The Reeve's Prologue and Tale

THE REEVE'S PROLOGUE

When folk had laughed their fill at this nice pass
Of Absalom and clever Nicholas,
Then divers folk diversely had their say;
And most of them were well amused and gay,
Nor at this tale did I see one man grieve,
Save it were only old Oswald the reeve,
Because he was a carpenter by craft.
A little anger in his heart was left,
And he began to grouse and blame a bit.
"S' help me," said he, "full well could I be quit
With blearing of a haughty miller's eye,
If I but chose to speak of ribaldry.
But I am old; I will not play, for age;
Grass time is done, my fodder is rummage,
This white top advertises my old years,
My heart, too, is as mouldy as my hairs,
Unless I fare like medlar, all perverse.
For that fruit's never ripe until it's worse,
And falls among the refuse or in straw.
We ancient men, I fear, obey this law:
Until we're rotten, we cannot be ripe;
We dance, indeed, the while the world will pipe.
liesire sticks in our nature like a nail
To have, if hoary head, a verdant tail,
As has the leek; for though our strength be gone,
Our wish is yet for folly till life's done.
For when we may not act, then will we speak;
Yet in our ashes is there fire to reek
"Four embers have we, which I shall confess:
Boasting and lying, anger, covetousness;
These four remaining sparks belong to eld.
Our ancient limbs may well be hard to wield,
But lust will never fail us, that is truth.
And yet I have had always a colt's tooth,
As many years as now are past and done
Since first my tap of life began to run.
For certainly, when I was born, I know
Death turned my tap of life and let it flow;
And ever since that day the tap has run
Till nearly empty now is all the tun.
The stream of life now drips upon the chime;
The silly tongue may well ring out the time
Of wretchedness that passed so long before;
For oldsters, save for dotage, there's no more."
Now when our host had heard this sermoning,
Then did he speak as lordly as a king;
He said: "To what amounts, now, all this wit?
Why should we talk all day of holy writ?
The devil makes a steward for to preach,
And of a cobbler, a sailor or a leech.
Tell, forth your tale, and do not waste the time.
Here's Deptford! And it is half way to prime.
There's Greenwich town that many a scoundrel's in;
It is high time your story should begin."
"Now, sirs," then said this Oswald called the reeve,
"I pray you all, now, that you will not grieve
Though I reply and somewhat twitch his cap;
It's lawful to meet force with force, mayhap.
This drunken miller has related here
How was beguiled and fooled a carpenter—
Perchance in scorn of me, for I am one.
So, by your leave, I'll him requite anon;
All in his own boor's language will I speak.
I only pray to God his neck may break.
For in my eye he well can see the mote,
But sees not in his own the beam, you'll note."

HERE ENDS THE PROLOGUE

THE REEVE'S TALE

At Trumpington, not far from Cambridge town,
There is a bridge wherethrough a brook runs down,
Upon the side of which brook stands a mill;
And this is very truth that now I tell.
A miller dwelt there, many and many a day;
As any peacock he was proud and gay.
He could mend nets, and he could fish, and flute,
Drink and turn cups, and wrestle well, and shoot;
And in his leathern belt he did parade
A cutlass with a long trenchant blade.
A pretty dagger had he in his pouch;
There was no man who durst this man to touch.
A Sheffield whittler bore he in his hose;
Round was his face and turned—up was his nose.
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As bald as any ape's head was his skull;
He was a market-swaggerer to the full.
There durst no man a hand on him to lay,
Because he swore he'd make the beggar pay.
A thief he was, forsooth, of corn and meal,
And sly at that, accustomed well to steal.
His name was known as arrogant Simpkin.
A wife he had who came of gentle kin;
The parson of the town her father was.
With her he gave full many a pan of brass,
To insure that Simpkin with his blood ally.
She had been bred up in a nunnery;
For Simpkin would not have a wife, he said,
Save she were educated and a maid
To keep up his estate of yeomanry.
And she was proud and bold as is a pie.
A handsome sight it was to see those two;
On holy days before her he would go
With a broad tippet bound about his head;
And she came after in a skirt of red,
While Simpkin's hose were dyed to match that same.
There durst no man to call her aught but dame;
Nor was there one so hardy, in the way,
As durst flirt with her or attempt to play,
Unless he would be slain by this Simpkin
With cutlass or with knife or with bodkin.
For jealous folk are dangerous, you know,
At least they'd have their wives to think them so.
Besides, because she was a dirty bitch,
She was as high as water in a ditch;
And full of scorn and full of back-bitting.
She thought a lady should be quite willing
To greet her for her kin and culture, she
Having been brought up in that nunnery.
A daughter had they got between the two,
Of twenty years, and no more children, no,
Save a boy baby that was six months old;
It lay in cradle and was strong and bold.
This girl right stout and well developed was,
With nose tip-tilted and eyes blue as glass,
With buttocks broad, and round breasts full and high,
But golden was her hair, I will not lie.
The parson of the town, since she was fair,
Was purposeful to make of her his heir,
Both of his chattels and of his estate,
But all this hinged upon a proper mate.
He was resolved that he'd bestow her high
Into some blood of worthy ancestry;
For Holy Church's goods must be expended
On Holy Church's blood, as it's descended.
Therefore he'd honour thus his holy blood,
Though Holy Church itself became his food.
Large tolls this miller took, beyond a doubt,
With wheat and malt from all the lands about;
Of which I'd specify among them all
A Cambridge college known as Soler Hall;
He ground their wheat and all their malt he ground.
And on a day it happened, as they found,
The manciple got such a malady
That all men surely thought that he should die.
Whereon this miller stole both flour and wheat
A hundredfold more than he used to cheat;
For theretofore he stole but cautiously,
But now he was a thief outrageously,
At which the warden scolded and raised hell;
The miller snapped his fingers, truth to tell,
And cracked his brags and swore it wasn't so.
There were two poor young clerks, whose names I know,
That dwell within this Hall whereof I say,
Willful they were and lusty, full of play,
And (all for mirth and to make reverly)
After the warden eagerly did they cry
To give them leave, at least for this one round,
To go to mill and see their produce ground;
And stoutly they proclaimed they'd bet they'd
The miller should not steal one half a peck
Of grain, by trick, nor yet by force should thief;
And at the last the warden gave them leave.
John was the one and Alain was that other;
In one town were they born, and that called Strother,
Far in the north, I cannot tell you where.
This Alain, he made ready all his gear,
And on a horse loaded the sack anon.
Forth went Alain the clerk, and also John,
With good sword and with buckler at their side.
John knew the way and didn't need a guide,
And at the mill he dropped the sack of grain.
"Ah, Simon, hail, good morn," first spoke Alain.
"How fares it with your fair daughter and wife?"
"Alain! Welcome," said Simpkin, "by my life,
And John also. How now? What do you here?"
"Simon," said John, "by God, need makes no peer;
He must himself serve who's no servant, eh?
Or else he's but a fool, as all clerks say.
Our manciple— I hope he'll soon be dead,
So aching are the grinders in his head—
And therefore am I come here with Alain
To grind our corn and carry it home again;
I pray you speed us thither, as you may."
"It shall be done," said Simpkin, "by my fay.
What will you do the while it is in hand?"
"By God, right by the hopper will I stand,"
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Said John, "and see just how the corn goes in; I never have seen, by my father's kin, Just how the hopper waggles to and fro."

Alain replied: "Well, John, and will you so? Then will I get beneath it, by my crown, To see there how the meal comes sifting down Into the trough; and that shall be my sport. For, John, in faith, I must be of your sort; I am as bad a miller as you be."

The miller smiled at this, their delicacy,
And thought: "All this is done but for a wile; They think there is no man may them beguile; But, by my thrift, I will yet blear their eyes,
For all the tricks in their philosophies. The more odd tricks and stratagems they make,
The more I'll steal when I begin to take."

Out of the door he went, then, secretly,
When he had seen his chance, and quietly;
He looked up and looked down, until he found
The clerks' horse where it stood, securely bound.

Behind the mill, under an arbour green;
And to the horse he went, then, all unseen;
He took the bridle off him and anon,
When the said horse was free, why he was gone
Toward the fen, for wild mares ran therein,
And with a neigh he went, through thick and thin.

This miller straight went back and no word said,
But did his business and with these clerks played,
Until their corn was fairly, fully ground.

But when the flour was sacked and the ears bound,
This John went out, to find his horse away,
And so he cried: "Hello! and "Weladay! Our horse is lost! Alain, for Jesus' bones Get to your feet, come out, man, now, at once! Alas, our warden's palfrey's lost and lorn!"

This Alain forgot all, both flour and corn,
Clean out of mind was all his husbandry,
"What? Which way did he go?" began to cry.
The wife came bounding from the house, and then
She said: "Alas! Your horse went to the fen, With the wild mares, as fast as he could go. A curse light on the hand that tied him so, And him that better should have knotted rein!"

"Alas!" quoth John, "Alain, for Jesus' pain, Lay off your sword, and I will mine also; I am as fleet, God knows, as is a roe; By God's heart, he shall not escape us both!" Why didn't you put him in the barn? My oath! Bad luck, by God, Alain, you are a fool!" These foolish clerks began to run and roll Toward the marshes, both Alain and John. And when the miller saw that they were gone, He half a bushel of their flour did take And bade his wife go knead it and bread make. He said: "I think those clerks some trickery feared; Yet can a miller match a clerkling's beard, For all his learning; let them go their way. Look where they go, yea, let the children play, They'll catch him not so readily, by my crown!"

Those simple clerks went running up and down With "Look out! Halt! Halt! here! 'Ware the rear! Go whistle, you, and I will watch him here!" But briefly, till it came to utter night They could not, though they put forth all their might, That stallion catch, he always ran so fast, Till in a ditch they trapped him at the last.

Weary and wet, as beast is in the rain,
Came foolish John and with him came Alain.
"Alas," said John, "the day that I was born! Now are we bound toward mockery and scorn.
Our corn is stolen, folk will call us fools,
The warden and the fellows at the schools, And specially this miller. Weladay!"

Thus John complained as he went on his way Toward the mill, with Bayard once more bound. The miller sitting by the fire he found, For it was night, and farther could they not; But, for the love of God, they him besought For shelter and for supper, for their penny.

The miller said to them: "If there be any, Such as it is, why you shall have your part. With empty hand no man takes hawk or gull; Well, here's our silver, ready to be spent." This miller to the town his daughter sent For ale and bread, and roasted them a goose, And tied their horse, that it might not go loose;
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And then in his own chamber made a bed,
With sheets and with good blankets fairly spread,
Not from his bed more than twelve feet, or ten.
The daughter made her lone bed near the men,
In the same chamber with them, by and by;
It could not well be bettered, and for why?
There was no larger room in all the place.
They supped and talked, and gained some small solace,
And drank strong ale, that evening, of the best.
Then about midnight all they went to rest.
Well had this miller varnished his bald head,
For pale he was with drinking, and not red.
He hiccoughed and he mumbled through his nose,
As he were chilled, with humours lachrymose.
To bed he went, and with him went his wife.
As any jay she was with laughter rife,
So copiously was her gay whistle wet.
The cradle near her bed's foot−board was set,
Handy for rocking and for giving suck.
And when they'd drunk up all there was in crock,
To bed went miller's daughter, and anon
To bed went Alain and to bed went John.
There was no more; they did not need a dwale.
This miller had so roundly bibbed his ale
That, like a horse, he snorted in his sleep,
While of his tail behind he kept no keep.
His wife joined in his chorus, and so strong,
Men might have heard her snores a full furlong;
And the girl snored, as well, for company.
Alain the clerk, who heard this melody,
He poked at John and said: "Asleep? But how?
Did you hear ever such a song ere now?
Lo, what a compline is among them all!
Now may the wild−fire on their bodies fall!
Who ever heard so outlandish a thing?
But they shall have the flour of ill ending.
Through this long night there'll be for me no rest;
But never mind, 'twill all be for the best.
For, John," said he, "so may I ever thrive,
As, if I can, that very wench I'll swive.
Some recompense the law allows to us;
For, John, there is a statute which says thus,
That if a man in one point be aggrieved,
Yet in another shall he be relieved.
Our corn is stolen, to that there's no nay,
And we have had an evil time this day.
But since I may not have amending, now,
Against my loss I'll set some fun−and how!
By God's great soul it shan't be otherwise!"
This John replied: "Alain, let me advise.
The miller is a dangerous man," he said,
"And if he be awakened, I'm afraid
He may well do us both an injury."
But Alain said: "I count him not a fly."
And up he rose and to the girl he crept.
This wench lay on her back and soundly slept,
Until he'd come so near, ere she might spy,
It was too late to struggle, then, or cry;
And, to be brief, these two were soon alone.
Now play, Alain! For I will speak of John.
This John lay still a quarter−hour, or so,
Pitied himself and wept for all his woe.
"Alas," said he, "this is a wicked jape!
Now may I say that I am but an ape.
Yet has my friend, there, something for his harm;
He has the miller's daughter on his arm.
He ventured, and his pains are now all fled,
While I lie like a sack of chaff in bed;
And when this jape is told, another day,
I shall be held an ass, a milksop, yea!
I will arise and chance it, by my fay!
'Unhardy is unhappy,' as they say."
And up he rose, and softly then he went
To find the cradle for expedient,
And bore it over to his own foot−board.
Soon after this the wife no longer snored,
But woke and rose and went outside to piss,
And came again and did the cradle miss,
And groped round, here and there, but found it not.
"Alas!" thought she, "my way I have forgot.
I nearly found myself in the clerks' bed.
Eh, ben'cite, but that were wrong!" she said.
And on, until by cradle she did stand.
And, groeping a bit farther with her hand,
She found the bed, and thought of naught but good,
Because her baby's cradle by it stood;
And knew not where she was, for it was dark;
But calmly then she crept in by the clerk,
And lay right still, and would have gone to sleep.
But presently this John the clerk did leap,
And over on this goodwife did he lie.
No such gay time she'd known in years gone by.
He pricked her hard and deep, like one gone mad.
And so a jolly life these two clerks had
Till the third cock began to crow and sing.
Alain grew weary in the grey dawning,
For he had laboured hard through all the night;
And said: "Farewell, now, Maudy, sweet delight!
The day is come, I may no longer bide;
But evermore, whether I walk or ride,
I am your own clerk, so may I have weal."
"Now, sweetheart," said she, "go and fare you well!"
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But ere you go, there's one thing I must tell.
When you go walking homeward past the mill,
Right at the entrance, just the door behind,
You shall a loaf of half a bushel find
That was baked up of your own flour, a deal
Of which I helped my father for to steal.
And, darling, may God save you now and keep!
And with that word she almost had to weep.
Alain arose and thought: "Ere it be dawn,
I will go creep in softly by friend John."
And found the cradle with his hand, anon.
"By God!" thought he, "all wrong I must have gone;
My head is dizzy from my work tonight,
And that's why I have failed to go aright.
I know well, by this cradle, I am wrong,
For here the miller and his wife belong."
And on he went, and on the devil's way,
Unto the bed wherein the miller lay.
He thought to have crept in by comrade John,
So, to the miller, in he got anon,
And caught him round the neck, and softly spake,
Saying: "You, John, you old swine's head, awake,
For Christ's own soul, and hear a noble work,
For by Saint James, and as I am a clerk,
I have, three times in this short night, no lack,
Swived that old miller's daughter on her back,
While you, like any coward, were aghast."
"You scoundrel," cried the miller, "you trespassed?
Ah, traitor false and treacherous clerk!" cried he,
"You shall be killed, by God's own dignity!
Who dares be bold enough to bring to shame
My daughter, who is born of such a name?"
And by the gullet, then, he caught Alain.
And pitilessly he handled him amain,
And on the nose he smote him with his fist.
Down ran the bloody stream upon his breast;
And on the floor, with nose and mouth a−soak,
They wallowed as two pigs do in a poke.
And up they came, and down they both went, prone,
Until the miller stumbled on a stone,
And reel'd and fell down backwards on his wife,
Who nothing knew of all this silly strife;

For she had fallen into slumber tight
With John the clerk, who'd been awake all night.
But at the fall, from sleep she started out.
"Help, holy Cross of Bromholm!" did she shout,
"In manus tuas, Lord, to Thee I call!
Simon, awake, the Fiend is on us all
My heart is broken, help, I am but dead!
There lies one on my womb, one on my head!
Help, Simpkin, for these treacherous clerks do fight!"
John started up, as fast as well he might,
And searched along the wall, and to and fro,
To find a staff; and she arose also,
And knowing the room better than did John,
She found a staff against the wall, anon;
And then she saw a little ray of light,
For through a hole the moon was shining bright;
And by that light she saw the struggling two,
But certainly she knew not who was who,
Except she saw a white thing with her eye.
And when she did this same white thing espy,
She thought the clerk had worn a nightcap here.
And with the staff she nearer drew, and near,
And, thinking to hit Alain on his poll,
She fetched the miller on his bald white skull,
And down he went, crying out, "Help, help, I die!"
The two clerks beat him well and let him lie;
And clothed themselves, and took their horse anon,
And got their flour, and on their way were gone.
And at the mill they found the well−made cake
Which of their meal the miller's wife did bake.
Thus is the haughty miller soundly beat,
And thus he's lost his pay for grinding wheat,
And paid for the two suppers, let me tell,
Of Alain, and of John, who've tricked him well.
His wife is taken, also his daughter sweet;
Thus it befalls a miller who's a cheat.
And therefore is this proverb said with truth,
"An evil end to evil man, forsooth."
The cheater shall himself well cheated be.
And God, Who sits on high in majesty,
Save all this company, both strong and frail!
Thus have I paid this miller with my tale.

HERE IS ENDED THE REEVE'S TALE
The Reeve’s Prologue and Tale

CliffNotes

Summary

The only pilgrim who dislikes *The Miller’s Tale* is Oswald, the Reeve, who takes the story as a personal affront because he was once a carpenter. He tells the Miller that he will pay him back for such a story, and so he does.

A dishonest miller, who lives close to a college, steals corn and meal brought to his mill for grinding. One day, the manciple (or steward) of the college is too ill to go to the mill to watch the miller grind his corn, and, in his absence, the miller robs him outrageously.

Two students at the college, John and Alan, are enraged at the news of the theft and volunteer to take a sack of corn to the mill. When they arrive, they announce that they will watch the milling. The miller, sensing that the students want to prevent him from stealing, untethers the students’ horse. When John and Alan find the horse missing, they chase it until dark before catching it. Meanwhile, the miller empties half the flour from the sack and refills it with bran.

Because it is now dark, the boys ask the miller to put them up for the night. The miller, who has a wife, a twenty-year-old daughter, and an infant son, agrees. Because the house is small, they all sleep in the same room but in separate beds: John and Alan in one bed, the Miller and his wife in another with the cradle beside, and the daughter in the third.

While the miller and his family sleep, John and Alan think of ways to get revenge. Suddenly, Alan announces that he is going to have that “wench there,” referring to the daughter. His logic is "If at one point a person be aggrieved / Then in another he shall be relieved" ("That gif a man in a point be aggrieved, / That in another he sal be releved"). John, however, stays in bed lamenting his condition; resolved finally to not spend the night alone, he gets up and quietly moves the baby and cradle next to his bed. About this time, the miller's wife gets up to relieve herself; returning to her bed, she feels for the baby's cradle, which is now beside John's bed. Thinking this her bed, she climbs in beside John, who immediately "tumbled on her, and on this goode wyf, he layed it on well."

At dawn, Alan says goodbye to the daughter, who tells him where to find his stolen flour. When Alan goes to wake John, he discovers the cradle and, assuming that he has the wrong bed, hops into the miller's bed. There, he tells John how he had the daughter three times during the night. "As I have thries in this shorte nyght / Swyved (screwed) the milleres doghter bolt upright." The miller rises from his bed in a fury. The miller's wife, thinking that the swearing is coming from one of the students, grabs a club and, mistaking her husband for one of the clerks, strikes him down. Alan and John gather their ground wheat and flour and flee the premises.

Analysis

The reader should keep in mind that the idea in one tale is often told to repay another. Thus, because the Reeve is upset over the Miller's tale about a carpenter, the Reeve tells a tale whereby a miller is ridiculed and repaid for his cheating.
Both tales deal with a seduction within the sanctity of the hearth (or household): In *The Miller's Tale*, only the young wife is seduced. In *The Reeve's Tale*, however, both the daughter and the wife are "swyved" (screwed) by the young students. As in *The Miller's Tale*, a rough sort of poetic justice is meted out. The miller intends to cheat the students and ridicules their education when he tells them to try to make a hotel out of his small bedroom. During the course of the night, the students do, indeed, make a type of hotel (house of prostitution) out of his house. Furthermore, the tale includes wonderful medieval puns: John and Alan talk of the grinding of their meal in covertly sexual terms: "Grinding" or "grinding corn" was common fourteenth-century London slang for sexual intercourse (the Wife of Bath also talks of bread and grinding in the prologue to her tale).

The natures of *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale* again testify to the differences in their personalities. The Reeve, who in *The Prologue* is described as "old and choleric and thin," tells a tale that reeks of bitterness and is less funny than *The Miller's Tale*, partly because the Miller is a boisterous and jolly person.