The Miller's Portrait

The Miller’s Prologue

THE MILLER’S TALE
The Portrait of the pilgrim Miller from the General Prologue

The MILLER was a stout carl for the nones.
Full big he was of brawn and eke of bones
That provèd well, for over all there he came
At wrestling he would have always the ram.
He was short-shouldered, broad, a thickè knarre.
There was no door that he n'ould heave off harre ¹
Or break it at a running with his head.
His beard as any sow or fox was red,
And thereto broad as though it were a spade.
Upon the copright of his nose he had
A wart, and thereon stood a tuft of hairs
Red as the bristles of a sow's ears.
His nosèthirls blackè were and wide.
A sword and buckler bore he by his side.
His mouth as great was as a great furnace.
He was a jangler and a goliardese
And that was most of sin and harlotries.
Well could he stolen corn and tollèn thrice,
And yet he had a thumb of gold pardee.²
A white coat and a blue hood wearèd he.
A bagpipe well could he blow and sound
And therewithal he brought us out of town.

¹ 550: "There was no door that he could not heave off its hinges."

² 563: A phrase hard to explain. It is sometimes said to allude to a saying that an honest miller had a thumb of gold, i.e. there is no such thing as an honest miller. But the phrase "And yet" after the information that the miller is a thief, would seem to preclude that meaning, or another that has been suggested: his thumb, held on the weighing scale, produced gold.
PROLOGUE to the MILLER'S TALE

The Host is delighted with the success of his tale-telling suggestion: everyone agrees that the Knight's tale was a good one.

When that the knight had thus his tale y-told,
In all the company ne was there young nor old
That he ne said it was a noble story
And worthy for to drawen to memory,
And namely the gentles every one.
Our Hostè laughed and swore: "So may I gone!
This goes aright. Unbuckled is the mail.
Let's see now who shall tell another tale,
For truly the game is well begun.
Now telleth you, sir Monk, if that you can,
Somewhat to quit with the Knight's tale."

The Miller that fordrunken was all pale
So that unnethe upon his horse he sat.
He n'ould avalen neither hood nor hat
N'abiden no man for his courtesy,
But in Pilatè's voice he gan to cry:
And swore by armès, and by blood and bones:
"I can a noble talè for the nones" With which I will now quit the Knight's tale."
Our Hostè saw that he was drunk of ale
And said: "Abidè, Robin, levè brother,
Some better man shall tell us first another.
Abide, and let us worken thriftily."
"By Godè's soul," quod he, "that will not I,
For I will speak, or elsè go my way."
Our Host answered: "Tell on, a devil way.

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1 3118: "Telleth" (plural) is the polite form of the imperative singular here. It means "tell."

2 3124: In medieval mystery or miracle plays the biblical characters of Pontius Pilate and of Herod were always represented as ranting loudly. Though all such plays that survive come from after Chaucer's time, the tradition seems to have been already established.
MILLER'S TALE

3135 Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome."
"Now hearkeneth," quod the Miller, "all and some.

But first I make a protestation
That I am drunk; I know it by my sound
And therefore, if that I misspeak or say,

3140 Wit it the ale of Southwark, I you pray
For I will tell a legend and a life
Both of a carpenter and of his wife,
How that a clerk hath set the wrighte's cap.

The Reeve, who has been a carpenter in his youth, suspects that this tale is going to be directed at him

The Reeve answered and said: "Stint thy clap.

3145 Let be thy lewèd, drunken harlotry. ¹
It is a sin and eke a great folly
T'apeiren any man or him defame
And eke to bringen wivès in such fame.
Thou may'st enough of other thingès sayn."

3150 This drunken Miller spoke full soon again
And saidé: "Levè brother Osèwald,
Who has no wife, he is no cuckold,
But I say not therefore that thou art one.
There be full good wivès — many a one,
And ever a thousand good against one bad.

3155 That know'st thou well thyself but if thou mad.
Why art thou angry with my tale now?
I have a wife, pardee, as well as thou,
Yet, n'ould I for the oxen in my plough

3160 Take upon me more than enough
A s deemen of myself that I were one.
I will believè well that I am none.
A husband shall not be inquisitive

¹ The Reeve is angry because, as a onetime carpenter, he feels the tale is going to be directed at him. He is probably right, and gets his revenge when his turn comes, by telling a tale where a miller is the butt of the joke.
Of Godè's privity, nor of his wife.

3165 So he may finde Godè's foison there, Provided / G's plenty
Of the remnant needeth not enquire." ¹

What should I morè say, but this Millér wouldn't restrain
He n'ould his wordès for no man forbeare vulgar
But told his churlè's tale. In his mannér,

3170 Methinketh that I shall rehearse it here. I think I'll retell

Once again the poet makes a mock apoloby for the tale he is going to tell: he has to tell the story as he has heard it from this rather vulgar fellow, a churl.

Those who do not like bawdy tales are given fair warning.

And therefore, every gentle wight I pray well bred person
Deem not, for Godè's lovè, that I say Judge not
Of evil intent, but for I must rehearse because I must retell
Their talès all, be they better or worse,

3175 Or elš falsen some of my mattèr. falsify
And, therefore, whoso list it not to hear whoever wishes
Turn over the leaf and choose another tale,
For he shall find enough, great and small, of narratives / nobility
Of storial thing that toucheth gentleness

3180 And eke morality and holiness also
Blameth not me if that you choose amiss. ¹ "Blameth"= Blame
The Miller is a churl; you know well this. low born man
So was the Reevè eke and others mo' also / more
And harlotry they tolden bothè two.

3185AVISETH you and put me out of blame. ribald tales
And eke men shall not make earnest of game. ² Take care

¹ 3162-6: A husband should not enquire about his wife's secrets or God's. Provided his wife gives him all the sexual satisfaction he wants (God's foison, i.e. God's plenty), he should not enquire into what else she may be doing.

² 3186: "Besides, you should not take seriously (make earnest) what was intended as a joke (game)."
The Miller’s Tale

The Miller’s Tale

Introduction

*The Miller's Tale* is one of the great short stories in the English language and one of the earliest. It is a fabliau, that is, a short merry tale, generally about people in absurd and amusing circumstances, often naughty sexual predicaments. The stories frequently involve a betrayed husband (the cuckold), his unfaithful wife, and a cleric who is the wife's lover. Such tales were very popular in France (hence the French term *fabliau*, pl. *fabliaux*).

The Miller calls his story a "legend and a life / Both of a carpenter and of his wife" (3141-2). *Legend* and *life* both normally imply pious narratives, as in *The Golden Legend*, a famous collection of lives of the saints. The Miller's story is not going to be a pious tale about the most famous carpenter in Christian history, Joseph, or his even more famous wife, Mary the mother of Christ. So there is a touch of blasphemy about the Miller's phrase, especially as the mention of the triangle of man, wife and cleric indicates that the story is going to be a fabliau. None of the pilgrims is bothered by this except the Reeve, who had been a carpenter in his youth, according to the General Prologue. His remonstrations seems to be personally rather than theologically motivated.

If you have read many French tales in a collection like that by R. Hellman and R. O’Gorman, *Fabliaux* (N.Y., 1965), you will concede that Chaucer has raised this kind of yarn-telling to an art that most of the French stories do not attain or even aspire to. In most simple fabliaux names rarely matter, and the the plot always goes thus: "There was this man who lived with his wife in a town, and there was this priest . . ." Characters are indistinguishable from each other shortly after you have read a few fabliaux.

By contrast the characters in *The Miller's Tale*—Absalom, Alison, John and Nicholas—are very memorable, and the plot is deliciously intricate and drawn out to an absurd and unnecessary complexity which is part of the joke. Even after many readings the end still manages to surprise. These and other characters who figure in Chaucer's elaborate plots have local habitations; they have names (often
pretty distinctive names like Damian or Absalom); they have personalities, and sometimes talk in quite distinctive ways, like the students with northern accents in The Reeve's Tale.

There is no regional accent here, but Absalom's language when he is wooing Alison (3698-3707) is a quaint mixture of the exotically Biblical, which goes with his name, and the quaintly countrified, which goes with his home. He mixes scraps of the biblical Song of Songs with mundane details of life in a small town. Alison's response reverses the expected sexual roles; where he is dainty, she is blunt, not so much daungerous as dangerous, even threatening to throw stones.

The Miller's Tale is the second of The Canterbury Tales coming immediately after The Knight's Tale which it seems to parody, and before The Reeve's Tale which it provokes. This kind of interaction between tales and tellers is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Chaucer's collection that has often been commented on.

At the opening of The Canterbury Tales the Knight draws the lot to tell the first tale, a medieval romance which, like many others, tells of love and war. Set in a distant time and place, his story involves two aristocratic young warriors in pursuit of the same rather reluctant lady over whom they argue and fight with all the elaborate motions of medieval courtly love and chivalry. One of them dies in the fight, and the other gets the rather passive maiden as his prize.

The Miller's Tale, which immediately follows, is also about two young fellows who are rivals for one girl. But there is no exotic locale here and no aristocratic milieu. Instead we have a small English university town, where students lodge in the houses of townspeople. The girl in question is no reluctant damsel, but the young, pretty and discontented wife of an old carpenter in whose house Nicholas the student (or "clerk") lodges. There is plenty of competition here too, but the love talking is more country than courtly; the only battle is an uproarious exchange of hot air and hot plowshare, and the principal cheeks kissed are not on the face. Chaucer deliberately makes this wonderfully farcical tale follow immediately upon the Knight's long, elegant story of aristocratic battle and romance, which he has just shown he can write so well, even if he writes it aslant. He is, perhaps, implying slyly that the titled people, the exotic locale, and the chivalric jousting of the The Knight's Tale are really about much the same thing as the more homely antics of
the boyos and housewives of Oxford. The deliberate juxtaposition of the tales is suggestive, but the reader must decide.

In a much-used translation of the Canterbury Tales from the early years of this century, by Tatlock and Mackaye, The Miller's Tale is censored so heavily that the reader is hard put to it to tell what is going on. Custom at that time and for long afterward did not permit the bawdiness of the tale to be accepted "frankly," as we would now put it. This squeamishness was not peculiar to the late Victorian sensibility, however. Chaucer himself realized that some people of his own day (like some in ours) might well take exception to the "frank" treatment of adulterous sex. So, just before the tale proper begins, he does warn any readers of delicate sensibility who do not wish to hear ribald tales, and invites them to "turn over the leaf and choose another tale" of a different kind, for he does have some pious and moral stories.

Along with the warning to the reader comes a kind of apologetic excuse: Chaucer pretends that he was a real pilgrim on that memorable journey to Canterbury, and that he is now simply and faithfully reproducing a tale told by another real pilgrim, a miller by trade. Such fellows are often coarse, naturally, but Chaucer cannot help that, he says. If he is to do his job properly, he must reproduce the tale exactly, complete with accounts of naughty acts and churlish words. Of course, nobody has given Chaucer any such job. There is no real miller; he is totally Chaucer's creation—words, warts and all. Drunken medieval millers did not speak in polished couplets, and a medieval reeve who brought up the rear of a mounted procession of thirty people could not indulge in verbal sparring with someone who headed up that same procession. We are clearly dealing with fiction in spite of Chaucer's jocose attempt to excuse himself for telling entertaining indecorous tales.

Another excuse and warning: it is only a joke, he says; one "should not make earnest of game," a warning often neglected by solemn critics.

Some Linguistic Notes

Spelling:
Sometimes the same word occurs with and without pronounced  -ê -
tubbes at line3626, but tubs at 3627; legges 3330; deare spouse 3610 but hoste lief and dear 3501; carpenter occurs often, but its possessive consistently has and -e- at the end: carpentère's; goode 3154 & good 3155; sweet 3206; sweete 3219; young 3225, younge 3233.

Y-:  y-told, has y-take, y-covered, y-clad. The words mean the same with or without the y-
-en: withouten, I will not tellen; I shall saven. Again, the words mean the same with or without the - (e)n.

Rhymes:
sail, counsel; Nicholas, rhymes with alas, was, solace, case;
likerous / mouse. wood, blood, flood 3507-8, 3518 (See also Stress below)

Stress:
Mostly miller, but millér (3167); certáin to rhyme with sayn and again(3495) but cértaín 3 times
MILLER'S TALE

THE MILLER'S TALE

Once upon a time

Whilom there was dwelling at Oxenford
A riché gnof that guestès held to board
And of his craft he was a carpenter.

With him there was dwelling a poor scholar
Had learnéd art, but all his fantasy
Was turned for to learn astrology;¹
And could a certain of conclusions
To deemen by interrogatïons
If that men askèd him in certain hours
When that men should have drought or elsè showers,
Or if men askèd him what shall befall.
Of everything, I may not reckon them all.

A pen portrait of Handy Nicholas, the lodger

This clerk was clepéd Handy Nicholas.²

Of dernè love he could and of solace³
And thereto he was sly and full privy
And like a maiden meeké for to see.
A chamber had he in that hostelry
Alone, withouten any company,

Full fetisly y-dight with herbès soot
And he himself as sweet as is the root
Of liquorice or any setéwale.
His Almagest and bookès great and small,
His astrolabé longing for his art,
3210 His augrim stones lying fair apart
  On shelves couched at his bede's head,
His press y-covered with a falding red
And all above there lay a gay sautry
On which he made a-nightes melody

3215 So sweetely that all the chamber rang
And "Angelus ad Virginem" he sang.  
And after that he sang the kinge's note.
Full often blessed was his merry throat.
And thus this sweete clerk his time spent

3220 After his friends' finding and his rent. 
    This carpenter had wedded new a wife
Which that he loved more than his life.
Of 18 years she was of age.
Jealous he was and held her narrow in cage,

3225 For she was wild and young and he was old
And deemed himself be like a cuckëwold.
He knew not Cato, for his wit was rude,
That bade a man should wed his similitude.
Men shouldë wedden after their estate,

3230 For youth and eld is often at debate,
But since that he was fallen in the snare,
He must endure, as other folk, his care.

A pen portrait of Alison, the attractive young wife of the old carpenter.

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1 3208-10: The Almagest was a standard text in astrology; an astrolabe was an instrument for calculating the position of heavenly bodies, an early sextant. Augrim (algorithm) stones were counters for use in mathematical calculations.

2 3216-7: "Angelus ad Virginem," the Angel to the Virgin (Mary), a religious song about the Annunciation. "King's note" (3217) has not been satisfactorily explained.

3 3220: Supported by his friends and with his own earnings (from astrology?).

4 3226: "And he thought it likely he would become a cuckold (i.e. a betrayed husband)."

5 3227: Cato was the name given to the author of a Latin book commonly used in medieval schools, which contained wise sayings like: People should marry partners of similar rank and age.
Fair was this youngé wife, and therewithal
As any weasel her body gent and small.

A ceint she wearéd, barréd all of silk
A barmcloth eke as white as morning milk
Upon her lendés, full of many a gore.
White was her smock and broiden all before
And eke behind and on her collar about

Of coal black silk within and eke without.
The tapés of her whité voluper
Were of the samé suit of her collar;
Her fillet broad of silk and set full high.
And sikerly she had a likerous eye.

Full small y-pulléd were her browès two
And those were bent and black as any sloe
She was full moré blissful on to see
Than is the newé pear-jennetting tree,
And softer than the wool is of a wether.

And by her girdle hung a purse of leather
Tasselled with silk and pearled with lattoun.
In all this world to seeken up and down
There is no man so wisé that could thench
So gay a popelot or such a wench.

Full brighter was the shining of her hue
Than in the Tower the noble forgéd new.
But of her song, it was as loud and yern
As any swallow sitting on a barn.

Thereto she couldé skip and make a game
As any kid or calf following his dame.
Her mouth was sweet as bragot or the meeth
Or hoard of apples laid in hay or heath.
Wincing she was as is a jolly colt,
Long as a mast and upright as a bolt.

A brooch she bore upon her lower collar
As broad as is the boss of a buckeler.
Her shoes were lacéd on her leggês high.
She was a primerole, a piggy's-eye
For any lord to layen in his bed
3270  Or yet for any good yeoman to wed.

_Handy Nick's very direct approach to Alison_

Now sir, and eft sir, so befell the case
That on a day this Handy Nicholas
Fell with this younge wife to rage and play
While that her husband was at Osênay.

3275  As clerkês be full subtle and full quaint;
And privily he caught her by the quaint
And said: "Y-wis, but if I have my will,
For derne love of thee, lemman, I spill."
And held her harde by the haunchè bones

3280  And saide: "Lemman, love me all at once
Or I will die, all so God me save."  
And she sprang as a colt does in the trave
And with her head she wrièd fast away
And said: "I will not kiss thee, by my fay.

3285  Why, let be," quod she, "let be, Nicholas
Or I will cry out `Harrow!' and `Alas!'
Do way your handès, for your courtesey."
This Nicholas gan mercy for to cry
And spoke so fair, and proffered him so fast,

3290  That she her love him granted at the last.
And swore her oath by Saint Thomas of Kent
That she would be at his commandèment
When that she may her leisure well espy.
"My husband is so full of jealousy

3295  That but you waitè well and be privy,
I wot right well I n'am but dead," quod she.
"You mustè be full derne as in this case."
"Nay, thereof care thee not," quod Nicholas.

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1 3278: "I will die _I spill_ of suppressed _derne_ desire for you, _sweetheart_ (lemman)."

2 3281: "I will die, I declare to God."

3 3295-6: "Unless you are patient and discreet (privy), I know _I wot_ well that I am as good as dead."
"A clerk had litherly beset his while
But if he could a carpenter beguile." ¹
And thus they be accorded and y-swore agreed & sworn
To wait a time, as I have said before.
When Nicholas had done thus every deal
And thwacked her upon the lendês well, patted her bottom
He kissed her sweet and taketh his sautry guitar
And playeth fast and maketh melody.

Enter another admirer, the foppish parish assistant, Absalom or Absalon

Then fell it thus, that to the parish church
Of Christe's ownè workès for to work
This good wife went upon a holy day.
Her forehead shone as bright as any day,
So was it washed when she let her work. left
Now was there of that church a parish clerk
The which that was y-clepèd Absalon.² who was called

A pen portrait of Absalom, a man of many talents

Curled was his hair, and as the gold it shone,
And strouted as a fan, large and broad. spread
Full straight and even lay his jolly shode. his neat hair parting
His rode was red, his eyen grey as goose.³ complexion / eyes
With Paule's windows carven on his shoes.⁴ St. Paul's

¹ 3299-3300: "A student would have used his time badly if he could not fool a carpenter."

² 3312-13: This clerk -- the town dandy, surgeon barber and lay lawyer -- is not a student nor a priest but a lay assistant to the pastor of the parish. Absalom or Absolon was an unusual name for an Englishman in the 14th century. The biblical Absalom was a byword for male, somewhat effeminate beauty, especially of his hair: "In all Israel there was none so much praised as Absalom for his beauty. And when he polled his head ... he weighed the hair at two hundred shekels." (II Sam. 14:25-6).

³ 3317: "He had a pink complexion and goose-grey eyes." Goose-grey or glass-grey eyes were generally reserved for heroines of romances.

⁴ A design cut into the shoe leather which resembled the windows of St Paul's cathedral, the height of fashion, presumably.
In hosen red he went full feticly.  
Y-clad he was full small and properly  
All in a kirtle of a light waget.  
Full fair and thické be the pointès set.  
And thereupon he had a gay surplice  
As white as is the blossom upon the rise.  
A merry child he was, so God me save.  
Well could he letten blood, and clip and shave,  
And make a charter of land or aquittance.  
In twenty manner could he skip and dance  
After the school of Oxenfordé tho  
And with his legges casten to and fro  
And playen songs upon a small ribible.  
Thereto he sang sometimes a loud quinible  
And as well could he play on a gitern.  
In all the town n'as brewhouse nor tavern  
That he ne visited with his solace  
Where any gaillard tapster was.  
But sooth to say, he was somedeal squeamish  
Of farting, and of speechè daungerous.  

Absalom notices Alison in church

This Absalom that jolly was and gay  
Goes with a censer on the holy day  
Censing the wivès of the parish fast,¹  
And many a lovely look on them he cast  
And namely on this carpentere’s wife.  
To look on her him thought a merry life.  
She was so proper and sweet and likerous,  
I dare well say, if she had been a mouse  
And he a cat, he would her hent anon.  
This parish clerk, this jolly Absalon,

¹ 3341: It was the custom at one or more points in the service for the clerk or altarboy to turn to the congregation swinging the incense (censing) several times in their direction as a gesture of respect and blessing.
Hath in his hearte such a love longing
That of no wife ne took he no offering.
For courtesy, he said, he woulde none.

Absalom serenades Alison

The moon when it was night, full brighte shone
And Absalom his giterne has y-take
For paramours he thoughte for to wake;
And forth he goes, jolly and amorous,
Till he came to the carpenters house
A little after the cockes had y-crow,
And dressed him up by a shot window
That was upon the carpenteres wall.

He singeth in his voice gentle and small:
"Now, deare lady, if thy will be,
I pray you that you will rue on me,"
Full well accordant to his giterning.
This carpenter awoke and heard him sing
And spoke unto his wife and said anon:
"What, Alison, hear'st thou not Absalon
That chanteth thus under our bower's wall?"
"Yes, God wot, John. I hear it every deal."

Absalom courts her by every means he can

This passeth forth. What will you bet than well?
From day to day this jolly Absalon
So wooeth her that he is woe-begone.

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1 3354: Either "For love's sake he intended to stay awake" or "For lovers he intended to serenade."

2 3358: "Took up his position near a shuttered window."

3 3361: Addressing a carpenter's wife as "lady" was far more flattering in the 14th century than it would be now.

4 3370: "This went on. What can I say?"
He waketh all the night and all the day,
He combed his lockes broad and made him gay.

He wooeth her by means and by brocage
And swore he would be her owne page.
He singeth, brocking as a nightingale.
He sent her piment, mead and spiced ale
And wafers piping hot out of the gleed

And for she was of town, he proffered meed;
For some folk will be wonned for richesse
And some for strokes, and some for gentleness.
Sometimes to show his lightness and mastery
He playeth Herodês upon a scaffold high.¹

Absalom’s wooing is in vain: she loves Handy Nick

But what availeth him as in this case?
So loveth she this Handy Nicholas
That Absalom may blow the bucke’s horn.
He ne had for his labor but a scorn.
And thus she maketh Absalom her ape

And all his earnest turneth to a jape.
Full sooth is this provérb, it is no lie,
Men say right thus: "Always the nighé sly
Maketh the farre leeve to be loth." ²
For though that Absalom be wood or wroth,
Because that he was farré from her sight
This nighé Nicholas stood in his light.
Now bear thee well, thou Handy Nicholas,
For Absalom may wail and sing "Alas!"

Nicholas concocts an elaborate plan so that he can make love to Alison

¹ 3384: Absalom seems rather miscast as Herod in a mystery play. Herod, like Pilate, is always portrayed as a tyrant in such plays, and he rants, roars and threatens. His voice is never "gentle and small." Hence Hamlet's later complaint about ham actors who "out-herod Herod." See 3124 above.

² 3392-3: "The sly one who is nearby (nighé) causes the more distant beloved (the farre leeve) to become unloved." i.e. Absence makes the heart grow farther.
And so befell it on a Saturday

This carpenter was gone to Osney
And Handy Nicholas and Alison
Accorded been to this conclusion:
That Nicholas shall shapen them a wile
This silly jealous husband to beguile,

And if so be this game went aright,
She should sleepen in his arms all night,
For this was her desire and his also.
And right anon withouten wordes mo'
This Nicholas no longer would he tarry

But doth full soft unto his chamber carry
Both meat and drinke for a day or tway,
And to her husband bade her for to say
If that he asked after Nicholas,
She should say she n'ist where he was;

Of all that day she saw him not with eye.
She trowed that he was in malady,
For, for no cry her maiden could him call.
He n'ould answer, for nothing that might fall.
This passeth forth all thilk Saturday

That Nicholas still in his chamber lay
And ate and slept or did what him lest
Till Sunday that the sunnë goes to rest.

The carpenter, worried about Nick's absence, sends a servant up to enquire

This silly carpenter has great marvel
Of Nicholas or what thing might him ail,

And said: "I am adread, by St. Thomás,
It standeth not aright with Nicholas.
God shieldë that he died suddenly.
This world is now full tickle sikerly.
I saw today a corpsë borne to church

That now on Monday last I saw him work."
"Go up," quod he unto his knave anon.
"Clepe at his door, or knocke with a stone. 
Look how it is and tell me boldly." 
This knave goes him up full sturdily.

And at the chamber door while that he stood, 
He cried and knockèd as that he were wood: 
"What! How? What do you, Master Nicholay? 
How may you sleepe all the longè day?"
But all for nought; he hearde not a word.

A hole he found full low upon a board 
There as the cat was wont in for to creep, 
And at that hole he lookèd in full deep 
And at the last he had of him a sight. 
This Nicholas sat ever gaping upright

As he had kikèd on the newè moon. 
Adown he goes and told his master soon 
In what array he saw this ilkè man.

The carpenter shakes his head at the excessive curiosity of intellectuals. 
_He is glad that he is just a simple working man_

This carpenter to blessen him began 
And said: "Help us, St. Fridèswide. 

A man wot little what shall him betide. 
This man is fall, with his astronomy, 
In some woodness or in some agony. 
I thought aye well how that it shouldè be. 
Men should not know of Godè's privity.

Yea, blessèd be always a Jewèd man 
That nought but only his beliefè can. 
So farèd another clerk with astromy. 
He walkèd in the fieldes for to pry 
Upon the stars, what there should befall—

Till he was in a marlèpit y-fall. 
He saw not that. But yet, by St. Thomàs, 
Me reweth sore of Handy Nicholas.

---

1 3455-6: "Blessèd is the illiterate man who knows (can) nothing but his belief [in God]."
He shall be rated of his studying, rebuked
If that I may, by Jesus, heaven's king.

With Robin's help he breaks down the door to Nick's room

3465 Get me a staff, that I may underspore, lever up
Whilst that thou, Robin, heavest up the door.
He shall out of his studying, as I guess." he applied himself
And to the chamber door he gan him dress. strong fellow indeed
His knavé was a strong carl for the nonce

3470 And by the hasp he heaved it up at once.
On to the floor the dooré fell anon.
This Nicholas sat aye as still as stone stayed sitting
And ever gapé up into the air.
This carpenter wend he were in despair 1 thought he was
And hent him by the shoulder mightily seized
And shook him hard and cried spitously: vehemently
I crouché thee from elves and from wights." I bless / (evil) creatures

3475 And therewith the night-spell said he anonrights 2
On fouré halvés of the house about sides
And on the threshold of the door without.
"Jesus Christ, and Sainté Benedict
Bless this house from every wicked wight,

3480 For the night's verie, the whité Pater Noster. sister
Where wentest thou, Sainté Peter's soster?" 3

1 3474: The carpenter's fine theological judgement diagnoses the symptoms as those of someone who has succumbed to one of the two sins against the virtue of Hope, namely Despair. He is wrong; Nicholas's defect is the other sin against Hope--Presumption.

2 3479-80: "I make the sign of the cross [to protect] you from elves and [evil] creatures.' Then he said the night prayer at once."

3 3483-6: The third and fourth lines of this "prayer" are pious gobbledygook of the carpenter's creation, a version of some prayer he has heard or rather misheard. Pater Noster is Latin for Our Father, the Lord's Prayer, but white P.N. is obscure, as is verie. Soster for the more usual suster may be an attempt at dialect usage.
Nicholas finally pretends to come to, and promises to tell the carpenter a secret in strictest confidence

And at the last, this Handy Nicholas
Gan for to sigh sore and said: "Alas!
Shall all the world be lost eftsoones now?"

This carpenter answered: "What sayest thou?
What, think on God, as we do, men that swink."
This Nicholas answered: "Fetch me drink.
And after will I speak in privity
Of certain things that toucheth me and thee.
Right now
I will tell it to no other man, certáin."
This carpenter goes down and comes again
And brought of mighty ale a largé quart
And when that each of them had drunk his part
This Nicholas his dooré fasté shut

And down the carpenter by him he sat
And saidé: "John, my hosté lief and dear,
Thou shalt upon thy truth swear to me here
That to no wight thou shall this counsel wray,
No person / divulge
For it is Christe's counsel that I say,
Lief = beloved
And if thou tell it man, thou art forlore,
Man=anyone / lost
For this vengeance shalt thou have therefore
That if thou wrayé me, thou shalt be wood."
"Nay, Christ forbid it for his holy blood,"
Betray me / go mad
Quod then this silly man. "I am no labb.
Blabber
And though I say, I am not lief to gab.
Not fond of gabbing
Say what thou wilt. I shall it never tell
To child nor wife, by Him that harrowed Hell." ¹
I.e. by Christ

There is going to be a new Deluge like the biblical one, but Nicholas can save only the carpenter and his wife -- IF John does as he is told

¹ 3512: A favorite medieval legend told how Christ, in the interval between His death on the cross and His resurrection, went to Hell (or Limbo) to rescue from Satan's power the Old Testament heroes and heroines from Adam and Eve onwards. This was the Harrowing of Hell.
"Now, John," quod Nicholas, "I will not lie. I have found in my astrology

As I have looked on the moon bright
That now on Monday next, at quarter night
Shall fall a rain, and that so wild and wood
That half so great was never Noah's flood.
This world," he said, "in less than an hour

Shall all be drenched, so hideous is the shower.
Thus shall mankind drench and lose their life." This carpenter answered: "Alas, my wife! And shall she drench? Alas, my Alison!"
For sorrow of this he fell almost adown

And said: "Is there no remedy in this case?"
"Why, yes, 'fore God," quod Handy Nicholas,
"If thou wilt worken after lore and redde.¹
Thou mayst not worken after thine own head.
For thus says Solomon that was full true:

`Work all by counsel and thou shalt not rue.'
And if thou worken wilt by good counsel,
I undertake, withouten mast or sail,
Yet shall I saven her and thee and me.
Hast thou not heard how savéd was Noë

When that Our Lord had warnèd him before
That all the world with water should be lore?"
"Yes," quod this carpenter, "full yore ago."

Nicholas gives John instructions on how to prepare for the Flood

"Hast thou not heard," quod Nicholas, "also
The sorrow of Noah with his fellowship

Ere that he mightè get his wife to ship?
Him had lever, I dare well undertake,
At thilkè time, than all his wethers black,
That she had had a ship herself alone.²

¹ 3527: "If you will follow advice and counsel."

² 3538 ff: A favorite character in medieval miracle plays was "Mrs Noah" who stubbornly
And therefore, wost thou what is best to done?

Does asketh haste, and of a hasty thing
Men may not preach or maken tarrying.

Anon, go get us fast into this inn
A kneading trough or else a kimelin
For each of us; but look that they be large

In which we mayen swim as in a barge.
And have therein victuals sufficient
But for a day. Fie on the remnant!
The water shall aslake and go away
Aboute prime upon the nexte day.

But Robin may not wit of this, thy knave,
Nor eke thy maiden Gill I may not save.
Aské not why, for though thou aské me
I will not tellen Gode's privity.
Sufficeth thee, but if thy wittès mad,

To have as great a grace as Noah had.
Thy wife shall I well saven, out of doubt.
Go now thy way, and speed thee hereabout.
But when thou hast for her and thee and me
Y-gotten us these kneading tubbes three,

Then shalt thou hang them in the roof full high,
That no man of our purveyance espy.
And when thou thus hast done as I have said
And hast our victuals fair in them y-laid
And eke an axe to smite the cord a-two,

When that the water comes, that we may go
And break a hole on high upon the gable
Unto the garden-ward, over the stable
That we may freely passen forth our way
When that the greatë shower is gone away —-

Then shalt thou swim as merry, I undertake,
As does the whitë duck after her drake.
Then will I clepe: "How, Alison! How, John!

refuses to leave her cronies and her bottle of wine to go aboard the ark. She has to be dragged to the ark, and she boxes Noah's ears for his pains. She is the quintessential shrew. Hence the idea that Noah would have given all his prize sheep if she could have had a ship to herself.
Be merry, for the flood will pass anon."
And thou wilt say: "Hail, Master Nicholay.
Good morrow. I see thee well, for it is day."
And then shall we be lords all our life
Of all the world, as Noah and his wife.

Further instructions on how to behave on the night of the Flood

But of one thing I warnè thee full right:
Be well advised on that ilk night
That we be entered into shipper's board
That none of us speake not a word
Nor clepe nor cry, but be in his prayer
For it is God's owne heste dear.
Thy wife and thou must hangè far a-twin
For that betwixt you shall be no sin,
No more in looking than there shall in deed.
This ordinance is said. Go, God thee speed.
Tomorrow at night, when men be all asleep,
Into our kneading tubbes will we creep
And sitten there, abiding God's grace.
Go now thy way, I have no longer space
To make of this no longer sermoning.
Men say thus: 'Send the wise and say nothing.'
Thou art so wise, it needeth thee not teach.
Go, save our lives, and that I thee beseech."

John tells the plans to his wife (who already knows). He installs the big tubs on the house roof, and supplies them with food and drink

This silly carpenter goes forth his way.
Full oft he said: "Alas!" and "Welaway!"
And to his wife he told his privity
And she was 'ware and knew it bet than he
What all this quaintè cast was for to say.
But notwithstanding, she fared as she would die,
And said "Alas! Go forth thy way anon."
Help us to 'scape, or we be dead each one.
I am thy truē, very, wedded wife.

Go, dearē spouse, and help to save our life."
Lo, which a great thing is affection.
Men may die of imagination,
So deepē may impression be take.
This silly carpenter beginneth quake.

Him thinketh verily that he may see
Noah's flood come wallowing as the sea
To drenchen Alison, his honey dear.
He weepeth, waileth, maketh sorry cheer.
He sigheth, with full many a sorry swough.

He goes and getteth him a kneading trough,
And after that a tub and kimelin,
And privily he sent them to his inn
And hung them in the roof in privity.
His ownē hand, he madē ladders three
To climben by the rungēs and the stalks
Unto the tubbēs hanging in the balks,
And them he victualled, bothē trough and tub,
With bread and cheese and good ale in a jub
Sufficing right enough as for a day.

But ere that he had made all this array,
He sent his knave and eke his wench also
Upon his need to London for to go.

On the fateful night all three get into their separate tubs, and say their prayers

And on the Monday, when it drew to night,
He shut his door withouten candle light,

And dressēd alle thing as it should be.
And shortly up they climben allē three.
They sitten stillē, well a furlong way.¹
"Now, Pater Noster, clum," said Nicholay.

¹ 3637: A “furlong way” is the time it takes to walk a furlong (1/8 of a mile)--about 2 or 3 minutes.
And "Clum," quod John, and "Clum," said Alison.¹

3640 This carpenter said his devotion
And still he sits and biddeth his prayer
Awaiting on the rain if he it hear.
   The dead sleep, for weary busy-ness,
Fell on this carpenter, right (as I guess)
3645 About curfew time or little more.
   For travailing of his ghost he groaneth sore
And eft he routeth, for his head mislay.

This is the moment that Nicholas and Alison have been waiting and planning for

   Down off the ladder stalketh Nicholay
And Alison full soft adown she sped.
3650 Withouten word more, they go to bed
   There as the carpenter is wont to lie.
There was the revel and the melody.
   And thus lie Alison and Nicholas
In busyness of mirth and of soláce
3655 Till that the bell of laud gan to ring
   And friars in the chancel gan to sing.

Absalom, thinking that the carpenter is absent, comes serenading again

   This parish clerk, this amorous Absalon,
That is for love always so woe-begone,
Upon the Monday was at Oseney
3660 With company, him to disport and play,
   And asked upon case a cloisterer
Full privily after John the carpenter,
   And he drew him apart out of the church.
And said: "I n’ot; I saw him here not work
3665 Since Saturday; I trow that he be went
   I guess he’s gone

¹ 3638-9: "Pater Noster": the first words of the Latin version of the Lord’s Prayer: Our Father. The "Clum" is meaningless, possibly a corrupt version of the end of "in saecula saeculorum," a common ending for prayers. Thus the whole prayer is ignorantly (and irreverently) reduced to beginning and ending formulas.
For timber, there our abbot has him sent.  
For he is wont for timber for to go  
And dwellen at the grange a day or two;  
Or else he is at his house certain.  
Where that he be I cannot soothly sayn."

This Absalom full jolly was and light  
And thought: "Now is time to wake all night,  
For sikerly I saw him not stirring  
About his door, since day began to spring."

So may I thrive, I shall at cocke's crow  
Full privily knocken at his window  
That stands full low upon his bower's wall.  
To Alison now will I tellen all  
My love longing, for yet I shall not miss

That at the leaste way I shall her kiss.  
Some manner comfort shall I have parfay.  
My mouth has itchéd all this longe day.  
That is a sign of kissing at the least.  
All night me mette eke I was at a feast."

Therefore I will go sleep an hour or tway,  
And all the night then will I wake and play.""

When that the firste cock has crowed anon  
Up rist this jolly lover, Absalon  
And him arrayeth gay at point devise.¹  
But first he cheweth grain and liquorice  
To smellen sweet. Ere he had combed his hair,  
Under his tongue a truelove he bare,  
For thereby wend he to be gracious.  
He roameth to the carpenteré's house  
And he stands still under the shot window.  
Unto his breast it rought, it was so low,  
And soft he cougheth with a semi-sound.  
"What do you, honeycomb, sweet Alison?"

¹ 3689: "Dresses himself to the nines in all his finery."
My fairè bird, my sweetè cinnamon.
Awaketh, lemman mine, and speak to me.
Well little thinketh you upon my woe
That for your love I sweatè where I go.
No wonder is though that I swelt and sweat.
I mourn as does the lamb after the teat.

Ywis, lemman, I have such love longing
That like a turtle true is my mourning.
I may not eat no morè than a maid."

Alison’s ungracious verbal response

"Go from the window, Jackè Fool," she said.
"As help me God, it will not be 'Compame'.

I love another (or else I were to blame)
Well bet than thee, by Jesus, Absalon.
Go forth thy way, or I will cast a stone,
And let me sleep, a twenty devil way." ¹
"Alas!" quod Absalom, "and Welaway!

That truè love was e'er so evil beset. ²
Then, kiss me, since that it may be no bet,
For Jesus' love, and for the love of me."
"Wilt thou then go thy way therewith?" quod she.
"Yea, certè, lemman," quod this Absalon.

"Then make thee ready," quod she. "I come anon."

Her even more ungracious practical joke

And unto Nicholas she saïdè still:
"Now hush, and thou shalt laughen all thy fill."
This Absalom down set him on his knees
And said: "I am a lord at all degrees.

For after this I hope there cometh more.

¹ 3713: "The devil take you twenty times"
² 3715: The line might be read: "That truè love was e'er so ill beset."
Lemman, thy grace and, sweete bird, thine ore"!
The window she undoes, and that in haste.
"Have done," quod she. "Come off and speed thee fast,
Lest that our neighebourés thee espy."

This Absalom gan wipe his mouth full dry.
Dark was the night as pitch or as the coal
And at the window out she put her hole.
And Absalom, him fell nor bet nor worse,
But with his mouth he kissed her naked arse

Full savorly, ere he was 'ware of this.
Aback he starts, and thought it was amiss,
For well he wist a woman has no beard.
He felt a thing all rough and long y-haired
And said: "Fie! Alas! What have I do?"
"Tee hee," quod she, and clapt the window to.
And Absalom goes forth a sorry pace.
"A beard! a beard!" quod Handy Nicholas.
"By God's corpus, this goes fair and well."

Absalom plots revenge for his humiliation

This silly Absalom heard every deal
And on his lip he gan for anger bite
And to himself he said "I shall thee 'quite."

Who rubbeth now? Who frotteth now his lips
With dust, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with chips
But Absalom that says full oft: "Alas!

My soul betake I unto Satanas,
But me were lever than all this town," quod he,
Of this despite a-wreaken for to be.
"Alas!" quod he "Alas! I n'ad y-blent." 2
His hotè love is cold and all y-quenched.

For from that time that he had kissed her arse

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1 3726: "Darling, [grant me] your favor, and sweet bird, [grant me] your mercy." A line parodying the love language of romances.

2 3753: "Alas, that I did not duck aside" (?)
Of paramours he settè not a curse,¹
For he was healèd of his malady.
Full often paramours he gan deny
denounce
And wept as does a child that is y-beat.

A softè pace he went over the street
Unto a smith men clepen Daun Gervase
That in his forge smithèd plough harness.
He sharpened share and couteur busily.
This Absalom knocks all easily
3760
Quietly he went
call
This Absalom knocks all easily
3765
And said: "Undo, Gervase, and that anon."
"What? Who art thou?" "It am I, Absalon."
"What, Absalon! What, Christè's sweetè tree!
Why risè you so rathe. Hey, ben'citatee!
What aileth you? Some gay girl, God it wot, pretty girl
3770
Has brought you thus upon the viritot.
By Saint Neòt, you wot well what I mean."
This Absalom ne raughtè not a bean
Of all his play. No word again he gave.
He hadde more tow on his distaff ²

Than Gervase knew, and saidè: "Friend so dear,
That hotè couteur in the chimney here
As lend it me. I have therewith to do.
And I will bring it thee again full soon.
Gervasè answered: "Certès, were it gold
Certainly
Or in a pokè nobles all untold,³
Thou shouldest it have, as I am trué smith.
 Eh! Christè's foe! What will you do therewith?"
"Thereof," quod Absalom, "be as be may.
I shall well tell it thee another day."
3780
And caught the couteur by the coldè steel.
cold handle

¹ 3756: "Curse": The intended word may be "cress," a weed.

² 3774: "He had more wool or flax on his distaff." A distaff was a stick, traditionally used by women, to make thread from raw wool or flax. The phrase appears to mean either "He had other things on his mind" or "He had other work to do."

³ 3779-80: "Certainly. [even] if it were gold or an uncounted (untold) number of coins (nobles) in a bag (poke) ..."
Full soft out at the door he 'gan to steal
And went unto the carpenterë's wall.

Absalom’s revenge

He cougheth first and knocketh therewithall
Upon the window, right as he did ere.

This Alison answered: "Who is there
That knocketh so? I warrant it a thief."
"Why, nay," quod he, "God wot, my sweetë lief.
I am thine Absalom, my darling.
Of gold," quod he, "I have thee brought a ring.

My mother gave it me, so God me save.
Full fine it is, and thereto well y-grave.
This will I given thee, if thou me kiss."
This Nicholas was risen for to piss
And thought he would amend all the jape.

He should kiss his arse ere that he 'scape.
And up the window did he hastily
And out his arse he putteth privily
Over the buttock, to the haunchë bone.
And therewith spoke this clerk, this Absalon:

"Speak, sweet heart. I wot not where thou art."
This Nicholas anon let fly a fart
As great as it had been a thunder dint
That with that stroke he was almost y-blint.
But he was ready with his iron hot

And Nicholas amid the arse he smote.
Off goes the skin a handëbreadth about.
The hot coulter burnëd so his tout
That for the smart he weened for to die.
As he were wood, for woe he 'gan to cry

"Help! Water! Water! Help! for God's heart."

The carpenter re-enters the story with a crash

This carpenter out of his slumber start
And heard one cry "Water!" as he were wood. And thought "Alas! Now cometh Noah's flood." He set him up withouten wordes mo'

And with his ax he smote the cord a-two
And down goes all—he found neither to sell Nor bread nor ale, till he came to the cell
Upon the floor, and there aswoon he lay.

Alison and Nicholas lie their way out of the predicament

Up starts her Alison, and Nicholay,

And cried "Out!" and "Harrow!" in the street. (Cries of alarm)
The neighbourès, bothè small and great
In runnen for to gauren on this man
to gape
That aswoon lay, bothè pale and wan.
For with the fall he bursten had his arm,

But stand he must unto his ownè harm,²
For when he spoke, he was anon bore down"With" = "By"
With Handy Nicholas and Alison.
They tolden every man that he was wood;
mad
He was aghast so of Noah's flood

Through fantasy, that of his vanity
He had y-bought him kneading tubbes three³
And had them hangèd in the roof above
And that he prayèd them for Godè's love
To sitten in the roof "par compagnie."

The folk gan laughen at his fantasy.
Into the roof they kiken and they gape
And turned all his harm into a jape
For whatso that this carpenter answered

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¹ 3821-3: "He found...floor": there was nothing between him and the ground below.

² 3830: A difficult line meaning, perhaps, "He had to take the responsibility for his injury (or misfortune)" or "He had to take the blame."

³ 3834-6: "He was so afraid of Noah's flood in his mind that in his foolishness he had bought...."
It was for naught. No man his reason heard.

3845 With oaths great he was so sworn adown
That he was holden wood in all the town. held to be mad
For every clerk anon right held with other.¹
They said: "The man was wood, my levé brother." mad, my dear b.
And every wight gan laughen at this strife. person

The "moral" of the story

3850 Thus swivéd was the carpenteré's wife laid
For all his keeping and his jealousy.
And Absalom has kissed her nether eye lower
And Nicholas is scalded in the tout. on the bottom
This tale is done, and God save all the rout. this group

¹ 3847: Presumably a reference to the "town" versus "gown" loyalties in university towns. Nicholas, a "clerk," is a member of the "gown," John the carpenter a member of the "town."