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# “The Bedroom and the Barnyard: Zoomorphic Lust Through Territory, Procedure, and Shelter in ‘The Miller’s Tale’ & HAUNCHEBONES

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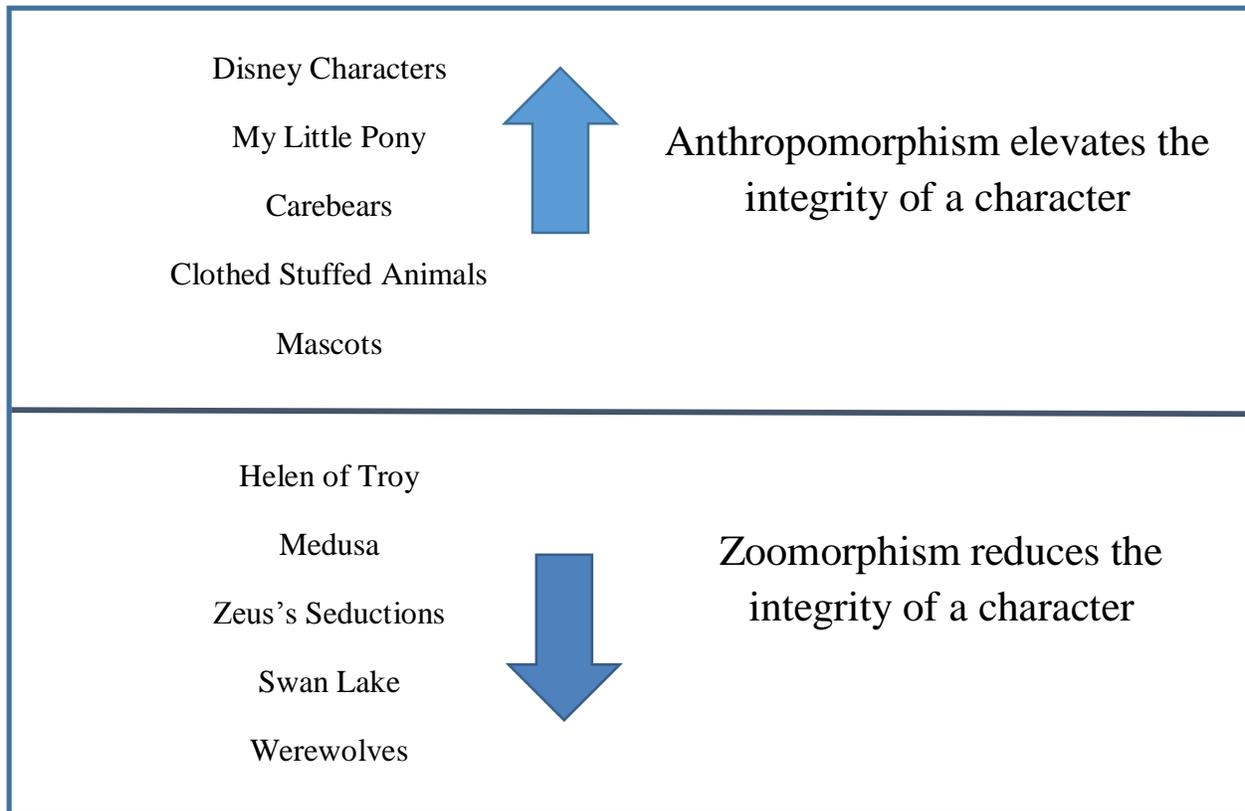
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**The Barnyard and the Bedroom:  
Zoomorphic Lust Through Territory, Procedure, and Shelter in “The Miller’s Tale”**

**Introduction**

Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale” is littered with references to animal-like behavior which are frequently portrayed by the bestial metaphors and similes in the story. The barnyard setting adjacent to the house, especially its bedroom, serves as a psychologically suitable environment for the tale’s climax, and compromises the human status of those who commit the adultery. This setting is complicated by the plot, a scenario which should provide an ease for two of the characters to sleep together; however, a ritualistic plan is created. The conflict of the plot is later created by the setting, taking the author’s zoomorphic language and dissolving the adulterous intent between the human plans in the barn and the animal intent in the bedroom. The result is the complexities of human scheme echoing in the animal-like desire. While sexual relations in literature may be confused with love, the primary motive in Chaucer’s tale is instead lust, and this primitive characteristic spreads itself throughout the text, exploiting the chaos between moral human will and immoral non-human instinct.

Characters with blended human and animal attributes transcend most cultures and periods, and there are two sides: anthropomorphic characters, and zoomorphic characters. Anthropomorphism relies on the subject being animal, yet with human traits. On the other hand, zoomorphism takes a human subject and suggests animal-like attributes. Characters who comprise the past three to four thousand years of storytelling are frequently a fusion of human and animal, though, typically can be categorized as anthropomorphic or zoomorphic. Anthropomorphic characters are generally good-natured and non-threatening, and their most popular characterizations are found in children’s media. On the other hand, “The Miller’s Tale”



*Figure 1.1* **Anthropomorphic & Zoomorphic Characterizations**

provides characters who are zoomorphic, and as Figure 1.1 demonstrates, characters of this nature are often connected to chaos, which is suitable when thinking of a civilized, human body becoming adulterated by the primitive nature of animals.

The idea of territory in the tale addresses the characters' possessive interactions and may be juxtaposed to the behavior to animals. Ownership is generally synonymous with power and thus, social status. The territorial behavior of animals may have the connotation of war-like behavior when it comes to one asserting what belongs to them, however, biologically, for animals this assurance of what is possessed by whom is more strongly related to breeding rites and not economics. "The Miller's Tale" echoes this branch of territorial anxiety, since Alisoun is property, yet she also has control of whom she does or does not sleep with. John is away in Osney when Nicholas proposes the rendezvous to Alisoun, so they could have a quick adulterous

accomplishment at this time, but since Nicholas insists on his plot for the couple to secretly have sex, he must rate Alisoun at an incredible value. A brief intimate moment could be accomplished between the pair at a variety of given times, but Nicholas seems to seek a higher gravity of making Alisoun his.

The characters' possessive actions may also be viewed as ritualistic procedure—another bestial trait, such as the mating ritual, which is intended to gain sexual possession of another. Nicholas' proposed scheme of the fictional flood and the washtubs strung in the barn's loft is far more elaborate than a simple quickie while John is out on business. Why make it so complicated? It is very likely that Nicholas would prefer to avoid such complexities in his mission to bed Alisoun, and his superfluous production suggests an underlying necessity for his plot. What do these procedures do for a sexually eager tenant? It alters the idea of social structure, and ceremoniously gifts to Nicholas what value he sees in Alisoun, allowing him to squeeze in on John's success. Through the actions of the flood scheme Nicholas obtains temporary ownership of Alisoun, as well as John's social status.

What one owns, and the procedure used to represent such possession, often requires a special setting or sort of shelter, leading to a blending of barn loft and bedroom in the tale. Much like places of worship, barns have an identity that distinguishes them from human dwellings. The zoomorphic qualities of the tale's settings amplify the presence of animal-human character descriptions and serve the characters' primary needs in the barn and the bedroom: a shelter for animals, and a shelter for sex. The boundaries of human and animal become blurred in these shelters by the actions of the characters, with Nicholas and Alisoun doing as they please in the bedroom, while John is left as a cuckold in the barn. These settings are as crucial to

understanding the zoomorphic nature of the story as they are crucial to the characters to commit their actions.

The zoomorphic metaphors and similes of “The Miller’s Tale” can be better understood by looking at the matters of territory, sexual procedures, and the shelters where these things take place. By examining the importance of territory in “The Miller’s Tale,” readers can begin to grasp the motives of the characters. These motives are further clarified by the degree of which Nicholas and Absolon plan their procedures of courtship to woo Alisoun. The effort put into the suitors’ schemes is equally significant to the main settings. The bedroom and the barn act as the necessary shelters for the sexual procedures to be carried out in the characters’ hope of advancing their territory. Because the animal-like nature of the tale is a significant theme, a more thorough comprehension of the story can be achieved in understanding zoomorphic lust’s relationship to territory, sexual procedures, and shelter.

### **I. Territory: Possession and Dominion**

Territorial behavior first occurs in “The Miller’s Prologue” as the Miller, Robyn, butts his drunken way into the story-telling sequence, and his uncivilized behavior reflects the nature of the tale he will tell “a devel wey” (I.3134). Alisoun is introduced as the younger wife of the well-to-do carpenter John, a relationship which implies to readers that John financially possesses Alisoun. When Nicholas makes his move on Alisoun, he blatantly grabs “hire harde by the haunchebones” like pulling the reins on a horse to control its actions (I.3279). Being in charge of one’s territory can determine an animal-like pecking order, and can often be governed by sexual fervor. By discussing such examples of territory in “The Miller’s Tale,” an interest in

power may be the ultimate explanation in the relationship between lust, zoomorphism, and territory. Medievalist

To some degree, ownership affects the power one has to work with in their given circumstances, a quality shared by both humans and animals. Social hierarchies are typically shaped by one's prestige and one's prestige is shaped by the quantity of what belongs to them. Arguably, this matter may be more of a political want than a survival need, but the result is a situation that frequently leads a human or animal to behave as though it is necessary to explore as many means as possible to prove an outstanding social status meant to belittle rivals. John is not of exquisite social status, being a carpenter, but what he owns is charming to a student of the clergy, Nicholas. Upstaging John's role in the home is theoretically as simple as sleeping with Alisoun, thus the plot of "The Miller's Tale." This same avenue to success, at least a better way of living, is partially what Absolon also sees in Alisoun. Her physical body is essentially the key feature of John's possessions, and the right to sleep with her suggests a zoomorphic belief that intercourse with Alisoun provides not only biological pleasure but sociopolitical pleasure. Neither Nicholas nor Absolon are likely planning to father children through Alisoun, but she is a physical piece of territory that can eventually offer more property: John's estate.

After the Miller has ravished the decorum of turn-taking rights, he proceeds unapologetically with his story, focusing on his primary characters who are presented in the first third of his dialogue, John, Nicholas, and Alisoun. If the other pilgrims are taking note, it is sure that Robyn, the Miller, had already presented a triangle of characters: a well-to-do carpenter, his younger wife, and his clerical tenant, Nicholas. The basics of the fabliau define that this should be enough, but this physical body of the story also possesses ambiguities. Nicholas' position in the love-triangle becomes invaded, unsuccessfully, by Absolon, making the role of adulterous

lover a territory coveted by each; however, because of the lack of zoomorphic metaphors in Nicholas' description, it seems implied that he will not be competing for Alisoun in the same animal-like mating ritual that Absolon performs. As Ralph Baldwin explains, "[Chaucer] portrays the person, the inner man, as well as the physical attributes, the outer man, [and] he does not severely separate, but rather mixes the two phases quite indiscriminately," a statement that is easily seen in Absolon and Alisoun, but Chaucer tells us very little about Nicholas' inner and outer description (37). This mysteriousness prevents readers from knowing just what Nicholas is capable of doing, and allows him to possess a superior position in the love-triangle.

Though attempts are made to remind him that it is not his place to speak next, the Miller tells his tale out of turn, taking advantage of the speaking role's territory. Why would the Miller mind when he tells his story? His intoxication surely contributes to his rude way of stealing his spot as "next," but he also seems to have some underlying agenda driven by social status. If the first person to share a story is a member of the royal court, the Knight, being the next storyteller might suggest a closeness to that social class. Also, one of the first things declared by Robyn about his tale is that it will be dirty. The Miller's words are the genesis of his territory in *The Canterbury Tales*, self-authorizing his queue among the characters. Before Robyn cuts in with his story, his drunkenness is indexed by the narrator, leading readers to expect a churl-like story, though the Miller describes his tale with words that reach into the high class, storytelling domain of the Knight. The Miller begins by stating that he "kan [tell] a *noble* tale" (emphasis mine I.3126), going on to introduce his story as a "legende" (I.3141), which suggests it may be saintly or about martyrdom. Arguably, such content could not come from the Miller, though he seems to apply such vocabulary as a method to mimic the knightly boundaries of a tale and genre.

The listening pilgrims are, however, not fooled as the Reeve begins his protest after the Miller states that the clerk in his story will deceive the Carpenter (I.3143). The Reeve, Osewold, scolds Robyn for “apeyren any man, or hym defame” (I.3147), and it becomes yet more clear that the tale will involve adultery as the Reeve warns him not to, “bryngen wyves in swich fame” (I.3148). The Reeve has seen through the Miller’s inflated, pseudo-knightly language as well as his skewed defensiveness. Though the pilgrims may not be pleased with the upcoming lewd content of the Miller’s story, he is left to roam in the territory of his storytelling like a wild animal passing through—no one stops him. The Host makes minimal effort to corral the Miller from the storytelling frontier he seeks, only offering “som bettre man shal telle us first another [tale]” (I.3130), to which he meets the Miller’s retaliation with “tel on, a devel way!” (I.3134). Furthermore, after confronted by the Reeve, Robyn antagonizes Osewold’s doubts without regressing, and both the Miller and the text seem to ignore any response from the Reeve as “The Miller’s Tale” follows within twenty lines with only apologies from the narrator “that [he] shal reherce it heere” (I.3170).

“The Miller’s Tale” introduces Nicholas as “a poure scoler” rooming in John the Carpenter’s house, implying there is not much in the house, or elsewhere, belonging to Nicholas (I.3190). The catalogue describing Nicholas details his minute space in John’s residence, leading to, at most, his intellect being his prime possession. Everything in Nicholas’ room is due to his scholarly endeavors, and these objects, such as his books, *Almageste*, and *sautrie*, are his belongings and part of his identity as a scholar. When Nicholas attempts to possess Alisoun as a sexual partner, the small quantity of things already belonging to him assists his intellectual identity in developing and carrying out the plan; however, as Trevor Whittock explains, Nicholas’ intellect is his downfall due to the arrogance it creates in him (85). This sole thing that

surely belongs to him, his intelligence, fails him when he adopts another's idea, Alisoun's butt-in-the-window prank. This arrogance created by Nicholas' intellect possibly leads him to reenact Alisoun's stunt with the intent that he can somehow do it better. In the end, Nicholas pays painfully, and is a victim of his own new territory—his cleverness.

When it comes to thoughts of Absolon and what he owns, there would likely be a sound of crickets from readers. Like Nicholas, Absolon is a young, unestablished man in medieval Oxford, so it is assumed he is earning a moderate to meager living, perhaps even no more than Nicholas. Absolon shares an infatuation with Alisoun similar to Nicholas', however, the means of territory Absolon uses in his plea, or mating ritual, as he sings outside her bedroom window, are just that—his promise of his body. Though, one who reads "The Miller's Tale" might wonder just what sort of physical body does Absolon have to offer? Since Absolon wants to sleep with Alisoun as badly as Nicholas, a focus on his reproductive parts is not out of bounds. Readers have already been introduced to Absolon's fancy of Alisoun in the parish church, as he waves his censor rod by her kneeled body, leaving the audience with an outstanding instance of phallic symbolism. Again, the only other moment in which Absolon possesses some leverage in the story is when the blacksmith Gerveys' hot poker is in his hands.

During both scenes, Absolon is ardent in executing his desires, but the phallic appropriation of his masculinity does not belong to him. The censor is a tool which readers may assume he uses as an erect pole with an end that functions as a utility of religion. Just as much, the hot poker is implemented as a utensil that the parish clerk carries and injures a bystander with per his intent to redress a wrong. R. Howard Bloch's text regarding the separated body of the fabliau implies a similar attitude, stating, "within the fabliau detached sexual organs circulate as freely as the detachable meanings contained [within the story]" (61). The possession of

Absolon's masculinity does not even belong to him because all of his demonstrations of male assertiveness are borrowed from the church and blacksmith, respectively.

Was the intent always present to start climbing the social hierarchy in John's house? Maybe not, but Alisoun's ambiguity as a piece of property makes the idea, for Nicholas or Absolon, worth the while for biological and sociopolitical satisfaction. Alisoun's body is like any other attractive, feminine body available in medieval Oxford, but what she is legally attached to, John's belongings, makes her an irresistible commodity to eventually be widowed. Sexually enticing though she may be, readers are only aware of her aesthetic awe via Chaucer's zoomorphic metaphors that lend her description. There seems to be a rush to describe her physical character, without her setting, and it portrays her with analogies that use outdoors imagery, predominantly the barnyard, rather than in her quarters, like Nicholas, where her actual social status as a housewife lies.

The goal of possessing Alisoun as territory is very tangible, yet necessary, as Alcuin Blamires says, "the women of the comic tales represent 'natural' objects of desire, [and] what the tales largely show is that masculine desire to possess them produces mayhem" (627). For both Nicholas and Absolon, the practices that afford them the grounds of wooing her behind her husband's back are certainly available in the fabliau, however, it is not Alisoun's physical body that is the trouble, but Nicholas and Absolon's means of obtaining her that introduces the estate of her body as an associate in exposing their intent. This issue might create the question of why Alisoun is so available. Well, theoretically she is not. She is a married woman, and while a plethora of adulterous literature exists about the scenario, Alisoun is never an instigator, only a participant, which defines the possession of herself to no one but her.

The tale's climax of John's fall from the barn's rafters results in his broken arm which may be viewed as a synecdoche, a physical part of his body figuratively representing the collective of his name and estate, and this broken arm suggests that everything connected to John's character has been broken by cuckoldry. Readers can only speculate the height of the rafters from which John's tub was hanging, but imagine falling from even a three-foot step ladder: the probability of injury is still present, and furthermore, several areas of the skeleton could potentially be broken. Chaucer's choice to write John walking away from the fall with specifically a broken arm is possibly an artistic decision to suggest that other things like his arm have been broken as well. If John becomes a cuckold, the integrity of his estate and name may become questionable. Looking at the zoomorphic qualities of this scene, it is not merely important that John's arm is broken, but that it is broken in the barn due to the adultery in his bedroom, and as David M. Turner says, the sexual "triumph" of the adulterous couple is often expressed as a "military victory," which suggests John's role in the bedroom has been conquered by another, reducing him to territory fit for barn animals (101).

## II. Sexual Procedures: Customs and Instincts

Nicholas's goal to obtain territory, Alisoun, is an elaborate procedure meant to ensure the benefits of bedding the carpenter's wife. Mating rituals are similar to Nicholas' and Abolon's operation, transcending the animal kingdom, and may be compared to human courtship, and may be viewed as a muddled portrayal of courtly love. When Nicholas propositions Alisoun "to rage and pleye / Whil that hir housbonde was at Oseneye," why does the couple not copulate at that time (I.3273-4)? John is away and spontaneous sex could assumedly not require much time, but Nicholas orchestrates a plot so that "if the game [goes] aright" the night he sleeps with Alisoun will be ritualistic (I.3405). Such a strategy not only brings Nicholas the pleasure of sex with

Alisoun, but allows him to take John's place to some degree. This scheme portrays the human-logic side of courting formalities while Absolon's method of singing by the bedroom window echoes a more animal-like instinct to compete, impress, and mate, though, he does it with clueless social grace. By exploring the tactics utilized for sexual possession of Alisoun, one can understand the synonymous attributes of sexual procedures and courtship as shared by human and animals for the purpose of sex.

While what one owns may parallel a degree of social importance, there is an assurance in gaining possessions when a procedure seems to grant that right. If Nicholas endures a constructed ordeal to sleep with Alisoun he will not only obtain her as a sexual partner, but also satisfy his lust for a greater social status such as John's. This focus on impressing a female through an endured process is seen in the culture of courtly love, which is echoed and mocked in the tale as a dismembered version of the ways of wooing. According to Barbara Tuchman, the procedure of courtly love might progress such as:

The chivalric love affair move[s] from worship [to] declaration of passionate devotion, virtuous rejection by the lady, renewed wooing with oaths of eternal fealty, moans of approaching death from unsatisfied desire, heroic deeds of valor which won the lady's heart by prowess, [and] consummation of the secret love, followed by endless adventures and subterfuges to a tragic denouement. (68)

However, it is clear that neither Nicholas nor Absolon abides by the formula of courtly love. Ideally, courtly love's first requirement is that lovers are of nobility, and no one in "The Miller's Tale" is of such social status. Ultimately, Absolon follows more of the chivalric procedures, but doesn't get to sleep with Alisoun. Nicholas, on the other hand, only cries about oncoming death

if he cannot execute his desire for her, and advances much further than Absolon. Courtly love's perspective of committing adultery traditionally carries with it a sense of civility and class, whereas the characters of Chaucer's tale mutate courtly love's procedures with animalistic disorganization.

Procedures and customs allow the tale's characters to take their previous social status and reshape it with their lust, not just for the pleasure of sex, but for a sense of being more important in society. For many species of animals this is partially the same truth. While unable to communicate an understanding of the procedure's purpose, animals demonstrate behaviors that may be compared to ritualistic patterns when it comes to attempting to attain a more credible social status. These measures are performed because the practitioner covets a particular reward, and that territory gained through this action of the operation and the belief of its purpose transcends the division of human and animal behavior. It is part of human culture to perceive such methods as rites that divide one way of existing from another, but for an animal it is more instinct than custom, and here the boundaries become blurred, especially in "The Miller's Tale."

Standard instances of adultery would likely not be viewed as a procedure due to the likelihood that they are spontaneous, however, the lovers' agreement to organize when they will sleep together suggests that they recognize a need to make their moment feel official. The decision is agreed upon after Alisoun's description and before Absolon is introduced. From the beginning, readers know that Nicholas has devised an impressive plan to bed Alisoun, and his method to do so appears far more structured and advance when the Miller explains Absolon's inability to choreograph the same. All of the characters are of human form, but it is their descriptions that entail examination of their possible non-human qualities. When it comes to

observing their behavior, the characters' integrity as human is undermined by their actions, or lack thereof, in the planning and acting out of sexual procedures.

When the Miller weaves his way into stealing his storytelling turn, he disrupts what is otherwise a policy of turn taking, and also challenges the social status of the Monk who is decided as the next teller of tale by the Host. The Host defines the Miller as drunk and unaware of what he is speaking about, but the Miller offers no apologies and continues passive-aggressively with his intent to tell his tale. The Miller continues in his intention to speak once it is certain he will not be reprimanded for his social class, and perhaps also sees potential elevation from his churl condition to someone with regard. Like an animal, it is as though a lower ranking member of a pack is challenging the authority of two alpha-males, the Knight and the Monk. He also attempts to better his status by telling a tale that belittles another of lower class, a carpenter. The hierarchy of these social statuses may also be perceived as a procedure with the connotations each demands one to recognize, and the Miller does not necessarily seek to disrupt the social formalities, but is intoxicatedly confident that he needs to perform at the given time.

Chaucer seems to use a procedure of reoccurring horse-like imagery throughout the tale, and it begins with "The Miller's Prologue," going on to sprinkle equine impressions often connected to moments involving lust and social status. While it fits in as part of the barnyard-themed metaphors, its repetitive use begins to appear choreographed, signaling to the reader a departure from the literal text and the transition to the figurative qualities of zoomorphism. These instances begin in the prologue as the Miller "for dronken was al pale, / So that unnethe upon his hors he sat" (I.3120-1). Though not easily, he is physically connected to his horse as he interrupts the practice of turn-taking, and while there are no zoomorphic details to the moment in

the prologue, without the horse the Miller cannot travel on the pilgrimage which provides him with the opportunity to tell his story. The horse imagery transitions from a scene of social status conflict to scenes of lust involving Alisoun. The narrator's description calls her "wynsynge [...], as is a joly colt," and quickly compares her to the animal again when "she sproong as a colt dooth in the trave" after Nicholas grabs her by the haunchebones (I.3263, I.3282). The horse-like imagery is later presented as an impression when Absolon visits Gerveys, a blacksmith of ploughing equipment. These various extensions of the equine theme are possibly a decorative storytelling procedure used by Chaucer to further complicate the perception of just how human, or not human, the characters are.

Nicholas creates a procedure to sleep with Alisoun as though it were a necessary mating rite. While he has declared a sexual desire for her, the act transforms his goal from a brief, intimate moment to an intent to replace John as the head of household. Because of the ritualistic plan to wait for John's return from Osney, lie to him, and act out the flood's threat before proceeding with the sex that could be happening during this plotting, it seems that adultery may even be secondary to Nicholas's intent. Unlike Alisoun and Absolon, Nicholas is not decorated with zoomorphic metaphors, instead, his musical capabilities and astrological studies highlight what readers know about him. If the text is not to lead readers to consider Nicholas as a zoomorphic character, then his strict role as a human might relay a sort of leadership, differentiating him from those whose essence the text liberally details with human-animal descriptions. This absence of a secondary animal identity not only separates Nicholas from the other characters of "The Miller's Tale," but establishes his degree of control in the sexual procedures.

Absolon is likely the tale's most clear example of zoomorphic, sexual procedures that interplay with lust and social status. When he is introduced in the same setting as Alisoun, the environment is a church where Absolon "Gooth with a sencer on the haliday, / Sensynge the wyves of the parisshe faste" (I.3340-1): a ceremony that replicates sexual procedural with the phallic imagery of the sensor erected in Absolon's hands. He then proceeds to transcend the zoomorphic element by arriving outside the carpenter's bedroom window to woo Alisoun in the likes of a mating call. Considering that he does so while John is sleeping in the same bed as Alisoun, which is a fact Absolon should have expected knowing that she is one of the wives who attends his church, Absolon really flunks out of sexual decorum from both the perspective of human and animal. It is possible to view Absolon's failure to follow courtship procedures as the result of his androgynous identity. As Carolyn Dinshaw discusses, "Chaucer plays with the gender associations, hermeneutics values, and power relations," especially in the moment that "feminized Absolon brands [the masculine body of Nicholas with] a hot poker" (9). The phallic imagery re-masculinizes Absolon, and though he has failed in the sexual procedures of courtly love, he is the only one successful in the procedure of revenge.

While Alisoun functions as the territory to be won, the procedures to obtain her provide explanation about her importance in these actions. The catalog of zoomorphic metaphors which describes Alisoun practically blurs the clarity of whether or not she is an animal, and viewing her as such transforms the courtly love procedures of Nicholas and Absolon into a medieval hunt. If an animal intends to survive being hunted it needs be smart. As Derek Pearsall states, "Nicholas makes himself vulnerable because he ceases to be smart, and tries to play the same trick on Absolon that Alisoun has already played: this is not the behavior of a cunning animal" (161). Alisoun perhaps gets away with her doings because she knows the ways of this hunt: she is

married. Having been the hunted, she knows when something is a good or bad idea, at least as far as her own happiness is concerned.

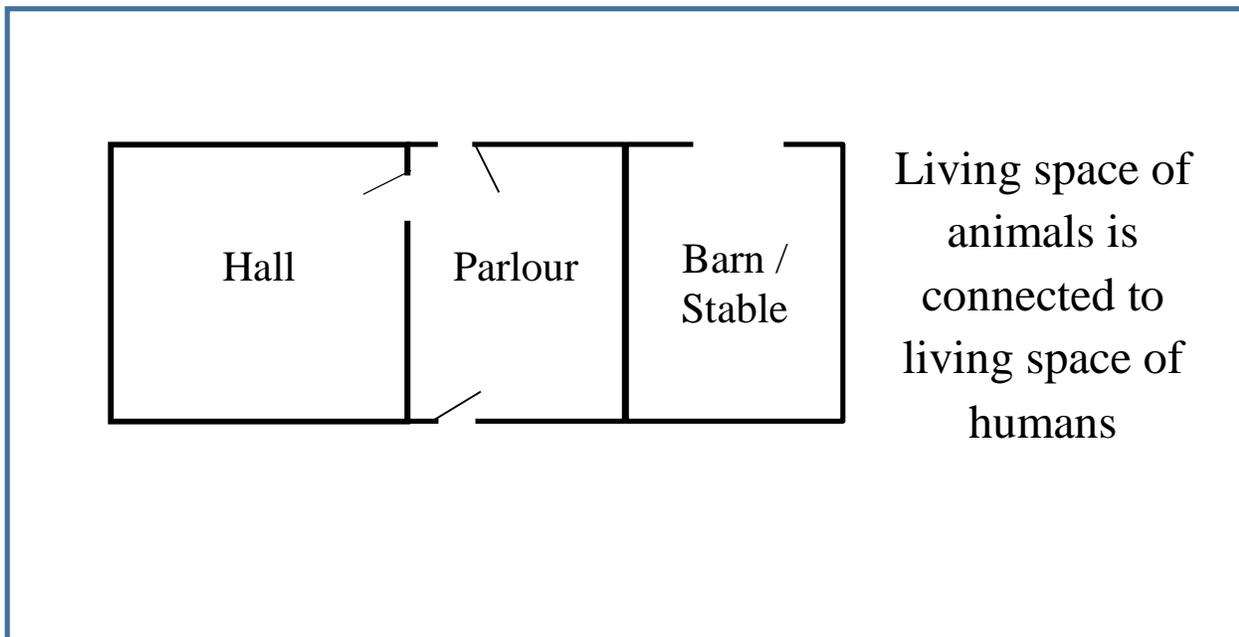
### **III. Shelter: Barns, Bedrooms, and Beyond**

Bringing the topic of shelter to a zoomorphic reading of “The Miller’s Tale” directs one’s attention to the barn as well as the bedroom. Nicholas relies on religious fables to bring his promiscuous plot in to the barn. John falls asleep in his bathtub in the barn rafters, convinced that a biblical flood is coming. The animal urges of Nicholas and Alisoun cross back into the house’s bedroom where his sex-plot has allowed him possession of the carpenter’s wife for this night. A pseudo-branding later happens outside of this bedroom’s window, a scene in which Absolon intends to use a method of claiming livestock to mark Alisoun with his revenge. The shifting boundaries of territory and procedures lead to these scenes, but the animal-like behavior happens exclusively in or by the bedroom instead of the barn. Focusing on the characters’ sexual tendencies as revealed through zoomorphic metaphors and similes, readers can see that the bedroom and the barn overlap in the story, providing further understanding to the argument of lust blurring the lines between animal and human in “The Miller’s Tale.”

Specialized procedures and schemes often assist people in obtaining things that are otherwise hard to get, and sometimes the setting, or shelter, is important in ensuring the procedure’s goal. Since ancient Mesopotamia, temples have been designed with the intent to stand apart from the other buildings, as “visible and tangible proof of the god’s presence and, more, that [the god] was [it]self a member of the community and had a stake in it” (Jacobsen 29). In the same way that temples stand with different character among a landscape of human housing, so do the barns in which people keep their livestock. Considering the matters of

territory and sexual procedures, what is the role of such shelter in “The Miller’s Tale?” Both the sacred house of worship and the barn are where humans put things that they wish to control. These shelters or housings have aggregates which distinguish them from the ordinary, and such constructions are architecturally ritualistic in establishing this recognition. For Chaucer, sending Nicholas’ plan to the barn is an accessory that compliments the zoomorphic metaphors, but also magnifies Nicholas’ plot when he and Alisoun leave for their consummation in the bedroom.

The zoomorphic metaphors and similes in the story describe the characters while also implying the hybrid nature of the shelters, but what is the distance between these dwellings? A modern perspective might assume a moderate amount of space between the barn and bedroom. It seems necessary for the bedroom to have a decent distance from the barn for numerous reasons—sanitation, noise, odors—but does this distance also involve a physical separation from the house? Again, a modern perspective likely thinks of the common stand-alone barn, however, historically, there are variations to the construction of a medieval home. This sometimes involves the barn being connected to the housing structure. Lloyd Kahn and Bob Easton provide a brief and helpful look at this issue, and include a blue print of an English cottage, circa 1200, in which the stable is built as part of the house (22). According to Kahn and Easton’s text, as causes of the Black Death began to be theorized and recognized, efforts in hygiene improved, which included the barn’s structure existing separately from the house (22). Unfortunately, the architecture of John’s house in the tale can really only be speculated. There are no textual clues that reveal the barn’s physical relationship to the house such as if the estate was passed down by the family, in which an older construction date might indicate a stronger possibility of the barn being attached to the house, however, the zoomorphic nature of the setting is still clear.



*Figure 1.2 Kahn and Easton's Thirteenth Century English Cottage*

Lust would ideally be reserved for the bedroom, but the Miller uses the barn as the fundamental location necessary for the execution of sexual accomplishment. Every time the barn is mentioned in the tale it involves lust, or a pursuit of lust. The Miller first takes readers inside of a bedroom as he describes Nicholas, yet only takes readers inside of a barn through metaphors when discussing Alisoun, and later when discussing Nicholas' pseudo flood. The bedroom becomes a setting in which plots begin and end. Nicholas is introduced in tale from his bedroom, and John later has a conversation with Nicholas in this same bedroom in which readers are revealed his plot of the flood. The master bedroom, that of John and Alisoun, is part of the scene in which Absolon attempts to woo Alisoun with song outside of the window. This is the same bedroom where Absolon will again call for Alisoun outside of the window, only she will be accompanied by Nicholas. John will go from his presence in the master bedroom, to Nicholas's bedroom, to the barn, where he will remain until the final scenes.

The manner in which the Miller introduces the characters leads readers through this very community of settings: John's general estate which would include the master bedroom,

Nicholas's bedroom, and Alisoun's introduction which reaches into both the bedrooms and barn, and Absolon who transfers from the religious setting to outside of the master bedroom. Gaston Bachelard discusses the spatial psychology within dwellings such as those in "The Miller's Tale," pointing out the intimacy reserved within one space rather than the collective of rooms as a whole, refining his argument down to the furniture in a room such wardrobes and drawers (74). As Bachelard points out, the compartments of such things provide "an inner space [that] is also *intimate space*, space that is not open to just anybody" (78). While only two bedrooms and a barn are referred to in Chaucer's text, each room is a spatial opportunity for a character to either act intimately with another, or to act intimately with their agenda by using other characters present in the room. This can be further narrowed down by including the tubs that are hung in the rafters of the barn. Each of the three tubs are an intimate space for a character to demonstrate their will. The tubs are meant to act as a new shelter against the flood Nicholas proposes, however, he and Alisoun abandon their tubs for the bedroom, leaving John to experience an unwanted intimate—then suddenly exposed—space when he falls and breaks his arm.

The Miller's Prologue is ultimately shelterless, however, it should not be forgotten that while he and the other story-telling contenders may be without housing, they are on a pilgrimage to a significant religious dwelling. It is, perhaps, worth questioning how such a lewd character got mixed up in a religious pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral, especially when his story is not just about adultery prevailing, but involves characters who are involved with the church.

Whatever his drunken motives, when it comes to considering the themes of shelter, the Miller plays a role opposite of Absolon, with one bringing his indecency to the church and the other bringing his indecency from the church, respectively. As Helen Cooper points out, "Christ's works and the business of sex are closely interlinked [in the text]," and, for example, "motifs of

the Flood and the ‘legende’ of a carpenter and his wife are secularized to the point of near-blasphemy” (101). This might also be viewed as the intermingling of human and animal—cultured order and primal chaos—with the idea of morale tainted by selfish lust that is accompanied by zoomorphic references.

The action of Absolon using the hot poker is much like the use of a branding iron for livestock, allowing the barnyard to reach once again into the bedroom. In this action, not only is animal nature soldered to human nature, but is done so by a member of the church. It is through religion that Absolon has met Alisoun, and his lust for her brings him from the church to the bedroom window. When Absolon gets the kiss he did not quite want, he is outside of the church, outside of the bedroom, and outside of the barn, thus he is free from the trinity of shelters to no longer be Nicholas’ or Alisoun’s victim when he decides to seek revenge. The next dwelling Absolon goes to, the blacksmith’s shop, produces items that attempt to control other living things, ploughing equipment, making it much like the church which attempts to control society with spiritual equipment. Nicholas is the one who has mastered using religion to manipulate others, so it is only appropriate for Absolon to punish Nicholas with an item from the blacksmith’s shop.

Nicholas is the only character introduced within the boundaries of the house. Furthermore, readers learn the most about Nicholas in the twenty one lines that catalog not only who he is, but provide details about his bedroom (I.3203-20). When the Miller first describes the “chambre hadde [Nicholas] in that hostelyre” (I.3203), the student tenant is described as “ful privee” (I.3201) and “allone, withouten any compaignye” (I.3204). All of this secretiveness and keeping to himself is suggestive when considering the nature of the fabliaux, and Thomas J. Farrell points out:

Most Old French fabliaux construct a private universe, one where society's concerns and well-being are subordinated to the satisfaction of some character's personal desires, even those of "the basest instinctual aspects of the psyche." Characters act for their own interests, and the genre rewards most generously those who do so most imaginatively. The genre's two chief narrative topoi—sexual triumph and physical battery—do not provide a realistic depiction of the fabric of life so much as powerful metaphors for private vengeance or domination: in fabliaux, sex occurs outside the social institution of marriage, and quite often as an extramarital attack on the institution; violence almost inevitably privileges individual vindictiveness (or whim) over social order. The typical setting is also private, since fabliau plots repeatedly demand small hiding places—tubs, closets, rafters, chests, cupboards, nooks—and of course beds. (2)

However, it is curious that with so much privacy in his bedroom Nicholas does not sleep with Alisoun here. The dwelling of the master bedroom, the one in which John sleeps with Alisoun every night, clarifies Nicholas' intent, connecting purposes of territory and procedure within Nicholas' selected space to have sex with Alisoun.

When Alisoun is introduced by the Miller, she is not placed in any specific setting until the wide array of metaphors describes her as the "hoorde of apples leyd in hey," and that she is worthy enough "for any lord to leggen in his bedde" (I.3262, 9). Though she only exists here figuratively, these places become a manifestation of her zoomorphic description as an animal, of many sorts, dressed nicely as a lady—an entity torn between belonging in the hay and belonging in the bed. Olivier Marc states that "all vital instincts and spiritual perceptions need a physical expression [...]. From this necessity came the house, which enabled man to bind himself closely to his psychic perceptions" (45), and appropriately, Alisoun's settings are as dubious as her

character. She is the one character who has been inside of all three settings—the bedroom, the barn, and the church—but readers would likely not identify her with a specific place as they might with the other characters. With the figurative idea of Alisoun’s bizarre characterization, her presence in the three settings is a reflection of her diverse description.

### **Conclusion of the Argument**

By incorporating outside sources on not just “The Miller’s Tale” but studies of human and animal sexual procedures and their relationship to territory, as well as shelter’s psychological role in these ideas, readers can more easily attach meaning to the case of lust instigating zoomorphism in the story. What is the purpose of this meaning? There are several possible answers to that question, however, this meaning perhaps makes a holistic look at *The Canterbury Tales* more tangible. In many of the other tales, the components of territory, sexual procedure, and shelter can be viewed in the same way they exist in “The Miller’s Tale,” and often even with the same theme of zoomorphic lust. But, why is this tale different? Comparatively, this tale is perhaps more edgy with its foul humor, but to some degree, when Robyn “quite[s] the Knyghtes tale,” he “quite[s]” all of the tales because he shows the audience the base nature present in all of the pilgrims as they are telling their stories in hopes of winning the contest (I.3127).

“The Knight’s Tale” involves two cousins who compete for a maiden’s love, “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” consists of a knight being punished for rape, “The Physician’s Tale” is about a father who beheads his daughter so an Emperor cannot sleep with her: the list of tales would not involve every story of the collective, but the chaos produced by lust is frequently the tension in a tale. As the characters try to counter the effects of lust, whether it is their own desires or another’s, their actions to do so are often animalistic behavior. By succeeding “The Knight’s

Tale,” what “The Miller’s Tale” does for the other stories is disrobe the whore dressed like a nun. The tale’s blatant use of zoomorphism alerts readers to a more recognized way of telling the same story about animal-like urges and competition that are the result of lust.

Overall, breaking down “The Miller’s Tale” with a zoomorphic perspective of the elements territory, procedure, and shelter simplifies the circumstances of adultery. The origins of the characters’ behavior are first defined by what they would like to possess. It is easy to interpret Alisoun as the domain sought by the suitors, but upon examining what it means to desire a territory, it becomes understood that sleeping with her also grants other advances, such as the sense of replacing John. In the same manner that this act is important to animals, a form of operation is necessary to make obtaining this territory possible. In the tale, these mating rituals are best described as procedures, and such organized plans indicate the characters’ determination to gain what they want, but these measures also match the tale’s zoomorphic language and magnify the animal instincts involved in reaching the goals. The aspect of zoomorphic shelters provides an appropriate stage for the procedures to obtain territory to play out. There are human needs in a barn, the animals kept for food, and arguably, there are animal needs in the bedroom, intercourse. In this case, the humans have become a hybrid of the animals, and both the barn and the bedroom are needed for consummation of the characters’ objectives. The result of studying “The Miller’s Tale” with a zoomorphic view is a heightened awareness of story structure inside and outside of *The Canterbury Tales*.

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Crofts/Reid/Funk

Honors Thesis (Creative Section)

*Haunchebones*

### Introduction to *Haunchebones*

Having had the pleasure of studying in all three of the single-author courses offered by the Department of Literature and Language at ETSU, I noticed the unfortunate trend of Chaucer and Milton not getting quite the same respect as Shakespeare. While the list of reasons is extensive, I find that the general population's preference of film and television over prose and poetry is a significant factor in which of the major authors gets the most attention. Performance is part of this equation, simply allowing Shakespeare to be more accessible to the masses. Watching another human being portray a character who was previously only living on the page helps to create a sense of familiarity with the situations they undergo. The character is no longer an image in our imagination, but a real person in physically real, though staged, settings.

Chaucer's dirty story, "The Miller's Tale," has comedic elements that travel well from the fourteenth century, with characters and a climax that can stand their ground beside of modern day humor. Once I settled on adapting "The Miller's Tale" into a 10-minute play, not only did I want to give this story the opportunity to entertain an audience through performance, but I implemented my academic work on the tale into the drama as well. Turning the characters into zoomorphic beings breathes a theatrical, stylized life into the six hundred year-old text, providing it with yet another facet of which to perceive the story. Furthermore, some of the play's scenes were inspired by medieval and early renaissance art, allowing additional non-performance material to bolster the on-stage adaptation. These works include Hans Holbein's *Dance of Death* woodcuts, *The Ill-Assorted Couple* by Albrecht Dürer, *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries, and Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The final product has resulted in a cohesion of zoomorphic beings with zoomorphic tendencies channeled from page and portrait to the stage.

## **Characters**

**The Miller** – Teller of the tale. Male or Female. Very physically enthusiastic. Will read most all lines from a book.

**Alisoun** – Young wife of John, Nicholas's lover, infatuation of Absolon. Female.

**John** – Older husband of Alisoun, deceived by Nicholas. Male or female (must tone down feminine qualities). Slow and gullible.

**Nicholas** – Clerk/student boarding in John's house, rival of Absolon for Alisoun's affection. Male or female. Sharp movements, cunning.

**Absolon** – Young parish priest who tries to woo Alisoun. Preferably a male who is slim who can portray a feminine essence. Whiny.

*The set consists of a barren tree, stage left, with one broken off branch. Downstage right are three bales of hay stacked like two steps with a bed's brass headboard strapped to the highest side of the hay. Warm lighting. Preferably, all characters speak with a low-English dialect to maintain the churl essence. Stage right implies the barn, stage left implies the house.*

*THE MILLER enters from stage left, in a skeleton costume from the neck down, and pantyhose pulled over his face/head, galloping drunkenly with a stick horse, eventually making it to downstage center. He stumbles trying to remove the stick horse from between his legs, finally succeeding and throwing the stick horse offstage left. He looks at the audience, remembering why he came out.*

*MILLER: Anyways...He raises his hand pointing his index finger as though to say something important. He cannot remember what, and, frustrated, throws his raised hand to his head, cursing. He looks down trying hard to remember what to say. Reaching down to scratch his crotch, he suddenly looks at the audience with enlightenment, raising the same hand again to point up. Yees! In the name of the devil, I will tell a legend and a life about a carpenter and his wife. He begins to walk towards the headboard-hay steps, sitting on it. ALISOUN and JOHN enter stage right walking towards the tree. She is leading him with a rope, and proceeds to tie him to the broken off branch. ALISOUN's hair is up, and John is wearing a full-coverage horse mask. John was simple and old. The only interesting thing about him was his money. Alisoun was much younger, and much interested in John's money. So they married. She ties JOHN to the tree, he holds his head down facing upstage left. ALISOUN takes a coin pouch from him and proceeds to walk downstage center where she stops to open the pouch and count its contents. NICHOLAS enters from stage right approaching her wearing a full-coverage*

*unicorn mask.* Nicholas was a student clerk boarding with the couple. He studied the testaments as avidly as he studied Alisoun. One day, he pounced on his prey.

NICHOLAS *prows behind ALISOUN, unclipping her hair, dividing it with his hands and pushing it forward by her face before he walks forward, stage right, to kneel beside of her. Staring ahead in rapture, ALISOUN drops the coin pouch, slowly turning to face kneeled NICHOLAS, looking only at his unicorn's horn. She touches it, her face breaking into realization.*

ALISOUN: Ooooooh. *She looks back at JOHN, then in the direction of the audience, settling her eye contact back to NICHOLAS.* Well, we have to use protection.

NICHOLAS: *Rising, grasping ALISOUN's arms, sliding his hands down to grasp hers.* Religion always makes people feel better in times like these. I suspect I can easily wash away any problems with John. *He pulls ALISOUN in front of him, she faces the audience, his arms wrapped around her holding her hands.* I can flood his mind with enough sacred worry to keep him out of our altar for one night. In that bed, there you'll be. *He raises his hand as to highlight lights above.* Alexandra...

ALISOUN: *She nudges NICHOLAS with her elbow.* Alisoun.

NICHOLAS: Alisoun. *He guides his lifted hand across.* Empress of the haunchebones.

ALISOUN: *Wimpers with content, smiling.* That would be me.

NICHOLAS: *Turns her body to face him again.* Soon, my colt, soon.

ALISOUN *exits stage left, guided by NICHOLAS, who stops at the tree to untie JOHN.*

NICHOLAS: *Leading JOHN downstage center.* John, have you noticed how peculiar the sky's been lately? *Rubs his eyes, looking upward.*

JOHN: *Looking at NICHOLAS for a moment, then looks upward, then back down.* I don't look up all too often.

NICHOLAS: *Looks back down at JOHN.* John, I've heard the testaments in my dreams. *Grasps JOHN's arms sincerely.* A flood is coming the next night!

JOHN: *Alarmed and ignorant.* Ooooh! What about Alisoun?

NICHOLAS: I've also dreamed how we might properly save ourselves! We'll tie up a wash tub for each of us in the barn's rafters, *points stage right to the barn,* and when the flood comes to dissolve the sinners we'll cut our ropes and gently float away unharmed.

JOHN: *Ignorantly gleeful.* Oh! Oh! I can't wait!

NICHOLAS and JOHN *exit stage left.*

THE MILLER: Nicholas has set the stage for making Alisoun his. ALISOUN *enters stage left to downstage center, kneeling and making the sign of the cross on herself.* But, he's not the only one taken with Alisoun. ABSOLON *enters from stage right, in partial-coverage lamb mask. He is swinging a censor.* Aboslon quite fancied Alisoun, fantasizing of her long before Nicholas. *Approaching downstage center by ALISOUN, he becomes giddy, and accidentally holds his censor like an erection. He frantically attempts to recover.*

ALISOUN: *Opening her eyes and looking stage right to him.* Is there something wrong?

ABSOLON: *Twitchy, over-correcting his poise.* Nooooo, nooooo. Nooo.

ALISOUN: *Looks discerningly at ABSOLON.* It seems like you're having a hard time with the service today.

ABSOLON: *Still socially recovering. Awkwardly.* The house of God is glad to have you.

ALISOUN: *Uncomfortably rises, dusting her knees.* I best be getting back home, now.

ABSOLON: *Stutters, unable to speak as she walks away.*

ALISOUN *exits stage left.* ABSOLON *depressively grunts like a lamb, turning slowly to exit stage right.*

THE MILLER: Absolon was a petty hurdle, a candle without much of a wick. ALISOUN and NICHOLAS *exit stage right rolling out JOHN in a washtub to downstage center.* But oh well, now it's time for the end of the world!

ALISOUN and NICHOLAS: *Standing at either side of JOHN, begin to spin the tub, chanting in Middle English.* To the barne, a devel way, so that we might rage and playe. *Pushing JOHN away in the rolling tub, stage right. They leave JOHN behind, giggling, running, and holding hands to exit stage left.*

THE MILLER: Absolon felt this was a good night to woo a young, married lady.

ABSOLON: *Enters from stage right, proceeding to downstage center. He puffs out his chest and sings pseudo-opera-ishly.* Ali-soun! *He exits stage left.*

THE MILLER: The parish clerk proposed a kiss, but through the bedroom window, Alisoun was more generous than he hoped. ABSOLON *enters from stage right proceeding to downstage center, rubbing his mouth, frowning.* He kissed her naked ass!

ALISOUN: *Offstage.* Does baby need a little bit of mouthwash? Tee hee. *She and*  
NICHOLAS *laugh.*

ABSOLON: *Looks with disdain towards the audience with pursed lips. He swishes his tongue against his cheek, seeming to catch something. He raises his fingers towards his lips to pull a hair from his mouth. He gags. He eventually looks up at the audience, angrily.* She mocks my affection with her horrible hole! *Exits stage right.*

THE MILLER: Absolon went to a blacksmith nearby and took the hottest poker from the fire.

ABSOLON: *Enters walking to downstage center carrying the branding stick. He examines it with evil eagerness.* I'll leave my mark on that swine whore, and her naked ass will be wedded to my heartache. *Exits stage left. Offstage,* Alisoun, could I have another one of your sweet kisses?

THE MILLER: Nicholas decided to join his lover in the prank, sticking out his rear until his haunchebones were nearly out the window, and Absolon crammed the branding iron against Nicholas's naked ass, making him cry out...

NICHOLAS: *Offstage.* Water! Water!

THE MILLER: Waking up John in the barn...

JOHN: *Offstage.* Water?! *An offstage crash.*

ALISOUN and NICHOLAS run across from stage left to stage right, rolling John out to downstage center in the washtub on wheels. NICHOLAS rubs his butt a bit between the assistance. He holds his right arm bent against his body as though injured.

THE MILLER: John cut his washtub down from the barn's rafters and crashed to the ground, NICHOLAS and ALISOUN help JOHN out of the washtub and place his broken arm in a sling, his arm broken in the barn by the adultery in his bedroom.

ALISOUN and NICHOLAS exit stage right.

JOHN: Takes his uninjured arm/hand and removes his horse mask gazing hopelessly at the audience. What a bunch of animals.

THE END

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