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The Miller's Tale and *Decameron* 3.4

Frederick M. Biggs, *University of Connecticut*

Whether a source or an analogue,¹ *Decameron* 3.4 has much to tell us about how Chaucer constructed The Miller's Tale, and yet establishing which it is may help us to perceive more clearly what he hoped to accomplish with the second story of the *Canterbury Tales*. Both sources and analogues can sharpen our understanding of a work, sources by revealing what an author has chosen to retain and omit, and analogues by indicating how others have handled similar material, although sources almost always make these points more forcefully and, of course, clarifying source relationships is useful in itself since this information can contribute to other literary-historical discussions. Within studies of the *Canterbury Tales*, however, the distinction between sources and analogues has become blurred, with analogues often considered second-best sources.² This blurring is due mainly to Chaucer's way of composing,³ which usually entails working

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1. Recent scholarship has been more inclined to accept Chaucer's knowledge of the *Decameron*; in addition to the studies of The Miller's Tale cited elsewhere, see in particular Helen Cooper, "Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: Reviewing the Work," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 19 (1997), 183–210. Yet scholars have also shown that Chaucer's text can be illuminated by Boccaccio's without definitive proof on this issue; see, for example, Janet L. Smarr, "Mercury in the Garden: Mythographical Methods in the *Merchant's Tale* and *Decameron* 7.9," in *The Mythographic Art: Classical Fable and the Rise of the Vernacular in Early France and England*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1990), pp. 199–214; N. S. Thompson, *Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Robert W. Hanning, "The *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Approaches to Teaching Boccaccio's Decameron*, ed. James H. McGregor (New York: Modern Language Association, 2000), pp. 103–18; David Wallace, "Afterword," in *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales: New Essays on an Old Question*, ed. Leonard Michael Koff and Brenda Deen Schildgen (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 317–20; Robert R. Edwards, *Chaucer and Boccaccio: Antiquity and Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 11–12; and Carol F. Heffernan, "Two 'English Fables': Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* and *Shipman's Tale* and Italian *Novelle*," *Neophilologus*, 90 (2006), 333–49.

2. While two stories might be said to be analogues because they descend from a common source, I am using the term more generally as "another story or plot which is parallel or similar in some way to the story under consideration"; Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), p. 9.

3. It also appears that some scholars would prefer not to be associated with a method that can be faulted for being too conservative; see, for example, Ruth Evans's response to

from narrative sources that can be identified by verbal correspondences, close similarities in plot, and/or occasional explicit comments by the author himself. Writing in the original *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, where neither source nor analogue is defined, W. F. Bryan comments: "the purpose is to present in so far as possible the sources of the *Canterbury Tales* as Chaucer knew these sources or, where the direct sources are not now known, to present the closest analogues in the form in which Chaucer presumably may have been acquainted with them."⁴ Similarly, Peter G. Beidler's "new terminology" defines a "hard analogue" as "a literary work that is old enough in its extant form that Chaucer could have known it and that bears striking resemblances, usually more narrative than verbal, to a Chaucerian work," and a "soft analogue" as "a literary work that, because of its late date or its remoteness from its Chaucerian counterpart, Chaucer almost certainly did not know, but that may provide clues to another work that Chaucer may have known."⁵ The assumption here is that Chaucer always worked from close literary models, and if these are not to be found, then more distant stories, analogues, may allow us to reconstruct the materials that he must have had at his disposal. What can be overlooked is Chaucer's ability to create.

The Miller's Tale may at first seem an odd place to look for originality especially because the nearly contemporary *boerde*, *Heile van Beersele*, appears to prove that the main elements of the story had been combined and were circulating in Chaucer's day;⁶ after reviewing the evidence Beidler has concluded that the Middle Dutch work should be considered "a hard analogue with near source status" for the Middle English.⁷ I have

the 2004 symposium on Chaucer's sources at the Glasgow Congress of the New Chaucer Society, published in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 28 (2006), 217–70; she comments that Harold Bloom's "put-down" of source study ("a wearisome industry . . . that will soon touch apocalypse anyway when it passes from scholars to computers") has "long held sway in many humanities departments" (p. 263). For an explanation and defense of this approach, see Thomas D. Hill's "Introduction," in *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture. Volume 1: Abbo of Fleury, Abbo of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and Acta Sanctorum*, ed. Frederick M. Biggs, Thomas D. Hill, Paul E. Szarmach, and E. Gordon Whatley (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan Univ., 2001), pp. xv–xxxiii.

4. *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1941), p. vii. The terms are also not defined in the new *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Robert Correale with Mary Hamel, 2 vols. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002–5). See also Amy W. Goodwin, who notes the lack of a definition for source in the draft "Guide for Contributors to the Sources and Analogues Project" issued in the early 1990s; "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*: Sources, Influences, and Allusions," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 28 (2006), 233.

5. Beidler, "New Terminology for Sources and Analogues: Or, Let's Forget the Lost French Source for *The Miller's Tale*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 28 (2006), 227.

6. This is the position of Stith Thompson, "The Miller's Tale," in *Sources and Analogues*, p. 106. He prints and translates *Heile* (pp. 112–18), as does Peter G. Beidler, "The Miller's Tale," in *Sources and Analogues*, II, 266–75.

7. Beidler, "New Terminology," 227. See also "The Miller's Tale," II, 249–65.

argued elsewhere that The Miller's Tale is in fact the direct source for *Heile*, and indeed the source for the later similar stories also printed in Bryan and Dempster as analogues.⁸ While conceding that the manuscript evidence weighs heavily in Beidler's favor, since those with the greatest knowledge of Dutch scripts prefer a date between 1350–75 for the part of the volume in which the single copy of *Heile* survives,⁹ I do not consider it conclusive: there are no colophons or internal evidence that require this early date, and there are examples of later, dated Dutch manuscripts that share similar features with this one. Instead, I argued that the narrative in *Heile*, particularly in details related to the Flood, is flawed in ways that indicate it is likely to be derived from Chaucer's story. Yet even showing that *Heile* itself can prove nothing about Chaucer's sources will do little to change our understanding of The Miller's Tale if we continue to assume, as Chaucer encourages us to do with his description of the tale as "harlotric" (I.3184),¹⁰ that it simply conforms to the generic expectations of short, comic tales that can be referred to broadly as *fabliaux*.¹¹

Looking again at *Decameron* 3.4 as a likely source, instead of as an analogue as it has often been considered,¹² reveals not only that Chaucer

8. Biggs, "The Miller's Tale and *Heile van Beersele*," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 56 (2005), 497–523.

9. On the date of the manuscript, Beidler quotes private correspondence from Geert Claassens, who comments that "there are certainly no indications to date it into the fifteenth century—it is clear-cut fourteenth century—and some indications to place it around 1350" and concludes that "a dating of around 1350–75 is rather safe"; "The Miller's Tale," II, 263. See also my discussion, where I refer to W. E. Hegman, J. P. Gumbert, and Albert Derolez, all of whom favor an earlier date; "The Miller's Tale," 499–502. An example of the script, Textualis Libraria, is illustrated by Derolez from the Middle Dutch *Treatise on the Ten Commandments*, dated to 1361, in Brussels, Royal Library, 3067–73; *The Palaeography of Gothic Manuscript Books From the Twelfth to the Early Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), pl. 31. Yet dated examples from 1444 and 1453 indicate that the script continued to be used for vernacular manuscripts well into the next century: Brussels, Royal Library, 19607 (*Manuscripts datés conservés en Belgique, Tome III: 1441–1460*, François Masai and Martin Wittek [Brussels: E. Story-Scientia, 1978], p. 26 and pl. 456); and The Hague, Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum, 10 C 19 (187) (*Manuscripts datés conservés dans les Pays-Bas, Tome I: Les Manuscrits d'origine étrangère [816–ca. 1550]*, G. I. Liefstinck [Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1964], p. 55 [item 128] and pl. 154). Beidler also considers questions of "authorship," "language," and "literary quality" to support his case (pp. 264–65). The first and third, in my opinion, are inconclusive: while Chaucer often works from other sources, it seems less likely that someone would create an illogical story—the detail from *Heile* that Beidler cites is the lack of motivation for the sermon predicting the end of the world—than that an existing story might be badly retold. On the possibility that Chaucer used Middle Dutch vocabulary in the tale, see my "Seventeen Words of Middle Dutch Origin in the *Miller's Tale*?" *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 53 (2006), 407–9.

10. Quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L. D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). For a discussion of criticism on this passage, see Thomas W. Ross, *A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 2: *The Canterbury*, pt. 3: *The Miller's Tale* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1983), p. 127.

11. See Karl D. Uitti, "Fabliau and Comic Tale," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer, 13 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1982–89), IV, 574–77.

12. A connection between the two stories was recognized by Marcus Landau, *Beiträge zur*

borrowed its narrative structure for his Flood story but also that he raised the spiritual stakes¹³—at issue is the judgment of mankind rather than the salvation of one person—precisely to challenge this assumption. Moreover, he sets up this concern with judgment and misjudgment in The Miller's Prologue by echoing Boccaccio's "Conclusione dell'autore," a possible borrowing long recognized yet more significant in this present context because it confirms that Chaucer is thinking about the *Decameron's* framing as he opens his collection. If *Decameron* 3.4 is a main source for The Miller's Tale, it shows that Boccaccio's collection had a profound effect on, to use Donald R. Howard's phrase, the idea of the *Canterbury Tales*.¹⁴

I. NARRATIVE BORROWINGS

From the opening description of Nicholas's predicting the weather (l.3190–98) to the concluding laughter of the neighbors at John's "fantasye" (l.3840), the Flood plays a prominent role in The Miller's Tale, and while the Bible itself and its reworking in the Corpus Christi plays are obviously sources for this material,¹⁵ Chaucer's decision to have his character exploit

Geschichte des italienischen Novelle (Vienna: L. Rosner, 1875), p. 49. Helen Cooper considers it a "remote analogue"; see *The Canterbury Tales, Oxford Guides to Chaucer*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), p. 96; see also Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, Unwin Critical Library (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 38. Richard Stephen Guerin, who devotes a chapter of his dissertation to the topic, asserts that The Miller's Tale is "based in all probability on a lost French fabliau"; *The Canterbury Tales and Il Decamerone* (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Colorado, 1966), p. 14. In contrast, Donald McGrady claims that "Chaucer wove together threads from several different *Decameron* tales"; "Chaucer and the *Decameron* Reconsidered," *Chaucer Review*, 12 (1977), 13. Peter G. Beidler, however, criticizes McGrady for ignoring Heile van Beersle; "Just Say Yes, Chaucer Knew the *Decameron*: Or, Bringing the Shipman's Tale Out of Limbo," in *The Decameron*, ed. Koff and Schildgen, p. 35. In this same volume, see also N. S. Thompson, "Local Histories: Characteristic Worlds in the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales*," pp. 85–101, esp. pp. 95–97. Carol Falvo Heffernan has recently provided a detailed account of the similarities between The Miller's Tale and *Decameron* 3.4, and although she accepts Heile (and the related analogues) as closer to Chaucer's tale, she describes its relationship to Boccaccio's *novella* as one of "memorial borrowing," writing at another point that "Chaucer's use of cues taken from Boccaccio and the variations he worked on them are at least as significant as the borrowing of one or another plot motif"; "Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and *Reeve's Tale*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and the French *Fabliaux*," *Italica*, 81 (2004), 321 and 319.

13. In contrast, Heffernan considers "the monk's instructions in *Decameron* 3, 4 and Nicholas's counsel" to be "equally outrageous"; "Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*," p. 320.

14. *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1976).

15. See Mícheál F. Vaughan, "Chaucer's Imaginative One-Day Flood," *Philological Quarterly*, 60 (1981), 117–23; V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative, the First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 197–216; and Sandra Pierson Prior, "Parodying Typology and the Mystery Plays in The Miller's Tale," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 16 (1986), 57–71.

religion to gain sexual pleasure is distinctive enough to deserve further attention. *Decameron* 3.4 provides not only this general idea but also closer parallels for the way Chaucer structures his narrative.¹⁶ Although there are differences, both stories introduce the lovers' schemes in similar ways, depict responses from the wives when they learn from their husbands about the plans, and culminate in descriptions of significant nights when the lovers enjoy each others' company virtually in the presence of the husbands. While these similarities may be mere coincidences, it seems more likely that Chaucer was drawn to the spatial challenge that Boccaccio's narrative presented—how can lovers be together when husbands are so close?¹⁷—and so used, either from memory or from a copy of the *Decameron*,¹⁸ significant parts of its plot.

The narrative element that connects *Decameron* 3.4 most closely to The Miller's Tale is that both introduce the schemes that control the action through long speeches in which the lovers, Dom Felice and Nicholas, hoodwink the husbands, Puccio di Rinieri (referred to as Friar Puccio because he has become a lay member of the Franciscans) and John, by seeming to take them into their confidence, pretending to reveal secrets to them, and swearing them to secrecy.¹⁹ In 3.4, Dom Felice immediately announces the confidential nature of his information and insists that he will only reveal it if Friar Puccio promises not to tell others:

16. A. C. Lee notes that "no source seems to have been discovered for this story"; *The Decameron: Its Sources and Analogues* (1909; repr. New York: Haskell House, 1966), p. 75. It is the sole item listed by Stith Thompson under K1514.2, "husband duped into doing penance while rascal enjoys the wife"; *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, rev. ed., 6 vols. (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955–58).

17. Another source for this idea is *Decameron* 7.2, the story of Peronella, who "hides her lover in a tub when her husband returns home unexpectedly"; Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam, 2d ed. (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 527; subsequent references to this translation will be noted in the text. It differs, however, from 3.4 and The Miller's Tale since the sexual activity takes place by chance, not by design. As I argued in "The Miller's Tale," it is in 7.2 that Chaucer finds his tubs, although he uses his more dramatically by winding them up into the rafters. Like the priest's sermon about the Flood in *Heile* (see n. 9), this detail too lacks an explanation in *Heile*, where it is also unclear why the first lover hears only the sermon and not the love-making that precedes it.

18. Since Robert K. Root first proposed it, memorial borrowing has often been invoked as a way to explain the lack of verbal echoes in the *Canterbury Tales* of the *Decameron*; see "Chaucer and the *Decameron*," *Englische Studien*, 44 (1909), 1–7; and, with further references, Cooper, "Sources and Analogues," 192–93, n. 24.

19. See Guerin, *Canterbury Tales*, pp. 16–17. Heffernan writes, "Even a casual reading of *Decameron* 3, 4 reveals that Chaucer picked up important cues from Boccaccio that helped him shape the scene of the lover's arrangements for the tryst in *The Miller's Tale*"; "Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*," 319. N. S. Thompson comments, "What links the two narratives is the motif of a secret knowledge of salvation that the scholar imparts (in Boccaccio, the attainment of a paradise and in Chaucer, salvation from the Flood) as the basis of a scheme for getting the husband apart so that the two lovers may enjoy each other intimately almost the husband's nose"; "Local Histories," p. 95.

"Io ho già assai volte compreso, fra Puccio, che tutto il tuo disidero è di divenir santo; alla qual cosa mi par che tu vadi per una lunga via, là dove ce n'è una ch'è molto corta, la quale il Papa e gli altri suoi maggior prelati, che la sanno e usano, non vogliono che ella si mostri; per ciò che l'ordine chericato, che il più di limosine vive, incontanente sarebbe disfatto, sí come quello al quale più i secolari né con limosine né con altro attenderebbono. Ma per ciò che tu se' mio amico e haimi onorato molto, dove io credessi che tu a niuna persona del mondo l'appalesassi e volessila seguire, io la t'insegnerei."²⁰

("It has been obvious to me for some time, Friar Puccio, that your one overriding ambition in life is to achieve saintliness, but you appear to be approaching it in a roundabout way, whereas there is a much more direct route which is known to the Pope and his chief prelates, who although they use it themselves, have no desire to publicize its existence. For if the secret were to leak out, the clergy, who live for the most part on the proceeds of charity, would immediately disintegrate, because the lay public would no longer give them their support, whether by way of almsgiving or in any other form. However, you are a friend of mine and you have been very good to me, and if I could be certain that you would not reveal it to another living soul, and that you wanted to give it a trial, I would tell you how it is done.") (McWilliam, p. 259.)

Even though there is no exact match in the Italian for McWilliam's "secret," the context makes it clear that this "way" ("via") to achieve salvation is known only to the highest Church officials, "il Papa e gli altri suoi maggior prelati," and that they guard it carefully. Friar Puccio will not only save his soul, but also enter an exclusive group, which includes his teacher, if he agrees not to reveal it.

Nicholas is at least as direct in bringing John into his plan, even if his claims are less believable because they are more extreme. His first words to John, following his provocative "Allas! / Shal al the world be lost eft-soones now?" (I.3488–89) as he pretends to awake from his trance at John's entrance, are designed to tie the two together:

... "Fecche me drynke,
And after wol I speke in pryvetee
Of certeyn thyng that toucheth me and thee.
I wol telle it noon oother man, certeyn." (I.3492–95)

Nicholas does not, of course, need anything to drink; we have already been told that he has provided himself with "bothe mete and drynke for a day or tweye" (I.3411). While it may make him appear more spiritual in John's eyes if he seems to have been fasting for several days, it also binds the two together in fellowship, recalling Dom Felice's practice of dining at Friar Puccio's house (Branca, p. 362; McWilliam, p. 258); Nicholas continues to speak only after "ech of hem had dronke his part" (I.3498).

20. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca, 6th ed. (Turin: Einaudi, 1991), p. 363; subsequent references to this edition will be noted in the text.

Moreover, in the lines quoted above, Nicholas ties John to him with his assertions that this matter “toucheth me and thee” and that he “wol telle it noon oother man.”²¹ Yet also significant here is that he introduces the idea of secrets and secrecy in the phrase “in pryvetee,” a central theme of the tale as a whole.²²

The secret that Nicholas then offers to reveal to John, which does not concern just his spiritual salvation but should involve the saving of mankind, is known not exclusively to the most important Church officials but only to God himself, and Nicholas. He makes the point at the beginning of his speech, linking his own instruction (“conseil”)²³ to God’s:

. . . “John, myn hooste, lief and deere,
Thou shalt upon thy trouthe swere me heere
That to no wight thou shalt this conseil wreye,
For it is Cristes conseil that I seye”. . . (I.3501–4)

He invokes this point again when he commands John not to tell his servant, and states that he may not save Alison’s maid—the point being that John should not tell, nor can Nicholas save, either—because he will not reveal God’s secrets:

“But Robyn may nat wite of this, thy knave,
Ne eek thy mayde Gille I may nat save;
Axe nat why, for though thou aske me,
I wol nat tellen Goddes pryvetee.” (I.3555–58)

Finally, near the end of his speech he adds that the three of them must not speak but rather pray when they are in the tubs, “For it is Goddes owene heeste deere” (I.3588).²⁴ While these claims are, of course, absurd, Nicholas uses them to achieve the same end that Dom Felice has in Boccaccio’s story.

Another detail that Chaucer has preserved from Dom Felice’s speech should also be noted: as in 3.4, Nicholas forbids intercourse between John and Alison.²⁵ In the *Decameron*, this injunction, which makes little sense because Friar Puccio is not interested in sex, is part of the penitential exercise:

21. See also I.3501, quoted below.

22. See Frederick M. Biggs and Laura L. Howes, “Theophany in the ‘Miller’s Tale,’” *Medium Ævum*, 65 (1996), 269–79.

23. The *Middle English Dictionary* [hereafter *MED*], ed. Hans Kurath and Sherman M. Kuhn (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1952–2001), s.v., cites I.3503 under meaning 8, “A secret, private matter(s), a secret plan.”

24. Recalling, as Heffernan notes (“Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*,” p. 321), Friar Puccio’s penance; see further n. 38 below.

25. See Heffernan, “Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*,” p. 320; and Daniel P. Poteet II, “Avoiding Women in Times of Affliction: An Analogue for the ‘Miller’s Tale,’” *A* 3589–91,” *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 19 (1972), 89–90.

“e appresso questo gli conviene cominciare un digiuno e una abstinenzia grandissima, la quale conven che duri quaranta dí, ne’ quali, non che da altra femina ma da toccare la propria tua moglie ti conviene astenersi.” (Branca, p. 364)

(“and next he must start to fast and practise a most rigorous form of abstinence, this to continue for forty days, during which you must abstain, not only from the company of other women, but even from touching your own wife.”) (McWilliam, pp. 259–60)

Chaucer preserves this point, perhaps because it will make it easier for Alison not to be observed by John when she descends from her tub to be with Nicholas:

“Thy wyf and thou moote hange fer atwynne,
For that bitwixe yow shal be no synne,
Namoore in lookyng than ther shal in deede.” (I.3589–91)

In both stories, however, this detail does little more than remind the audience, at the husbands’ expense, of the lovers’ intentions.

Moreover, in both stories the husbands immediately tell their wives, although here too Chaucer develops the point to emphasize John’s stupidity.²⁶ As already noted, Dom Felice asserts that he will only reveal this way to gain salvation if Friar Puccio swears he will not show it to others, and Panfilò, the teller of 3.4, continues:

Frate Puccio, divenuto disideroso di questa cosa, prima cominciò a pregare con grandissima istanzia che gli ele insegnasse e poi a giurare che mai, se non quanto gli piacesse, a alcun nol direbbe. . . . (Branca, p. 363)

(Being anxious to learn all about it, Friar Puccio began by earnestly begging Dom Felice to teach him the secret, then he swore that he would never, without Dom Felice’s express permission, breathe a word about it to anyone. . . .) (McWilliam, p. 259)

John, too, promises he will not reveal what Nicholas tells him:

“Nay, Crist forbede it, for his hooly blood!”
Quod tho this sely man, “I nam no labbe,
Ne, though I seye, I nam nat lief to gabbe.
Sey what thou wolt, I shal it nevere telle
To child ne wyf, by hym that harwed helle!” (I.3508–12)

In spite of his oaths, the rhyme of “labbe” (“one who cannot keep a secret, a blabbermouth”) with “gabbè” (“to speak foolishly, talk nonsense; also talk indiscreetly”) undercuts this speech and suggests that “sely” here probably means “foolish” or “gullible” rather than “spiritually favored.”²⁷

26. See Guerin, *Canterbury Tales*, pp. 20–21.

27. *MED*, s.vv.

Yet more striking is John's use of the word "wyf," although by also mentioning a "child," something he does not have, he suggests that he is not specifically thinking of Alison.

In any case, while Friar Puccio receives permission to tell his wife, Monna Isabetta, John does not. As Panfilo tells his story, "E da lui partitosi e andatosene a casa, ordinatamente, con sua licenzia perciò, alla moglie disse ogni cosa" (Branca, p.365; After leaving Dom Felice he went straight home, where, having obtained the monk's permission beforehand, he explained everything to his wife in minute detail; McWilliam, pp. 260–61). In *The Miller's Tale*, John too goes directly to his wife, but here there is no indication that Nicholas has told him he may speak to her:

This sely carpenter goth forth his wey.
Ful ofte he seide "Allas and weylawey,"
And to his wyf he tolde his pryvetee. . . . (I.3601–3)

The characterization of John again as "sely" links this passage to the earlier one, but more important is that here the secret ("pryvetee") has become his own: he is not aware that it might have any larger meaning. John breaks his promise because he has understood it, as the empty phrases "allas and weylawey" indicate, only in the most superficial way.

Equally significant are the ways the wives respond: Chaucer uses this scene, as Boccaccio has, to show the woman's intelligence, but modifies it to suggest that Nicholas and Alison have already discussed the plan. In the *Decameron*, Monna Isabetta is apparently learning about the scheme for the first time, but quickly understands it and shapes a place for herself within it:

La donna intese troppo bene, per lo star fermo infino a matutino senza muoversi, ciò che il monaco voleva dire; per che, parendole assai buon modo, disse che di questo e d'ogni altro bene che egli per l'anima sua faceva ella era contenta, e che, acciò che Idio gli facesse la sua penitenzia profittevole, ella voleva con essolui digiunare ma fare altro no. (Branca, p. 365)

(The lady grasped the monk's intentions all too clearly, particularly when she heard about the business of standing still without moving a muscle until matins. Thinking it an excellent arrangement, she told her husband that she heartily approved of the idea, and also of any other measures he took for the good of his soul, adding that in order to persuade God to make his penance profitable she would join him in fasting, but there she would draw the line.) (McWilliam, p. 261)

Monna Isabetta thinks quickly here, anticipating Alison's tricking of Absolon at the end of *The Miller's Tale*, and decides immediately to fit in with this scheme, joining with the fasting, which sets up the joke at the conclusion of this story, but nothing else. Moreover, she incites her husband to undertake the program even as she reveals that she understands

his weakness: she will fast “acciò che Idio gli facesse *la sua* penitenzia profittevole.” Friar Puccio’s concern is only with his own salvation.

Alison’s response shows that she knows John’s weakness as well. When she hears his story,

... she ferde as she wolde deye,
 And seyde, “Allas! go forth thy wey anon,
 Help us to scape, or we been dede echon!
 I am thy trewe, verray wedded wyf;
 Go, deere spouse, and help to save oure lyf.” (I.3606–10)

It is Alison’s death that most concerns John when Nicholas tells him of the Flood: “‘Allas, my wyf! / And shal she drenche? Allas, myn Alisoun!’” (I.3522–23); and one might hear Alison mocking John in her “Allas!” In any case, she stresses her role as John’s wife in the phrases “trewe, verray wedded wyf” and “deere spouse,” and so her concluding “oure lyf” sounds like an affirmation of their life together, until, of course, one remembers that Nicholas will also be saved.

The suggestion at this point in *The Miller’s Tale* that Alison already knows of Nicholas’s scheme before John tells her—“And she was war, and knew it bet than he” (I.3604)—draws attention to another change that Chaucer has made in his source, the reason why the lovers must come up with their elaborate plots in the first place. *Decameron* 3.4 addresses this problem directly:

Ma quantunque bene la trovasse disposta a dover dare all’opera compimento, non si poteva trovar modo, per ciò che costei in niun luogo del mondo si voleva fidare a esser col monaco se non in casa sua; e in casa sua non si potea però che fra Puccio non andava mai fuor della terra; di che il monaco avea gran malinconia. (Branca, pp. 362–63)

(But although he found her very willing to give effect to his proposals, it was impossible to do so because she would not risk an assignation with the monk in any other place except her own house, and her own house was ruled out because Friar Puccio never went away from the town, all of which made the monk very disconsolate.) (McWilliam, p. 258)

While the Miller’s claims that John was “jealous” and held Alison “narwe in cage” (I.3224) allude to a similar explanation, it quickly becomes apparent that neither is true, and indeed that John is often away from his house where both Nicholas and Alison reside. The lack of any need for Nicholas’s elaborate scheme to fool John is perhaps the most glaring inconsistency in Chaucer’s tale, suggesting that he inherited it—at first surprisingly, but ultimately to good effect—from this source.

It is more difficult to see Chaucer’s use of *Decameron* 3.4 in the conclusion of *The Miller’s Tale* since he complicates the story by including a second lover, Absolon, as well as the details of the misdirected kiss and the

branding.²⁸ Yet even here we can perceive 3.4's influence, not only in the emphasis on the intelligence of the women but also in the question of domestic space. Panfilo's story culminates not on the first occasion when Dom Felice and Monna Isabetta enjoy the success of the scheme,²⁹ but rather on a later one when Friar Puccio is disturbed from his penance by "alcuno dimenamento di palco" (Branca, p. 366; a certain amount of vibration in the floorboards; McWilliam, p. 261) and so asks Monna Isabetta what is going on. The following exchange emphasizes her quick wit:

La donna, che mottegevole era molto, forse cavalcando allora la bestia di san Benedetto o vero di san Giovanni Gualberto, rispose: "Gnaffé,³⁰ marito mio, io mi dimeno quanto io posso."

Disse allora frate Puccio: "Come ti dimeni? che vuol dir questo dime-nare?"

La donna ridendo (e di buon'aria e valente donna era e forse avendo cagion di ridere) rispose: "Come non sapete voi quello che questo vuol dire? Ora io ve l'ho udito dire mille volte: 'Chi la sera non cena, tutta notte si dimena.'" (Branca, p. 366)

(His wife, who had a talent for repartee, and who at that moment was possibly riding bareback astride the nag of St. Benedict or St. John Gualbert, replied: "Heaven help me, dear husband, I am shaking like mad.")

"Shaking?" said Friar Puccio. "What is the meaning of all this shaking?"

His wife shrieked with laughter, for she was a lively, energetic sort of woman, and besides, she was probably laughing for a good reason. "What?" she replied. "You don't know its meaning? Haven't I heard you saying, hundreds of times: 'He that supper doth not take, in his bed all night will shake?'" (McWilliam, p. 261)

Although it may be absurd to look for a source for laughter, we may hear an echo of Monna Isabetta in Alison's "Tehee!" (I.3740) as she shuts the window on Absolon.³¹ She has just told Nicholas, "thou shalt laughen al

28. A possible source for the misdirected kiss is "Du Berangier au lonc cul"; see Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Anderson, *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux: Texts and Translations* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1971), pp. 10–25. Benson and Anderson comment that Chaucer "probably did not" know this *fabliau* (p. 11), but see my "The Miller's Tale," 516–17. On the branding, see Roy J. Percy, "A Minor Analogue to the Branding in 'The Miller's Tale,'" *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 16 (1969), 333–35.

29. The two stories also differ in that Nicholas's plan is designed to permit the lovers to be together only once while Dom Felice's makes this possible as long as Friar Puccio's penance lasts. Indeed, Panfilo concludes by remarking that his lovers continue meeting even after the penance has ended. Chaucer raises this possibility by describing John's public humiliation at the end of the tale, but leaves it unresolved.

30. I am currently preparing an essay that will support Guerin's suggestion that this word, a Tuscan interjection derived from "mia fé" (Branca, p. 63 n. 5), may have contributed to Chaucer's identification of John at the beginning of the tale as a "gnof"; *Canterbury Tales*, pp. 21–22.

31. N. S. Thompson also notes that this "humorous exchange with her husband on the other side of the bedroom wall . . . parallels Alison's ready repartee with Absolon"; "Local Histories," p. 97.

thy fille" (I.3722) and the laughter of the "folk" (I.3840) when they survey the entire scene also suggests that of the *Decameron's* female story-tellers at Panfilo's account (Branca, p. 368; McWilliam, p. 263). Chaucer has caught the light-hearted tone of this *novella*, and it is finally the woman who turns the scheme to her own pleasure.

Yet this ending also calls attention to the amusing challenge of *Decameron* 3.4, the proximity of the lovers to the husband. Boccaccio leads into the exchange quoted above with the comment that "Era il luogo, il quale frate Puccio aveva alla sua penitenza eletto, allato alla camera nella quale giaceva la donna, né da altro era da quella diviso che da un sottilissimo muro" (Branca, pp. 365–66; The place where Friar Puccio had elected to do his penance was adjacent to the room where the lady slept, from which it was separated only by a very thin wall; McWilliam, p. 261); and following their near discovery, the lovers engage in their activity "in altra parte della casa" (Branca, p. 367; in another part of the house; McWilliam, p. 262). The limited space in houses makes this story all the more remarkable. Aware of this problem, Chaucer not only has John sleep through much of the night, but also sets The Miller's Tale in Oxford, where we can imagine the events taking place in a room large enough to be rented as a hall to one of the fledgling colleges.³²

II. RELIGIOUS CONTENT

Decameron 3.4 is also more likely to be a source rather than an analogue for The Miller's Tale since we can see Chaucer developing its religious content for a specific purpose, to force his audience to question their certainty about their judgments of the characters, particularly John, and, more surprisingly, of the significance of the world in which they live. Simply by transforming the penitential exercise of 3.4 into a prediction of a second Flood, he makes the theme of judgment more prominent since Noah's Flood was often associated typologically with the Last Judgment.³³ This theme dominates the end of the tale, as is apparent even to those, such as Seth Lerer, who view its particular details as lost in the carnivalesque laughter of the "folk" (I.3826–49) and so consider the tale as a whole to

32. See my "Miller's Tale," 508.

33. The Flood is compared to the Second Coming in Matthew 24:38–39 (cf. Luke 17:26–27) and to the fire of Judgment in 2 Peter 3:6–7. See also Jack P. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), pp. 169–73; Biggs and Howes, "Theophany," 278, n. 18; and Daniel Anlezark, *Water and Fire: The Myth of the Flood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 21–43, and 73–84.

be essentially secular.³⁴ Yet within the laughter, the Miller's perspective remains distinct, condemning John as the jealous husband of the *fabliaux* tradition: "Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf, / For al his keypyng and his jalousye" (I.3850–51). That Chaucer expects us to question this view seems evident, as has already been mentioned, from John's lack of jealousy throughout the story and, most clearly, from the way he is introduced, which differs significantly from the opening description of Friar Puccio in *Decameron* 3.4. The result of this questioning, however, is not to turn the tale into one with a clear moral, but rather to open the possibility that the physical world may have more spiritual significance than we assume, a theme, too, that Chaucer could have borrowed, if to a different end, from Boccaccio's *novella*.

Both *Decameron* 3.4 and The Miller's Tale begin with descriptions of the husbands, even agreeing on the detail that they both are prosperous ("ricco," Branca, p. 361; and "riche," I.3188). Panfilo's version, however, moves toward its important concluding detail—Friar Puccio is quite possibly a member in a confraternity of flagellants:

Secondo che io udi' già dire, vicino di San Brancazio stette un buono uomo e ricco, il quale fu chiamato Puccio di Rinieri, che poi essendo tutto dato allo spirito si fece bizzoco di quegli di san Francesco e fu chiamato frate Puccio; e seguendo questa sua vita spiritale, per ciò che altra famiglia non avea che una donna e una fante, né per questo a alcuna arte attendere gli bisognava, usava molto la chiesa. E per ciò che uomo idiota era e di grossa pasta, diceva suoi paternostri, andava alle prediche, stava alle messe, né mai falliva che alle laude che cantavano i secolari esso non fosse, e digiunava e disciplinavasi, e bucinavasi che egli era degli scopatori. (Branca, p. 361)

(Close beside the Church of San Pancrazio, or so I have been told, there once lived a prosperous, law-abiding citizen called Puccio di Rinieri, who was totally absorbed in affairs of the spirit, and on reaching a certain age, became a tertiary in the Franciscan Order, assuming the name of Friar Puccio. In pursuit of these spiritual interests of his, since the other members of his household consisted solely of a wife and maidservant, which relieved him of the necessity of practising a profession, he attended church with unfailing regularity. Being a simple, well-intentioned soul, he recited his paternosters, attended sermons, went to mass, and turned up infallibly whenever lauds were being sung by the lay-members. Moreover, he practised fasting and

34. "The brilliance of the *Miller's Tale* rests precisely in this confusion of scatology and eschatology. All the apocalyptic imagery of flood and fire, hell mouth and horror, finds itself reduced to farts and private parts. And the proper response to such theatricalized mockery and play is the laughter of the group. The townsfolk's response to John the Carpenter's experience may well model our own, as we are invited to laugh at this fantasy (I.3840)"; *The Yale Companion to Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006). This Bakhtinian reading of the tale is anticipated by Alfred David, who indeed quotes Bakhtin; *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 92–107. See also Pearsall, *Canterbury Tales*, pp. 179–80.

other forms of self-discipline, and it was rumoured that he was a member of the flagellants.) (McWilliam, p. 257)

As Gordon Leff notes at the beginning of his discussion of the movement, which originated in Perugia in 1260, "flagellation as such was neither new nor heretical,"³⁵ and when Clement VI banned it in 1351, following a wide-spread outbreak in response to the Plague, his attention was apparently directed mainly toward Germany and the Low Countries where the disturbances had been most violent.³⁶ Yet Clement's bull, *Inter sollicitudines*, condemns more widely the "prophana multitudo simplicium hominum, qui se Flagellantes appellant"³⁷ (the ungodly multitude of simple men, who call themselves Flagellants), and Boccaccio's construction, "bucinavasi che egli era degli scopatori," suggests that what Friar Puccio is doing is wrong.³⁸ In contrast, then, to V. A. Kolve, who sees the *novella* as moving "toward a moment of greater thematic tension" than The Miller's Tale, since Friar Puccio "practices genuine devotion" in one room while Monna Isabetta and Dom Felice engage in fornication in another,³⁹ I would argue that this opening might well influence a reading of the story: Dom Felice's scheme not only exploits Friar Puccio's weakness but also points out his sin, and so Friar Puccio deserves to live in ignorance of his wife's and his friend's dishonesty toward him.

Apparently recognizing that Boccaccio's initial characterization of the husband could change, upon reflection, the sense of his *novella*'s conclusion, Chaucer too begins his tale with a significant piece of information, yet one that does not lead to a single conclusion but rather invokes such

35. *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent c. 1250-c. 1450*, 2 vols. (Manchester: Univ. of Manchester Press, 1967), II, 485.

36. See Richard Kieckhefer, "Radical Tendencies in the Flagellant Movement of the Mid-Fourteenth Century," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 4 (1974), 157-76; and John Henderson, "The Flagellant Movement and Flagellant Confraternities in Central Italy 1260-1400," in *Religious Motivation: Biographical and Sociological Problems for the Church Historian*, ed. Derek Baker, Studies in Church History, 15 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), pp. 147-60. Henderson discusses flagellation in Florence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); see especially pp. 113-54.

37. *Corpus documentorum Inquisitionis haereticae pravitatis Neerlandicae*, ed. Paul Fredericq, 4 vols. (Ghent: Martinus Nijhoff, 1889-1900), I, 200. See Leff, *Heresy*, p. 485. Chaucer may also have been influenced in his decision to change Friar Puccio's private penance to an apocalyptic second Flood by the Flagellants' "letter from heaven," published on Christmas Day 1348, that announced God would destroy the world unless Christians stopped sinning; see Leff, *Heresy*, p. 488.

38. Heffernan comments, "Boccaccio even suggests that limited intelligence caused Puccio to become a religious fanatic"; "Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*," p. 320.

39. *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, p. 211. Kolve illustrates this point with an image from Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal 5070, fol. 108v, a Flemish manuscript dated 1432. He concedes that Friar Puccio's "is imprudent and excessive," but argues that "he seeks an end that, in other medieval contexts, might be affirmed" (p. 211).

different possible interpretations that it makes us aware of the difficulty of passing any judgment at all on John. His opening lines conclude with the assertion that John is a carpenter:

Whilom ther was dwellynge at Oxenford
A riche gnof, that gestes heeld to bord,
And of his craft he was a carpenter. (I.3187–89)

This profession is significant for the story, explaining John's absences at Oseney and his ability both to hang tubs in the rafters and to construct ladders to reach them. Yet it also has meaning outside of the story for the Miller, who tells his tale to anger the Reeve, a carpenter (I.614 and I.3913–15) who, apparently, fears being cuckolded (I.3151–53). From the Miller's perspective, John deserves his punishment, much as Friar Puccio does, because he is a stock character from the *fabliaux* tradition, the foolish old man who has married a much younger wife (I.3221–32). Since the tale itself, however, provides no indication that John is jealous and instead emphasizes his love for Alison, John's profession assumes meaning on a level not available to the Miller: he invokes not only Noah, builder of the Ark, but also Joseph, who in the popular tradition of the Corpus Christi plays fears Mary's pregnancy proves him a cuckold. As Robert Hanning has noted, Chaucer sets up this possibility in the Miller's description of his tale as "a legend and a lyf, / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf" (I.3141–42).⁴⁰ While neither Flood nor Incarnation occurs in the tale, to consider it devoid of religious significance is to read it only as the Miller does.

Rather than offering a simple moral message such as, as has been suggested, the punishment of the sins of lechery, avarice, and pride,⁴¹ The Miller's Tale, in part through the character of John, directs our attention to the possibility of a spiritual dimension in this world, a theme Chaucer may well have found in the controlling joke of *Decameron* 3.4. Panfilo introduces the *novella* with the comment, "Madonna, assai persone sono che, mentre che essi si sforzano d'andarne in Paradiso, senza avvedersene vi mandano altrui" (Branca, p. 360; Madam, many are those who, whilst they are busy making strenuous efforts to get to Paradise, unwittingly send some other

40. "'Parlous Play': Diabolic Comedy in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*," in *Chaucer's Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Jean E. Jost, Garland Studies in Humor, 5 (New York: Garland, 1994), p. 303. See further, as Hanning notes, Prior, "Parodying Typology," p. 61 and n. 10.

41. For example, D. W. Robertson claims that "the theme of the three temptations, or of the three basic sins to which these temptations appeal, appears as a framework for the Miller's Tale"; *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 382; see also Whitney F. Bolton, "The 'Miller's Tale': An Interpretation," *Mediaeval Studies*, 24 (1962), 83–94; and Paul A. Olson, "Poetic Justice in the *Miller's Tale*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 24 (1963), 227–36. Pearsall dismisses these interpretations; *Canterbury Tales*, p. 179.

person there in their stead; McWilliam, p. 257). He returns to this idea in the conclusion, where he notes that Monna Isabetta often tells Dom Felice during their times together, “‘Tu fai fare la penitenzia a frate Puccio, per la quale noi abbiamo guadagnato il Paradiso’” (Branca, p. 367; “You make Friar Puccio do penance, but we are the ones who go to Paradise”; McWilliam, p. 262). For Kolve, this is a “bedroom compliment,”⁴² one that does not undercut the unarticulated yet still present moral perspective of the story. What may have caught Chaucer’s attention, however, is the suggestion that physical activity, either penance or sex, is the means to gain the reward of a paradise in this world. While Boccaccio may expect readers to draw Kolve’s further contrast between Friar Puccio’s actions and those of Dom Felice and Monna Isabetta, his narrator, Panfilo, does not.

Similarly, it is being saved in this world that Chaucer emphasizes in his discussion of a second Flood, the more dramatic religious theme that he substitutes for Boccaccio’s concern with penance as a way to achieve personal salvation in heaven. Nicholas’s description of the approaching catastrophe to John reiterates the false prophecy that he has allowed him to overhear (I.3488–89, quoted above) since it concerns only the destruction of mankind, not any moral reasons for this punishment or any suggestion of its place in a larger plan of salvation:⁴³

“Now John,” quod Nicolas, “I wol nat lye;
I have yfounde in myn astrologye,
As I have looked in the moone bright,
That now a Monday next, at quarter nyght,
Shal falle a reyn, and that so wilde and wood
That half so greet was nevere Noes flood.
This world,” he seyde, “in lasse than an hour
Shal al be dreynt, so hidous is the shour.
Thus shal mankynde drenche, and lese hir lyfe.” (I.3513–21)

John’s response (I.3522–23, quoted above) shows his concern only for Alison’s physical survival. Indeed, the only suggestion of any spiritual significance for this event is Nicholas’s remark that, although he does not know God’s reason, John should be content “to han as greet a grace as Noe hadde” (I.3560), which echoes Genesis 6:8, “Noe vero invenit gratiam coram Domino” (But Noah found grace before the Lord).⁴⁴ Yet even here, Nicholas follows this comment with the promise: “Thy wyf shal I wel saven, out of doute” (I.3561), a theme which he develops in his vivid account of their life first during and then after the Flood:

42. Bennett, *Chaucer*, p. 211.

43. Kolve’s discussion of the Corpus Christi plays demonstrates that these issues would have been readily apparent to a medieval audience; *Chaucer*, pp. 198–216.

44. *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, editio minor, ed. Robert Weber (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1984); the translation is the Douay-Rheims.

"Thanne shaltou swymme as myrie, I undertake,
As dooth the white doke after hire drake.
Thanne wol I clepe, 'How, Alison! How, John!
Be myrie, for the flood wol passe anon.'
And thou wolt seyn, 'Hayl, maister Nicholay!
Good morwe, I se thee wel, for it is day.'
And thanne shul we be lordes al oure lyf
Of al the world, as Noe and his wyf." (I.3575–82)

Their reward will be not eternal salvation but sovereignty in this world and so "grace" appears to mean no more than "help from God in a secular matter."⁴⁵

Although this emphasis on the purely physical nature of this Flood reflects John's limited understanding of religious matters, the amount and kind of information Chaucer includes about him gives him and the world in which he lives their own spiritual weight.⁴⁶ Of John's ignorance of religious matters there can be no doubt.⁴⁷ It is, for example, striking that Nicholas threatens him with the loss not of salvation but rather of his reason if he betrays him:⁴⁸

"And if thou telle it man, thou art forlore;
For this vengeaunce thou shalt han therfore,
That if thou wreye me, thou shalt be wood." (I.3505–7)

Moreover, immediately before this conversation, John has mixed charms with prayers when he attempts to awake Nicholas from his trance:

Therwith the nyght-spel seyde he anon-rightes
On foure halves of the hous aboute,
And on the thresshold of the dore withoute:
"Jhesu Crist and Seinte Benedight,
Blesse this hous from every wikked wight,
For nyghtes verye, the white *pater-noster*!
Where wentestow, Seinte Petres soster?" (I.3480–86).

Yet in spite of this confusion and his desire to save Nicholas "from elves and fro wightes" (I.3479), his initial appeal to him is particularly apt and

45. *MED*, s.v., def. 2.

46. In contrast, Kolve argues that John's inability to place the Flood in even the most apparent Biblical context justifies John's punishment: "complacent in his certainty that men 'sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee' (3454), he forgets they need some candid sense of their own"; *Chaucer*, p. 210.

47. Alan J. Fletcher explains many of the expressions that characterize John's belief; "The Faith of a Simple Man: Carpenter John's Creed in the Miller's Tale," *Medium Aevum*, 61 (1992), 96–105. While Fletcher is inclined to see Chaucer satirizing John through these descriptions, I would suggest that they might be read more positively.

48. Kisha Tracy has pointed out to me that this passage recalls John's fear that Nicholas has fallen "in some woodnesse" (I.3452) and so may play on a particular weakness in his character.

contrasts his simple faith with Nicholas's pretended knowledge of spiritual secrets:

"What! Nicholay! What, how! What, looke adoun!
Awak, and thenk on Cristes passioun!" (I.3477-78)

The note in the *Riverside Chaucer* comments that "the recalling of Christ's passion is a traditional remedy against despair,"⁴⁹ and yet equally striking is the command that Nicholas change the direction of his gaze, away from hidden spiritual matters to God's revealed presence in this world, a theme Chaucer has set up with John's reflection on "another clerk" who was so intent "upon the sterres" that "he was in a marle-pit yfalle" (I.3457-60).⁵⁰

It is finally the specificity of John's Oxford that Chaucer uses to question any simple judgment of this character and his world.⁵¹ John's work for the Augustinian abbey of Oseney, which stands in stark contrast to Nicholas's exploitation of his university connections, Absolon's abuse of his ecclesiastical privileges, and Friar Puccio's self-serving religious practices, is carefully, if obliquely, detailed. Situated just outside the city walls, the abbey would, in J. A. W. Bennett's phrases, "catch the traveller's eye" with "its vast array of buildings," more notable even than the "noble Norman tower" of Saint Frideswide's monastery within.⁵² John is at the abbey when Nicholas first approaches Alison (I.3274), and again when Nicholas prepares to fool him with his trance (I.3400); yet it is the scene in which the cloisterer responds to Absolon that reveals more about his work:

This pariss clerk, this amorous Absolon,
That is for love alwey so wo bigon,
Upon the Monday was at Oseneye
With compaignye, hym to disporte and pleye,
And axed upon cas a cloisterer
Ful prively after John the carpenter;
And he drough hym apart out of the chirche,
And seyde, "I noot; I saugh hym heere nat wirche
Syn Saterdag; I trowe that he be went
For tymber, ther oure abbot hath hym sent;

49. Ed. Benson, p. 846. See also Fletcher, "Faith," p. 101 and n. 33; and Biggs and Howes, "Theophany," p. 271 and n. 12.

50. In contrast to Nicholas, John's devotion is genuine: see Heffernan's comparison ("Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*," p. 321) between Friar Puccio's prayers and the *Paternoster* begun by Nicholas as the three settle down in their tubs (I.3638) and Ross, who calls attention to the words "devocioun," "biddeth," and "prayer" in the following lines (I.3640-41) and comments "of the three, apparently only John is devout enough to pray"; *Variorum*, p. 213.

51. Although he reaches a different conclusion, J. W. A. Bennett provides, it should be noted, much of the information on which the following remarks are based; *Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1974).

52. Bennett, *Chaucer*, p. 24.

For he is wont for tymber for to go
And dwellen at the grange a day or two . . ." (I.3657–68)

The contrast with Absolon, who travels with friends "to disporte and pleye" is clear, and is strengthened if, as Bennett writes, "Oseney probably means Oseney Mead or Bulstake Mead—a name that itself suggests the sport of bull-baiting."⁵³ John is clearly known to the cloisterer for his work, and indeed is held in such esteem by the abbot that he trusts him to travel to outlying buildings to select timber.⁵⁴ It is this willingness to work, which is emphasized in the tale by his fatigue after making the ladders and hanging the tubs,⁵⁵ that sets him apart from Nicholas, who lives "After his freendes fyndyng and his rente" (I.3219),⁵⁶ and from Friar Puccio, whose wealth, as the introductory passage quoted above reveals, allows him to attend a seemingly endless series of services since he does not need to follow any profession.

Helen Cooper speaks for many when she identifies the "firm grounding in fourteenth-century Oxford" as "one of the things that makes the Miller's Tale unique";⁵⁷ let me recall just one more example, the oaths, since they too may suggest Chaucer's use and development of *Decameron* 3.4. Panfilo's ribald comment, quoted earlier, that on the night in question Monna Isabetta "was riding bareback astride the nag of St. Benedict or St. John Gualbert" becomes more meaningful when we know that her lover is not just a monk, and so under the order of St. Benedict,⁵⁸ but one associated with the monastery of San Pancrazio, which at the time was under the control of the Vallombrosan order,⁵⁹ founded by the local Florentine saint, John Gualbert.⁶⁰ Similarly John, as he attempts to waken Nicholas from his trance, appeals to St. Frideswide (I.3449), who, as Cooper notes, was "the most notable local saint,"⁶¹ and the founder of the Oxford monastery dedicated to her,⁶² which was, like Oseney, under the

53. Bennett, *Chaucer*, p. 54.

54. Bennett, *Chaucer*, p. 30.

55. Cooper suggests that making tubs "would have been joiner's work"; *Canterbury*, p. 99; Bennett notes that "carpenters often made similar objects"; *Chaucer*, p. 30. Perhaps Chaucer acknowledges that there would not have been time to make them.

56. See Ross, *Variorum*, p. 138.

57. Cooper, *Canterbury*, p. 99.

58. Boccaccio makes similar jokes, as Branca points out, in 1.4 and 3.8; *Decameron*, p. 366.

59. See Walter Paatz and Elizabeth Paatz, *Die Kirchen von Florenz, ein kunstgeschichtliches Handbuch*, 6 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1952–55), IV, 565.

60. See Kennerly M. Woody, "John Gualberti, St.," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Strayer, VII, 123; and Anna Benvenuti, "San Giovanni Gualberto e Firenze," *I Vallombrosani nella Società Italiana dei Secoli XI e XII*, ed. Giordano Monzio Compagnoni, Archivio Vallombrosano, 2 (Vallombrosa: Edizioni Vallombrosa, 1995), pp. 83–112.

61. Cooper, *Canterbury*, p. 98.

62. See John Blair, "Frithuswith," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 61 vols. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), XXI, 50–51.

control of Augustinian canons in the fourteenth century.⁶³ If Chaucer was aware of Boccaccio's use of a local tradition, he removes the satire from his, and instead surrounds it with two more oaths by John, both to "Seint Thomas" (I.3425 and 3461). Since Alison has previously sworn "by Seint Thomas of Kent" (I.3291), it seems likely that John also invokes Thomas Becket, whose shrine is the destination of the Canterbury pilgrims, and yet who, as Bennett notes, also had a significant local presence: "Oxford had a parish of St. Thomas, a St. Thomas Hall, a fraternity of St. Thomas with a private chapel at St. Mary's, the university church, and an annual gathering for Mass on St. Thomas's day, followed by a dinner; the fraternity's chantry priest, who acted as gospeller to the vicar of the parish, said Mass daily between five and six a.m., so that travellers and scholars could attend before beginning their day."⁶⁴ Alison's oath, promising to commit adultery, should warn against taking all references to spiritual matters as necessarily devout, a point that is again apparent in the conflicting interpretations of Gerveys's swearing "by seinte Neot" (I.3771): Angus MacDonald associates it with Neot's chastising Alfred for his carnal desires,⁶⁵ while Mary Richards links it to the saint's habit of praying early in the day.⁶⁶ Yet related to the present argument is Ruth H. Cline's discussion of fourteenth-century traditions connecting St. Neot to the founding of Oxford University, and more specifically to New College.⁶⁷ Simply by invoking saints connected to Oxford, Chaucer strengthens the possibility that this world has greater religious significance than expected, although exactly what that significance is remains difficult to judge.

III. APOLOGY AND JUDGMENT

While scholars have found the possible influence of other *novelle* in The Miller's Tale,⁶⁸ it is Chaucer's borrowing from Boccaccio's "Conclusione dell'autore" in his "apology" at the end of the *Prologue* (I.3167–86) that best supports the argument advanced here, since it shows his interest in

63. See David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), pp. 169–70.

64. Bennett, *Chaucer*, p. 15.

65. "Absolon and St. Neot," *Neophilologus*, 48 (1964), 235–37.

66. "The Miller's Tale: 'By Seinte Note,'" *Chaucer Review*, 9 (1975), 212–14. On the texts she cites, see also her "The Medieval Hagiography of St. Neot," *Analecta Bollandiana*, 99 (1981), 259–78.

67. "Three Notes on *The Miller's Tale*," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 26 (1963), 131–35. See also Edmund Reiss, "Daun Gerveys in the *Miller's Tale*," *Papers in Language and Literature*, 6 (1970), 115–24; and James Ortego, "Gerveys Joins the Fun: A Note on *Viritoot* in the *Miller's Tale*," *Chaucer Review*, 37 (2003), 275–79.

68. See the references in n.12, above.

the themes of judgment and misjudgment. As has been noted,⁶⁹ he closely follows Boccaccio's claim—"ma io non pote' né doveva scrivere se non le raccontate, e per ciò esse che le dissero le dovevan dir belle e io l'avrei scritte belle" (Branca, p. 1258; But I could only transcribe the stories as they were actually told, which means that if the ladies who told them had told them better, I should have written them better; McWilliam, p. 831)—that he should be excused for some of the stories since he merely reports what he has heard:

And therfore every gentil wight I preye,
For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere. (I.3171-75)

Yet while Boccaccio then in effect concedes he is the author ("Ma se pur prosuppor si volesse che io fossi stato di quelle e lo 'nventore e lo scrittore, che non fui, dico . . ."; Branca, p. 1258; But even if one could assume I was the inventor as well as the scribe of these stories [which is not the case], I still insist . . .; McWilliam, p. 831), Chaucer maintains the fiction and shifts the responsibility for choosing what they read to the audience:⁷⁰

And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys. (I.3176-81)

Boccaccio, too, notes that "Tuttavia che va tra queste leggendo, lasci star quelle che pungono e quelle che diletano legga" (Branca, p. 1259; And the fact remains that anyone perusing these tales is free to ignore the ones that give offence, and read only those that are pleasing; McWilliam, pp. 831-32). Yet his mechanism for allowing the reader to decide, the summaries that precede each tale (Branca, p. 1259; McWilliam, p. 832), differs sharply from Chaucer's:

The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this.
So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two. (I.3182-84)

69. The resemblance between the two passages was noted by Root, "Chaucer and the Decameron," 1-5, and discussed more fully by Hubertis M. Cummings, *The Indebtedness of Chaucer's Works to the Italian Works of Boccaccio* (1916; repr. New York: AMS Press, 1967), pp. 177-78. See also McGrady, "Chaucer," p. 2; Pearsall, *Canterbury*, pp. 36-7; Beidler, "Just Say Yes," pp. 33-34; and Heffernan, "Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*," p. 314.

70. See Biggs and Howes, "Theophany," pp. 275-76.

By asking his readers to judge the character of the teller and not just the moral worth of the story, Chaucer opens the possibility that narrators, including his own fictional persona, may misjudge their material. His “apology,” then, is not only derived from the same source as the following tale, it points to the theme he will develop in it.

While it is possible to view The Miller’s Tale as purely secular, to do so is to follow only the leads of Nicholas as he hoodwinks John, the Miller as he antagonizes the Reeve, and Chaucer the pilgrim as he deceives his audience. Even without recognizing the relationship of this tale to *Decameron* 3.4, the reader is offered many reasons—including the invoking of a second Flood—to look beyond these misjudgments. Yet establishing 3.4 as a main source for this tale brings Chaucer’s intentions here and in the *Canterbury Tales* more clearly into focus. While preserving the light-hearted tone of the *novella*, he increases the moral complexity of his story by inviting judgments and misjudgments of the characters and their world from various perspectives, including that of the Last Judgment. That he reaches to the end of the *Decameron* to set up this theme indicates that his concern is, most likely, not just with this story but with the work as a whole, a possibility supported by a fainter echo of the passage from “Conclusion” in The General Prologue (I.725–42). In *Decameron* 3.4, then, Chaucer found narrative, thematic, and even spatial challenges that inspired him to balance The Miller’s Tale, as he does the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, between “ernest” and “game” (I.3186).