'He pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye'?

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English medieval drama is a phenomenon of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, late for the Middle Ages even by English standards. No-one knows where it came from, although theories abound, from the now largely discredited view of E.K. Chambers and others that it slowly evolved from the sung Latin drama of the medieval church,[1] to the more current 'big bang' theory which sees it as a product of a particular set of socio-economic circumstances.[2] Although the work of Records of Early English Drama has done much in recent years to demonstrate that religious drama of some kind or another was played all over late medieval England, the surviving texts of the great cycles still mean that for scholars of the plays as literary texts it remains a predominantly northern phenomenon. That the earliest references to the medieval stage's most celebrated stock bombastic characters, Herod and Pilate, should occur in *The Canterbury Tales* is, accordingly, as troublesome as it is well known. Both references are associated with the Miller and his *Tale*. The Miller is first heard crying 'in Pilates voys' (line 3124) when he disrupts the orderly proceedings of the newly opened tale-telling competition, and it is Absolon, the failed lover in the Miller's fabliau parody of the Knight's courtly romance who, it is improbably claimed, 'pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye' (line 3384).[3] These references, comprehensible to any modern reader familiar with the fifteenth-century cycles from York, Wakefield, Chester and Coventry, clearly also held meaning for Chaucer and his London-based, late fourteenth-century audience. In what follows, I will offer some circumstantial evidence and some speculation about Absolon and his theatrical prowess. *The Miller's Tale* is a rich and self-sufficient, not to say over-read, narrative, but an understanding of its possible theatrical context may enrich the modern reader's appreciation of its range of imaginative resonances.

Absolon is a comic fantasy poised between the outlandish and the effeminate.

> Crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon,

And strouted as a fanne large and brode;
Ful streight and evene lay his joly shode.
His rode was reed, his eyen greye as goos.
With Poules window corven on his shoos,
In hoses rede he went fetisly.
Yclad he was ful smal and proprely
Al in a kirtel of a light waget;
Ful faire and thikke been his pointes set.
And thereupon he hadde a gay surplis
A whit as is the blosme upon the ris.
A mirie child he was, so God me save.
Wel koude he laten blood and clippe and shave,
And maken a chartre of lond or acquitaunce.
In twenty manere koude he tripe and daunce
After the scole of Oxenforde tho,
And with his legges casten to and fro,
And pleyen songes on a smal rubibile;
Therto he song som time a loud quinible;
And as wel koude he pleye on a giterne.
In al th toun nas brewhous ne taverne
That he ne visited with his solas,
Ther any gailard tappestre was.
But sooth to seyn, he was somdeel squaymous
Of farting, and of speche daungerous. (Lines 3314-38)

His hair is outlandish by any standards. Generally it is considered to link him with Absolom in 2 Samuel who was hanged by his luxuriant hair from an oak tree. This can seem a delightful critical dead-end, if it were not that Adam of Usk in his partisan Lancastrian *Chronicle* compared the deposed Richard II with Absolon also.[4] Chaucer is probably taking a satirical side-swipe at the petty disobediences of the minor clergy in matters such as the tonsure, using a comparison with Absolom in matters concerning pride in appearance which was voguish, even if the specific political reference is too late for the Tale. In general, however, the application of the tools of practical criticism to the portrait of Absolon, with his array of small town accomplishments, while yielding such rich results which permit the reader to conceive a vivid individual identity for a pathetic burlesque character, conveniently evade the question of what a 'normal' parish clerk for Chaucer might be like.

'The name of the office is hardly distinctive: it is almost misleading', wrote Toulmin Smith in 1857.[5] Both before and after the Reformation the privilege of appointing parish clerks was a matter of dispute between priest and parish, but by whichever means they were appointed they had freehold of their office and could not be turned out without just cause. The parish clerks of London in particular were incorporated by a charter of Henry III and authorised to make by-laws and ordinances for their own regulation.[6] The office appears to have changed little between the earliest records, which considerably predate Chaucer, and the nineteenth century except insofar as the activity surrounding the divine office which they supported was changed by the Reformation. The parish clerk, before and after the Reformation, has always been connected with the carrying out of the supportive duties and rituals concerned with the services of the church. His duties are distinct from those of the churchwarden, being concerned with the management of the conduct of church ritual and ceremony rather than the administration of church security, finance and fabric. Before the Reformation parish clerks were often, but not always in holy orders, so, while Absolon might have been tonsured, he need not have been. They seem to have been chosen from among those who, had they better social origins, would have sought a clerical career, and held an office 'half-way between that of a curate or assistant minister and that of a church menial'. Dr Johnson remarked in 1781 that 'a parish clerk should be a man who is able to make a will or write a letter for anybody in the parish'.[7] They assisted the priest in the administration of divine office, such as censing, taking up the collection, leading the responses and singing.

Parish clerks, seen as the poor parish's substitute for a deacon or sub-deacon, were chosen from amongst promising scholars in local schools and were in their turn expected to engage in teaching the children of the parish, duties laid down in 1230 in the Decretals of Gregory IX.[8] In particular, they supported themselves from the office of *aquaebajalus*, that is of carrying the holy water around the parish for the priest's use, from which they received a customary allowance and also their popular alternative name, 'holy-water clerks'. Their other income seems to have come chiefly from customary gratuities from the wealthier members of the congregation every Sunday, as well as bread at Christmas, eggs at Easter and sheaves at harvest time.[9] Most of the duties feature either directly or obliquely in Chaucer's portrait of an enthusiastic and accomplished holder of the office, and an understanding of the means by which parish clerks received their remuneration goes some way towards explaining Absolon's sycophancy with the more impressionable members of the congregation, his evident need to supplement his income from other sources, and his conviction that gifts of food and money will help to win Alison's heart (lines 3375-82).

The relationship of the late medieval office of parish clerk to general clerical rules of celibacy, critical to an understanding of Absolon's moral status, if such things matter in this Tale, seem to have been anomalous. By the 1420s in London the office had emerged as a new lay profession, whereas the records from Chaucer's period suggest they were in transition from the previous position of being in minor orders. Norman James, who is currently editing the Bede Roll of the London Parish Clerks' Company, first compiled in 1449, writes,

> In fourteenth-century London the evidence is fragmentary, but we have examples of married parish clerks, although in at least one case there is a glimpse of a stalled ecclesiastical career in the will of a married parish clerk leaving books appropriate to priestly studies. We do not have enough source material to suggest exactly when the majority of the London parish clerks was first composed of laymen, content to remain in this office with no aspirations to join the higher ranks of the clergy. By the time of the Bede Roll this was a fait accompli.[10]

The position under canon law was set out in 1429 by the Official Principal of the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Lyndewoode, in his *Provinciale*. According to Lyndewoode, the parish clerk married once may enjoy all the privileges of a cleric in minor orders. Should he marry more than once, however, he will be considered a layman except that, as long as he continues to wear clerical habit and the tonsure, he retains benefit of clergy under the law.[11] Married or celibate, the holy water clerk, like the friar, might in the course of his duties, visit townswomen in their homes while their husbands were away, something which attracted a certain reputation for sexual seduction to the office. At least one contemporary lyric appears to suggest a rather racey reputation for the office:

> Ladd I the dance a Midsomer Day:
> I made smale trippe as, soth for to say.
> Jack oure haly-water clerk, com by the way,
> And loked me upon – he thought that it was gay.
> Thought I on no gile . . .

The victim of this clerical lothario continues to think on no guile after a night of passion,

Till my gurdle aros, my wombe wax out.[12]

The humour of Absolon's chaste ardour would presumably be enriched for contemporary readers if they were accustomed to a stereotypically sexually predatory image of the holy water clerk. Such stereotypical expectations would also go some way towards explaining Gervase the smith's laconic reception of the clerk who turns up playing the thwarted lover in his smithy in the middle of the night (lines 3766-71). Chaucer, however, never once refers to the parish clerk's customary duties as *aquaebajulus* in the Tale. Absolon certainly does enjoy intimate encounters with local wives of the parish:

This Absolon that jolif was and gay,
Gooth with a censer on the haliday,
Sensynge the wyves of the parisshe faste;
And many a lovely look on hem he caste . . . (3339-43)

Chaucer, however focuses not on aspersion with holy water but on the other clerical duty of censing. In a tale in which so much depends on water, or the lack of it, this may seem a lost opportunity. Chaucer was evidently confident that such were the stereotypical expectations of the holy water clerk that they could be realised in their frustration; his strategic choice of incense over holy water is then free to contribute to the construction of the obsessively hygiene-conscious Absolon whom Paul Strohm has memorably called, 'the most orally fastidious character in literature'.[13]

Anyone fitted to fulfill the office of parish clerk was bound to be an asset in the production of religious plays. It was after all the clerk who had charge of all aspects of the ceremonial trappings that accompanied the round of church feasts and fasts, as well as the conduct of the cotidien rituals of the parish. He was a modest scholar, with sufficient literacy to run a parish school, he could lead choral singing, read sacred text coherently, process and genuflect in an exemplary way, and care for and dispose correctly all the church vestments and plate. A parish clerk was, therefore, vocationally practised in what we might call stage-management and public self-presentation. Unsurprisingly, therefore, we find parish clerks featuring in English parish drama records, deployed in a number of ways in ensuring that the show went on. As far as the great cycles are concerned, in York we find that Robert Hewyk, a parish clerk from Leeds, was, along with Thomas Fitt, tapiter, and Henry Clayton, weaver, both of York, appointed pageant-master by the mercers in 1454.[14] In Coventry the city waits were also clerks at Holy Trinity, so references in the sixteenth century

records there to payments for singing clerks who participated in the plays probably refer to them.[15] Ingram assumes that the city waits served as singing clerks at Holy Trinity, but it seems at least possible in view of the elaborate rules governing the office of clerk enshrined in the 1462 constitution of Holy Trinity parish, that the combination of duties might be expressed the other way round.[16]

In the southern counties, beyond the scope of the great urban play cycles, there is more evidence of parish activity which matches Absolon's *curriculum vitae*, although the involvement of the clerk is not explicitly mentioned. From Salisbury's records, Audrey Douglas has demonstrated conclusively that dancing was an integral part of pre-Reformation parish activity as part of liturgical ceremony and as a means of raising money for the church or cathedral fabric. The money is receipted in churchwardens accounts. It is particularly, but not exclusively, at Whit that processional ceremonies seem to have included dance.[17] Regrettably most parish entertainment from Chaucer's time in which parish clerks might have participated goes unremarked, and it is only after the Reformation that we learn of the persistence of ancient customs, by which time the church and its scions are firmly set against the traditional festive activities of their parishioners. This is not always the case, however, and Barbara Palmer in her search for records of early dramatic activity in West Yorkshire, discovered one parish clerk, John Birkbie of All Saints, Moor Monkton, who appears to have been a throw back to a livelier age, for he

> . . . vesthe veine vndecent apparell namelie great britcheis cut and drawen oute with sarcenet and taffitie, and great Ruffes laid on with laceis of gold and silk and of late toke vpon him to minister or saie devine Service in the Churche of Rippon vpon a holie daie in the assemblie of the people in his Cote without gowne or Cloke with a long sword by his side And he is also vehementlie Suspected to be a notable ffornicator, and he haithe divers times in the night time bene taken abroade in the towne of Rippon by the wakeman and other officers with Lewde women, and he vseth to Daunce verie offencivelie at alehowsesand mariages in the presence of Common people to the verie evell example of others and the greate Slaunder of the ministerie . . .[18]

One cannot help but imagine that, in the ecclesiastical climate of 1567, this behaviour was the equivalent of the conscript appearing on parade with his underpants on his head contrivedly seeking dishonourable discharge.

Alexandra Johnston's work on plays in the Thames Valley has also generated another possible context for Absolon's playing activities. One of the problems, or elisions, of reading the Miller's Tale has too often been that one mention of Absolon's playing Herod leads to an association with the mystery cycles, northern and far too late, though probably cheek by jowl on the same undergraduate course on Middle English literature. Chaucer's audience in the late fourteenth century must have found the idea of a New Testament play, performed on a scaffold in the vicinity of Oxford at least comprehensible enough for it to trigger humour. Johnston finds that, 'what is clear is that small scale Biblical drama was far more common than the ambitious processional plays of the midland and northern cities', and a particularly common form of parish drama was the Easter play, possibly para-liturgical in form, and a useful element in bringing in modest amounts of revenue to the parish.[19] The records are still all too late for Chaucer, but the scale, the parish as the organisational structure, and the mode of performance in a number of places along the Thames Valley as well as more widely across southern England, or so it seems as the Records of Early English Drama project develops, suggest a playing tradition more appropriate for our reading of Absolon's dramatic activities than the great cycles of York or Coventry. The records of all such events survive in the churchwardens' accounts, because it was the churchwarden who was responsible for raising funds. This does not, however, make the churchwardens the initiators of the entertainment itself; the money collected swelled the fabric funds, but the likeliest 'faciltators', because of the nature of their regular parish duties, were the parish clerks.

Chaucer may have been a detached cosmopolitan bystander at the performance of a parish biblical play on one of his visits to the environs of Oxford. We know that he had other reasons for visiting Oxford which also made their mark on *The Miller's Tale*. One of his associates was the philosopher Ralph Strode of the Merton school of astronomers , and Chaucer's young son Lewis, for whom he wrote the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, lived, and probably went to school, in Oxford. One of the same circle of astronomers at Merton was Nicholas Lynn, whose fashionable theories on the measuring of shadows Chaucer makes enthusiastic use of elsewhere. Derek Pearsall has suggested that Nicholas in *The Miller's Tale* was named after him.[20]

Oxford may have inspired the provincialism of the *Miller's Tale*, and the character and astrological interests of Nicholas, but I want to suggest that Chaucer did not have to leave London for the theatrical inspiration of the Tale, nor for the character of Absolon, although their transposition into Oxfordshire depended too on parish playing traditions in that vicinity. For evidence of parish clerks engaged in Bible plays in Chaucer's lifetime one need go no further than Clerkenwell. Not far from the City,

Clerkenwell was the semi-rural site of the annual Bartholomew Fair, close both to Smithfield and to the surviving medieval church of St Bartholomew the Great. The name Clerkenwell derives from the fact that throughout the late fourteenth century, the independent confraternity of parish clerks of London performed their plays there. The origins of the London confraternity are obscure, although it is traditionally said to have been granted a charter by Henry III in 1233. On 22 January 1441/2, Henry VI granted a charter confirming the foundation of the body, though no trace of the earlier thirteenth century document has ever been discovered, and the confraternity made no return to the court of Chancery as was required of all guilds in 1389. The 1442 charter refers, however, to forty years' or more previous activity by the brotherhood.[21]

A celebrated performance by the brotherhood was that staged before Richard II in 1391, for which payment of £10 is recorded in the *Issue Rolls*:

> 11 July. To the clerks of the parish churches and to divers other clerks of the city of London. In money paid to them in discharge of £10 which the Lord the King commanded to be paid to them of his gift on account of the play of the 'Passion of Our Lord and the Creation of the World' by them performed at Skynnerwell after the feast of St Bartholomew last past. By writ of Privy Seal amongst the mandates of this term. – £10.[22]

The London antiquarian, Stow, provides an account of a production in 1390:

> The third [well] is called Clarkes well, or Clarken well, and is curbed about square with hard stone, not farre from the west ende of Clarken well Church, but close without the wall that incloseth it: the sayd Church tooke the name of the Well, and the Well tooke name of the Parish Clarkes in London, who in old time were accustomed there yearely to assemble and to play some large hystorie of holy Scripture. And for example of later time, to wit in the yeare 1390, the 14. of Richard the second, I read the Parish Clarkes of London, on the 18 of July, playd Enterludes at Skinners well neare vnto Clarkes well which play continued three dayes togither, the King, Queene, and Nobles being present.[23]

Stow follows this immediately with an account of a further production attended by royalty in 1409, and lasting eight days. Adams believes that the plays were

presented regularly from 1384 onwards, possibly deriving from some original connection with St Bartholomew's Fair instituted by Rahere to pay for his new buildings at Smithfield. The plays are traceable to the early sixteenth century.[24]

There is no definitive dating for *The Canterbury Tales*, let alone *The Miller's Tale*, although 1387 is usually cited as *terminus a quo*. The clerk's plays took place in July 1390, the middle of a hot summer during which plague raged in London,[25] and during which Geoffrey Chaucer had the misfortune to be stuck in the capital in his position as Clerk of the King's Works. The post was, as Crow and Olsen put it in the *Life Records*, 'no sinecure', and involved arrangements for the

> procurement, transportation, and care of a great store of many kinds of building materials, tools, implements, containers, machines etc., needed for construction and repair. If any of the materials were carried away he had to see they were brought back. Also he had to supervise the sale of branches and bark from the trees purveyed for the king's works . . .[26]

From his appointment he was engaged in work to complete a wharf at the Tower of London, work inherited from his predecessor and completed by June 1390. His other big job that summer was superintending work at St George's Chapel, Windsor, but he was not commissioned to do that until July 12. During the same period he was engaged in superintending the erection and dismantling of scaffolds for two jousts in Smithfield, one in May and one in October. A mandate was issued on 1 July to meet the costs he incurred in May.[27]

This was an anxious time for Chaucer, dealing with eminent men like Henry Yevele, as well as other workmen, holding responsibility for quantities of capital plant, meeting contract deadlines, and carrying large pay-packets around London and its suburbs. The records are confused, but it seems that during the same summer he was personally mugged and robbed at least twice.[28] Derek Pearsall observes that Chaucer's involvement in the tournaments may have led him to revise the description of the lists in *The Knight's Tale*. The composition of that tale is known to predate the *Tales* as a whole, as it is mentioned in the *Legend of Good Women*.[29] It is at least conceivable that *The Miller's Tale* the complex companion piece to *The Knight's Tale* was inspired by Chaucer's experiences that same summer. He had become perforce during that hot summer intimately knowledgeable about carpenters, their materials, tools and work, as can be observed from the indenture by which dead stock was transferred to Chaucer by Elham, his predecessor as Clerk of Works in November 1389

. . . videlicet: Infra palacium Westmonasterii: viii paria aundyerns quorum pedes ii franguntur et devastantur i par scipparum i patella i rake i ladel et i soudour pro officio plumbarii i ymago eris ii ymagines lapidee non depicte vii ymagines facte ad similatudinem regum xv clavi vocati clergyngnaill pro officio vitriarii ii molendina manualia quorum deficiu[n]t ii paria wynches i lathe pro officio carpentarii i parva campana vocata Wyron i grossum fern[um] cum toto apparatu i crowe ferri i instrumentum vocatum ramme cuius stipes (frangitur et devastatur) i grossus anulus in superiori parte et les stayinghokes franguntur et devastantur i trabs ferri stannati cum statera lignea diversa pondera plumbi continencia Ccxli libras ii grossa fanes nuper facta pro magna aula ii spyndles ferri pro eisdem i olla plumbea pro glutine v casus ferrei pro fenestris vitreis certe parcelle unius carre facte pro Rege Edwardo videlicet ii paria rotarum ferro ligaturum iiii pecie pre celura camere viii pecie ordinate pro costeriis dicte camere iiii pecie pro costeris aule i somere cum axella ii staybarres ferri stannati xii pecie meremii pro carra predicta i countre coopertum de novo cum viridi panno pro domo compoti i stopp i botell pro inclaustro i pixis pro pulvere i piciosia ii scale i cable xii hirdles pro scaffoldes i par de lystis duplicatis continentibus in circuitu xxxi perticatas i quartronus viii libre stanni pro soudura xxi panelli vitrei in casibus ferreis firmati pro fenestris camere regis CCxv petre de Stapulton continentes xliii doliata i par ptentegarnettarum pro quodam ostio i par grossarum potentegarnettarum cum iiii boltis ferreis ii colers ferri numper facta pro quodam ponte vertibili iii vertivelli ferrei pro ostiis iiii hopes ferri pro rotis carri ix [a]nuli ferrei pro barruris predictarum lystarum i vetus trabs pro ponder' i vetus ferramentum ii tabule pro officio vitriarii quarum una est parva ii slynges pro le crane ii tribula ferrata quarum i debilis ii crowdeweyns xii petre de Reygate pro ii fenestris.

[that is to say: within the palace of Westminster: 8 pairs of andirons of which the feet of 2 are broken and destroyed, 1 pair of dry measures, 1 small pan, 1 rake, 1 ladle, and 1 solder (soldering iron?) for the office of plumber, 1 statue (*eris*?), 2 statues of unpainted stone, 7 statues made in the likeness of the king, 15 keys called 'clergyngnaills' for the office of the glazier, two mills,

the handles of which are missing, 2 pairs of winches, 1 lathe for the office of carpenter, 1 poor bell called 'Wyron', 1 gross windlasses with all apparatus, 1 iron crow-bar, 1 instrument called a ram of which the posts are broken and destroyed, 1 gross of rings of which the fixing hooks at the upper ends are broken and destroyed, 1 steel-yard of tinned iron with a balance of diverse woods containing weights of lead, 241 pound weights, 2 gross banners newly made for the great hall, 2 spindles of iron for them, 1 lead pot for glue, 5 cases of iron for the window glass, certain parcels relating to a carriage made for King Edward, that is to say 2 pairs of wheels with iron braces, 4 pieces for the canopy of the chamber, 8 pieces ordained for the hangings of the same chamber, 4 pieces for the hangings of the hall, 1 beam with an axel, 2 staybars of tinned iron, 12 pieces of timber for the aforesaid carriage, 1 new counting-cloth with greenwood timbers for the counting house, 1 stoup, 1 butt for nails (?), 1 vessel for powder, 1 pick-axe, 2 scales, 1 cable, 12 hurdles for scaffolds, 1 pair of double lists containing 31 perches (banks of seating?) in its circuit, 1 quarter-weight, 8 pounds of tin for solder, 21 panes of fortified glass in cases of iron for the windows in the king's chamber, 215 Stapleton stones contained in 43 tuns, 1 pair of cross-garnet hinges for a certain door, 1 pair of large cross-garnet hinges with 4 bolts of iron, 2 collars of iron newly made for a certain drawbridge, 3 hinges of iron for doors, 4 hoops of iron for the wheels of a carriage, 9 rings of iron for the barriers of the aforesaid lists, 1 old shaft for a heavy old piece of ironwork, 2 tables for the office of glazier of which one is poor, 2 slings for the crane, 2 shovels of iron, one of them weak, 2 handcarts, 12 Reigate stones for 2 windows.]

This is just the inventory of items at Westminster, which include the scaffolds and barriers for the lists; he took into his keeping further miscellaneous items at the Tower (including one bucket and one frying pan) and more still at Sheen, Eltham, Kennington, Childern Langley and Byfleet, all equally assorted.[30] Whether Chaucer assiduously checked them off one by one, and to what extent he had hands-on experience of the use of such items in the following months, is anyone's guess. He would have been familiar with projects such as the out-of-town work that John the

carpenter is described as being involved in, would know how long it could take to fetch a load of timber, and possibly encountered local residents as dense as the monk who is unable to tell Absolon quite where the carpenter might be. In short, there can be no doubt that he was involved in the world of the building trades and their tackle, and that in the course of his duties he was commuting to and fro between Smithfield, Westminster and the Tower, so could not have avoided knowing about, if not watching, the elaborate amateur theatricals of the parish clerks at Clerkenwell.[31]

Theatricality in the *Miller's Tale* goes well beyond what inspiration Chaucer may have derived from plays at Clerkenwell in his construction of Absolon's character as recent criticism has acknowledged. John Gamin and Linda Lomperis have both noticed how the Tale is preoccupied with dressing-up and with role-playing although Absolon is the only one labeled as an actor.[32] Alison is dressed as the petit bourgeois wife, Absolon plays at being the stereotypical courtly lover, and Nicholas pretends to be a foreteller of the future, which leads to his persuading John and Alison, albeit for different reasons, to play at Noah and his wife. There, by a couple of simple moves, we are back with Bible plays.

What I want to do now is to push the acting analogy a little further and suggest that amateur performance of Bible plays provides more than just a footnote in this Tale; it supplies a set of metaphorical resonances based on the idea of pretending to be what you are not, which supply the mainspring of the Tale's satirical thrust. Modern readers persist in seeing Absolon as effete, even effeminate. There is the hair for a start. His eyes, too, provide us with a detail of indeterminate significance. Grey eyes are associated with the ideal courtly lady; his are a debased burlesque version, grey as a goose (line 3315). But there is no innuendo about Absolon's sexual orientation to match that directed at that other flaxen-haired falsetto, Chaucer's Pardoner; on the contrary Absolon is rather keen on women, if fastidious and precise about his appearance. To be able to sing falsetto is a skill, not an affliction, and there is nothing to suggest that Absolon spoke like the Pardoner.

The balance of probability is that no women participated in the London Clerks' plays, as the organising body there was exclusively male, so some of the participants would have developed the skills necessary to take on female roles. There has been some debate in recent years about whether women took part in medieval theatricals, which there is not the space to rehearse here.[33] For present purposes I want to suggest that some of the humour of the Miller's Tale depends on Chaucer's having seen biblical plays with all male casts. In particular, the joke on Absolon, the multi-talented parish clerk and seasoned performer, is not simply that he is rather effete and, therefore, woefully miscast as Herod, but that he is modeled on either an individual or

a stereotypical cross-dresser, a parish-clerk actor accustomed because of his appearance, as well as certain physical and vocal skills, to being cast in some female role, even as the Virgin Mary. To understand the portrait of Absolon in this way explains how he can at once suggest characteristics which the modern reader perceives as effeminate, but can also be a show-off, would-be courtly lover, and womaniser.

The theatrical analogy can be pushed further. There is a proto-mystery play in The Miller's Tale, but it is not a play containing a Virgin Mary or a Herod, it is a Noah Play. The London parish clerks performed 'The Passion of Our Lord and the Creation of the World', one assumes not in that order, which may have contained a Noah's ark. Alexandra Johnston has pointed out that although parish Bible plays were often Easter plays, the Brome and Northampton plays of Abraham and Isaac fall into the category of parish dramas. Old Testament episodes were not, it seems, exclusive to the large civic cycles.

The famous burlesque action of a Noah play involved the ante-diluvial marital strife of ancient Noah and his wife. It is frequently remarked that John the carpenter and Alison belong to the stock fabliau mal-mariée tradition, often connected, as in Chaucer's Merchant's Tale, with the story of Joseph and Mary. In The Miller's Tale another biblical partnership is invoked, however, as John and Alison end the story playing Noah and his wife in their kneading tubs. The 'play' is a construct of Nicholas's imagination, and, if Nicholas the intelligent outsider who gets the girl is Chaucer's surrogate here, it is the author's imagination which puts this provincial Noah and Mrs Noah into kneading tubs in a village duck-pond. Epic theatre is always difficult to produce convincingly on parish scale.

If Alison, then, is Mrs Noah in our proto-drama, she needs to be shrewish. This she qualifies for well. Her voice is 'as loude and yerne/As any swalwe sittinge on a berne' (3257-58). The contemporary rules of female speech emphasise the desirability of silence and the need for demure speech, which call to mind Chaucer's paragons Griselda and Virginia.[34] The only exception to the rule is the bold speech of female virgin martyrs, and indeed when Alison has her first encounter with Nicholas, fearing rape, she does speak entirely in expletives; the trouble is that she is no virgin, and we remain unconvinced that she means it. Her 'Out! Harrow!' would, nonetheless, not be inappropriate on the medieval stage. She also, however, needs to be a man.

The famously anthologised portrait of Alison at the beginning of the Tale generally provokes commentary along the lines that Alison is a picture of female vitality which is, nonetheless, at odds with the courtly archetype of the sexually attractive woman. Generally commentary focuses on the fields of imagery, farmyard and mercantile, as the explanation for this and demonstrates how the portrait therefore

differs from that of Emily in The Knight's Tale. Alison's appearance merits another look, however. She is very tall and, in modern parlance, 'straight-up-and-down'. To be as tall as a mast, upright as a bolt and slender as a weasel, is to be more like a youth than a voluptuous girl. Then there is the loud voice, the elaborate figure-concealing dress – again the arbiters of conduct proscribe superfluity of clothing[35] – in particular the broad collar and the apron, and the plucked eyebrows. Absolon may not be the only female impersonator in this Tale.

There is, of course, a robust strain of contemporary criticism that finds interest in the complexities surrounding gender in The Miller's Tale, all based on the observation that no-one inhabits his or her gender identity in a simple way. Laskaya has remarked that *The Miller's Tale* seems to see men who worship women according to the courtly love tradition as effeminate, that all the men in the Tale seek to control their world through their own versions of masculinity: John is the working man who creates with his hands, Nicholas the intellectual who creates with his mind, Absolon is the courtly lover whose goal is to love women.[36] All are vulnerable because their culturally constructed masculine roles depend upon assumptions about other men and about women, which turn out to be unreliable. Lomperis finds that there is no evidence that Alison is caged by John, whose main attitude to her seems loving and protective, that ostensibly the Tale pits Nicholas's aggressive masculinity against Absolon's passive effeminacy, yet it is Absolon who wields the phallic coulter at the end. Alison is not so much a passive sex-object either, but seems to be Nicholas's willing partner. Her conclusion is that all the characters are highly theatrical. She remarks that cross-dressing characterised the medieval theatre, that people gain attention in the Tale by their acting abilities, dressing up, role-playing and keeping up appearances. She relates this to fashions at the court of Richard II where heterosexuality may not have been the only acceptable sexual practice.[37] Elaine Tuttle Hansen's focus is the denouement, where the emphasis on Alison's 'queynt' shifts to one on her 'hole', from the specifically female organ to 'the undifferentiated anus', concluding that

> this shift is set up and is writ large by the subsequent substitution of Nicholas's body for Alisoun's, a maneuver that returns agency to the male but in doing so also exposes the humiliating and frightening lack of difference between male and female bodies . . .[38]

She observes that Absolon's first anxiety when he reels back from his kiss is that he has kissed a man's mouth rather than a woman's. She goes on to explore further the

sequence of confusions arising from what she calls 'cross-undressing' as anticipatory of Freudian narrative.[39]

I find the same features in the Tale's characterisations, but would wish to tie them to a more specific and literal source. Yes, there is a 'humorous substitution of the male body for the female', not just in the articulation of body parts at the Tale's denouement, but throughout. Absolon's capacity for manly action is fatally underestimated because he chooses on occasion to play the woman, and Alison in many respects *is* a man.

Chaucer's experiences as Clerk of Works in the long hot summer of 1390, working on the scaffolds at Smithfield, may well have inspired more than the description of the lists in The Knight's Tale. In the same summer he spent a lot of time in intimate contact with artisans in the building trade, particularly carpenters, and had every opportunity to observe the all-male amateur theatricals put on nearby by the Company of Parish Clerks. His court audience would have shared much of this experience, as they attended both the tournament and the plays, and we know from Froissart's account of the rickety nature of the scaffolds from which the tournament was viewed, that a story which ended with a carpenter falling from a great height and breaking his arm is unlikely to have missed its mark.[40] The Miller's Tale is an acknowledged palimpsest of The Knight's Tale, so it seems entirely appropriate to suggest that they were polished into the form in which they survive in The Canterbury Tales together. That being the case, it is unsurprising that both Tales draw elements of their imaginative worlds, and contemporary references for their original target audiences, from the experiences Chaucer had and the events he witnessed in London during that summer.

NOTES

[1] E.K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), 2, pp. 69-70.

[2] See, for example, R.B. Dobson, 'Craft Guilds and City:The Historical Origins of the York Plays Reassessed', in *The Stage as Mirror*, ed. by Alan E. Knight (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 91-106.

[3] All references to *The Canterbury Tales* are taken from Larry D. Benson (gen. ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston, 1987).

[4] Nigel Saul, 'Richard II: Author of his Own Downfall', *History Today* (September 1999), 36-41, p. 37 points out that Lancastrian chroniclers used comparisons with Absolom, Solomon and Chosroes of Persia to imply that Richard was brought down by the turning of Fortune's wheel.

[5] J. Toulmin Smith, *The Parish, its Power and Obligations at Law* (London, 1857), p. 197.

[6] John Steer, *Parish Law* (London, 1830), p. 99.

[7] Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act: the Parish and the County* (London, 1906), pp. 32-34, especially 32 n.2.

[8] P.H. Ditchfield, *The Parish Clerk* (London, 1907), p. 17, Reginald H. Adams, *The Parish Clerks of London* (London and Chichester, 1971), pp. 4-5.

[9] Steer, pp. 96-102; Adams, pp. 2-3.

[10] I am very grateful to Dr Norman James of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts for his illuminating correspondence on the subject. An edition of the Bede Roll of the Parish Clerk's Company, Guildhall Library, London, MS 4889, with an explanatory introduction, is being prepared by Norman and Valerie James for publication by the London Record Society.

[11] Ditchfield, p. 18.

[12] Gonville and Caius College Cambridge, MS 383, 41, quoted from *Medieval English Lyrics: a Critical Anthology*, ed. by R.T. Davies (London: Faber, 1963), p. 205.

[13] Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), p. 135.

[14] Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, *York*, 2 vols, Records of Early English Drama (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), I, p. 87.

[15] R.W. Ingram, *Coventry*, Records of Early English Drama, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), pp. 491, 183, 475-76, 478-80

[16] Ditchfield, pp. 36-38.

[17] Audrey Douglas, '"Owre Thanssynge Day": Parish Dance and Procession in

Salisbury', *English Parish Drama*, ed. by Alexandra Johnston and Wim Hüsken (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 41-63.

[18] Barbara D. Palmer, '"Anye disguised person": Parish Entertainment in West Yorkshire', *English Parish Drama*, pp. 81-93, 89.

[19] Alexandra F. Johnston, '"What revels are in hand": Dramatic Activities Sponsored by the Parishes of the Thames Valley', *English Parish Drama*, pp. 95-104, 98-99.

[20] Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 217.

[21] Adams, pp. 13-14.

[22] Ditchfield, p. 131

[23] John Stow, *A Survey of London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), p. 15.

[24] Adams, p. 7.

[25] *The Westminster Chronicle 1381-1394*, ed. and trans. by L.C. Hector and B. Harvey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 438-39.

[26] Martin M. Crow and Claire C. Olsen, *Chaucer Life Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 473.

[27] Ibid., pp. 470-72.

[28] Ibid., pp. 477-89.

[29] Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 212.

[30] Crow and Olsen, *Life Records*, pp. 406-08.

[31] In 1419, one of the confraternity of Parish Clerks of London rose to be Town Clerk and wrote the *Liber Albis* (Adams, 14). His name was John Carpenter, a fact which must remain simply a coincidence, as Nicholas Rogers reports, 'I am afraid that there is no John Carpenter among the few parish clerks from fourteenth century London who are known by name' (private correspondence).

[32] John M. Gamin, *Chaucerian Thearicality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Linda Lomperis, 'Bodies that Matter in the Court of Late Medieval England and in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*', *Romanic Review*, 86 (1995), 243-64.

[33] See Peter Meredith, '"Item for a grone – iijd" – records and performance', *Records of Early English Drama: Proceedings of the First Colloquium*, ed. JoAnna Dukta (Toronto, 1979), p. 55, n.42, who points out that what evidence there is all points to women's roles having been taken by men. Meg Twycross, '"Transvestism"' in the Mystery Plays', *Medieval English Theatre* 5:2 (1983), 123-180, adheres to the same argument, supported by practical experiment. On the other side, Jeremy Goldberg, 'Craft Guilds, the Corpus Christi Play and Civic Government', *The Government of Medieval York: Essays in Commemoration of the 1396 Royal Charter*, ed. by Sarah Rees-Jones (York, 1997), pp. 141-65, 146-47, has recently suggested that the scant evidence of women's participation in civic ceremonial is connected with the fact that the survival of records is directly related to

the growth of civic control over mystery plays, but that it is reasonable to speculate that women may have performed in the civic cycle plays before their participation came to be proscribed by the controlling civic authorities.

[34] Margaret Hallisey, *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer's Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1993), pp. 59-74.

[35] Ibid., pp. 113-34.

[36] Anne Laykaska, *Chaucer's Approach to Gender in The Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995).

[37] Lomperis, 'Bodies that Matter'.

[38] Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1992), p. 228.

[39] Ibid., pp. 231-36.

[40] Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 213.