as envisioned by patristic exegesis might indicate that it is for immediate gratification, or revel (literally), for a longer time of comfort and relaxation of the libido, a sense of ego satisfaction and well-being subsumed under the abstract term "melodye" (allegorically) and for an even more protracted time of fulfilment in longterm happiness and probable childbearing, which is its "bisnesse" tropologically. Finally, anagogically considered, it is co-creation with the creator of the universe.

To moderns nourished intellectually by the Western thought systemized by Plato, the conjunction of matter and spirit well might seem reprehensible. That an act of eroticism--and illicit at that--could also be a means of contact with God is a concept likely offensive to those who carefully separate matter and spirit, body and soul, and think of the mundane as inimical to pure religion. Yet the exegetical system, like deep understanding or the power of the Creator, unites all levels of interpretation.

When Chaucer wrote the lines about Alisoun and Nicholas going to bed, was he aware of himself illustrating the four levels of exegetical meaning? I believe that he was, particularly so because he allows the anagogical level to be ambiguous. This time his ambiguity is used (ambiguously) for more than humor. The lines which betoken the spiritual level of eroticism through their imagery

Til that the belle of laudes gan to
ringe, And freres in the chauncel

gonne singe. (469-470)

could also revert to the literal. Aside from the religious imagery they might merely suggest the passage of time during which Nicholas and Alisoun were reveling. But one who admires Chaucer's use of jocularly in his tongue-in-cheek retraction, his mocking portrait of himself as a tongue-tied and unentertaining pilgrim going to Canterbury, and his sly use of irony in describing various of the pilgrims in the Prologue will have no problem seeing Chaucer's subtlety in allowing the reader to interpret the sounds of bells and lauds as either or both literal and/or anagogic. Such ambiguity shows wit--the puckish, bantering, deceptively teasing urbanity of a man at ease with both his body and his soul. It also could keep him out of a peck of trouble from the type of reader to whom he has already said, if the flgentjl wight "doesn't want to hear "a cherk's tale." he should "Turne over the leef, and chese another tale,"

Those who see Alisoun's promise of love

. . . she hir love him graunted atte laste,
And swoor hir ooth, by seint Thomas of Kent,
That she wol been at his comandement..

and Nicholas' acceptance of it--"For this was his desyr and hir also"--

as exemplifying a love that on the erotic level may be considered an abomination of spirituality might think it blasphemous to suggest otherwise. But others may see it as a form of *caritas*, imitating, in a physical way, the divine gift of love from God to man. One should consider the socially redeeming qualities of their relationship. Their affection comes not from legalities such as wedding vows or from legal ownership of each other (Carpenter John shows such lip-smacking propriety and conformity to the norms of his society, such superficially orthodox Christian behavior, such circumspect and traditional adherence to the well-worn grooves of proper schoolboy deportment in his marrying a woman less than half his age) but in the natural propriety of young and innocent lovers using their bodies in the way that the God of both nature and religion ordained. Even if one considers his seduction and her adultery a sin, the giving of affection and sexual pleasure to each other, although a mockery of matter-versus-spirit religion, is yet a lowlife imitation of religious *caritas*. This gift, through its very oppositeness, illustrates the greatness and importance of the spiritual principle.

The theme of *caritas* and/or the reversal thereof continues in "The Miller's Tale" as Absolon woos Alisoun. Although he is ill-suited to be her lover, being too young and unrealistic to properly conduct an intrigue, too squeamish about physicality to deal with the coupling of vile bodies, Absolon thinks himself a lover. Yet he does not speak to her personally, or even use his hands as directly as "hende" Nicholas, but woos her once by singing under her window and then by "menes

and brocage," that is, by intermediaries and bargaining. Further he sends her gifts. Contrast his behavior with that of Nicholas, who makes his frontal attack, controls himself when repulsed, and then prays to Alisoun for mercy and begs for her love to save him, lest he die. He allows her to act freely and even to exemplify virtue through her generosity. Absolon offers no target either for acceptance or rejection because he is not there. Unintentionally he leaves her powerless¹ which as anyone who has read *The Canterbury Tales* knows, is not the way women want to be treated.

Absolon's messenger-service approach is as vapid as his gifts, which are not presents from a generous and overflowing heart but bribes meant to win him sexual pleasure. Gifts they are, and hence microcosms of God's *caritas*, but his mead, wine, spiced ale, cookies hot from the oven and other tangible gifts are those of one obviously thinking more of his own than of mutual pleasure. Absolon fails not because he is subverting the principle of *caritas*, but because of the natural consequence of his stupidity and ill-management.

Is Alisoun, although rural, also cheap enough to be bought with bribes? Absolon seems to think so. His wooing is as unrealistic and insincere as his use of cardamon seeds and licorice root to make his breath sweet. The reader is justified in seeing him as a foppish and prettified rake, obviously more in love with the idea of himself as a lover than with Alisoun. His incessant hair-combing and sartorial excesses further

reveal the narcissism of one who has no *caritas* despite his hot-cookie gifts. He deserves whatever comeuppance he gets from Alisoun at the shot window.

When Nicholas pretends to swoon with revelations of a new Noah's flood, carpenter John brings him "of mighty ale a large quart," ironically symbolizing, by his sharing of spirit the sharing of Alisoun that they are soon to do. The affinity is more than mere familiarity. Despite his other faults, John's concern for Nicholas' welfare is genuine. He is concerned about Nicholas' health, has the door broken down to rescue him, and is generous with his ale when he realizes that Nicholas needs drink. Since his generosity is an example of *caritas*, John shows himself worthy (at least in this area of conduct) as one who loves his neighbor as himself. Since Nicholas dupes gullible old John the lecher, however, consuming his ale as he will consume his wife, Nicholas also deserves whatever comeuppance he gets at the shot window. In each instance, the gift, whether intended for bribery, compliment, or generosity of *caritas*, reveals the medieval ideal of selfless love or an abomination of it so culpable that such sin deserves consequent pain for its being an Augustinian "lesser good." But while it may be a "lesser good," it is still a subverted microcosm--a dim reflection of God's bright *caritas*.

Other gifts in the tale--the kiss, the hot poker, etc.--are so well known as to need no protracted explanation. If one interprets them in the light of the previous ones I have mentioned, the result will be to further support my thesis. It could hardly be otherwise. Since in the medieval view everything

existed in the economy of God then everything must either be a manifestation of His glory and benevolence or a mockery of it. Since nothing can exist outside the boundaries of His control (for there are no boundaries), everything must reflect, even negatively, His providential *caritas*.

Since the ale contains alcohol, or spirit, it is therefore reminiscent of the wine of the Eucharist--Christ's blood. It is likely that the Christian use of alcoholic spirit to symbolize holy spirit is based on earlier discovery, probably by caveman, that fruit or grain, the staff of life, produces alcohol if left in water, the curious effects of drinking it revealing, to the primitive mind, a spirit that must be contained in the grain and which, consumed by man, enhanced his spirit also, releasing him from the bonds of his body. Thus religion might be said to be a by-product of the brewing process.

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