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Chapter Five

The Miller's Tale
and the Politics of Laughter

"Facts, words, historic ideas. He struggled against his fate, yes, exactly, like someone in the social universe of Marx. He believed genuinely in high principles and aims even if he was not yet assured of a sense of perspective."

The *Knight's Tale* represents in its narrative and exemplifies by its mode of narration the crisis of governance experienced by the fourteenth-century aristocracy. With the Miller's drunken interruption, we know that this crisis has encroached upon the tale-telling game of the *Canterbury* pilgrims. When Harry Bailly calls upon the Monk to tell "some-what to quite with the Knightes tale" (3119), his choice shows that he is dutifully organizing the game according to the conservative program of the three orders: first the *miles*, then his clerical counterpart, the *monachus*.¹ But the Miller will have none of it, and by his intervention not only subverts the social hierarchy but substitutes his own principle of order. "I kan a noble tale for the nones," he says, "with which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale" (3126–27), and his tale enacts the very "quitting" it narrates. What happens to Absolon, Nicholas, and John in the *Miller's Tale*, in other words, happens to the Knight *by means of* the *Miller's Tale*. Indeed, in his aggressive misreading of the Host's words, whose "quite" means "reward" but which the Miller reinterprets as "retaliate," he allows into the tale-telling game the linguistic subversion that characterizes his own *Tale*, in which words such as "derne," "hende," "pryvetee," and "berd," and even the innocuous "water," are all revealed to have meanings that subvert or "quite" their conven-

tional and intended meanings.² So too is his interruption a subversion of form. The principle of hierarchy derived from the three orders is set aside in favor of an internally generated and self-sustaining principle of "quitting." The tale-telling game, in short, becomes itself a fabliau and is apparently henceforth to be governed by the fabliau principle—explicitly announced by the Reeve—of *ars ut artem falleret*.³

With the Miller's interruption, Chaucer thus sets aside a principle of order sanctioned by social authority in favor of one derived from a literary form that continually proclaims its own marginality. More generally, he asserts that the dynamic of the *Canterbury Tales* will be self-generating rather than derivative, that in its spontaneity and self-discovery it will resist mechanical and externally imposed structural dispositions, and especially those—such as estates satire—expressive of the established institutions of social authority. And yet as soon as this experiment in form is proclaimed it begins to be called into question. In its bitter "quitting" of the Miller the Reeve's "jape of malice" (4338) indulges the fabliau's dark undercurrent of violence and victimization that the *Miller's Tale* managed to contain if not fully to efface, while the Cook then introduces a tale in which the Reeve's "cherles termes" now delineate a world of *Lumpenproletariat* squalor and moral anarchy. With his interruption the Miller seems to have allowed entrance into the pilgrimage of a "harlotrie" (3184) and "ribaudye" (3866) that has debased the "game and pley" (4335) of tale telling itself.

But despite this apparent failure, Chaucer provocatively returns to precisely the same structure in the second movement of the *Tales* (Fragments II–III), and now with the Wife of Bath as his revisionary agent. After the Man of Law has completed his "thrifty tale" (1165) of Constance, the Host calls upon the Parson to continue. "I se wel," he says, "that ye lerned men in lore / Can moche good" (1168–69), and despite the Parson's censoriousness the Host encourages him in his "predicacioun" (1176). But the Wife of Bath now reenacts the Miller's earlier subversion: "'Nay, by my fader soule, that shal he nat,' / Seyde the [Wyf of Bathe],

2. For some of these puns, see E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Idiom of Popular Poetry in the *Miller's Tale*," *English Institute Essays*, 1950 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 116–40.

3. As Alfred David says, "A case could be made that the whole pilgrimage had to be invented for the sake of the fabliaux" (*The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976], 106.) See also Traugott Lawler's argument that the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole is "a kind of meta-fabliau" (*The One and the Many in the Canterbury Tales* [Hamden: Archon Books, 1980], 39).

1. For the relation of the Knight to the Monk, see Robert A. Kaske, "The Knight's Interruption of the *Monk's Tale*," *ELH* 24 (1957): 249–68.

'schal he nat preche'" (1178-79), and she herself becomes the "noble prechour" (III, 165) whom she has displaced.⁴ And with her interruption the Wife initiates a line of development—both in the limited scope of the so-called Marriage Group and in the extended pattern of binary opposition that governs the articulation of the *Tales* throughout—that will continue until the definitive cancellation of the *Canterbury Tales* finally accomplished by the long-deferred Parson.

Why does the Wife of Bath's interruption succeed while the Miller's fails? The answer to this question is, I believe, best framed in political terms: the Miller's challenge is articulated in explicitly class terms and is as a result too explicitly threatening, while the Wife's is deflected into a traditional mode of ideological opposition—that is, into promoting the claims of a socially undetermined subjectivity, traditionally thought to be possessed by women, that stands apart from *all* forms of class consciousness. In other words, Chaucer begins by posing his opposition to the dominant ideology in terms of class antagonism, but then retreats by setting up as his privileged category subjectivity *per se*, the free-floating individual whose needs and satisfactions stand outside any social structure. The Miller's peasant self-assertiveness is immediately registered as threatening, and the subsequent development of Fragment I serves to contain this threat by stigmatizing it as not merely disruptive of social order but destructive of its own holiday gaiety. Then in Fragments II–III this containment is given a definitive form first by the Wife of Bath, with her privileging of a subjectivity that is presented as politically inert, and then in the complementary tales of the Friar and Summoner, in which peasant self-assertiveness is both dissipated into internecine squabbling among ecclesiastical agents and appropriated, at the end of the *Summoner's Tale*, by seigneurial authority. And while we may see this move as politically timid, it was nonetheless crucial to Chaucer's subsequent dominance of our literary tradition. For it is as the great champion of the individual that Chaucer has displaced his rivals (like Gower and, especially, Langland—both of whom haunt the *Canterbury Tales* as rejected possibilities) in order to establish himself as the Father of English Poetry.

4. I have adopted the emendation proposed by E. Talbot Donaldson, ed., *Chaucer's Poetry*, 2d ed. (New York: Ronald Press, 1975), 190. Donaldson has defended this emendation in "The Ordering of the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies: Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley*, ed. Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 201–3. For my reliance on the Ellesmere order, which entails accepting the authenticity of the *Man of Law's Endlink*, see above, Introduction, 41–44.

I

If we are fully to understand the social meaning of the first eight *Canterbury Tales*, we must revise our conventional understanding of the shape of fourteenth-century society. Specifically, we must dispense with the ideas that the most dynamic element of late-medieval English society was the city and that the agents of historical progress were merchants. On the contrary, we must realize that the most powerful forces for economic and social change were generated in the country, and that the agents of these changes were agrarian workers (like the Miller) and rural small-commodity producers (like the Wife of Bath). For literary critics, this is an understanding that requires a shift in assumptions. For we have instinctively assumed that medieval society can still be understood in terms of an opposition between the *Naturalwirtschaft* of an economically inert, socially repressive, and culturally backward country and the *Geldwirtschaft* of an innovative, mobile, and avant-garde town. But this account has come under attack both for its political assumptions and for its simplification of the historical evidence.

What underwrites the traditional account is the assumption that the town—and the open market that is its *raison d'être*—is the solvent of the feudal mode of production: urban freedom from the reciprocal dependencies of feudalism allows for the creation of a free-floating individual, capable of entering into contractual relations; labor is divided into the specializations necessary for the eventual triumph of industrialization; and an emergent civic humanism provides the foundations for the development of parliamentary democracy. What has been widely if tacitly accepted, in other words, is the familiar and oddly inescapable Whig interpretation of history, with the heroic bourgeoisie, here instantiated in the form of the medieval merchant adventurer, as history's prime mover.⁵ As R. J. Holton has recently pointed out, this account depends upon the classic Enlightenment notion that history proceeds "in terms of the progressive realisation of a system of 'natural liberty' achievable through free market relations. . . . The assumption is that given the removal of barriers economic freedom (or 'capitalism') becomes established of itself."⁶

5. Herbert F. Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell, 1931).

6. R. J. Holton, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 35, 38–39. For a recent version of the orthodox account, see Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy, 1000–1700*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1980 [1976]), for whom "the urban movement of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries [was] the turning point of world history. . . . The urban revolution of the eleventh and twelfth centuries was the prelude to, and created the prerequisites for, the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century" (146, 149).

Even if one reads the changes brought about by the rise of a money economy negatively, the essential terms of the analysis do not change. Rather than arguing that individuals are now free to determine their own economic fates for themselves, with a consequent increase in innovative entrepreneurialism and technological development, we could instead, in a quasi-Marxist way, describe these changes in terms of the infection of personal relations with the cash nexus, the subjection of natural value to the relentless commodification of the market, and the transformation of the worker, who under feudalism was either himself part of the means of production or, better yet, possessed them, into an alienated wage laborer. But such a neo-Smithian Marxism, as it has been cogently termed, still sees the agency of economic and social transformation as the town-based market economy—and still stigmatizes the country as a regressive brake upon the productive forces.⁷

In fact, political interests quite apart, the idea that the dynamic of late-medieval society can be understood in terms of the opposition between a feudal natural economy and a capitalist money economy has been for many years under attack by medieval historians.⁸ Over forty years ago, M. M. Postan called the rise of the money economy "one of the residuary hypotheses of economic history: a *deus ex machina* to be called upon when no other explanation is available"—cautionary words that have had too little impact upon literary critics.⁹ Similarly

7. Robert Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism," *New Left Review* 104 (1977): 25–82. This is not to say that Marx himself does not provide the materials for such an analysis, as in the chapter on money in the *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973 [1857–58]), especially 156–58. For Marx's varying views on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, see Holton, *Transition*, 64–102; J. S. Neale, "Introduction," in *Feudalism, Capitalism and Beyond*, ed. Eugene Kamenka and J. S. Neale (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1975), 3–27; and Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 301–17.

8. See especially M. M. Postan, *Medieval Trade and Finance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); *The Medieval Economy and Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975 [1972]); and Georges Duby, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 1968).

9. M. M. Postan, "The Rise of a Money Economy," *Economic History Review* 14 (1944), reprinted in *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 28. Chaucerians for whom the rise of the money economy is a central interpretive category include R. A. Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word* (Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1983) and Stephen Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

oversimple is the notion that the changes in late-medieval English society can be understood as a struggle between progressive urban centers dominated by a mobile bourgeoisie and free citizenry and, ranged against them, a hierarchical and static rural feudalism dominated by a conservative nobility and Church. It is clear, for example, that the agrarian economy was thoroughly monetized and exchange oriented throughout the Middle Ages, that peasant society had been for many centuries highly stratified and differentiated, and that there existed since at least the twelfth century a vigorous, monetized, and even credit-based peasant land market, a market for agricultural wage labor, and small-scale but essential rural industry and commodity production.¹⁰ Similarly, both lay and ecclesiastical landlords were engaged in sophisticated techniques of estate management and in the calculative pursuit of profit maximization,¹¹ many members of the seigneurial class were deeply involved in the world of international trade,¹² and even the quintessentially noble activity of warfare was pervaded with the values of the cash nexus.¹³ Finally, the notion that medieval cities were "non-feudal islands in a feudal sea"—while pointing to an important truth—can too easily be exaggerated.¹⁴ If in theory *Stadtluft macht frei*, in practice a city like London tightly restricted access to citizenship, while civic life as a whole was dominated by a conservative merchant patriciate that imposed upon the city much the same structure of domi-

10. Rodney H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); and Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (London: Hambledon Press, 1985); see also P. D. A. Harvey, ed., *The Peasant Land Market in Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

11. For the role of monasticism in the development of the calculative pursuit of profit maximization that, following Sombart and Weber, is usually regarded as the central characteristic of capitalism, see H. E. Hallam, "The Medieval Social Picture," in Kamenka and Neale, *Feudalism, Capitalism, and Beyond*, 29–49. On landlords' adaptation to changed circumstances, see the general account given by Harry A. Miskimin, *The Economy of Early Renaissance Europe, 1300–1460* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975 [1969]), 32–47; and K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973): "All the evidence suggests that most of the landowners of our period—all who have left any records—were well able to take care of their property, and if they got the chance, of their neighbours' also. The indolent, the vacillating, or the feebly good-intentioned would not long have had any estates to enjoy" (53).

12. On the aristocratic participation in trade, see Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962 [1948]), 243–44, 256–63; T. H. Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) entitles his fifth chapter, "Edward III—Woolmonger Extraordinary."

13. See above, chapter 3, 172–74.

14. Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, 239.

nance and subordination as was in force across the feudal world as a whole.¹⁵

It has been argued that what this revisionary history demonstrates is that feudalism was really capitalism writ small, a variant on the Whig thesis that capitalism represents the natural condition of economic man.¹⁶ The most vigorous alternative to this account is that offered by recent Marxist historians, for whom the key component of *all* nonsocialist economies is the governing classes' exploitation of the producers in order to extract surplus value.¹⁷ These historians understand feudalism not simply as an inefficient means by which the individual seeks to fulfill his economic destiny but as a mode of production characterized by the *direct* rather than indirect exploitation of labor by the ruling classes. Similarly, markets—and the cities that developed around them—represent not an alternative to the feudal mode of production but, given the need of the exploiting class to extract surplus value in the form of money, an element necessary for the proper functioning of the feudal economy.¹⁸ For Marx, medieval merchant capital was never itself progressive or transformative but remained parasitic upon the truly productive forces of society—forces that had always been and

15. See below, chapter 7, 329–30.

16. This argument has been most vigorously advanced by Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), and in his subsequent work. For a useful analysis, see K. D. M. Snell, "English Historical Continuity and the Culture of Capitalism: The Work of Alan Macfarlane," *History Workshop* 27 (1989):154–63.

17. The crucial figures here are Rodney Hilton (see note 10), Maurice Dobb, and Robert Brenner. The central topic of their work is the nature of the transition from feudalism to capitalism: see Rodney Hilton, ed., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1978)—a collection of essays, mostly from the 1950s, concerned with the seminal book by Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), and including an important introduction by Hilton; see also John E. Martin, *Feudalism to Capitalism: Peasant and Landlord in English Agrarian Development* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1983); Kamenka and Neale, *Feudalism, Capitalism and Beyond*, and Holton, *Transition*. For theoretical comments as well as empirical studies, see also Hilton, *Class Conflict*, and Guy Bois, *The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy c. 1300–1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). The work of Dobb and Hilton is discussed by Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (London: Polity Press, 1984). For the reemergence of these issues in the work of Robert Brenner, see T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

18. For a recent discussion, with extensive bibliography, see R. J. Hilton, *Cities, Capitalism and Civilization* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986); see also Rodney Hilton, "Towns in Societies—Medieval England," *Urban History Yearbook* (1982): 7–13, and Hilton, "Medieval Market Towns and Simple Commodity Production," *Past and Present* 109 (1985): 3–23.

(until at least the eighteenth century) remained agricultural.¹⁹ In sum, the prime mover in feudal society was not proto-capitalist trade but the growing surplus value that the landowning class was able to extract from the agrarian economy. Thus it is that contemporary medieval historians have discovered, to cite the title of Robert Brenner's recent, highly influential article, "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism"—a discovery that sees the agricultural sector as being the locus for Marx's "really revolutionizing path" of transition by which the producer becomes himself a capitalist.²⁰

Understanding economic life in terms of class struggle, these historians have argued that what brought about the collapse of feudalism and the transition to capitalism was the growing ability of the late-medieval peasant to withhold surplus value and turn it to his own, independent economic uses. Thus historians such as Maurice Dobb and, especially, Rodney Hilton have followed Marx's lead in describing the period 1350 to 1450 as the golden age of the English peasant.²¹ As Hilton has pointed out, "Medieval peasants were quite capable, in economic terms, of providing for themselves without the intervention of any ruling class. In this they differed from ancient slaves, and from modern wage workers who have to work on the means of production in order to gain their living."²² Since it always possessed (even if it did not yet own) the means of production, when the medieval peasantry developed sufficient strength to resist the grossest forms of seigneurial exaction it was able to retain the surplus value of the agrarian economy, which had up to this time been appropriated by the ruling classes. Hilton describes the results in the following terms:

Between 1350 and 1450 . . . we find that relative land abundance was combined, for various reasons, with a relaxation of seigneurial domination and a notable lightening of the economic burden on the peasant economy. Peasant society, in spite of still existing within (in broad terms) a feudal framework, developed according to laws of motion internal to itself. The village community was dominated by the richer

19. Marx's attack on merchant capital as not being what he calls in the first volume of *Capital* "the really revolutionizing path" of transformation can be found in chapters 20 and 47 of *Capital* III.

20. Brenner's article appeared first in *Past and Present* 97 (1982): 16–113, and is now reprinted in Aston and Philpin, eds., *Brenner Debate*, 213–327.

21. Hilton is here following the lead of both Postan and of the great economic historian and political radical, J. E. Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England*, 7 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1866–1902).

22. Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free* (London: Methuen, 1977 [1973]), 41.

peasant families, who ran the manorial court in its jurisdictional, punitive and land-registration functions. The limits on rents and services were firmly fixed well below what the lords wanted.²³

Hence, concludes Hilton, "it is possible that the century after the Black Death was the golden age of the middle rather than of the rich peasantry (the yeoman)."²⁴ But it is also the case that this rural economy is the seedbed for later capitalist development. As Dobb pointed out, and as Hilton and Brenner have shown in detail, "It is then from the petty mode of production (in the degree to which it secures independence of action, and social differentiation in turn develops within it) that capitalism is born."²⁵

The effect of these arguments is to present a very different picture of late-medieval English society than we are used to seeing. Rather than the merchant class and the city functioning as the agents for change, they are instead to be understood as dependent upon a seigneurial class addicted to luxuries but under increasing economic pressure.²⁶ Conversely, however, the agricultural economy remains strong but always at a local level: while the increased agricultural productivity of the postplague years does not, because of the decline in demand, lead to a substantial increase in money income, the small agricultural producers are able to keep more of their product and to expand their holdings, an expansion that takes place at the expense of both the large landholders and, on the other side, of their less successful peasant neighbors.²⁷ It is thus the rural sector of the economy that is dynamic, and the solvent of feudal relations is neither merchant capital nor the trading activity it finances but a vigorous peasant economy; and the crucial element in the collapse of feudalism is peasant resistance to the seigneurial extrac-

23. Rodney Hilton, "Reasons for Inequality Among Medieval Peasants," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 5 (1978): 271-83, reprinted in *Class Conflict*, 149.

24. Hilton, "Reasons for Inequality," 149. Hilton's *The English Peasantry of the Later Middle Ages* provides a description of this golden age.

25. Maurice Dobb, "A Reply," in Hilton, *Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, 59.

26. The growth of the luxury trade, and its impoverishing effect upon seigneurial fortunes, is discussed by Miskimin, *Economy of Early Renaissance Europe*, 135-37; see above, chapter 3, note 68. For a detailed picture of aristocratic consumption as well as an account of how the nobility met the economic crises of the later Middle Ages, see Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 27-108.

27. Both the existence and the nature of the late-medieval improvement of peasant conditions remains a controversial issue among medieval historians; for alternative accounts, see Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, 201-2, and Miskimin, *Economy of Early Renaissance Europe*, 50-51, 56-57.

tion of surplus profit from the agrarian economy. What we have, then, to conclude this discussion with a highly schematic description, is a feverish consumer boom in luxury goods masking irreparable structural weaknesses and set against a powerful, self-confident peasant economy—a self-confidence visible throughout the later-medieval period and nowhere more dramatically than in the Rising of 1381. For the Rising was much less the *cri de coeur* of an unbearably downtrodden peasantry than the outraged reaction of independent peasant producers to the seigneurial attempt to contain their growth.²⁸

This account should encourage us to recognize that the distinction between noble and bourgeois, feudal and urban, while real and visible, does not describe the central opposition within fourteenth-century English society. On the contrary, both sets of values, however different one from the other, are *together* part of the dominant ideology, and both are to be set against the largely inarticulate but nonetheless insistent pressure of rural commodity production and the political resistance it spawned. The crucial ideological opposition is not between the seigneurial nobility and the urban merchant class but between both of these elements of the exploiting class and the increasingly independent and self-sufficient productive classes in the country.

The unity of the ruling classes, whether seigneurial or mercantile, is especially visible in the case of Chaucer himself. Far from being simply an ordinary London citizen (itself a privileged category, to be sure), Chaucer was the son of one of the members of the mercantile patriciate who controlled the city, a position that is certainly reflected in his early entrance into the household of the Duchess of Ulster and in his successful career within the courts of Edward III, of John of Gaunt, and of Richard II. Moreover, as one of Richard's royal servants the poet did not, as we have seen, disclaim any interest or role in politics; on the contrary, he was very much the king's man in the crucial Parliament of 1386, suffered for his allegiance when the king's party failed, and was finally rewarded for his loyalty when the king regained power in 1389.²⁹ In other words, to see Chaucer as somehow caught between two worlds and therefore free of both is both to misunderstand the structure of late-medieval English society and to underestimate the strength of the poet's political commitments, whether freely chosen or not. What this ultimately means, then, is that whatever signs of a turn-

28. Christopher Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381," in *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 9-42.

29. See above, 32-39, 155-162.

ing away from the forms and values of aristocratic culture that we recognize in the *Canterbury Tales*—and I believe there are a great many—should be understood not as a function of the instinctive pull of a natural origin (Chaucer returning to his bourgeois roots) but as a conscious and deliberate decision. Moreover, given the fact that the most powerful alternative to this dominance was embodied in a rebellious peasantry that we might expect Chaucer to have regarded with little natural sympathy, we can anticipate that any turn toward alternative values will be marked with a powerful ambivalence.

II

One could argue that Chaucer chose a miller as his initial agent of disruption simply in order to set up the hostile Reeve's use of the traditional tale of The Miller and Two Clerks. But in fact millers played a crucial if still somewhat obscure role in the medieval rural economy. The millsoken—the toll paid by peasants who were required to have their grain ground at the seigneurial mill—was not only a significant source of income for the landlord but a bitterly resented imposition upon the rural producer and a central focus of peasant resistance to seigneurial authority.³⁰ But if the disruptive energy with which Chaucer endows his Miller derives from this general condition, we remain uncertain about the particular role that millers themselves played in the struggle for peasant advancement. Since they are neither tenants of land nor tillers of soil they cannot technically be considered peasants. Rather, their vocation locates them within the artisanal class, like the Miller's John the carpenter. But their actual functioning within the village community, like their economic status, remains uncertain. Were they agents of seigneurial control, like bailiffs? Were they mediatory agents, as reeves were supposed to be? Or were they themselves part of the resistant village community, underlings who had their own grievances? We know that from at least the twelfth century mills were leased out by landlords for a fixed rent, but to what extent the leasees were

30. See Richard Holt, "Whose Were the Profits of Corn Milling," *Past and Present* 116 (1987): 3–23; Richard Bennett and John Elton, *The History of Corn Milling*, 4 vols. (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1898–1904), 1:20–21 and 4:40–53; Marc Bloch, *Land and Work in Medieval Europe*, trans. J. E. Anderson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 157. For an account of what Bloch calls "a veritable milling epic" at St. Albans during the Rising, see Rosamond Faith in "The 'Great Rumour' of 1377 and Peasant Ideology," in Hilton and Aston, *English Rising*, 66.

themselves the millers is by no means clear.³¹ We also know that throughout the thirteenth century most of the previously "free" mills that had been owned by nonseigneurial proprietors were brought back under manorial control.³² So too, that millers stole is confirmed by both numerous documents and popular reputation, but were their victims primarily the peasants or the lord?³³ Similarly, we do not really know how relatively prosperous millers were. There is some evidence to support the widespread opinion that "the miller was commonly one of the most considerable men in the village," and the sharp decline in mill rents in the postplague period suggests that millers were, like the other members of the peasant community, able to drive better bargains with mill owners—a sign of growing strength that doubtless contributed to their unpopularity.³⁴ Not coincidentally, then, millers were included in

31. For the leasing of mills, see Evgeny A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Ruth Kisch, ed. Rodney H. Hilton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956), 52. For an example of the miller as himself the leasee, see Herbert P. R. Finberg, *Tavistock Abbey: A Study in the Social and Economic History of Devon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 195; a recent study of medieval milling reportedly claims that "mills became part of peasant holdings by the thirteenth century rather than monopoly tools of exploitation by the lords" (a summary by J. Ambrose Raftis, "Social Change versus Revolution: New Interpretations of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381," in *Social Unrest in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Francis X. Newman [Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1986], 7, of Christopher Dyer and John Langdon, "English Medieval Mills," *Bulletin of the University of Birmingham* [23 January 1984]: 1–2—a paper I have been unable to consult). But for examples of the leasee as a nonresident, who then either pays the miller a salary or allows him to reimburse himself by taking a portion of the toll, see the discussion by Bennett and Elton, *History of Corn Milling*, 4:67–84, 136–43; and Tim Lomas, "Southeast Durham: Late Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," in Harvey, *Peasant Land Market*, 323. The mill that Margery Kempe bought in the early fifteenth century must have been operated by a hired miller; see *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Barry Windeatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 44.

32. For this "reassertion of seigneurial monopoly," see Holt, "Whose Were the Profits," *passim*.

33. On the distasteful reputation of millers, see George Fenwick Jones, "Chaucer and the Medieval Miller," *MLQ* 16 (1955): 3–15, and Bennett and Elton, *History of Corn Milling*, vol. 3, *passim*. There is also evidence that millers stole from mill owners: among the many accusations laid against millers in the legal records, there are a number that charge them with stealing mill parts; see Barbara Hanawalt, *Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300–1348* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 135. When the miller's "popular" image as a thief is invoked, it should also be remembered that the custodians of the documents that record this description were not the peasants whose grain was being ground but the governing classes who were extracting profit from the process over which the miller presided.

34. The common opinion is cited from George C. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), 285, who unfortunately offers no evidence. According to William G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: The Economic*

the various Statutes of Labourers whose fees the government sought to control.³⁵

One thing we do know for certain, however, is that millers were participants in the Rising of 1381. One John Fillol, for instance, a miller from Hanningfield, Essex, was hanged for his part in the revolt, and the records indicate that other millers played a prominent role.³⁶ Furthermore, if names are any indication of occupation, it is significant that a John Millere of London was charged with being one of those who stole wine from the Vintry, another John Meller of Ulford was hung and his goods confiscated, and the eloquent leader of the rebels at St. Albans was William Grindecobbe.³⁷ Moreover, when the rebels of Bury St. Edmonds beheaded John Cavendish, a king's justice who had enforced the Statute of Labourers with particular severity, the executioner was named Matthew Miller; given both the physical strength of millers

and *Social History of a Leicestershire Village* (London: Macmillan, 1957), "Among the tradesmen of Wigston in the sixteenth century the miller was pre-eminent" (169); and in "Debt Litigation in a Late Medieval English Vill," in *Pathways to Medieval Peasants*, ed. J. Ambrose Raftis (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1981), Elaine Clark shows that in at least one instance millers served as village money lenders. On the other hand, in "Berkshire: Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," in Harvey, *Peasant Land Market*, Rosamond Faith provides a custumal drawn up in 1221 for the village of Woolstone that seems to show that the three millers living in the village were considered among the least substantial of the inhabitants (122-23). Holt, "Whose Were the Profits," tells of the prosperity of one Leuric the Miller on a Glastonbury estate, but it appears that Leuric did not do the milling himself but simply leased the mill and then hired a servant to do it for him (18-19). On mill income, Finberg points out that for the mills on the manors of Tavistock Abbey "the farm was appreciably lower in the fifteenth century than it had been before the Black Death" (*Tavistock Abbey*, 195). The fact that the mills were not farmed during the period 1350-1450 suggests that no tenants could be found. For other examples of falling rents from mills, see J. Ambrose Raftis, *Warboys: Two Hundred Years in the Life of an English Mediaeval Village* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), the table on 260, and especially Bois, *Crisis of Feudalism*, 226-34.

35. Bertha Haven Putnam, *Enforcement of the Statute of Labourers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), 81.

36. For John Fillol, see Christopher Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background," 38; for another anonymous miller, see Dyer, 16. In his hysterical account of the rebellion in *Vox clamantis*, John Gower also contemptuously testifies to the presence of millers among the rebels: "nor did the dog at the mill stay home" (*The Major Latin Works of John Gower*, trans. Eric W. Stockton [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962], 59). Francis R. H. Du Boulay, *The Lordship of Canterbury: An Essay on Mediaeval Society* (London: Nelson, 1966) mentions that one of the ringleaders of "Cade's" rebellion in the mid-fifteenth century was a "malt-miller" (191).

37. On the two John Millers, see André Réville and Charles Petit-Dutaillis, *Le Soulèvement des Travailleurs d'Angleterre en 1381* (Paris: Picard, 1898), 224 and 232; on William Grindecobbe, and his famous speech, see R. B. Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 269-77.

and their reputation for violence, the name seems likely here to coincide with vocation.³⁸

Most important, however, is the fact that the peasants themselves seem to have seen the figure of the miller as capable of embodying both their grievances and their desire for an almost apocalyptic reckoning. Two of John Ball's famous letters that circulated during the Rising refer specifically to an allegorized miller:

Johan the Mullere hath ygrownde smal, smal, smal;
The Kyngis sone of heuene shalle pay for alle.
Be war or ye be wo;
Knoweth 3oure frend fro 3oure foo,
Haveth ynowe and seyth "Hoo":
And do welle and bettre, and fleth synne,
And seketh pees and holde thereynne.

Jakke Mylner asketh help to turne hys mylne aright. He hath grounden smal smal; the kings sone of heven he schal pay for alle. Loke thy mylne go aright, with the foure sayles, and the post stands in stedfastnesse. With ryght and with myght, with skyl and with wylle, lat myght helpe ryght, and skyl go before wille and ryght before myght, than goth oure mylne aryght. And if myght go before ryght, and wylle before skylle, than is oure mylne mys adyght.³⁹

38. Edgar Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia in 1381* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), 13-14. In fact, perhaps because of their social location at one of the pressure points of the feudal system, millers do seem to have been involved in violence more than other peasants: see James Buchanan Given, *Society and Homicide in Thirteenth-Century England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 87.

39. The verse letter is cited from Thomas Walsingham, *Historia anglicana*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley (London: Longman, 1864), 2:34; the second, from Knighton's *Chronicon*, is cited from Dobson, ed., *Peasants' Revolt*, 381-82. For a bibliographical account of the various versions of these letters, see Russell Hope Robbins, "Poems on Contemporary Conditions," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, ed. Albert E. Hartung (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1975), 5:1513-14. For further discussion of John Ball's Letters, see Russell Hope Robbins, "Dissent in Middle English Literature: The Spirit of (Thirteen) Seventy-Six," *M&H*, 9 (1979): 25-51; and Russell A. Peck, "Social Conscience and the Poets," in Newman, *Social Unrest*, 113-48. These two texts have been recently put in relation to the *Miller's Tale* by Paul A. Olson, *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 54-55, who presents the Miller as "cousin to the revolt's 'Jack the Miller' but seen through [Chaucer's] elite court eyes" (75). A reading similar to Olson's may be found in the excellent article by Robert P. Miller, "The Miller's Tale as a Complaint," *ChR* 5 (1970-71): 147-60; see also Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 90-93.

No doubt there is a scriptural subtext to these threatening words (see, e.g., Matthew 21:44, Luke 20:18), but they more immediately witness to the long history of peasant anger toward the seigneurial monopoly of the power of the mill—a power that the rebels of 1381 here seek to appropriate and turn to their own, retributive uses. Chaucer's Robin the Miller would have called such retribution *quiting*, and lest we think the analogy with John Ball's Jack the Miller is arbitrary, let us remember at the outset that Jack's message includes an ambiguous injunction—"Haueth y-now, and seith 'Hoo' "—that is also at the center of Robin's lesson:

I have a wyf, pardee, as wel as thou;
Yet nolde I, for the oxen in my plogh,
Take upon me more than ynogh. . . .
So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
Of the remenant nedeth nat enquire. (3158–66)

Part of the peasant's claim to freedom, and what sets him apart from the extortionate lord who would bind him, is that he understands the natural fitness of things, and knows both when he has (and when he has had) enough.

III

There is a specifically political appropriateness to the fact that the *Miller's Tale* is a narrative staging of the vitality and resourcefulness of the natural world. In part, these values are embodied in Alisoun, whose vernal beauty serves to elicit the male desire that motivates the *Tale*. All three of the men attempt, with varying degrees of success, to constrain her to their needs: John holds "hire narwe in cage, / For she was wylde and yong, and he was old" (3224–25);⁴⁰ to Absolon she is a prey to be caught—"if she hadde been a mous, / And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon" (3346–47);⁴¹ and if Nicholas does manage to seize her,

40. Implicit in this metaphor is the Boethian image of the caged bird who yearns for its woodland home—an allusion that serves to legitimize Alisoun; see George D. Economou, "Chaucer's Use of the Bird in the Cage Image in the *Canterbury Tales*," *PQ* 54 (1975): 679–84.

41. Absolon's attack with the coulter takes on a telling configuration in this context: in thinking to brand Alisoun he means both to efface the hairy sexual reality that she has forced upon him and to force her to the sexual cultivation appropriate to her femaleness (hence the coulter); but in instead branding/plowing Nicholas he reveals what a Boethian philosopher would call his true "ende." I take it that the Miller's purpose in establishing

it is only for a moment: "she sproong as a colt dooth in the trave, / And with hir heed she wryed faste away" (3282–83). Yet the *Miller's Tale* does not in fact articulate an opposition between natural freedom and social constraint; on the contrary, it presents this opposition as mediated by a moderation that bespeaks a calm confidence in the just workings of natural law. The *Tale* everywhere displays an apparently flawless orderliness: not only does the apparently random aimlessness of the plot reveal itself to be ordered by an exquisite logic, but the unthinking hedonism of the action leads to judgments of an impeccable exactness. The dandified Absolon suffers a scatological humiliation, the too-clever Nicholas—who "thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape" (3799)—becomes himself the butt of a jape executed by his intended victim, and the arrogantly know-nothing John is victimized by his violation of the natural law that "man sholde wedde his simylitude" (3228). Compared to the moral anarchy over which the Knight has (however unwittingly) presided, the *Miller's Tale* seems to articulate a world of perfect moral sense: in a famous comment, E. M. W. Tillyard described the climax of the *Tale* as arousing "feelings akin to those of religious wonder."⁴² Although the Miller's ludic festivity bursts into the pilgrimage with rude insistence, it appears to contain its own self-regulation. To attempt to control it is at once unavailing and unnecessary. The natural and the supernatural are in perfect harmony, the *Tale* tells us, and the "belle of laudes" (3655) that rings while the lovers are enjoying their sexual frolics harmonizes the "melodye" (3652) in Alisoun's and Nicholas's bed of love with the song of the friars in the chantry. The result is an unstinted hymn of praise: "what wol ye bet than weel?" (3370).⁴³

Criticism has traditionally read this claim as either an end in itself—an effect of the benign naturalism of the *fabliau*—or as an expression of the Miller's philosophical naivete and spiritual culpability.⁴⁴ But in fact, I believe, the Miller's celebration of the natural—as a world of beauty, as a source of glad animal spirits, and (most important) as a principle of order—is best understood as a political statement that is consistent

this pattern is to mock what he takes to be a homerotic rivalry that binds Arcite and Palamon together in the *Knight's Tale*.

42. E. M. W. Tillyard, *Poetry Direct and Oblique* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1945), 92.

43. See David, *Strumpet Muse*, 103.

44. For the first, see V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 158–216; for the second, Morton Bloomfield, "The Miller's Tale—an unBoethian interpretation," in Mandel and Rosenberg, *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies*, 205–11.

with the deeply political nature of the *Tale* as a whole.⁴⁵ Criticism has shown how the *Tale* launches a pointed attack upon the chivalric ideology so thoroughly, and critically, represented in the *Knight's Tale*. The heroic *Theseus artifex* is here represented by John the carpenter, his astrological credulity inciting him, to his cost, to pry into "Goddess pryvetee" (3454, 3558), just as Theseus's hubric oratories invoked planetary gods who then brought disasters down upon the world that worshipped them; and in its largest sense, the *Tale* teaches a lesson about the impossibility of constraining either people or events to the kind of overmastering will that characterizes chivalry. Similarly, Nicholas and Absolon travesty two forms of the chivalric love ethic that underwrites the *Knight's Tale*: Nicholas is the predatory seducer who deploys the forms of courtly wooing in order to gratify his appetites, Absolon the narcissistic, inefficient dandy who plays at lovemaking without understanding how to do it. And here too the critique is not only mocking but includes as well a sharp sense of grievance: in directing their attentions to Alisoun, after all, Nicholas and Absolon seek to enact a characteristically seigneurial appropriation:

She was a prymerole, a piggesnye,
For any lord to leggen in his bedde,
Or yet for any good yeman to wedde. (3268–70)

Yet it is not only or even primarily the seigneurial class that is the target of the Miller's *quitting*. If the representations of Nicholas and Absolon serve to mock and subvert the Knight's chivalric culture, they are also vehicles for an attack upon an ecclesiastical establishment that is perceived as equally overbearing and exploitative; and given the fact, as Hilton has pointed out, that "the great ecclesiastical landlords [were] notorious for their bad relations with their tenants," the anticlericalism of the *Tale*, as of medieval peasant movements as a whole, is not to be wondered at.⁴⁶ To be sure, in the figure of the inefficient Absolon, a parish clerk who puts on snobbish airs, theatrically displays (in his role as Herod) a ferocity he clearly lacks in life, and laughably deforms the

45. See Olson, *The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society*, 75–80.

46. Rodney Hilton, *A Medieval Society: The West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 156. For the anticlericalism of peasant movements, see Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 50–52, 101–3, 106–8, 124–25, 167–68, 198–206; Michel Mollat and Philippe Wolff, *Ongles bleus, Jacques et Ciompi: les révolutions populaires en Europe aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles* (Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1970), 288. One episode in the Rising particularly relevant to the *Miller's Tale* is the attack at Cambridge against the manor held by Corpus Christi College; for an account, see Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 240–42.

biblical text for seductive purposes, the Miller's critique is essentially mocking and contemptuous. But even here more than mockery is at issue. For by having Absolon use the *Song of Songs* as his text, the Miller is calling attention to a tradition of interpretation in which is visible perhaps more than in any other the coercive manipulation inherent in the institution of biblical exegesis per se. As the very frequency with which it was discussed suggests (it was by far the most commonly interpreted book of the Bible throughout the Middle Ages), the *Song of Songs* was an especially provocative text to medieval exegetes, challenging them to rewrite a Hebrew love song into the dogmatic terms of church doctrine.⁴⁷ And yet, implies the Miller, if their fascination bespeaks an awareness of the *Song's* destabilizing potential, it also witnesses to an unacknowledged pleasure in its seductive literality, a literality that Absolon here turns precisely to the purposes of seduction. In other words, the Miller is arguing that Absolon's misuse of the *Song of Songs* is a characteristically clerical misappropriation: what exegetes typically do to the *Song of Songs*, Absolon here seeks to do to Alisoun by means of the *Song of Songs*.⁴⁸

If in the figure of Absolon clerical *dominium* is revealed as hypocritically self-regarding and yet comically ineffective, in the figure of Nicholas the ecclesiast is represented as a far more proficient manipulator. Here the instruments of manipulation are other forms of clerical culture—astrology to be sure but also, and most tellingly, the mystery plays to which allusion is made throughout the *Tale*. For it is Nicholas who stages the entire production, using as his primary text the Noah

47. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Jean Misrahi (New York: New American Library, 1962), 90–93. The inescapable ambiguity of the *Song* is well demonstrated by Tony Hunt, "The *Song of Songs* and Courtly Literature," in *Court and Poet*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1981), 189–96, and by Theresa Coletti, *Naming the Rose: Eco, Medieval Signs, and Modern Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 47–53.

48. For telling instances of the ambivalence with which the "plaisir du texte" of the *Song of Songs* was regarded by medieval exegetes, see Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 2, 6, and the Preface to Origen's *Commentary*, in which he warns "everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it" (*The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson [Westminster: The Newman Press, 1957], 23). As a castrate, Origen was of course protected from this threat, which is perhaps why it is the effete Absolon who purveys the *Song* in the *Miller's Tale*. For modern exegetical readings of the Miller's allusions, see Robert E. Kaske, "The 'Canticum Canticorum' in the 'Miller's Tale,'" *SP* 59 (1962): 479–500; James Wimsatt, "Chaucer and the Canticle of Canticles," in *Chaucer the Love Poet*, ed. Jerome Mitchell and William Provost (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1973), 66–90.

play.⁴⁹ It is the appropriateness of this choice that I wish to examine. In one sense, since the play focuses on the theme of *maistrye* in the relationship of Noah to his wife, it has a natural affinity for "maister Nicholay" (3437, 3579)—who, as his unnecessarily elaborate plot shows, is seeking not just to seduce Alisoun but to demonstrate in particularly spectacular fashion his superiority over "men that swynke" (3491).⁵⁰ But it has as well, I believe, another, deeper relevance to the political dynamic that controls the *Miller's Tale*, the exploration of which will return us to the question of peasant consciousness and the nature of nature.

IV

When Richard II revoked his charters of manumission and suppressed the rebellion, he told the peasants, "Rustics you were and rustics you are still; you will remain in bondage, not as before but incomparably harsher."⁵¹ Behind these chilling words lies what Rodney Hilton calls "the caste interpretation of peasant status"—the idea that serfdom is a permanent condition of moral inferiority inherent in the peasant's very being rather than a social status capable of being both assumed and (at least in theory) left behind.⁵² The common medieval opinion that the grossly inequitable social order was a consequence of man's sinful nature, while implying a passive acquiescence in injustice, was not in a crudely direct way an instrument to enforce specific class interests: for Augustine, the distinction between Cain, the founder of the *civitas terrena* (in which we all live) and Abel, the precursor of Christ and thus founder of the *civitas Dei* (to which we all aspire), was less historical than moral and spiritual, an opposition fought out within the soul of each Christian.⁵³ But later writers gave the distinction a specific social

49. For an excellent account of these allusions, see Sandra Pierson Prior, "Parodying Typology and the Mystery Plays in the Miller's Tale," *JMRS* 16 (1986): 57–73.

50. For the Noah play as about *maistrye*, see V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 146–51.

51. This is Walsingham's account, as translated in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 311. For the original, see Walsingham, *Historia anglicana*, 2:18. Dobson also prints a contemporary account of the revolt of the villeins of Darnall and Over in 1336, who are forced to swear to the Abbot of Vale Royal "that they were villeins, they and their sons after them to all eternity" (81).

52. Hilton, *Class Conflict*, 138.

53. Augustine explained that before the fall there was no mastery or servitude because God "did not wish the rational being, made in his own image, to have dominion over any but irrational creatures, not man over man, but man over the beasts." But with the entrance of sin into the world all was changed: "The first cause of servitude is sin,

instantiation: as one late-medieval cleric misleadingly claimed, "Augustine said that the miserable calamity of bondage hath reasonably been brought into the world because of the demerits of the peoples, so that bondage is now fitly rooted among peasants and common folk."⁵⁴ And this distinction could then be scripturally authorized by identifying Abel as the father of all nobility, Cain as the first *servus*.⁵⁵ The ultimate effect of this line of argument was not only to explain the peasant's subjection as a function of his sinfulness but to define the peasant as in effect belonging to another order of being, as a member of a different species, a nonhuman. Hence when Gower says, in Book 5 of the *Vox clamantis*, that the peasantry "is a race without power of reason, like beasts," he is not only repeating a ubiquitous vilification but characterizing the peasantry as subhuman creatures whose fallen nature requires subjection.⁵⁶

whereby man was subjected to man in the condition of bondage" (*City of God* 19, 15; trans. Henry Bettenson [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972], 874–75). For the medieval justification of social inequality, and specifically of sin as the source of the class of *laboratores*, see Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 52 and passim.

54. Balthasar Reber, *Felix Hemmerlin von Zurich* (Zurich, 1846), cited by G. G. Coulton, *The Medieval Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 522.

55. David Williams, *Cain and Beowulf* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982); see also Coulton, *Medieval Village*, 21, 247; and for the representation of Cain in the Towneley *Mactatio Abel* as a husbandman, see G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), 491–92. It is this enrollment of the peasant in the damned race of Cain that accounts for his designation in antipeasant writings as a Jew (see Paul Lehmann, *Parodistische Texte* [Munich: Die Drei Masken, 1923], where the peasant is described as being "ineptus et turpis ut Judeus" [21]), as a Christ-killer (see Francesco Novati, *Carmina Medii Aevi* [Florence: Libreria Dante, 1883], for a poem that asserts that "Christo fu da villan crucifìcò, / e stogom sempre in pioza, in vento e in neve, / perchè havom fato così gran peccò" [27 n. 1]), and as an *alter Judas* (Novati, 45).

56. *Major Latin Works*, trans. Stockton, 210; this is an identification that he later enforced by depicting the Peasants' Revolt as a rising of maddened animals. For other instances of the use of animalistic language to describe the participants in the events of 1381, see Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 138, 173, and passim. For examples of antipeasant writings that stress the animal nature of the peasant, see Novati, *Carmina Medii Aevi*, 32 n. 1, 34–38; as Matteo Vegio said in the early fifteenth century, a peasant's ox has a more human appearance than does the peasant himself (31 n. 1). See also the medieval proverb, "Rusticus asello similis est, hoc tibi dico" (Hans Walther, *Lateinische Sprichwörter und Sentenzen des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Paul Gerhard Schmidt [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986], 9:511 [item 223]). The notion of the peasant as a creature capable not of love but only of lust is part of this identification of his fallen nature: as Andreas Capellanus famously said in his *De amore*, rustics "are impelled to acts of love in the natural way like a horse or a mule, just as nature's pressure directs them" (ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh [London: Duckworth, 1982], 223). See also the treatise on love included within *Li Hystore de Julius César*: "Volentei d'amer ki en villain se met estriner le

It was this definition of serfdom as an intrinsic and permanent condition of sinfulness, and not simply certain economic disadvantages that attached to villeinage, that the 1381 rebels sought to efface. Froissart's well-known summary of the peasants' demands makes this abundantly clear:

These unhappy people . . . said that they were kept in great servage, and in the beginning of the world, they said, there were no bondmen, wherefore they maintained that none ought to be bond without he did treason to his lord, as Lucifer did to God; but they said that they could have no such battle for they were neither angels nor spirits, but men formed to the similitude of their lords, saying why should they then be kept so under like beasts.⁵⁷

As Hilton has said, the rebels "strove not merely for a reduction of rent but for human dignity"⁵⁸—a statement that can also be applied to virtually every late-medieval peasant revolt.

For all its comic tolerance, the *Miller's Tale* takes part in this struggle, and not least by subverting and mocking the very terms with which the reigning ideology sought to stigmatize and oppress peasants. For one thing, the Miller's witty, even elegant *Tale*—an achievement that not even modern critics, who continue to wonder at the presence of so intelligent a tale in the mouth of so obviously brutish a teller, have been quite prepared to grant him—proves that the peasant is not the inarticu-

fait aussi comme une beste sauvage, ne il ne poet son corage aploier a nule cortoisie ne a nule bonté, ains aime folement et sans couverture. Et che n'est mie amours, ains est ensi comme rage, quant vilains s'entremet d'amer" (ed. A. Långfors, *Romania* 56 [1930], 367).

Two well-known representations of the peasant as a subhuman, animal creature can be found in Chrétien de Troyes' *Le chevalier du lion* and in *Aucassin et Nicolette*; a particularly bestial visual image of a miller may be found in the margins of the Luttrell Psalter, conveniently reproduced on the cover of the paperback edition of Postan's *Medieval Economy and Society*. Less prejudicial pictures that serve to link the peasant to the natural world can be seen in late-medieval calendar illustrations, where the peasant serves as virtually a marker of the passage of the year. For examples, see Henrik Specht, *Poetry and the Iconography of the Peasant: The Attitude to the Peasant in Late Medieval English Literature and in Contemporary Calendar Illustration* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1983). Duby is by and large correct when he points out that the medieval world "still recognized only one value in manual labor: that of salutary punishment. Work was servitude. It debased, degraded" (*Three Orders*, 325–26). As Hilton says, "The gentry and the nobility regarded peasants as different creatures from themselves, almost as a different race" (*Bond Men Made Free*, 35).

57. Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 370; the translation is by Lord Berners. For the original, see Kervyn de Lettenhove, ed., *Oeuvres de Froissart* (Brussels: Devaux, 1869), 9:387.

58. Hilton, *Class Conflict*, 138.

late figure that hostile representations had depicted. It also establishes an alternative version of the natural world. In place of the Knight's paranoid insistence on the continual need for supervision and constraint, the Miller describes (as we have seen) a world that shatters all efforts at confinement but that nonetheless contains its own principle of equilibrium, a natural sense of fitness and decorum. In locating at the thematic center of his *Tale* this benign, virtually prelapsarian *lex naturalis*, the Miller is thus reversing the terms of anti-peasant defamation. Far from being fallen and degraded, nature here serves as a beneficent and supportive principle; far from being in need of compensation by the *lex positiva* created by men, the *lex naturalis* is seen as providing an unerring standard.

The Miller's rehabilitation of nature as a principle of moral order is itself profoundly expressive of his class consciousness. For he promotes a view of the natural world that was—so far as we can tell from the fragmentary evidence—common to rural movements throughout the late Middle Ages. That nature provides a self-evident norm of fairness, an originary and still authoritative principle of equality, is implicit in the famous couplet of 1381, "Whan Adam dalf, and Eve span / Wo was thanne a gentilman?"⁵⁹ And in their political program the rebels sought to return England to a similarly prelapsarian condition, in which both a people's monarchy and a people's church could subsist without any intervening hierarchy.⁶⁰ Furthermore, both here and throughout the Middle Ages, one of the goals of peasant resistance was to achieve access to the bounty of the natural world—the woods, fish, and game—that they felt was theirs by right of being natural creatures like their lords.⁶¹ In sum, stigmatized by their opponents as beings who expressed with special and culpable directness the fallenness of nature—"they so till the earth, they are so utterly earthly, that we may

59. Walsingham, *Historia anglicana*, 2:32. That this couplet was a traditional homiletic saying long before 1381 does not affect its utopianist meaning within the context of political rebellion; see Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, 291–94.

60. For the program of the Peasants' Revolt, see Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 229.

61. For examples, going back as far as the tenth-century peasants' war in Normandy, see Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 71, 230; and for the peasant sense that the natural world should not be subjected to the tyrannical control entailed by private ownership, see 40. As the German peasants of 1525 said in the Fourth of their Twelve Articles, "When the Lord God created man, he gave him dominion over all animals, over the birds of the air, and the fish in the waters" (Peter Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants' War from a New Perspective*, trans. Thomas A. Brady and H. C. Erik Midelfort [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981], 198). Similarly, as Hilton points out, the Robin Hood ballads express a "Utopian vision of free communities of hunters eating their fill of a forbidden food" (*Bond Men Made Free*, 72).

truly say of them: They shall lick the earth and eat it," as one particularly vicious prelate put it, while an English celebrant of peasant humility described them as "grobbyng aboute the erthe"—peasants not only accepted this "natural" identity but redeemed it by insisting, like the Miller in his *Tale*, upon nature's essential goodness.⁶²

Far from being the result of either misguided optimism or spiritual turpitude, then, the Miller's rehabilitation of nature is part of a political program that turns against the governing classes one of its own instruments of ideological control. The same thing can be said about his use of the Noah story. We have already seen how the distinction between Cain and Abel was used as an aristocratic *Gründungsage* to justify the subjection of the peasant. The story of Noah was upon occasion used for the same purpose. When human history was refounded after the flood, the original division of peoples established by Cain and Abel now became a threefold distinction to be drawn among Noah's three sons, Japhet, Ham, and Shem. Once again, a distinction that for patristic writers existed at the level of the spiritual and ecclesiastical life became defined in the later Middle Ages in terms of social opposition. The first writer to make this definition explicit was, it seems, Honorius of Autun in his *De imagine mundi* (1133): "At this time humankind was divided into three: into freemen, knights, and serfs [*servos*]. Freemen [are descended] from Shem, knights from Japhet, serfs from Ham."⁶³ Ham's subjection was to be explained by the curse laid upon Ham's son Canaan by Noah when Ham mocked his drunken father's nakedness: "Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants [*servus servorum*] shall he be unto his brethern" (Genesis 9:25). As exegetes had always insisted, Ham was of the race of Cain, and now this text identified that race with the *servi* who were so visible a part of medieval life.⁶⁴ Needless to say,

62. Roderigo, Bishop of Zamorra, *Speculum Vitae Humanae* (c. 1465), cited by Coulton, *Medieval Village*, 518; for the second citation, see Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, 553. Perhaps the most explicit peasant assertion of the authority of the *lex naturalis* (which they identified with the *lex divina*) now available to us is that found in the documents produced during the German Peasants' War of 1524–25. For a discussion, see Blickle, *Revolution of 1525*, 168, and Heiko A. Oberman, "The Gospel of Social Unrest," in *The German Peasant War of 1525—New Viewpoints*, ed. Bob Scribner and Gerhard Benecke (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), 39–51. Coulton is surely right when he says that the Twelve Articles "rest upon [an] appeal from oppressive human law and custom to natural law" (*Medieval Village*, 546).

63. Honorius of Autun, *De imagine mundi*: "Huius tempore divisum est genus humanum in tria: in liberos, milites, servos. Liberi de Sem, milites de Japhet, servi de Cham" (PL 172:166).

64. For Ham as a member of the race of Cain, see Oliver F. Emerson, "Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English," *PMLA* 21 (1906), 925–26.

any argument that stigmatizes the vast majority of the population as damned beyond redemption—"curssed uppon þe grounde," as the York play put it—can hardly enter the mainstream of medieval political thought.⁶⁵ Yet there is evidence that, despite its exorbitance, this identification of the cursed Ham with rustics did achieve considerable currency. The popular *Cursor mundi*, first written in about 1300 and then rewritten into two other versions, appended to the usual geographical distribution of Noah's sons (Shem to Asia, Ham to Africa, and Japhet to Europe) Honorius's social analysis:

Knyzt & þral and fre man
of þese þre briþeren bigan;
Of Sem fre mon, of Iapheth knyzt,
Þral of Cam, waryed wizte.⁶⁶

More significant is the very popular *Liber de moribus hominum, et officiis nobilium ac popularium super ludo scachorum*, written in the early fourteenth century by Jacobus de Cessolis and in the course of the century translated at least twice into French and then later four times into German and once (by Caxton) into English. For de Cessolis not only enforces the identification of peasants as members of the race of Cain, but he uses the story of Ham's mockery to introduce a discussion of the four kinds of drunkenness (like a lion, a lamb, a swine, and an ape), a vice that is then associated with the laborer and seen as a spur to social disturbance: wines (in Caxton's translation) "make the poure [man] riche as longe as the wyn is in his hed and shortly dronkenschyp is the begynnyng of alle euylles."⁶⁷

But the text that is most interesting in terms of the *Miller's Tale* is the *Liber armorum*, a brief treatise on heraldry included in the early fifteenth-century *Boke of Seynt Albans*.⁶⁸ For here the anti-peasant myth

65. *Sacrificium Cayme and Abel*, in *The York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London: Arnold, 1982), line 86.

66. Sarah M. Horrall, ed., *The Southern Version of Cursor Mundi* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1978), 2133–36 (1:102–3).

67. William Caxton, trans., *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, 2d ed. (Westminster: Caxton, 148[?]), reprinted in facsimile by William Figgins (London, 1855). For an edition of de Cessolis, see Ferdinand Vetter, ed., *Das Schachzettelbuch Kunrats von Ammenhausen nebst den Schachbüchern des Jakob von Cessole und des Jakob Mennel* (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1892).

68. According to E. F. Jacob, "The Book of St. Albans," *BJRL* 28 (1944): 99–118, the *Liber armorum* is in part dependent upon both Nicholas of Upton's *De officio militari* (late 1420s–early 1430s) and a "Book of the Lineage of Cote Armour." The two other items in this compilation—treatises on hawking and hunting—are both based on early fourteenth-century sources.

of Ham is not only deployed in a way that makes its relevance to the *Miller's Tale* evident but that suggests that its late-medieval currency was a response to the debate about the nature of serfdom that was at the center of the class struggle taking place in fourteenth-century England. The *Liber armorum* begins by demonstrating "how gentilmen shall be knowyn from vngentill men and how bondeage began first" specifically in order to counter peasant claims of natural equality: "A bonde man or a churle wyll say, 'All we be cummyn of Adam.' So Lucifer with his cumpany may say, 'All we be cummyn of heuyn'." ⁶⁹ Lucifer and his rebel angels were the first group to be placed in bondage, followed by Cain, who was damned by God and by Adam for his fratricide: "By that did Cayn become a chorle and all his ofspryng after hym" (cci^v). Noah was descended from Abel's son Seth, and he in turn

had .iii. sonnys begetyn by kynde; by the modre .ii. were named Cham and Sem and by the fadre the thirde was namyd Jafeth. Yit in theys .iii. sonnys gentilnes and vngentilnes was founde. In Cham vngentilnes was founde to his own fadre, dooun to discover his preuytes and laugh his fadre to scorne. Jafeth was the yongist and repreued his brodre. Than like a gentilman, take mynde of Cham: for his vngentilnes he was become a chorle and had the cursyng of God and his fadre Noe. And whan Noe awoke he sayde to Cham his sonne, "Knowyst nott thow how hit become of Cayn, Adam[s] soon, and of his churlish blode? All the worlde is drownde saue we .viii. And now of the to begynne vngentilnes and a cause to destroye vs all—vppon the hit shall be and so I pray to God that it shall fall. Now to the I gyuve my curse, wycked kaytife for euer, and I gyuve to the the north parte of the worlde to draw thyn habitacion, for ther shall it be where [are] sorow and care, colde and myschef. As a churle thow shalt haue . . . the thirde parte of the worlde, wiche shall be calde Europe, that is to say the contre of churlys." (ci^v–ci^{ir})

Nothing could more vividly illustrate the writer's sense of contemporary urgency than his or her willingness to override the traditional geographical endowments. Far from being exiled to distant Africa, the damned race of Ham is ubiquitously present in the here and now of late-medieval Europe, a presence that requires gentle readers to learn,

69. *The Boke of Seynt Albans* (St. Albans, 1486), fol. ci^r; further page numbers will be included in the text. I have supplied the punctuation. The *Boke* has also been discussed by Coulton, *Medieval Village*, 232–33, and by Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 288–319.

for their own self-protection, the way "to deseuer Gentilnes from vngentilnes" (ci^r). ⁷⁰ And so it is not surprising that aristocratic genealogies of the fifteenth century were careful to trace the descent of England's noble houses from Adam through Japhet. ⁷¹ Finally, lest we doubt the currency of this identification of the serf with Canaan and the children of Ham, we actually find a somewhat inaccurate reference to it in that most orthodox of late-fourteenth-century texts, Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*: "This name of thraldom was nevere erst kowth til that Noe seyde that his sone Canaan sholde be thral to his bretheren for his synne" (X, 765). ⁷²

What the *Miller's Tale* does, then, is to turn the myth of Ham against the clerical culture from which it originally arose. For here the searcher into hidden "pryvetee," far from being a peasant, is instead the astrologer-cleric Nicholas, who uses his illicit knowledge to mock and scorn John the Carpenter, the father Noah of the play he is staging. ⁷³ Moreover, the characteristics that are ascribed to the biblical Ham by medieval clerical culture are here applied, with striking aptness, to Nicholas. Ham's name means, according to the commentators, *calidus*, and he represents a spirit that is *impatiens*, *inquietus*, and *commotior*. ⁷⁴ He also represents, according to Augustine's authoritative exegesis,

those who boast the name of Christian and yet live scandalous lives. For it is certain that such people proclaim Christ's passion, symbolized by Noah's nakedness, in their professions, while they dis-

70. The racist nature of the myth of Ham was made explicit in early nineteenth-century America, where it functioned as a justification for slavery; see Thomas Virgil Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South* (Metuchan: Scarecrow Press, 1978).

71. Alison Allan, "Yorkist Propaganda: Pedigree, Prophecy, and the 'British History' in the Reign of Edward IV," in *Patronage, Pedigree and Power in Later Medieval England*, ed. Charles Ross (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1979), 172.

72. This sentence is not found in the text that apparently served as Chaucer's source: Siegfried Wenzel, "The Source of Chaucer's Deadly Sins," *Traditio* 30 (1974), 368. For other contemporary examples of Ham as the progenitor of serfs, see Patricia Heath Barnum, ed., *Dives and Pauper*, EETS, OS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 1:305; and John Wycliff, *Opera Minora*, ed. Johann Loserth (London: Paul, 1913), 146. Wycliff calls this opinion "foolish."

73. It is just possible that Chaucer derived the idea of having the role of Ham played by a cleric from Gower's identification of Ham in the *Confessio amantis* as the inventor of writing and the founder of *clergie* (G. C. Macaulay, ed., *The Complete Works of John Gower*, [London: Clarendon Press, 1900], 4, 2396–400 [1:366]); according to Macaulay's note to the passage, Gower derived his information from Godfrey of Viterbo's *Pantheon*.

74. See, for example, Ambrose, *Liber de Noe et arca* (PL 14:435); Isidore, *Quaestiones in Veterum Testamentum: In Genesis*, 8, 6 (PL 83:235–36).

honour it by their evil actions. It was of such people that we read in Scripture, "You will recognize them by their fruits."⁷⁵

Most centrally, Ham is the heretic who reveals that which ought to remain a mystery, the *corporis mysterium* enacted in the passion and reenacted in the Eucharist: he "makes manifest that which was for the prophets a secret," and with this illicit knowledge he "deceives the simple"—the sort of "lewed man," like John, "That noght but oonly his bileve kan."⁷⁶ As John succinctly says, with (as we know from his prologue) the Miller's approval, "Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee" (3454–56). The relevance of these characteristics to the Miller's Nicholas is self-evident. In his picture of Nicholas the Miller offers a biting exercise in cultural criticism, turning the materials of clerical culture against its proprietor and revealing by his very act of criticism how defamatory—and self-protective—are its misrepresentations.

V

Yet we must also recognize that the *Miller's Tale*, in its animosity toward John the Carpenter, contains as well an act of peasant self-criticism. In part, of course, we may have an expression here of the stresses and strains within the peasant community itself: John is a "riche gnof," and Robin represents himself in the tale as a servant boy who can be packed off to London and (so John at least thinks) to death by drowning without a second thought.⁷⁷ But again, I think we do best to understand the Miller's scorn for John as political in a deeper, more serious sense. Despite being a successful village craftsman, John not only allows himself

75. Augustine, *City of God*, 16, 2 (650–51). This interpretation is repeated throughout the Middle Ages, as by Isidore, *Quaestiones in Veterum Testamentum: In Genesim*, 8, 6 (PL 83:235–36), and by Rabanus Maurus, *Commentarius in Genesim*, 2, 9 (PL 107:525–26). So, too, the interpretation of Noah's drunken nakedness as representing Christ's passion is the standard exegesis.

76. Rabanus Maurus, *Commentarius in Genesim*, 2, 9 (PL 107:525), and Remigius, *Commentarius in Genesim*, 9 (PL 131:78). Cassian identified Ham as a worker in secret arts: see Williams, *Cain and Beowulf*, 30–31, and Gower, *Confessio amantis*, 4, 2396–400, ed. Macaulay, *Complete Works*, 1:366.

77. For the relative wealth of carpenters, see Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 226–27. For their inclusion within the Statutes of Labourers, and for the accusation of overcharging, signs that they were profiting from postplague economic conditions, see Putnam, *Enforcement*, 75, 80–81, 163, and 214. For carpenters becoming country gentlemen in the fifteenth century, see Du Boulay, *Lordship of Canterbury*, 163. That Robin represents himself in so helpless a role in his *Tale* provides some evidence that although others saw millers as prosperous and powerful, millers thought of themselves otherwise.

to be intimidated by his lodger but has, by marrying the youthful Alisoun, violated a natural law that he, of all people, ought to understand; and when the Miller says that John married Alisoun because "he knewe nat Catoun, for his wit was rude" (3227), he is mockingly invoking an *auctoritas* to support a truth that ought to be self-evident to the truly natural man.⁷⁸ As Langland had put it, "kynde wit" is the companion of the commons and teaches "ech lif to knowe his owene."⁷⁹ Moreover, and more reprehensibly, John has also betrayed his class interests by handing himself over to a smooth-talking clerical con man.⁸⁰

Thus it is John who is most severely punished at the end of the *Miller's Tale*: his wife is "swyved," his arm is broken, and his reputation as a man of probity is ruined. Yet even here, significantly enough, the Miller cannot finally withhold his sense that this punishment, however merited, is nonetheless enacted in the distasteful form of class victimization:

The folk gan laughen at his fantasye;
 Into the roof they kiken and they cape,
 And turned al his harm unto a jape.
 For what so that this carpenter answerde,
 It was for noght; no man his reson herde.
 With othes grete he was so sworn adoun
 That he was holde wood in al the toun;
 For every clerk anonright heeld with oother.
 They seyde, 'The man is wood, my leeve brother;
 And every wight gan laughen at this stryf. (3840–49)

78. See Tillyard, *Poetry Direct and Oblique*, 88.

79. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds., *Piers Plowman: The B-Text* (London: Athlone Press, 1975), Prol. 121–22. See also the poem written in 1392 by John Berwald of Cottingham, in which he insists that it would be "vnkind" (i.e., unnatural) for a villein to suffer "any villan hething," that is, the oppression or derision of any other villein; Rossell H. Robbins, ed. *Historical Poems of the 14th and 15th Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 61; and see Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 383–84.

80. An instance of clerical contempt for peasants with special relevance to the plot of the *Miller's Tale* is the widespread parodic prayer against rustics:

Deus, qui multitudinem rusticorum congregasti et magnam discordiam inter eos et nos seminasti, da, quesumus, ut laboribus eorum fruamur et ab uxoribus eorum diligamur.

O God, who brought forth a multitude of rustics and sowed great discord between them and us, grant, we beseech, that we may live off their labors and enjoy their wives.

Lehmann, *Parodie im Mittelalter* (Munich: Die Drei Masken, 1923), 178; see also 117, and Lehmann, *Parodistische Texte*, 22.

Before beginning to rehearse the *Miller's Tale* a nervous narrator had warned the "gentils" "nat [to] maken ernest of game" (3186); now at the end the Miller reverses the terms—and meaning—of the warning: when a group of clerks turn "al [a rustic's] harm unto a jape," more is at issue than simple comedy. The point is not only that the clerks band together against the rich artisan—an opposition that figures both the traditional medieval antagonism between clerks and peasants and also, in an oblique but nonetheless historically corroborated fashion, the larger conflict between the classes that was the central social phenomenon of Chaucer's England. Rather, it is that the terms the Miller uses here to represent the carpenter's oppression bear a powerfully political valence and force us to attend to the class consciousness to which the tale witnesses.

The clerks do not here merely silence John's arguments—"no man his reson herde"—but deny him rationality itself.⁸¹ In twice insisting that the clerks considered John mad, the Miller is again invoking a terminology typical of medieval commentators (most of them, of course, clerics) on peasant behavior. And this madness is nowhere more visible than when the peasant seeks to promote his own interests. For the early fourteenth-century chronicler of the Abbey of Vale Royal, the "bestial men of Rutland" who had recourse to the courts and the king in a vain effort to prove that they were not the Abbot's serfs were *rabicanes*—mad dogs.⁸² And as we should perhaps expect, the chroniclers of the Rising consistently use the language of insanity to describe the rebels. For Walsingham, the Rising as a whole is an expression of the *insania natorum*—the madness of bondmen—and his account is both saturated with terms like *dementes*, *irrationabiles*, and *stulti* and invokes throughout the language of satanic possession: the rebels are *ganeones daemoniaci* (children of the devil), perhaps even

81. Not, of course, that this silencing is insignificant. In *Literature and Pulpit*, Owst provides a summary of a fourteenth-century sermon that attacks just this inability of the rich to hear the poor:

if a poor man . . . were to come asking help of some rich neighbours, "for the love of his father and mother and all those dear to him," they would deign neither to hear nor see him. If, redoubling his entreaties, he were to beg, "My Lord, for the love of Christ crucified and all the saints of God, help me, lest I be destroyed unjustly by my adversaries," still there would be "neither voice nor hearing." (315–16)

82. A long extract from the *Ledger Book of Vale Royal Abbey* (Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society, 1914), is translated by G. G. Coulton, *Medieval Village*, 132–35; for *rabicanes*, see 133.

peiores daemonibus (worse than devils).⁸³ Gower also describes the Rising as an expression of bestial madness: the rebels "were swine into which a cursed spirit had entered, just as Holy Writ tells of," and "just as the Devil was placed in command over the army of the lower world, so this scoundrel [Wat Tyler] was in charge of the wicked mob."⁸⁴ And even less vindictive observers invoke the language of madness and folly: a relatively disinterested macaronic poet calls the rebels "folus" and *stultes*, Knighton calls them *stultes* and refers to them as servants of the devil, Froissart compares them to devils from hell, and the monk of Westminster reinvokes *rabicanes*.⁸⁵

"The man is wood," say the clerks about John when he tries to tell "his reson"—a designation important enough that the Miller first invokes it in his own voice and then has the clerks repeat it. The use of the language of folly and demonic possession to describe peasant resistance surfaces again in the *Canterbury Tales*: the lord in the *Summoner's Tale* begins by assuming that the churl John is a "fool" (2292) or—a term that is applied twice and implied once—a "demonyak" (2240, 2292; and cf. 2221). The point is that these are not simply terms of casual abuse but are derived from the language of moral censure with which the governing classes of medieval Europe, including fourteenth-century England, tried to stigmatize, and so to control, peasant protest. In having the unified mockery of the clerics pervert John's "resons" into the irrationality of madness, then, the *Miller's Tale* offers a bitter commentary upon not just the Rising of 1381 but upon the official language that sought to censor peasant resistance at the level of discourse as effectively as the instruments of government suppressed it politically.

VI

In searching for an ideological posture by means of which to distance himself from the cultic and increasingly caste-defined aristocratic culture of his time, Chaucer almost inevitably turned to the most vigorous oppositional force within his society—the rural world of peasant culture. In the *General Prologue* the Miller is represented in the conventional terms of peasant caricature: he is grossly ugly, with a flat nose, a huge mouth, and swinishly red hairs that protrude from a wart and match a beard also red "as any sowe or fox"—in sum, a threatening

83. Walsingham, *Historia anglicana*, 1:457–60, 472, 2:13, 16; see Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 169–74, 272–75, 307–10.

84. Stockton, *Major Latin Works*, 58, 65.

85. For these terms, see Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 144, 183, 189, 199, 278.

figure of peasant animality who uses his head not for rational thought (of which peasants are in any case incapable) but to enact invasive acts of violence: "Ther was no dore that he nolde . . . breke it at a rennyng with his heed" (I, 550–51).⁸⁶ And when he then invades the tale-telling game, he displays two of the most characteristic of peasant vices—drunkenness and a contempt for order.⁸⁷ In sum, the essential terms of the Miller's representation are not moral and psychological but social and political; and the consciousness articulated by his *Tale* is derived from the politics of late-medieval English society.

It is a consciousness, moreover, to which Chaucer grants remarkable scope and force, allowing it both to counter the hegemonic culture of the aristocracy and to subvert the language of class hatred promoted by certain forms of clerical discourse. Yet as we should expect, this authority is immediately, and severely, circumscribed. For as soon as the claims of peasant class consciousness are put forward they are countered. The *Reeve's Tale* accomplishes this subversion in two ways. One is to reveal the disunity within the peasant class itself, not simply by the antagonism between the Reeve and the Miller but by the Reeve's own betrayal of class interests. He is himself both an agent of seignorial control and has social ambitions: he began life as a carpenter, he is now a reeve, and his dress and diction reveal clerical ambitions.⁸⁸ In short, he shows that the social identity asserted by the Miller is a fiction, that there is no class unity among the peasantry but only individuals.

86. For a discussion of the conventions governing the representation of peasants, see Alice M. Colby, *The Portrait in Twelfth-Century French Literature* (Geneva: Droz, 1965), 73–81; Beatrice White, "Poet and Peasant," in *The Reign of Richard II*, ed. F. R. H. Du Boulay and Caroline Barron (London: Athlone Press, 1971), 58–74.

87. Indeed, he is even given a name that is not only itself lower class—the male protagonist of the *pastrouelle*, for instance, is typically called Robin—but that seems to have carried implications of subversion and illegality: a number of fourteenth-century texts, including *Piers Plowman*, refer to criminals as Roberdesmen, and the term—perhaps like the Miller's own name—was probably derived from the stories of Robin Hood; see J. C. Holt, "The Origins and Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood," *Past and Present* 18 (1960), reprinted in R. H. Hilton, ed., *Peasants, Knights and Heretics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 241. For Chaucer's familiarity with the Robin Hood rhymes, see *Troilus* 5, 1174, where Pandarus refers to "haselwode, there joly Robyn pleyde."

88. In theory the reeve was chosen by the tenants to represent them, and should therefore be distinguished from the bailiff, who was the lord's agent; but in practice the reeve often functioned as a bailiff: see H. S. Bennett, "The Reeve and the Manor in the Fourteenth Century," *EHR* 41 (1926): 358–65. In the later Middle Ages, according to Father Raftis, "the inability of the villagers to depend upon officials (reeves, for instance) as their 'men' left the peasant exposed to demands such as the poll tax" ("Social Change versus Revolution," 16).

The second way in which the Reeve subverts the politics of the *Miller's Tale* is by reinvoking the religious imperatives that the Miller, in his displacement of the Monk and his satire on clerical values, had sought to set aside. At the heart of the Reeve's attempt to "quite" (3916) the Miller is his all-out assault on one of the central principles that governs the Miller's world—that the natural and the supernatural, the sexual and the religious, animal nature and Christian imperatives, are in essential congruence. For the Reeve such a notion is a naive wish-fulfillment, a self-gratifying delusion. In his *Tale* Alisoun's innocent "Tehee" becomes the "Wehee" (4066) of the clerks' horse as he ramps among the "wilde mares" (4065) in the fen: the coltish gladness of the *Miller's Tale* is here shown to be the dangerous wildness of the stallion, and as Kolve has shown, the horse imagery that pervades the *Tale* invokes a traditional and uncompromising warning of the dangers of loosing the animal passions that inhabit man.⁸⁹

The Reeve represents himself as painfully aware of those passions within himself (unlike Robin, who can see the mote in another's eye "but in his owene he kan nat seen a balke" [3920]); and in his *Prologue* he deploys a penitential language that speaks to man's sinful nature. The Reeve's screed on the four sins of old men and the dotage of age is a way to assert both his moral and his social superiority, and his aspirations to clerical status inform us as well why he was so oversensitive to the Miller's tale about a carpenter—the lowly craft he left behind on his way to becoming a reeve. But his "sermonyng" (3899) also establishes penitential values in the privileged position that the Monk would have given them had he been allowed to speak. Moreover, it articulates those values from the perspective of the end: the Reeve ostentatiously insists upon his age, and in his image of Death drawing the tap of life and letting the wine run out (including the wine of Southwark that has fueled Robin's revelry) he offers a challenge to the festivity that underwrites the tale-telling game as a whole.⁹⁰ The source of the Reeve's image here, as of his earlier one of the four coals that lurk in the old man's ashes, is Jean de Meun's *Testament*, and his words witness to a familiar medieval sense of terminality.

Osewald had described himself as a medlar pear, "an open-ers":

That ilke fruyt is ever lenger the wers,
Til it be roten in mullok or in stree.

89. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 236–48.

90. Again, Kolve's discussion of this image demonstrates its centrality to the Reeve's consciousness (*ibid.*, 222–33).

We olde men, I dred, so fare we:
 Til we be roten, kan we nat be rype;
 We hoppen alwey while the world wol pype. (3871-76)

It is under the sign of this condition, in which ripeness and rottenness are indistinguishable, that the *Reeve's Tale* is told: his vision of life haunted by an awareness of the end to which all things come, "myrthe and revelrye" (4005) are for him always tainted by a retributive justice that prefigures that of the ultimate Judge whom he is himself shortly to confront. Hence he correlates the fabliau principle that "a gylour shal hymself bigyled be" (4321) with the Old Testament principle of *oculum pro oculo*, and he imposes upon both Robin the Miller and the narrative agents of his *Tale* the harsh judgment he himself anticipates.⁹¹ Nor is this judgment in fact delayed: by revealing its teller's culpable ignorance of his own moral failures and his small-minded vindictiveness, the *Reeve's Tale* comes ultimately to have most relevance to the Reeve himself, to *quite* its own teller. Thus Chaucer's recasting of the fabliau principle of *ars ut artem falleret* shows how this self-marginalized literary form can begin to accommodate the penitential imperatives of the pilgrimage.

The Host, championing the holiday spirit as long as it remains wholly without political force, will of course have none of it: not only is

91. Paul Olson has shown that the text of Matthew 7:1-5 ("Judge not that ye be not judged")—part of which the Reeve himself cites (3919-20)—governs the *Tale* ("The Reeve's Tale: Chaucer's Measure for Measure," *SP* 59 [1962]: 1-17). The idea of correlating this text with the fabliau principle of beguiling the guiler was perhaps suggested to Chaucer by the passage in the C-Text of *Piers Plowman* where Christ explains how by the perfect symmetry of salvation history his sacrifice simultaneously fulfills and transcends (i.e., *quites*) the Old Law:

Pe old law techeth
 That gylours be bigiled and yn here gyle falle,
 And ho-so hit out a mannes eye or elles his fore-teth,
 Or eny manere membre maymeth oper herteth,
 The same sore shal he have pat eny so smytheth.
Dentem pro dente, et oculum pro oculo.
 So lyf shal lyf lete, ther lyf hath lyf anyented,
 So pat lyf quyte lyf, þe olde lawe hit asketh.
Ergo, soule shal soule quyte and synne to synne wende,
 And al þat men mysdede, y man to amenden hit;
 And þat deth fordede my deth to releve,
 And both quykie and quyte that queynte was thorw synne,
 And gyle be bigyled thorw grace at þe laste.
Ars ut artem falleret. (20, 381-92)

Langland's influence upon the *Reeve's Tale* is all the more likely since Chaucer probably included a reeve in the *General Prologue* on Langland's model: see Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 163-67.

the Reeve's self-aggrandizing sermonizing itself a waste of the time of which he claims to have so little, but it is singularly out of place. Harry Bailly wishes to hurry the Reeve, but the language he uses bespeaks his own sense of festal temporality:

What, shul we speke alday of hooly writ?

 Sey forth thy tale, and tarie nat the tyme.
 Lo Depeford! and it is half-wey pryme.
 Lo Grenewych, ther many a shrewe is inne!
 It were al tyme thy tale to bigynne. (3902-8)

Although the bourgeois mind defines here a quintessentially mercantile temporality, as it does again in the *Man of Law's Prologue* (16-32), it also wishes to protect the special time of holiday from the encroachments of an inappropriate spiritual earnestness. If it is already seven-thirty in the morning, it is *only* seven-thirty, and the Host wants to make sure that the pilgrims do not speak "*alday* of hooly writ." In the *Parson's Prologue* the shadows will lengthen and reveal it to be "*foure* of the klokke" (X, 5), which is the time for the language of penance; but that time has not yet arrived. The pilgrimage is both itself an act of satisfaction prescribed by the sacrament of penance and has at its goal another performance of the sacrament. But the Reeve's penitential *Prologue* and confessional *Tale* have introduced into the tale-telling game an earnestness it cannot sustain. Hence the penitential impulse that he articulates is simultaneously invoked and discredited: he is a fraudulent penitent, a social climber masquerading as a priest whose self-abasement is a warped self-gratification; and his inadvertently self-betraying *Tale* is a long way from a genuine confession.

Yet he has not only reintroduced into the tale telling the spiritual imperative the *Miller's Tale* was designed to neutralize, but he has also redirected the oppositional dynamics of the *Canterbury Tales* from the potential violence of political hostility to the less inflammatory debate between religious imperatives and literary interests. To be sure, this debate is central to the very premise of the *Canterbury Tales*: are the pilgrims heading from London to Canterbury under a spiritual guidance that comes to be embodied in the Parson, or is the Host returning them to the festal board at the Tabard? Is there a mode of literary discourse that can celebrate a wider range of human experience than a narrow piety will allow and yet not fall prey to a merely recreative revelry? That these literary topics become central questions as the *Canterbury Tales* unfold shows the extent to which the urgent social issues raised by the *Miller's Tale* have been disarmed.

The stigmatizing of the Miller's interruption is carried to its inevitable conclusion by means of the *Cook's Tale*. Although he means to recoup the disruptive energies of the *Miller's Tale*, the Cook reveals them to be not enlivening but destructive, not a necessary alternative to the hegemonic ideology of the *Knight's Tale* but a riotous excess that threatens the social order as a whole. This excess is embodied in the aptly named Perkyn Revelour. Initially described in terms that recall the innocent festivity of the *Miller's Tale* (4367–74), this rake's progress takes him from the socially approved processions or "ridyng[s]" (4377) of Cheapside first to the "disport" (4382) of gambling and theft, then to the public humiliation with which he is "lad with revel to Newegate" (4402), and finally to the "revel and disport" (4420) he shares with his "lowke" (4415), whose prostitute-wife "swyved for hir sustenaunce" (4422). The *Cook's Tale* is thus a story of degeneration and ejection—of "aquitaunce" (4411)—that itself *quites* the fabliaux that have preceded it. This operation is made explicit in the Cook's proverb, which refers to him and his *Tale* as well as to his protagonist: "Wel bet is roten appul out of hoord / Than that it rotie al the remenaunt" (4406–7). And his own performance is, appropriately, terminated before it can defile the *Tales* as a whole.

In making the Cook the voice of lower-class criminality, Chaucer links him with journeyman wage laborers and, beneath them, the marginals of urban society, the men whom the merchant patriciate was most concerned to keep under control for reasons that were made scandalously clear when they welcomed the rebellious peasants in 1381.⁹² And in having him employed by the guildsmen, and serve as an expression of their social pretensions, Chaucer extends this culpability to the small, relatively powerless craft guilds.⁹³ The social meaning of the *Cook's Tale*, in other words, reveals Chaucer placing his poetry in the service of the dominant merchant patriciate from which he himself originally derived. So it is hardly surprising that the *Cook's Tale* is used to pass judgment upon the Miller's efforts to mount a political opposition to the hegemony of aristocratic values.

This judgment reappears one last time, in the penultimate moment of the *Canterbury Tales*. In the *Manciple's Prologue* the Cook's revelry has been reduced to inarticulate drunkenness. Unable to undergo the

"penaunce" (IX, 12) of tale telling the Host there imposes on him, he is roused into ineffective rage by the Manciple's satire and launches a hapless attack that is mockingly described in the language of chivalry: "This was a fair chyvachee of a cook!" (50). Hogg of Ware here reveals his truly bestial nature: "Fy, stynkyng swyn!" (40), the Manciple says, and describes him—in the defamatory language that the *Game and Playe of the Chesse* applied to the lower orders as a whole—as "wyn ape" (44).⁹⁴ He is also described as devilish:

Hoold cloos thy mouth, man, by thy fader kyn!
The devel of helle sette his foot therin!
Thy cursed breeth infecte wole us alle. (37–39)

In the *Vox clamantis* Gower identified the peasants as swinish, accused them of being inspired by the devil (their attack upon the Tower of London reminded him of the jaws of Hell), mentioned cooks as among the participants, and even designated one of the most vainglorious with the name of Hogg: "Hogg brandishes his pomp, for with his noble bearing he thinks he is greater than any king."⁹⁵ At the end of the *Tales*, then, Chaucer is also prepared to represent the rebellious Cook in Gower's abusive terms. The final word on this contretemps is the Host's citation of a prayer to St. Bacchus that parodies the Pater Noster, a festive gesture that definitively annuls the very revelry it seeks to reinvoke:

O thou Bacus, yblessed be thy name,
That so kanst turnen earnest into game!
Worship and thank be to thy deitee! (99–101)⁹⁶

And the Host concludes, "Of that mateere ye gete namoore of me" (102)—nor from anyone else. Thoroughly discredited by both this episode and the Manciple's mordant and insincere fable, festivity drains out of a game that is shortly to be brought to a definitive conclusion by the Parson. In this penultimate moment, then, the Cook's rebelliousness, and rebelliousness per se, stand for all that must be annulled if the *Canterbury Tales* is to be brought to its appointed and orthodox conclusion.

94. See above, note 67.

95. Stockton, *Major Latin Works*, 87, 59, 67.

96. For this prayer, see "Le Martyr de Saint Baccus," *Nouveau recueil de contes, dits, fabliaux, et autres pièces inédites des XIII^e, XIV^e et XV^e siècles*, ed. Achille Jubinal (Paris: Pan-nier, 1839), 1:250–65, especially 251–52.

92. For the marginals, see Bronislaw Geremek, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

93. For the distinction between the powerful trade guilds or merchant companies, and the far weaker craft guilds, see Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 27–41. For a different account of the *Cook's Tale*, which sees it as expressing the attitude of a conservative guildsman, see Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 257–96.