

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.	<i>strong fellow</i>
	Full big he was of brawn and eke of bones	<i>and also</i>
	That provéd well, for over all there he came	<i>for, wherever</i>
	At wrestling he would have always the ram.	<i>prize</i>
	He was short-shouldered, broad, a thickè knarre.	<i>rugged fellow</i>
550	There was no door that he n'ould heave off harre ¹	<i>couldn't heave / the hinge</i>
	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.	<i>And also</i>
	Upon the copright of his nose he had	<i>tip</i>
555	A wart, and thereon stood a tuft of hairs	
	Red as the bristles of a sowè's ears.	
	His noséthirlès blackè were and wide.	<i>nostrils</i>
	A sword and buckler bore he by his side.	<i>shield</i>
	His mouth as great was as a great furnace.	
560	He was a jangler and a goliardese	<i>loud talker & joker</i>
	And that was most of sin and harlotries.	<i>& dirty talk</i>
	Well could he stolen corn and tollèn thrice,	<i>take triple toll</i>
	And yet he had a thumb of gold pardee. ²	<i>by God</i>
	A white coat and a blue hood wearèd he.	
565	A bagpipe well could he blow and sound	
	And therewithal he brought us out of town.	<i>And with that</i>

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,	
3110	In all the company ne was there young nor old	<i>there was nobody</i>
	That he ne said it was a noble story	<i>that didn't say</i>
	And worthy for to drawen to memory,	<i>keep in memory</i>
	And namely the gentles every one.	<i>especially the gentry</i>
	Our Hostè laughed and swore: "So may I gone!	<i>On my word!</i>
3115	This goes aright. Unbuckled is the mail.	<i>bag</i>
	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, ¹	
	Somewhat to quitè with the Knight's tale."	<i>something to match</i>
3120	The Miller that fordrunken was all pale	<i>very drunk</i>
	So that unnethe upon his horse he sat.	<i>scarcely</i>
	He n'ould avalen neither hood nor hat	<i>wouldn't take off</i>
	N'abiden no man for his courtesy,	<i>Nor wait politely</i>
	But in Pilatè's voice he gan to cry ²	<i>a bullying voice</i>
3125	And swore by armès, and by blood and bones:	
	"I can a noble talè for the nones	<i>I know / occasion</i>
	With which I will now quit the Knight's tale."	<i>requite, match</i>
	Our Hostè saw that he was drunk of ale	
	And said: "Abidè, Robin, levè brother,	<i>Wait / dear</i>
3130	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.	<i>devil take you</i>

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.

3135 Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome."
 "Now hearkeneth," quod the Miller, "all and some. *listen / everyone*
 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 *Blame*
 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. *fooled the worker*

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. *Stop your chatter*
 3145 Let be thy lewèd, drunken harlotry. ¹
 It is a sin and eke a great folly *and also*
 T'apeiren any man or him defame *To slander*
 And eke to bringen wivès in such fame. *(bad) reputation*
 Thou may'st enough of other thingès sayn."
 3150 This drunken Miller spoke full soon again
 And said: "Levè brother Osèwald, *Dear*
 Who has no wife, he is no cuckold, *betrayed husband*
 But I say not therefore that thou art one.
 There be full goodè wivès — many a one,
 3155 And ever a thousand good against one bad.
 That know'st thou well thyself but if thou mad. *unless thou art mad*
 Why art thou angry with my talè now?
 I have a wife, pardee, as well as thou, *by God*
 Yet, n'ould I for the oxen in my plough *I would not*
 3160 Take upon me morè than enough
 As deemen of myself that I were one. *think / "one"= cuckold*
 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. *secrets, privacy*
 3165 So he may findè Godè's foison there, *Provided / G's plenty*
 Of the remnant needeth not enquire."¹
 What should I morè say, but this Millér
 He n'ould his wordès for no man forbear *wouldn't restrain*
 But told his churlè's tale. In his mannér, *vulgar*
 3170 Methinketh that I shall rehearse it here. *I think I'll retell*

Once again the poet makes a mock apology 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 elsè falsen some of my mattér. *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 storial thing that toucheth gentleness *of narratives / nobility*
 3180 And eke morality and holiness. *also*
 Blameth not me if that you choose amiss. *"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. *ribald tales*
 3185 Aviseth you and put me out of blame. *Take care*
 And eke men shall not make earnest of game.² *seriousness of a joke*

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

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 - é :

tubbes at line 3626, 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: *carpenter'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*;
likeros / mouse. *wood, blood, flood* 3507-8, 3518 (See also Stress below)

Stress:

Mostly *míller*, but *millér* (3167); *certáin* to rhyme with *sayn* and *again*(3495) but *cértain* 3 times

THE MILLER'S TALE

	Whilom there was dwelling at Oxenford	<i>Once upon a time</i>
	A richè gnof that guestès held to board	<i>fellow who kept lodgers</i>
	And of his craft he was a carpenter.	<i>And by trade</i>
3190	With him there was dwelling a poor scholar	
	Had learned art, but all his fantasy	<i>all his attention</i>
	Was turned for to learn astrology; ¹	
	And could a certain of conclusions	<i>knew some</i>
	To deemen by interrogations	<i>judge by observation</i>
3195	If that men asked him in certain hours	
	When that men should have drought or elsè showers,	
	Or if men asked him what shall befall.	
	Of everything, I may not reckon them all.	

A pen portrait of Handy Nicholas, the lodger

	This clerk was clepèd Handy Nicholas. ²	<i>was called</i>
3200	Of dernè love he could and of solace ³	
	And thereto he was sly and full privy	<i>And also / secretive</i>
	And like a maiden meekè for to see.	
	A chamber had he in that hostelry	
	Alone, withouten any company,	
3205	Full fetisly y-dight with herbès soot	<i>nicely strewn / sweet</i>
	And he himself as sweet as is the root	
	Of liquorice or any setèwale.	<i>(a spice)</i>
	His Almagest and bookès great and small,	<i>His astrology text</i>
	His astrolabè longing for his art,	<i>belonging to</i>

¹ 3191-2: He had studied the Seven Liberal Arts: Grammar, Rhetoric, and Logic (the Trivium); the Quadrivium covered Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astrology. Then, as now, there was little money in most of these; then, as now, the most profitable was probably astrology, which then included genuine astronomy.

² 3199: M.E. *hende* (which I have rendered "handy") meant a variety of things, all relevant to Nicholas: close at hand; pleasant; goodlooking; clever; and, as we shall see, handy, i.e. good with his hands.

³ 3200: "He knew about secret (*derne*) love and (sexual) pleasure (*solace*)".

- 3210 His augrim stonès lying fair apart ¹ *algorithm stones*
 On shelvès couchèd at his beddè's head, *placed*
 His press y-covered with a falding red *cupboard / red cloth*
 And all above there lay a gay sautry *fine guitar*
 On which he made a-nightès melody *at night*
- 3215 So sweetèly that all the chamber rang
 And "Angelus ad Virginem" he sang.²
 And after that he sang the kingè's note.
 Full often blessèd was his merry throat.
 And thus this sweetè clerk his timè spent
- 3220 After his friendès' finding and his rent.³
 This carpenter had wedded new a wife
 Which that he lovèd morè than his life.
 Of 18 years she was of age.
 Jealous he was and held her narrow in cage, *cooped up*
- 3225 For she was wild and young and he was old
 And deemed himself be like a cuckèwold.⁴
 He knew not Cato, for his wit was rude,⁵ *uneducated*
 That bade a man should wed his similitude. *one like himself*
 Men shouldè wedden after their estate, *according to status*
- 3230 For youth and eld is often at debate, *age / at odds*
 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

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 youngè wife, and therewithal	<i>Pretty / & also</i>
	As any weasel her body gent and small.	<i>slim</i>
3235	A ceint she wearèd, barrèd all of silk	<i>belt / striped</i>
	A barmcloth eke as white as morning milk	<i>apron</i>
	Upon her lendès, full of many a gore.	<i>hips / pleat</i>
	White was her smock and broiden all before	<i>embroidered</i>
	And eke behind and on her collar about	<i>And also</i>
3240	Of coal black silk within and eke without.	
	The tapès of her whitè voluper	<i>cap</i>
	Were of the samè suit of her collar;	<i>same kind</i>
	Her fillet broad of silk and set full high.	<i>headband</i>
	And sikerly she had a likerous eye.	<i>seductive</i>
3245	Full small y-pullèd were her browès two	<i>well plucked</i>
	And those were bent and black as any sloe	<i>arched / berry</i>
	She was full morè blissful on to see	
	Than is the newè pear-jennetting tree,	<i>early-ripening pear</i>
	And softer than the wool is of a wether.	<i>sheep</i>
3250	And by her girdle hung a purse of leather	<i>her belt</i>
	Tasselled with silk and pearlèd with lattoun.	<i>beaded with brass</i>
	In all this world to seeken up and down	
	There is no man so wisè that could thench	<i>imagine</i>
	So gay a popelot or such a wench.	<i>So pretty a doll / girl</i>
3255	Full brighter was the shining of her hue	<i>complexion</i>
	Than in the Tower the noble forgèd new.	<i>in the Mint the coin</i>
	But of her song, it was as loud and yern	<i>eager</i>
	As any swallow sitting on a barn.	
	Thereto she couldè skip and make a game	<i>Also / & play</i>
3260	As any kid or calf following his dame.	<i>his mother</i>
	Her mouth was sweet as bragot or the meeth	<i>(sweet drinks)</i>
	Or hoard of apples laid in hay or heath.	<i>or heather</i>
	Wincing she was as is a jolly colt,	<i>Lively</i>
	Long as a mast and upright as a bolt.	
3265	A brooch she bore upon her lower collar	
	As broad as is the boss of a buckeler.	<i>knob of a shield</i>
	Her shoes were lacèd on her leggès high.	
	She was a primerole, a piggy's-eye	<i>(names of flowers)</i>
	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	<i>and again</i>
	That on a day this Handy Nicholas	
	Fell with this youngé wife to rage and play	<i>Began ... to flirt</i>
	While that her husband was at Osénay,	
3275	As clerkès be full subtle and full quaint;	<i>v. clever & ingenious</i>
	And privily he caught her by the quaint	<i>crotch</i>
	And said: "Y-wis, but if I have my will,	<i>Certainly, unless</i>
	For derné love of thee, lemman, I spill." ¹	<i>secret / darling</i>
	And held her hardè by the haunchè bones	
3280	And saidè: "Lemman, love me all at once	<i>sweetheart</i>
	Or I will die, all so God me save." ²	
	And she sprang as a colt does in the trave	<i>in the shafts</i>
	And with her head she wriéd fast away	<i>twisted</i>
	And said: "I will not kiss thee, by my fay.	<i>faith</i>
3285	Why, let be," quod she, "let be, Nicholas	
	Or I will cry out `Harrow!' and `Alas!'	<i>(Cries of alarm)</i>
	Do way your handès, for your courtesy."	<i>for your c. = please!</i>
	This Nicholas gan mercy for to cry	<i>forgiveness</i>
	And spoke so fair, and proffered him so fast,	<i>pressed her</i>
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.	<i>see a good chance</i>
	"My husband is so full of jealousy	
3295	That but you waitè well and be privy,	<i>That unless / & be discreet</i>
	I wot right well I n'am but dead," quod she. ³	
	"You mustè be full derne as in this case."	<i>v. secretive</i>
	"Nay, thereof care thee not," quod Nicholas.	

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
 3300 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 thwackèd her upon the lendès well, *patted her bottom*
 3305 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 Christè's ownè workès for to work
 This good wife went upon a holy day.
 3310 Her forehead shone as bright as any day,
 So was it washèd 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,
 3315 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 Paulè'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 fetisly.	<i>red stockings / stylishly</i>
3320	Y-clad he was full small and properly	<i>neatly</i>
	All in a kirtle of a light waget.	<i>tunic of light blue</i>
	Full fair and thickè be the pointès set.	<i>laces</i>
	And thereupon he had a gay surplice	<i>church vestment</i>
	As white as is the blossom upon the rise.	<i>bough</i>
3325	A merry child he was, so God me save.	<i>lad / I declare</i>
	Well could he letten blood, and clip and shave,	<i>draw blood & cut hair</i>
	And make a charter of land or aquittance.	<i>or quitclaim</i>
	In twenty manner could he skip and dance	<i>20 varieties</i>
	After the school of Oxenfordè tho	<i>In Oxford style there</i>
3330	And with his leggès casten to and fro	<i>kick</i>
	And playen songs upon a small ribible.	<i>fiddle</i>
	Thereto he sang sometimes a loud quincible	<i>Also / treble</i>
	And as well could he play on a giteren.	<i>guitar</i>
	In all the town n'as brewhouse nor tavern	<i>there wasn't</i>
3335	That he ne visited with his solace	<i>entertainment</i>
	Where any gaillard tapster was.	<i>pretty barmaid</i>
	But sooth to say, he was somedeal squeamish	
	Of farting, and of speechè daungerous.	<i>fastidious</i>

Absalom notices Alison in church

	This Absalom that jolly was and gay	<i>& well dressed</i>
3340	Goes with a censer on the holy day	<i>incense burner</i>
	Censing the wivès of the parish fast, ¹	
	And many a lovely look on them he cast	
	And namely on this carpenterè's wife.	<i>especially</i>
	To look on her him thought a merry life.	<i>seemed to him</i>
3345	She was so proper and sweet and likerous,	<i>pretty / seductive</i>
	I dare well say, if she had been a mouse	
	And he a cat, he would her hent anon.	<i>seize her at once</i>
	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 (*ensing*) several times in their direction as a gesture of respect and blessing.

Hath in his heartè such a love longing
 3350 That of no wife ne took he no offering.
 For courtesy, he said, he wouldè none. *would (take)*

Absalom serenades Alison

The moon when it was night, full brightè shone
 And Absalom his gitern has y-take *guitar*
 For paramours he thoughtè for to wake;¹
 3355 And forth he goes, jolly and amorous,
 Till he came to the carpenterè's house
 A little after the cockès had y-crow, *had crowed*
 And dressed him up by a shot window ²
 That was upon the carpenterè's wall.
 3360 He singeth in his voice gentle and small:
 "Now, dearè lady, if thy willè be,³
 I pray you that you will rue on me," *have pity*
 Full well accordant to his giterning. *w. guitar accompaniment*
 This carpenter awoke and heard him sing
 3365 And spoke unto his wife and said anon:
 "What, Alison, hear'st thou not Absalon
 That chanteth thus under our bower's wall?" *bedroom*
 "Yes, God wot, John. I hear it every deal."

Absalom courts her by every means he can

3370 This passeth forth. What will you bet than well? ⁴
 From day to day this jolly Absalon
 So wooeth her that he is woe-begone.

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,	<i>He stays awake</i>
	He combed his lockès broad and made him gay.	<i>& dressed up</i>
3375	He wooeth her by means and by brocage	<i>by proxies & agents</i>
	And swore he wouldè be her ownè page.	<i>servant boy</i>
	He singeth, brocking as a nightingale.	<i>trilling</i>
	He sent her piment, mead and spicèd ale	<i>flavored wine</i>
	And wafers piping hot out of the glead	<i>out of the fire</i>
3380	And for she was of town, he proffered meed;	<i>And because / money</i>
	For some folk will be wonnè for richesse	<i>won by riches</i>
	And some for strokes, and some for gentleness.	<i>by beating</i>
	Sometimes to show his lightness and mastery	<i>agility & skill</i>
	He playeth Herodès upon a scaffold high. ¹	<i>stage</i>

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

3385	But what availeth him as in this case?	
	So loveth she this Handy Nicholas	
	That Absalom may blow the buckè's horn.	<i>whistle in wind</i>
	He ne had for his labor but a scorn.	<i>had not</i>
	And thus she maketh Absalom her ape	
3390	And all his earnest turneth to a jape.	<i>joke</i>
	Full sooth is this provèrb, it is no lie,	<i>v. true</i>
	Men say right thus: "Always the nighè sly	<i>near sly one</i>
	Maketh the farrè leevè to be loth." ²	<i>farther beloved / hated</i>
	For though that Absalom be wood or wroth,	<i>mad or angry</i>
3395	Because that he was farrè from her sight	<i>farther</i>
	This nighè Nicholas stood in his light.	<i>closer N.</i>
	Now bear thee well, thou Handy Nicholas,	<i>be happy</i>
	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 (*nighè*) causes the more distant beloved (*the farrè leevè*) to become unloved." i.e. Absence makes the heart grow farther.

- And so befell it on a Saturday
 3400 This carpenter was gone to Osénay
 And Handy Nicholas and Alison
 Accorded been to this conclusiōn: *Have agreed*
 That Nicholas shall shapen them a wile *devise a trick*
 This silly jealous husband to beguile, *to deceive*
 3405 And if so be this gamè went aright,
 She shouldè sleepen in his arms all night,
 For this was her desire and his also.
 And right anon withouten wordès mo' *more*
 This Nicholas no longer would he tarry
 3410 But doth full soft unto his chamber carry
 Both meat and drinkè for a day or tway, *Both food & / two*
 And to her husband bade her for to say
 If that he askèd after Nicholas,
 She shouldè say she n'istè where he was; *did not know*
 3415 Of all that day she saw him not with eye.
 She trowèd that he was in malady, *She guessed / sick*
 For, for no cry her maiden could him call. *maid*
 He n'ould answer, for nothing that might fall. *would not / happen*
 This passeth forth all thilkè Saturday *all that*
 3420 That Nicholas still in his chamber lay
 And ate and slept or didè what him lest *did w. pleased him*
 Till Sunday that the sunnè goes to rest. *sun*

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,
 3425 And said: "I am adread, by St. Thomás,
 It standeth not aright with Nicholas.
 God shieldè that he died suddenly. *God forbid*
 This world is now full tickle sikerly. *unsure certainly*
 I saw today a corpsè borne to church
 3430 That now on Monday last I saw him work."
 "Go up," quod he unto his knave anon. *servant lad, then*

- "Clepe at his door, or knockè with a stone. *Call*
 Look how it is and tell me boldely."
 This knavè goes him up full sturdily.
 3435 And at the chamber door while that he stood,
 He cried and knockèd as that he were wood: *mad*
 "What! How? What do you, Master Nicholay?
 How may you sleepen all the longè day?"
 But all for nought; he heardè not a word.
 3440 A hole he found full low upon a board *he = boy*
 There as the cat was wont in for to creep, *was accustomed*
 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
 3445 As he had kikèd on the newè moon. *gaped*
 Adown he goes and told his master soon
 In what array he saw this ilkè man. *condition / this same*

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 *bless himself*
 And said: "Help us, St. Fridéswide. *(an Oxford saint)*
 3450 A man wot little what shall him betide. *knows / happen*
 This man is fall, with his astronomy,
 In some woodness or in some agony. *madness / fit*
 I thought aye well how that it shouldè be. *I always knew*
 Men should not know of Godè's privity. *secrets*
 3455 Yea, blessèd be always a lewèd man *an illiterate man*
 That nought but only his beliefè can. ¹
 So fared another clerk with astromy. *astronomy*
 He walkèd in the fieldès for to pry
 Upon the stars, what there should befall—
 3460 Till he was in a marlepit y-fall. *claypit*
 He saw not that. But yet, by St. Thomás,
 Me reweth sore of Handy Nicholas. *It grieves me*

¹ 3455-6: "Blessed 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."
 And to the chamber door he gan him dress. *he applied himself*
 His knavè was a strong carl for the nonce *strong fellow indeed*
- 3470 And by the hasp he heaved it up at once.
 On to the floor the doorè fell anon.
 This Nicholas sat aye as still as stone *stayed sitting*
 And ever gapèd up into the air.
 This carpenter wend he were in despair ¹ *thought he was*
- 3475 And hent him by the shoulder mightily *seized*
 And shook him hard and crièd spitously: *vehemently*
 "What Nicholay! What how! What! Look adown.
 Awake and think on Christè's passïon.
 I crouchè thee from elvès and from wights."
 Therewith the night-spell said he anonrights ² *I bless / (evil) creatures*
- 3480 On fourè halvès of the house about *sides*
 And on the threshold of the door without.
 "Jesus Christ, and Saintè Benedict
 Bless this house from every wicked wight,
 3485 For the night's verie, the whitè Pater Noster.
 Where wentest thou, Saintè Peter's soster?" ³ *sister*

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 sighè sore and said: "Alas!
 Shall all the world be lost eftsoonès now?" *right now*
- 3490 This carpenter answered: "What sayest thou?
 What, think on God, as we do, men that swink." *work*
 This Nicholas answered: "Fetch me drink.
 And after will I speak in privity *privacy*
 Of certain things that toucheth me and thee. *concern me*
- 3495 I will tell it to no other man, certáin."
 This carpenter goes down and comes again
 And brought of mighty ale a largè quart
 And when that each of them had drunk his part
 This Nicholas his doorè fastè shut
- 3500 And down the carpenter by him he sat
 And saidè: "John, my hostè lief and dear, *lief = beloved*
 Thou shalt upon thy truth swear to me here
 That to no wight thou shall this counsel wray, *no person / divulge*
 For it is Christè's counsel that I say,
- 3505 And if thou tell it man, thou art forlore, *man=anyone / lost*
 For this vengeance shalt thou have therefore
 That if thou wrayè me, thou shalt be wood." *betray me / go mad*
 "Nay, Christ forbid it for his holy blood,"
 Quod then this silly man. "I am no labb. *blabber*
- 3510 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
3515 As I have lookèd on the moonè bright
That now on Monday next, at quarter night *about 9 p.m.*
Shall fall a rain, and that so wild and wood *furious*
That half so great was never Noah's flood.
This world," he said, "in lessè than an hour
3520 Shall all be drenched, so hideous is the shower. *drowned*
Thus shall mankindè 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
3525 And said: "Is there no remedy in this case?"
"Why, yes, 'fore God," quod Handy Nicholas, *before God*
"If thou wilt worken after lore and redde.¹ *by advice & counsel*
Thou mayst not worken after thine own head.
For thus says Solomon that was full true:
3530 `Work all by counsel and thou shalt not rue.' *by advice / regret*
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 savèd was Noë *Noah*
3535 When that Our Lord had warnèd him before
That all the world with water should be lore?" *lost*
"Yes," quod this carpenter, "full yore ago." *long 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 *and his family*
3540 Ere that he mightè get his wife to ship? *Before he could*
Him had lever, I dare well undertake, *He'd rather / I bet*
At thilkè time, than all his wethers black, *At that time / sheep*
That she had had a ship herself alone.² *to herself*

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?	<i>know you?/ to do</i>
3545	This asketh haste, and of a hasty thing Men may not preach or maken tarrying.	<i>or delay</i>
	Anon, go get us fast into this inn A kneading trough or else a kimelin	<i>Quickly / house tub</i>
	For each of us; but look that they be large	
3550	In which we mayen swim as in a barge. And have therein victuals sufficient	<i>food enough</i>
	But for a day. Fie on the remnant! The water shall aslake and go away	<i>Never mind the rest! slacken off</i>
	Aboutè prime upon the nextè day.	<i>About 9 a.m.</i>
3555	But Robin may not wit of this, thy knave, Nor eke thy maiden Gill I may not save.	<i>not know / servant</i>
	Askè not why, for though thou askè me I will not tellen Godè's privity.	<i>secrets</i>
	Sufficeth thee, but if thy wittès mad,	<i>unless you're mad</i>
3560	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.	<i>busy yourself</i>
	But when thou hast for her and thee and me Y-gotten us these kneading tubbes three,	<i>tubs</i>
3565	Then shalt thou hang them in the roof full high, That no man of our purveyance espy.	<i>preparations</i>
	And when thou thus hast done as I have said And hast our victuals fair in them y-laid	<i>our supplies</i>
	And eke an axe to smite the cord a-two,	<i>And also / cut in two</i>
3570	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 greatè shower is gone away —	
3575	Then shalt thou swim as merry, I undertake, As does the whitè duck after her drake.	
	Then will I clepe: "How, Alison! How, John!	<i>I will call</i>

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." *soon*
 And thou wilt say: "Hail, Master Nicholay.
 3580 Good morrow. I see thee well, for it is day."
 And then shall we be lordès 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 advisèd on that ilkè night *that same*
 3585 That we be entered into shippè's board
 That none of us ne speakè not a word
 Nor clepe nor cry, but be in his prayer *call out*
 For it is Godè's ownè hestè dear. *solemn order*
 Thy wife and thou must hangè far a-twin *asunder*
 3590 For that betwixtè you shall be no sin,
 No more in looking than there shall in deed.
 This ordinance is said. Go, God thee speed. *This order is given*
 Tomorrow at night, when men be all asleep,
 Into our kneading tubbès will we creep
 3595 And sitten there, abiding Godè's grace. *awaiting*
 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.
 3600 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!" *(cries of dismay)*
 And to his wife he told his privity
 And she was 'ware and knew it bet than he *aware / better*
 3605 What all this quaintè cast was for to say. *elaborate plot*
 But natheless, she fared as she would die, *she acted*
 And said "Alas! Go forth thy way anon.

- Help us to 'scape, or we be dead each one.
 I am thy true, very, wedded wife. *thy loyal, faithful*
- 3610 Go, dearè spouse, and help to save our life."
 Lo, which a great thing is affection. *See what / feeling*
 Men may die of imagination,
 So deepè may impression be take. *be made*
 This silly carpenter beginneth quake. *shake*
- 3615 Him thinketh verily that he may see
 Noah's flood come wallowing as the sea
 To drenchen Alison, his honey dear. *To drown*
 He weepeth, wailleth, maketh sorry cheer.
 He sigheth, with full many a sorry swough. *sigh*
- 3620 He goes and getteth him a kneading trough,
 And after that a tub and kimelin, *vat*
 And privily he sent them to his inn *secretly / house*
 And hung them in the roof in privity. *in secrecy*
 His ownè hand, he madè ladders three *(With) his own*
- 3625 To climben by the rungès and the stalks *rungs & uprights*
 Unto the tubbès hanging in the balks, *rafters*
 And them he victualled, bothè trough and tub, *he supplied*
 With bread and cheese and good ale in a jub *jug*
 Sufficing right enough as for a day.
- 3630 But ere that he had made all this array, *before / ready*
 He sent his knave and eke his wench also *servant boy & girl*
 Upon his need to London for to go. *On his business*

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,
 3635 And dressèd allè thing as it should be. *prepared everything*
 And shortly up they clomben allè three. *climbed*
 They sitten stillè, well a furlong way.¹ *few minutes*
 "Now, Pater Noster, clum," said Nicholay. *Our Father,*

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 *offers*
 Awaiting on the rain if he it hear.
- The deadè sleep, for weary busy-ness,
 Fell on this carpenter, right (as I guess)
- 3645 Aboutè curfew time or little more. *About nightfall*
 For travailing of his ghost he groaneth sore *In agony of spirit*
 And eft he routeth, for his head mislay. *also he snored*

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

- Down off the ladder stalketh Nicholay *slips*
 And Alison full soft adown she sped.
- 3650 Withouten wordès more, they go to bed
 There as the carpenter is wont to lie. *is accustomed*
 There was the revel and the melody.
 And thus lie Alison and Nicholas
 In busyness of mirth and of soláce *enjoyment*
- 3655 Till that the bell of laudès gan to ring *bell for morning service*
 And friars in the chancel gan to sing. *in the church*

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 askèd upon case a cloisterer *by chance a monk*
 Full privily after John the carpenter, *V. quietly about*
 And he drew him apart out of the church.
 And said: "I n'ot; I saw him here not work *I don't know*
- 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 certáin.
 3670 Where that he be I cannot soothly sayn." *at outlying farm*
- This Absalom full jolly was and light
 And thoughté: "Now is time to wake all night,
 For sikerly I saw him not stirring *certainly*
 About his door, since day began to spring.
 3675 So may I thrive, I shall at cocké's crow *On my word!*
 Full privily knocken at his window
 That stands full low upon his bower's wall. *bedroom wall*
 To Alison now will I tellen all
 My love longing, for yet I shall not miss
 3680 That at the leasté way I shall her kiss.
 Some manner comfort shall I have parfay. *in faith*
 My mouth has itched all this longé day.
 That is a sign of kissing at the least.
 All night me mette eke I was at a feast. *I dreamed also*
 3685 Therefore I will go sleep an hour or tway, *two*
 And all the night then will I wake and play." *& have fun*
- When that the firsté cock has crowed anon
 Up rist this jolly lover, Absalon *riseth*
 And him arrayeth gay at point devise.¹
 3690 But first he cheweth grain and liquorice *cardamom*
 To smellen sweet. Ere he had combed his hair,
 Under his tongue a truelove he bare, *spice he put*
 For thereby wend he to be gracious. *hoped to be attractive*
 He roameth to the carpenteré's house
 3695 And he stands still under the shot window. *shuttered*
 Unto his breast it rought, it was so low, *reached*
 And soft he cougheth with a semi-sound. *gentle 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.
 3705 Ywis, lemman, I have such love longing *Indeed, dear*
 That like a turtle true is my mourning. *turtle-dove*
 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'." *`Come kiss me'(?)*
 3710 I love another (or else I were to blame)
 Well bet than thee, by Jesus, Absalon. *better*
 Go forth thy way, or I will cast a stone,
 And let me sleep, a twenty devil way." ¹
 "Alas!" quod Absalom, "and Welaway!
 3715 That truè love was e'er so evil beset." ² *so badly treated*
 Then, kiss me, since that it may be no bet, *better*
 For Jesus' love, and for the love of me."
 "Wilt thou then go thy way therewith?" quod she.
 "Yea, certès, lemman," quod this Absalon. *certainly, darling*
 3720 "Then make thee ready," quod she. "I come anon."

*Her even **more** ungracious practical joke*

And unto Nicholas she saidè still: *quietly*
 "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. *in every way*
 3725 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, sweetè bird, thine ore"¹
 The window she undoes, and that in haste.
 "Have done," quod she. "Come off and speed thee fast,
 Lest that our neighèbourès thee espy."
 3730 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, *befell / better*
 But with his mouth he kissed her naked arse
 3735 Full savorly, ere he was 'ware of this. *aware*
 Aback he starts, and thought it was amiss,
 For well he wist a woman has no beard. *well he knew*
 He felt a thing all rough and long y-haired
 And saidè: "Fie! Alas! What have I do?"
 3740 "Tee hee," quod she, and clapt the window to.
 And Absalom goes forth a sorry pace. *with sad step*
 "A beard! a beard!" quod Handy Nicholas. *"beard" also=joke*
 "By God's corpus, this goes fair and well." *By God's body!*

Absalom plots revenge for his humiliation

- This silly Absalom heard every deal
 3745 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 *repay you*
 With dust, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with chips *scrapes*
 But Absalom that says full oft: "Alas!"
 3750 My soul betake I unto Satanas, *I'll be damned*
 But me were lever than all this town," quod he, *I had rather*
 Of this despite a-wreken for to be. *avenged for this shame*
 "Alas!" quod he "Alas! I n'ad y-blent." ²
 His hotè love is cold and all y-quenched. *hot*
 3755 For from that time that he had kissed her arse

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	<i>lovers</i>
	For he was healèd of his malady.	
	Full often paramours he gan defy	<i>denounce</i>
	And wept as does a child that is y-beat.	<i>beaten</i>
3760	A softè pace he went over the street	<i>Quietly he went</i>
	Unto a smith men clepen Daun Gervase	<i>call</i>
	That in his forge smithèd plough harness.	
	He sharpens share and coulter busily.	<i>(plough parts)</i>
	This Absalom knocks all easily	
3765	And said: "Undo, Gervase, and that anon."	<i>open up</i>
	"What? Who art thou?" "It am I, Absalon."	
	"What, Absalon! What, Christè's sweetè tree!	<i>cross</i>
	Why risè you so rathe. Hey, ben'citee!	<i>so early / bless you!</i>
	What aileth you? Some gay girl, God it wot,	<i>pretty girl</i>
3770	Has brought you thus upon the viritot.	<i>on the prow(?)</i>
	By Saint Neót, you wot well what I mean."	<i>you know</i>
	This Absalom ne raughtè not a bean	<i>did not care</i>
	Of all his play. No word again he gave.	<i>jesting</i>
	He haddè morè tow on his distaff ²	
3775	Than Gervase knew, and saidè: "Friend so dear,	
	That hotè coulter in the chimney here	<i>hot plough part</i>
	As lend it me. I have therewith to do.	<i>need of it</i>
	And I will bring it thee again full soon.	
	Gervasè answered: "Certès, were it gold	<i>Certainly</i>
3780	Or in a pokè nobles all untold, ³	<i>bag coins uncouted</i>
	Thou shouldst it have, as I am truè smith.	
	Eh! Christè's foe! What will you do therewith?"	<i>What the devil will ...</i>
	"Thereof," quod Absalom, "be as be may.	
	I shall well tell it thee another day."	
3785	And caught the coulter by the coldè steel.	<i>cold handle</i>

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 uncouted (*untold*) number of coins (*nobles*) in a bag (*poke*) ..."

Full soft out at the door he 'gan to steal
And went unto the carpenterè's wall.

Absalom's revenge

	He cougheth first and knocketh therewithall	<i>also</i>
	Upon the window, right as he did ere.	<i>before</i>
3790	This Alison answered: "Who is there That knocketh so? I warrant it a thief."	<i>I'm sure it is</i>
	"Why, nay," quod he, "God wot, my sweetè lief. I am thine Absalom, my darling. Of gold," quod he, "I have thee brought a ring.	<i>God knows / love</i>
3795	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."	<i>engraved</i>
	This Nicholas was risen for to piss And thought he would amenden all the jape.	<i>improve the joke</i>
3800	He should kiss <i>his</i> arse ere that he 'scape. And up the window did he hastily And out his arse he putteth privily Over the buttock, to the haunchè bone. And therewith spoke this clerk, this Absalon:	<i>He = Absalom</i>
3805	"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	<i>I know not</i>
3810	And Nicholas amid the arse he smote. Off goes the skin a handèbreadth about. The hot coulter burnèd so his tout That for the smart he weenèd for to die. As he were wood, for woe he 'gan to cry	<i>clap</i> <i>blinded</i> <i>he struck</i> <i>backside</i> <i>from pain he expected</i> <i>As if mad</i>
3815	"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. *mad*
 And thought "Alas! Now cometh Noah's flood."
 He set him up withouten wordès mo' *more*
 3820 And with his ax he smote the cord a-two *cut*
 And down goes all—he found neither to sell
 Nor bread nor ale, till he came to the cell *bottom*
 Upon the floor,¹ and there aswoon he lay.

Alison and Nicholas lie their way out of the predicament

Up starts her Alison, and Nicholay,
 3825 And crièd "Out!" and "Harrow!" in the street. *(Cries of alarm)*
 The neighèbourès, 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,
 3830 But stand he must unto his ownè harm,²
 For when he spoke, he was anon bore down *talked down*
 With Handy Nicholas and Alison. *"With" = "By"*
 They tolden every man that he was wood;
 He was aghastè so of Noah's flood *mad*
 3835 Through fantasy, that of his vanity
 He had y-bought him kneading tubbès three³
 And had them hangèd in the roof above
 And that he prayèd them for Godè's love
 To sitten in the roof "par compaignie." *for company*
 3840 The folk gan laughen at his fantasy.
 Into the roof they kiken and they gape *stare*
 And turnèd all his harm into a jape *joke*
 For whatso that this carpenter answered

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 oathes 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 levè brother."
 And every wight gan laughen at this strife. *mad, my dear b. person*

The "moral" of the story

3850 Thus swived was the carpenterè'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."