Reading the **Miller's Tale**

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Modern narrative theory has provided new ways of analysing
stories and a new critical vocabulary for discussing narratives.
Some such theories emphasise the way in which the reader is involved
in the act of reading a narrative, bringing skills and assumptions
to the text which enable him to interpret the words which make up
the story. Traditionally we have tended to confine literary
analysis to the words on the page; narratologists and structuralists
invite us to examine also what the reader brings to the text. Such
an analysis not only interprets the texts under discussion but also
helps to lay bare the assumptions of the reader. This paper will
provide an analysis of Chaucer's **Miller's Tale** using a theory of
narrative analogous with transformational grammar.

I have discussed the theoretical basis for such an analysis
elsewhere,[1] but will outline it here. Understanding any narrative,
even the simplest, is a complex operation, and it is useful to
assume not merely a "grammar of narrative",[2] but also the more
narrowly defined notion of "narrative competence"; that is to say
that, from our earliest childhood experience of stories onwards,
we learn how to "understand" narratives: to link and order the
given elements of narrative, to anticipate and evaluate likely
outcomes of a given series of narrative events, to provide
satisfactory conclusions of incomplete narratives, to use detail
(sometimes seemingly inconsequential detail) to make sense of (that
is, "understand") the story. Narrative competence, like linguistic
competence, is thus culturally acquired and determined, derived
from the repeated experience of reading/hearing and indeed of
telling stories and like all skills, may be developed to a highly
sophisticated degree.

Our first experience of narrative is almost invariably of oral
narrative, heard and understood at our mothers' knees; though I shall

generally use the terms "read" and "readers", these terms are to be understood to include "listen" and "listeners", an important assumption for this particular study, since **The Canterbury Tales** were written for oral recitation quite as much as for private reading, and if we are aware of them as tales to be heard we will be reminded of the necessity of an analysis which works carefully through from beginning to end, rather than one that anticipates details from later in the text.

Understanding any narrative can be seen as involving two distinct processes (as Brewer has pointed out),[3] one of which links and orders the events of the narrative and thus constructs a narrative sequence, even when the events are not presented sequentially within the text, while the other retains (at least subconsciously) all the clues, hints and details in any particular telling of a story and then uses them to construct the "meaning" of the story, to make sense of it, though the reader may not be aware that this is what he is doing since the process is partly subconscious.

Modern narrative theory, from the Russian Formalists onwards, has acknowledged the distinction between **sjuzet and fabula**, between the basic events upon which a narrative is built (events which may not have any existence outside the narrative which embodies them) and any particular text, discourse, act of storytelling. This distinction goes back to antiquity, and was clearly perceived by mediaeval writers (who distinguished between **materia, modus tractandi** and **sensus** and who were accustomed to think of themselves not so much as creative artists but as translators).[4] Its modern currency is a revival, not a discovery. Whilst the distinction is commonplace, there is a bewildering choice of terminology to describe it; I have preferred the terms used by Seymour Chatman, "story" and "discourse".[5]

The model borrowed from transformational grammar assumes that stories have a deep structure which we reach through the details of the surface structure. Here the deep structure is to be equated with the "story", whereas the phrase "surface structure" refers not

to the "discourse" in its entirety, but to the particular words
and images, the constituent elements of the "discourse".

It is self-evident that the same story can be told in different
versions in which the surface structure of each (that is,the
particular words in which the story is related) do not overlap at
all. Perhaps "self-evident" is to put the case too strongly, since
on occasion I have had to convince students of the truth of the
proposition (though that is an easy task); I usually respond by
telling them the beginning of a story: "There was once a Chelsea
football supporter who was badly beaten up in a brawl after Chelsea
had beaten Arsenal one Saturday evening in March. He lay bleeding
on the pavements of London, where he was seen by the local priest,
who passed him in his car on the way to an important meeting..."
I have yet to meet a Western student who could not only complete
this narrative sequence satisfactorily but also identify the story
(the Good Samaritan), though it has hardly a word in common with
the Biblical version. Similarly a particular telling may embellish
a given story with additional, expendable incidents without
damaging the basic structure; we have at home a version of
"Goldilocks" which provides an elaborate (and completely uncanonical)
account ot the three bears' activities while Goldilocks is in their
house. Borrowing terminology from Chatman again, we may call the
inessential events "satellites" as opposed to the essential ones,
the "kernels".[6] However, any tired parent who has ever tried to
leave out either the three bowls of porridge or the three chairs
will have discovered that some parts of the story are essential:
without three bowls of porridge the story is not felt to be
"Goldilocks"! Many mediaeval tales retell familiar stories; we may
surmise that the original audience derived pleasure both from
recognizing the story and from hearing it told in a new and
different way, hence the mediaeval interest in "amplification" and
also the perception of poet-as-translator, which we have already
discussed.

Similarly, in reading stories, the reader will supply what is
left out, just as he recognizes accretions to the basic plot. For

when we read or hear a narrative, we construct the story for
ourselves from the clues provided in the discourse, often making
assumptions and filling in gaps. So E.M. Forster's famous
distinction between story and plot does not tell the whole story:

> We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged
> in their time sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events,
> the emphasis falling on causality. "The king died and the
> queen died" is a story. "The king died and then the queen
> died of grief" is a plot. [7]

The distinction is not as clear as he makes out, for no rendering,
however "complete", can give "the whole story"; fictions always
select and thus supply the "missing" links between narrative events.
We are all familiar enough with this from our experience of film
and television: when a frame showing a child rousing from sleep and
switching off an alarm clock is followed by one of the same child
eating cornflakes, we tacitly assume that between the two frames he
got up, got dressed, came downstairs etc and that the time gap
between the two frames is very short; indeed to discover
subsequently that the two events occurred six months apart would be
disturbing, since there seems to be a rule that if sequential
activity happens in adjacent frames, then we can assume an immediate
sequence, and that longer time gaps are clearly indicates. This is
well illustrated by fig. 1. Here we have a familiar enough school
exercise: a series of pictures from which the child is expected to
construct a narrative in a foreign language. This particular
example is quite rich in detail: there are several indications of
the passage of time and we are given the name of the film seen by
the boys and the cost of tickets. But there are many gaps to be
filled; they include the journey from school to town between frames
2 and 3 and the return journey between frames 5 and 6; the discovery
of their absence after frame 2 but before frame 6. The most striking
gap is that between frame 4 (in which the boys purchase their cinema
tickets) and frame 5 (in which they have breakfast and smoke a
(doubtless forbidden) fag in an all-night cafe.) We are not shown
the boys entering, inside or leaving the cinema; we are left to
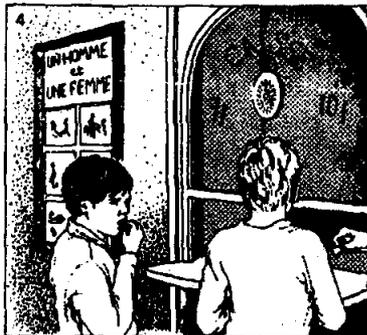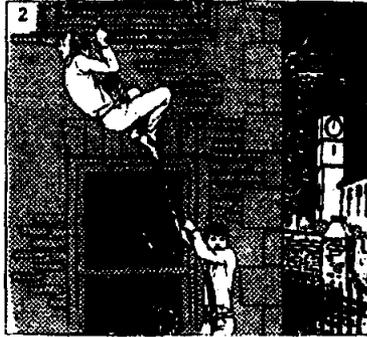
Taken from: **Histoires Vues, Histoires Lues**, compiled C.T. Gill
Leech, (Basingstoke, 1974).

assume that they did in fact see the film. It would presumably be
a perverse child who chose to argue that the boys actually changed
their minds and spent the night scrumping apples or pinching lead
from the local church roof: the clues in the narrative do not
support such a reading. All this seems obvious, but only because
we take our narrative competence for granted; a visitor from an
alien culture might well find the sequence quite mysterious.

As I have argued elsewhere,[8] we as yet lack a vocabulary for
discussing the nature of these unspoken links between narrative
events. It is in fact a continual process of anticipation and
modification: we predict possible outcomes from even a single
narrative event (the man in the pin-striped suit walks towards the
banana skin and...); with two narrative events there are a number
of possible outcomes; the possibilities narrow and the outcome
becomes more preditable as the story continues. The reader's
interest in the unfolding of the story is sometimes (as Forster
says) defined in terms of providing answers to the questions "what
then?" and "why?"; it can be argued that in many narratives, these
questions are displaced by the question "how?". We all know that
eventually the handsome prince/doctor will marry the beautiful
princess/nurse; our interest lies in the obstacles to be overcome
before that outcome, in the mechanism for bringing about the
expected end. And, once past childhood, we mostly accept that a
sophisticated storyteller may play on our expectations and
deliberately thwart them: the handsome doctor may choose to devote
all his time to medicine and remain a confirmed bachelor and thus
ignore the adoring nurse. But without our expectations, even that
story does not make sense; why else should the nurse figure in the
story?

Narrative competence has so far been perceived as fundamentally
determined by culture (our "knowledge" of the expectations of
princesses/nurses or of schoolboys' love of adventure and their
desire to savour the forbidden), but in a narrower sense, our ability
to read stories and anticipate possible outcomes is determined also
by generic expectations; we bring to each new story the knowledge

gained from all the stories we have ever heard or read. We all
pick up the clues which enable us to perceive that we are reading
a romance or a detective novel or an epic; indeed if we pick up
clues that we are reading feminist parody we may predict that the
pretty nurse may marry the doctor and live unhappily ever after, or
perhaps decide to train as a doctor herself.

All these basic skills come into play as we read the **Miller's
Tale**; awareness of their deployment should help our understanding
of the text and its possible meanings. For we quickly begin to
order the narrative events and pick up clues which enable us to
identify the genre of the piece, and to acknowledge the culturally
shared assumptions which enable us to "understand" the story.

We can read the **Miller's Tale** as a structure with two interwoven
strands of story, thus:

A_1 Young "scholar" takes lodgings in the house of old carpenter and
his young wife
A_2 scholar woos wife
B_1 parish clerk woos wife
A_3 scholar dupes husband into building and taking refuge in tub to
avoid a great flood
A_4 Thus enabling scholar to spend night of love with the wife
B_2 clerk arrives
B_3 his request for kiss rewarded by kissing the wife's arse
B_4 he gets a hot coulter
B_5 scholar tries to repeat the misdirected kiss
B_6 is branded by the coulter
A_5 carpenter takes his cry to indicate the deluge
A_6 he becomes object of ridicule

Such an analysis of the structure has some important
implications for interpretation of the tale. Firstly, it places
the scholar and not the carpenter at the centre of the story; this
reading is clearly corroborated by details in the surface structure
(as we shall see later). Secondly, it defines Alisoun as a passive
"object" (not subject); she is here the object of her husband's

21

jealousy as later she is to be the object of the attentions of two
suitors; her compliance in Nicholas' plot is to be an interesting
detail in the telling but her actual role is merely supportive; the
answer to the question often posed by twentieth century readers,
"why doesn't Alisoun get her come-uppance?" is surely that she is
not of sufficient importance in herself for her fate to be
considered.   In the concluding lines of the tale, which summarise
it retrospectively, neither she nor John is named; Alisoun is
referred to as "this carpenteris wyf", and her role is exclusively
passive:

> Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
> For al his kepyng and his jalousie. (11.3850-1)[9]

Using a somewhat different analysis (indebted to Jakobson and
Greimas[10]), the tale can be read as embodying a number of binary
oppositions.   Details in the telling confirm these oppositions: the
polarities of youth and age, cleverness and stupidity (nicely
particularised as gown and town), naturalness and unnaturalness,
and, implicitly at least, lords and yeomen (aristocracy and artisan).
Before we analyse the tale sequentially and examine the way in
which the surface structure details enable us to interpret the
narrative sequence, we must first look at the means by which these
"kernel" events are linked.   The first (A_1) had actually taken place
before the tale begins; the event itself, with its juxtaposition of
characters and certain cultural assumptions (examined more fully
below) enable the reader to predict Nicholas' advances to Alisoun,
and also that there will have to be some ruse for cuckolding and
ridiculing John.   Those who heard the Miller's prologue to his tale
have foreknowledge of this:

> For I wol telle a legende and a lyf
> Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf,
> How that a clerk hath sette the wrightes cappe. (11.3141-3)

This, together with the early clues about the cuckolding, precludes
suspense; not "what?" but "how?" is the question in the reader's
mind. A_3 cannot easily be predicted, though it is felt to be a

satisfactory continuation of the story since the reader realises in retrospect that clues have been laid which might have enabled him to predict it; if A_2 leads inevitably to A_4, A_3 provides the answer to the question "how will this happen?" and provides the means for bringing about A_5 and A_6, which are themselves the inevitable outcome of A_3. With the arrival of a second lover in B_1, two possibilities present themselves: either his acceptance (and involvement in Nicholas' plot in some way) or his rejection. As we shall see later, the clues from the surface structure lead us to predict that Absolon will not be successful and that he will be ridiculed and punished in some way (as happens in kernels B_2 and $_3$). A comparison with Masuccio's story "Viola and her Lovers"[11] makes the point that it is the surface structure details and not the deep structure which leads to this prediction by the reader, since the Masuccio story begins with the same sequence of events but closes with the woman receiving three lovers and accepting them all; the reader finds Masuccio's outcome equally satisfactory since the surface structure is quite different. We return to Chaucer: the next kernel opens a new sequence of events ($B_{4, 5, 6}$); it is in itself an arbitrary and therefore unpredictable event, a coda to the story of Absolon's love for Alisoun, and apparent digression from the story of Nicholas and John; it is in fact to prove functionally essential, providing the means for the denouement of the whole tale. Chaucer's version of the story seems more arbitrary than the analogues, in which the second lover is not a clerk but a smith and the coulter comes to hand quite naturally. It is from culturally acquired assumptions that the reader predicts and interprets in this sequence. Whilst Absolon never explains why he wants a coulter, we perceive his rage and his desire for revenge ("and to himself he seyde, 'I shal the quyte'") and we assume that the coulter will be instrumental in the revenge. Similarly, we do not have to be told that Nicholas is foolish to try and repeat the "joke"; we know that practical jokes cannot be repeated in this way (not in stories anyway) and we know that Nicholas is pushing his luck and will inevitably be punished for his over-confidence. The

final kernels provide an outcome to the story which is not only well-prepared but brilliant in its structural simplicity.

It is sometimes suggested that narratives are built upon proverbs. I shall argue that this is a crucial perception for understanding the **Miller's Tale**. Berek Brewer[12] has argued that beneath the tale lies the dictum "kiss my arse". But this is only one of several of the proverbial saying underlying the tale; for example, beneath this sequence $(B_{4,5,6})$ lies the proverb "He who laughs last laughs longest". The tale in fact relies heavily upon proverbs and proverbial wisdom,[13] whose "truths" are interestingly interpreted in the telling. And so we turn to the details of the surface structure.

The opening sentences of the tale are crucial in establishing the nature of the story and its essential elements. The first piece of information given is the setting – Oxford, a University city; we are thus led to anticipate the possibility that either students or learning will play a part in the story, an anticipation instantly confirmed since we are then introduced in quick succession to a carpenter-landlord and his tenant, a 'scholar'. The pair are contrasted: the carpenter is rich, the scholar poor; the carpenter not merely "town" but a "gnof" (churl); the scholar, who is described in terms of his studies and his interest in astrology and foretelling the future, is clearly "gown". That the carpenter is described here in 2 lines, whilst 28 lines are devoted to the scholar puts the scholar firmly in the centre of the story, as does the fact that the scholar is named here, near the beginning of the story, whereas we have to wait a further 170 lines before we learn the carpenter's name. Their very names also confirm Nicholas centrality, for whilst he is particularised and made "real" by **his** name,[14] the carpenter's name is plain and simple: John; it is as a carpenter, a landlord and an old husband that John figures, not really as a sympathetic individual; he is indeed usually designated "this carpenter".

The **Miller's Tale** is rich in detail; all the characters are fully described, though one would not wish to argue that the

24

descriptions create "real" people; they are not even "real" in terms
of fourteenth century "realism" for Chaucer is quite at home
elsewhere describing his characters convincingly from within, as par
excellence in the portrayals of Troilus and Criseyde; in this tale
the characters are described coolly from outside. The descriptions
in the tale have two main functions: they provide information to be
used later in the dénouement of the story and they control our
responses to the fates of the characters. Thus it is important for
the story that John is a carpenter: the skills of his trade will be
called upon later to make the tubs; his absence at his trade in the
nearby village of Oseney will provide Nicholas and Alisoun with an
opportunity to further their liaison; and later in the tale his
carpentry links him with Noah. [15]

There is a wealth of detail about Nicholas given in the opening
lines. Much has been written on the adjective most frequently used
to describe him, "hende";[16] we take it first in its most conventional
(if déclassé) sense of "courteous, gracious", but as the tale
unfolds, it becomes clear that "hende" is ironic and carries with it
also other meanings "nearby, handy" and "skilled, clever, crafty",
the latter meaning reinforced because from the outset we have been led
to think of John and Nicholas as a contrasting pair, so that the
meaning of "hende Nicholas" is partly defined by John's repeated
designation as "this sely carpenter". The opening lines establish
Nicholas' interest in astrology (which helps to bring about the
deception of John) and his reputation of being able to predict the
future (again, adding plausibility to John's belief in his
predictions later in the tale). Indeed, though we all doubtless
assume at the time that the line adds only a little local colour,
the particular prediction cited here as an example of his powers
turns out to be precisely appropriate to what is going to happen:

> To demen by interrogaciouns,
> If that men asked hym in certein houres
> Whan that men sholde have droghte or elles shoures. (ll.3194-6)

They also establish his familiarity with "derne love". The
stereotypical student lodger does not seem to have changed

significantly over the centuries! The remaining lines of this opening description reinforce and flesh out these two basic pieces of information, giving details of his study in astrology and astronomy, emphasising his "sweetness", his musical ability (also to play a small part in the story;[17] his singing and his study are both night time activities, so no doubt is "derne love". Whilst Nicholas' poverty was earlier contrasted with John's riches, we are prevented from feeling much sympathy on this score; indeed his poverty seems to exist primarily to contrast him with John; unlike Chaucer's other poor clerk of Oxenford, Nicholas seems reasonably if modestly endowed with this world's goods, his standard of living limited only by the extent of the generosity of those friends who charitably provide his maintenance:

> And thus this sweete clerk his time spente
> After his freendes finding and his rente. (11.3219-20)

And so, with the relationship between landlord and lodger made clear, we are introduced to the carpenter's 17-year old wife. But before she is described in detail, she is clearly defined in terms of her husband, who loves her "more than his lyf", jealously keeps her "narwe in cage", thus alienating the reader's sympathy and potentially arousing sympathy for the wife; that sympathy is immediately modified by the knowledge that she is not merely "yong" but also "wylde".

We have been reading or listening to the tale for rather less than a minute, but already the plot is clearly established and our responses firmly controlled. We have heard enough to recognise the genre: fabliau, comic dirty story. Between our expectations of the genre and the expectations created by the juxtaposition of lusty student, old husband and wild young wife, we can all predict the outwitting of the husband. Lest any miss the cultural associations, they are made explicit by the narrator (not necessarily the Miller at this point), who refers to the authority of the proverbial wisdom of Cato:

> He knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude,
> That bad man sholde wedde his similitude.
> Men sholde wedden after hir estaat
> For youthe and elde is often at debaat. (11.3227-30)

The interest in the story does indeed lie here more in "how?" than in "what then?" or "why?". As we have seen, there have been clues (in the references to astrology for example) even to "how?".

We have spoken already of Alisoun's secondary role in the story. Unlike that of Nicholas, her description provides no clues to the unfolding of the plot, though it does control our responses to her; since it has been much analysed,[18] a brief summary will suffice. Her presentation which is based on the rhetorical convention of the **descriptio feminae**, nevertheless undercuts the conventional picture of a beautiful woman with some distinctly unconventional comparisons and hints of vulgarity. Nicholas and John are presented as a contrasting pair; since Alisoun, like Nicholas, is young and wily, then her alignment with an old and simple-minded husband must inevitably strike us as grotesque and her alignment with the clever young student more natural; but the portrait of Alisoun contains contrasts and paradoxes within it: she is both natural (a primrose, her voice like the swallow's, her mouth like apples) and unnatural (her eyebrows plucked, her face shining like a newly forged coin from recent washing as we later learn, her clothes adorned with a large and showy brooch); whilst the social status of both John and Nicholas is clear enough, hers is ambiguous since it is defined by the status of her "man": as John's wife she is unmistakably a peasant, but she has the potential "for any lord to leggen in his bedde."

Nicholas' wooing of her is however far from aristocratic. Both his actions and the language used to describe them are direct and uncourtly, no doubt confirming the view of the original aristocratic audience that "true love" was the prerogative of the aristocracy. The use of words like "queynte" (in 1. 3276) cannot readily be explained away by reference to the fictional narrator. It is difficult to assess whether the original audience would have been shocked by such language; if so, then (as Alfred David argues,

following Bakhtin[19]) the indecenty provides a subversive
undercutting of the patrician values which are otherwise both
explicit and implicit in the tale, and, as B.K. Martin argues,[20]
the tale can be described as a concatenation of dirty jokes,
presented in a genre which provides license to mention the
unmentionable and deal openly with sex, violence and hatred. What
is quite clear is that in the surface details of the telling,
different registers of language sit uneasily (and thus comically)
side by side. Whilst modern critics are right to point out that
much of the language of the tale is taken from the idiom of popular
romance,[21] within the framework of fabliau, with its emphasis on
earthy and fundamental activities, the romance language must
inevitably be comic. The joke operates at two levels. Firstly an
aristocratic audience may laugh at the ineptitude of popular (as
opposed to courtly) romance. But there is a second level of comedy
more complex and more disturbing. Even if it is the case that our
mediaeval forbears were more blunt and outspoken in the language
they used for describing sex and other bodily functions, that cannot
be relevant here; the language used to describe the lovemaking of
Troilus and Criseyde is idealised and metaphorical; it is only in
the world of fabliau that one could dare the outrageous rhyme "kiss/
piss", for the tale proceeds in the "cherles termes" which the
Reeve as well as the reader recognise as characteristic of the
genre. The tale abounds in sexual innuendo and **double entendre**, as
Paula Neuss has demonstrated.[22] One of the jokes in the tale is a
joke about language: the "courtly" language with which Absolon woos
Alisoun:

> What do ye, honycomb, sweete Alisoun,
> My fair bryd, my sweete cynamoune?" (11. 3698-9)

After all, we have already seen her wooed and won by Nicholas' more
direct rough-handling; moreover, we know the game they play is the
same; despite his language and his pretensions, Absolon is honest
enough about his aim, to win a kiss "atte leeste". In such a
context the courtly language is revealed as a pretentious cover-up
of naked sexual desire. That the idiom is derived more from popular

romance than from real courtly literature (or life) provides a way in which the aristocratic reader can avoid the implications of the satire, though, as is his wont, Chaucer leaves the whole question uncomfortably open.

We return to Nicholas' wooing of Alisoun to notice that there are clues to reinforce the reader's assumption that the tale is really about a clever clerk's tricking a simple-minded carpenter for this point is made specifically twice here; once in an authorial generalisation, where we share the received wisdom that

> clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte (1.3275)

and again in Nicholas' plain statement of what he is about:

> A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle,
> But if he koude a carpenter bigyle. (11.3299-3300)

Earlier we saw how our "knowledge" of small boys enabled us to understand the story of the midnight escapade; this wooing scene provides an interesting example of how we use assumptions learned from our culture to understand the links between the events. In 11. 3283-7 Alisoun plainly rejects Nicholas, yet three lines later, with a minimal explanation (Nicholas has pleaded for mercy) she has granted her love and is promising to do his will. Maybe there are even twentieth century readers who need reminding that these two events do not follow each other in some "natural" order of things: they make sense only for readers who "know" that women really mean "yes" when they say "no". In the **Miller's Tale**, we have been well prepared anyway, since with her "likerous ye" and obvious sexual attraction, we all "know" what sort of girl Alisoun is and that she will be easily won. The implications for a feminist reading of this text are quite obvious.

Nicholas' wooing is essential to the story, a kernel; the next event in the tale is a satellite: Alisoun goes to church on a holy day. This facilitates the introduction of the second story (the rejected lover) and the fourth principal character, Absolon. Those critics who see irony here (that is, who argue that there is some

religious frame of reference) are surely misguided; the churchgoing is merely functional. As we have already seen, the very fact that Absolon comes second after the success of Nicholas suggests that his suit may be unsuccessful; but the details in the description leave us in no doubt, for Absolon cuts a ridiculous figure with his effeminate habits and pretensions as a courtly lover. Again we pass over this with some speed since it has been much discussed elsewhere, though not without commenting on the many references which link Absolon with mouths and kissing and thus prepare us for the "misdirected" kiss. Absolon's unnaturalness provides a foil to Nicholas' naturalness, just as Nicholas' youth and cleverness provide a foil for John's age and gullibility. In fact more time is expended on the description than on the event crucial to the plot: Absolon's journey to the carpenter's house to woo Alisoun.

The time-scale and location provide the reader with a clear framework within which to perceive the action of the story and the relation of events to one another. The location of the tale is extremely straightforward: it is set in the University city of Oxford, all the main events take place at the carpenter's house from which also people set out (John to Oseney, Alisoun to church, Absolon to Gerveys the smith) and which provides a stable centre for the story.

Similarly the time sequence provides a clear framework enabling the reader to chart the progress of the story. Nicholas woos Alisoun "on a[n unspecified] day" while John is at Oseney (1.3272-4); similarly Alisoun went to church "on an haliday" (1.3309) and Absolon is there with his sencer "on the haliday" (1.3340). That night and "fro day to day" he comes to woo Alisoun (11.3371). But once the plot is under way, the time scheme gets more specific. On a Saturday (1.3399) John goes to Oseney and Nicholas plots to "this sely jalous housbonde to bigyle" (1.3404); note here again that the ruse is to make a fool of John and not merely to make love to Alisoun. He spends "al thilke Saterday" and all of Sunday in his room until sundown, when John rises to his bait. Nicholas prophecies the flood for the Monday and John works at his tubs all day Monday

until curfew time. All the kernel events from A_4 take place on the
Monday night (it seems likely that some belief about black Mondays
prevailed even in the fourteenth century.[23]) Absolon decides at
cockcrow to visit the carpenter's house, we know the night is almost
over and eagerly await the action which will complete the tale and
which does in fact bring it to a speedy conclusion.

Since the possibilities narrow as the tale proceeds and since
the basic clues which enable us to "interpret" the story have been
established, we can move more quickly through our analysis, commenting
on the elaborate detail with which the central kernels are presented,
which construct the solidity, the "substantiality" of the tale.[24]
Unlike the **Pardoner's Tale** of the three rioters, the **Miller's Tale**
is rich in such detail. It is this which has led so many readers
to speak of its "realism". But little of this detail is there only
for "realism". It is often remarked that the precise details of
the carpenter's house contribute to the speedy denouement of the
story (the cat-hole and the shot-window, for example) and are thus
functional.[25] There are other details which enrich the comedy and
which need not detain us long, for example the contrasted songs of
Nicholas and Absolon which lead us to the metaphor describing their
love-making ("Ther was the revel and the melodye"); and Gerveys'
chatty sociability when Absolon is nearly silent with rage. Other
elements in fact work against the dominant ethos of the tale,
inviting uncomfortable questions in the same way as the
juxtaposition of courtly and profane in the language of love,
commented upon earlier. Whilst Absolon's love for Alisoun is
compared to that of a cat for a mouse, John's concern that his
beloved Alisoun may drown in the flood provides the one instance of
human feeling in the tale. The comparisons with Noah make John
ridiculous; whilst Noah was traditionally conceived primarily as a
henpecked husband, a figure of fun, there is also the disturbing
fact that the biblical Noah was both godly and right.

By its structure and in its very telling, the tale contains them; it
juxtaposes polarities without reconciling them and introduces
details which are not entirely consistent with the world of the
tale. This may go some way to explain why we still choose to read
it.

NOTES

[1]"Reading the **Pardoner's Tale**", in **Talking about Text**, edited by Malcolm Coulthard, (Birmingham, 1986) pp.61-74.

[2]G. Prince, "Aspects of a Grammar of Narrative," **Poetics Today**, I, 3, 49-63 and updated in **Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative**, Chapter III, (Berlin and Amsterdam, 1982).

[3]"Towards a Chaucerian Poetic", **Proceedings of the British Academy**, 60(1974), 219-252 (Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture) reprinted in **Chaucer: The Poet as Storyteller**, (London, 1984), p.56ff.

[4]This seems to be the implication of medieval scholastic theories of authorship, see Alastair Minnis, **Medieval Theories of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages**, (London, 1984).

[5]Seymour Chatman, **Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film**, (Cornell, 1978); Shlomith Rimmon, "A Comprehensive Theory of Narrative", **Poetics and Theory of Literature I** (1976), 35-62.

[6]Chatman is modifying Barthes, **Story and Discourse**, p.53.

[7]**Aspects of the Novel**, Chapter V.

[8]"Reading the **Pardoner's Tale**, p.66.

[9]All references to the tale are to **The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer**, edited by F.N. Robinson, second edition (Boston and London, 1957).

[10]A.J. Greimas develops Roman Jakobson's notion of binary oppositions for the analysis of narratives, see **Semantique Structurale**, (Paris, 1966) and **Du Sens**, (Paris, 1970).

[11]Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson, **The Literary Contexts of Chaucer's Fabliaux: Texts and Translations**, (Indianapolis and New York, 1971), pp.26-37.

[12]**Chaucer: The Poet as Storyteller**, p.82.

[13]Alfred David, **The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's poetry**, (Bloomington and London, 1976), p.99; Derek Brewer also has some interesting points about Chaucer's use of proverbs and sententiousness, **Chaucer: The Poet as Storyteller**, p.72.

[14]I am not persuaded by W.F. Bolton's argument that the name Nicholas puts many readers in mind of the fornicating Nicolaites, "The 'Miller's Tale: An Interpretation," **Medieval Studies, 24** (1962), 83-94.

[15]Beryl Rowland, "The Play of the **Miller's Tale**: A Game within a Game", **Chaucer Review V** (1970-1), 145.

[16] E.T. Donaldson, "The Idiom of Popular Poetry in the **Miller's Tale**, reprinted in **Speaking of Chaucer**, (New York, 1970) pp.17-19; Paul E. Beichner, "Chaucer's Hende Nicholas",**Medieval Studies**, XIV (1952), 151-3.

[17] The role of music in the **Miller's Tale** has been widely noted, see for example Derek Pearsall, **The Canterbury Tales**, (London, 1985), pp.174-5).

[18] See for example Charles Muscatine, **Chaucer and the French Tradition**, (Berkeley, 1957), pp.228-30 and Betty Hill, "Chaucer: the **Miller's** and **Reeve's Tales**", **Neuphilologische Mitteilungen** LXXIV (1973), 665-675.

[19] Alfred David reads the **Miller's Tale** as "subversive comedy" in a reading much indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin, **The Strumpet Muse**, Chapter VI.

[20] B.K. Martin, "The Miller's Tale as Critical Problem and as Dirty Joke", in **Studies in Chaucer** edited by G.A. Wilkes and A.P. Reimar (Sydney, 1981), pp.86-120.

[21] Donaldson, "The Idiom of Popular Poetry", pp.13-29.

[22] Paula Neuss, **"Double entendre in The Miller's Tale," Essays in Criticism**, XXIV (1975), 86-90.

[23] John C. Hirsh, "Why does the Miller's Tale take place on a Monday?", English Language Notes XIII (1975), 86-90.

[24] Charles Muscatine, p.226.

[25] T.W. Craik, **Chaucer's Comic Tales**, (London, 1966), pp.13-15.