Summary & Analysis of The Miller’s Prologue & Tale

Summary

The pilgrims applaud the Knight’s Tale, and the pleased Host asks the Monk to match it. Before the Monk can utter a word, however, the Miller interrupts. Drunk and belligerent, he promises that he has a “noble” tale that will repay the Knight’s (3126). The Host tries to persuade the Miller to let some “bettre” man tell the next tale (3130). When the Miller threatens to leave, however, the Host acquiesces. After the Miller reminds everyone that he is drunk and therefore shouldn’t be held accountable for anything he says, he introduces his tale as a legend and a life of a carpenter and of his wife, and of how a clerk made a fool of the carpenter, which everyone understands to mean that the clerk slept with the carpenter’s wife (3141–3143). The Reeve shouts out his immediate objection to such ridicule, but the Miller insists on proceeding with his tale. He points out that he is married himself, but doesn’t worry whether some other man is sleeping with his wife, because it is none of his business. The narrator apologizes to us in advance for the tale’s bawdiness, and warns that those who are easily offended should skip to another tale.

The Miller begins his story: there was once an Oxford student named Nicholas, who studied astrology and was well acquainted with the art of love. Nicholas boarded with a wealthy but ignorant old carpenter named John, who was jealous and highly possessive of his sexy eighteen-year-old wife, Alisoun. One day, the carpenter leaves, and Nicholas and Alisoun begin flirting. Nicholas grabs Alisoun, and she threatens to cry for help. He then begins to cry, and after a few sweet words, she agrees to sleep with him when it is safe to do so. She is worried that John will find out, but Nicholas is confident he can outwit the carpenter.

Nicholas is not alone in desiring Alisoun. A merry, vain parish clerk named Absolon also fancies Alisoun. He serenades her every night, buys her gifts, and gives her money, but to no avail—Alisoun loves Nicholas. Nicholas devises a plan that will allow him and Alisoun to spend an entire night together. He has Alisoun tell John that Nicholas is ill. John sends a servant to check on his boarder, who arrives to find Nicholas immobile, staring at the ceiling. When the servant reports back to John, John is not surprised, saying that madness is what one gets for inquiring into “Goddes pryvetee,” which is what he believes Nicholas’s astronomy studies amount to. Nevertheless, he feels sorry for the student and goes to check on him.

Nicholas tells John he has had a vision from God and offers to tell John about it. He explains that he has foreseen a terrible event. The next Monday, waters twice as great as Noah’s flood will cover the land, exterminating all life. The carpenter believes him and fears for his wife, just what Nicholas had hoped would occur. Nicholas instructs John to fasten three tubs, each loaded with provisions and an ax, to the roof of the barn. On Monday night, they will sleep in the tubs, so that when the flood comes, they can release the tubs, hack through the roof, and float until the water subsides. Nicholas also warns John that it is God’s commandment that they may do nothing but pray once they are in the tubs—no one is to speak a word.
Monday night arrives, and Nicholas, John, and Alisoun ascend by ladder into the hanging tubs. As soon as the carpenter begins to snore, Nicholas and Alisoun climb down, run back to the house, and sleep together in the carpenter’s bed. In the early dawn, Absolon passes by. Hoping to stop in for a kiss, or perhaps more, from Alisoun, Absalon sidles up to the window and calls to her. She harshly replies that she loves another. Absolon persists, and Alisoun offers him one quick kiss in the dark.

Absolon leaps forward eagerly, offering a lingering kiss. But it is not her lips he finds at the window, but her “naked ers [arse]” (3734). She and Nicholas collapse with laughter, while Absolon blindly tries to wipe his mouth.

Determined to avenge Alisoun’s prank, Absolon hurries back into town to the blacksmith and obtains a red-hot iron poker. He returns with it to the window and knocks again, asking for a kiss and promising Alisoun a golden ring. This time, Nicholas, having gotten up to relieve himself anyway, sticks his rear out the window and farts thunderously in Absolon’s face. Absolon brands Nicholas’s buttocks with the poker. Nicholas leaps up and cries out, “Help! Water! Water!” (3815). John, still hanging from the roof, wakes up and assumes Nicholas’s cries mean that the flood has come. He grabs the ax, cuts free the tub, and comes crashing to the ground, breaking his arm. The noise and commotion attract many of the townspeople. The carpenter tells the story of the predicted flood, but Nicholas and Alisoun pretend ignorance, telling everyone that the carpenter is mad. The townspeople laugh that all have received their dues, and the Miller merrily asks that God save the company.

Analysis

In the Miller's Prologue, we perceive tension between social classes for the first time in The Canterbury Tales. The Host clearly wants the Monk to tell the second tale, so that the storytelling proceeds according to social rank. By butting in, the Miller upsets the Host’s plan. Like the Knight’s Tale, which fits his honorable and virtuous personality, the Miller’s Tale is stereotypical of the Miller’s bawdy character and low station. However, nothing about the drunken, immoral, and brutal Miller could possibly prepare the reader for the Miller’s elegant verse and beautiful imagery. The Miller’s description of Alisoun draws on a completely different stock of images from the Knight’s depiction of Emelye, but it is no less effective. Whereas Emelye is compared to a rose, a lily, the spring, and an angel, Alisoun’s body is delicate and slender like a weasel, her apron is as white as morning milk, and her features are compared to plums and pear trees. The Miller’s imagery is less conventional and less elevated than the Knight’s, drawn instead from the details of village or farm life.

Although the narrator is unforgiving in his depiction of the drunk, rowdy Miller, whom he presents according to the stereotypes of the Miller’s class and profession, there are a few intriguing points of similarity between the narrator and the Miller. For instance, the Miller apologizes for the tale he is about to tell, and transfers all blame to the “ale of Southwerk”—in effect, to the Host himself (3140). Thirty lines later, the narrator himself makes a similar apology, and reminds his audience to blame the Miller if it finds the tale offensive. Also, the Miller begins his story by giving little
portraits of each of his characters, just as the narrator begins his story of the pilgrimage by outlining each of its members.

The Host asks the Monk to “quite,” or repay, the Knight’s Tale (3119). But when the Miller interrupts and cries out that he can “quite the Knyghtes [Knight’s] tale,” he changes the word somewhat to mean “revenge” (3127). Indeed, the Miller does take “revenge” upon the Knight to an extent. Just as he transforms the meaning of the word “quite,” the Miller takes several of the themes from the Knight’s Tale and alters them. For instance, the Knight’s Tale suggested that human suffering is part of a divine plan that mortals cannot hope to know. In a completely different tone and context, the Miller, too, cautions against prying into “God’s pryvetee,” meaning God’s secrets (3164). He first raises this idea in his Prologue, arguing that a man shouldn’t take it upon himself to assume that his wife is unfaithful. In the Miller’s Tale, John repeats the caution against prying into “God’s pryvetee.” Several times, John scolds Nicholas for trying to know “God’s pryvetee,” but when Nicholas actually offers to let John in on his secret, John jumps at the chance. John also jealously tries to control his young wife, reminding us that the Miller equated an attempt to know God’s “pryvetee” with a husband’s attempt to know about his wife’s “private parts.” The two round tubs that the foolish carpenter hangs from the roof of his barn, one on either side of a long trough, suggest an obscene visual pun on this vulgar meaning of “God’s pryvetee.”

The Miller’s Tale also responds to the Knight’s by turning the Knight’s courtly love into a burlesque farce. The Miller places his lovers’ intrigues in a lower-class context, satirizing the pretensions of long-suffering courtly lovers by portraying Nicholas and Alisoun in a frank and sexually graphic manner—Nicholas seduces Alisoun by grabbing her by the pudendum, or “queynte” (3276). Absolon, the parish clerk, represents a parody of the conventional courtly lover. He stays awake at night, patiently woos his lady by means of go-betweens, sings and plays guitar, and aspires to be Alisoun’s page or servant. For his pains, all he gets is the chance to kiss Alisoun’s anus and to be farted on by Nicholas.

In addition to parodying tales of courtly love, the Miller’s Tale also plays with the medieval genres of fabliaux and of mystery plays. Fabliaux are bawdy, comic tales that build to a ridiculous and complex climax usually hinging on some joke or trick. Nicholas is parody of the traditional clever cleric in a fabliau. As the deviser of the scheme to trick John, he seems to be attempting to write his own fabliau, although Absolon foils his plan. Yet, John is still the big loser in the end. The moral of the play is that John should not have married someone so young: “Men sholde wedden after hire estaat [their estate], / For youthe and elde [old age] is often at debaat” (3229–3230). Justice is served in the Miller’s eyes when Alisoun commits adultery, because she revenges her husband “[f]or . . . his jalousye” (3851). Despite their differences, the two clerics ally at the story’s end to dupe the carpenter, and so nobody believes John’s story about Nicholas’s trick.
The Miller’s Tale also includes references to different scenes acted out in medieval mystery plays. **Mystery plays**, which typically enacted stories of God, Jesus, and the saints, were the main source of biblical education for lay folk in the Middle Ages. As John’s gullibility shows, his education through mystery plays means that he has only a slight understanding of the Bible. The Miller begins his biblical puns in his Prologue, when he says that he will speak in “[Pontius] Pilates” place. His statement that he will tell “a legende and a lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf” is a reference to the story of Joseph and Mary. “Legends and lives” were written and told of the saints, and the story in which Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant (and the many jokes that could be made about Mary being unfaithful) was a common subject of mystery plays. The stories of Noah’s flood, and of Noah’s wife, are also obviously twisted around by the Miller. These biblical puns work up to the climax of the tale. When he says that Nicholas’s fart was as great as a “thonder-dent,” the Miller aligns Nicholas—the creator of the action—with God (3807). Absolon, who cries out, “My soule bitake I unto Sathanas [Satan]” (3750), becomes a version of the devil, who damns God by sticking him with his red-hot poker. The result of Absolon’s actions is that John falls from the roof in a pun on the fall of humanity.