AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMIC ELEMENTS IN
CHAUCER'S "MILLER'S TALE"

by

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INTRODUCTION

1. Previous Criticism of Chaucerian Comedy. In the five hundred and sixty years since Chaucer's death, literary opinion has been generally in agreement that Chaucer was a poet of comedy; the critics have done little, however, to analyse the nature of his comedy. Early opinion extolled him as a comic poet; for example, in 1574 Richard Robinson suggested that Chaucer's "merie tales" were "well esteemed" by his own contemporaries.\(^1\) In the next century readers of Chaucer made few and sometimes unappreciative comments on his comedy. John Evelyn praised Chaucer's "facetious style,"\(^2\) but Joseph Addison showed how little understood and appreciated Chaucer's poetry had become when he stated that the poet "tries to make his Readers laugh in vain," and that age had "obscured his wit."\(^3\)

Although in the eighteenth century the title of comic poet was a stigma implying lack of dignity,\(^4\) a few critics still found Chaucer's work worthy of praise. Thomas Warton went so far as to say that Chaucer was the "first who gave the English nation an idea of humour."\(^5\) In 1765 Thomas Percy was able to find an exonerating moral purpose in the poet's comic writing: "...while all Europe was captivated with the bewitching charms of Chivalry and Romance, two of our own writers... could see thro' the false glare that surrounded them and discover whatever was absurd in them."\(^6\) Although Percy did not make
this remark in reference to the "Miller's Tale"—the subject of the present work—it will be shown that Chaucer makes extensive use in his comic tale of the absurdities inherent in chivalry and romance.

Leigh Hunt's comment of 1846 made evident that comic poetry had lost the stigma of impropriety attached to it by the eighteenth century; Hunt speaks of Chaucer's poetry as "entertaining, profound, and good natured." But the critic qualifies this praise with the condition that Chaucer must be free from his taint of coarseness in order to be delightful. Hunt goes on to give a description of Chaucer's comic genius, more extensive than any heretofore noted. Even in Hunt's remarks, however, the description of Chaucer's comedy is brief and general, with little or no discussion of specific examples of comedy in the poetry. In the same period, George Meredith, whose Essay on Comedy will be discussed in this work in relation to the "Miller's Tale," examines at some length the comic writing of Molière; but of Chaucer he says only that the poet "bubbles" with the "Comic Spirit."

To turn to the present century, one finds that there is ample appreciation (though of course not complete understanding) of Chaucer as a comic poet; but concerning the how and why of the comic elements in particular tales and poems, there is almost nothing published. One may search diligently and find only brief remarks, which may be easily recorded in full. A. W. Ward, for example, speaks of Chaucer's "exuberant love of fun and light-hearted gaiety." G. L. Kittredge calls attention to "ironical jocosity" in the Tales and sees the whole series as a "human comedy." G. K. Chesterson passes quickly over what he calls "broad comedy or farce" in the Tales. E. de Selincourt comments on the comic technique of the "Miller's Tale," but one
wishes that the idea were more developed. He says that the "vulgar" tale is "only comic from a sense of incongruity, and their whole humor depends ultimately upon the ideal which they seem to travesty or outrage." Using the word humor in its modern sense (as de Selincourt also appears to use it), Howard R. Patch says of Chaucer's poetry, "Humor there is almost everywhere in his work." Patch goes on to suggest one reason that there is so little discussion of this aspect of the poetry. "Insight into the matter of humor is in any case a delicate faculty, and as it varies from one individual to another so it has differed in intensity from one century to another. ...Understanding of this special feature has been slow in developing." 

That insight into the nature of comedy or humor is a delicate faculty is especially apparent when, in his study of medieval literature and technique, J. W. H. Atkins mentions only "Chaucer's rich vein of humour." In praising the "Miller's Tale," Eugene H. Long says that "this story, 'vulgar' or 'bawdy' as it may be, sheds light on the comedy of life," but he makes no analysis of how it does. David Stephenson calls the portraits in the "misanthropic tales" amusing. Nevill Coghill discusses the "Miller's Tale" in a way that is worthy of emulation and extension if one wishes to gain a greater appreciation of the comic elements in the tale. Coghill proposes that with the "Miller's Tale" "Chaucer the Courtier suddenly reveals the power to create an outrageous and unquenchable cottage laughter." Continuing, the critic explains that "The spirit of these tales is subtended from his general glee in existence, a joy in the warm energies of nature being itself. ...The quality of this new poetry can be tasted in a single line, perhaps the funniest line
in the funniest story in the world: "Tehee!" quod she, and clapte the wyndow to.' If this is the spirit that propels these stories, it propels them in two contrary directions, harmonized by the miracles of Chaucer's factual style of daily imagery. From one point of view they are totally fantastic, from another rigidly realistic. What is fantastic is the narrative outline; what is realistic, the detail of village life, conversation, and character.\textsuperscript{17} But even as much analysis as Coghill provides is rare. In Raymond Preston's study, Chaucer's comedy is explained as a violation of decorum,\textsuperscript{18} and left at that. Milton Miller describes Chaucer's wit as never bitter, and the folly it displays as delightful.\textsuperscript{19} Charles Muscatine attributes Chaucer's "comic irony" to incongruous juxtaposition.\textsuperscript{21} Paull F. Baum calls Chaucer's comedy bright, not penetrating the depths. "A great measure of the fun is in his exhibition of low-caste humor to the 'gentils' of his courtly readers...."\textsuperscript{21}

2. Inadequacy of the Previous Criticism. Though Chaucer's comedy has not gone without general commentary, it has not had any thorough examination of particular comic elements. The scholar-critics state that Chaucer is a poet of comedy, but they do not ask what makes his poetry comic. There are several causes for this neglect. In the first place, matters of text, manuscript, language, and literary derivations have for many years consumed the energy of scholars, and left little opportunity for artistic criticism. Secondly, some of the most richly comic poetry of Chaucer has the taint of bawdry and ribaldry, which has undoubtedly made generations more conservative than the present one hesitate to comment on it. Thirdly, critics may have shared Patch's opinion that being systematic in an investi-
gation of humor can cause a scholar to "be far too funny for what he
is trying to do, without uncovering the full humor of the original,"\(^\text{22}\)--certainly an eminent danger. Finally, one may find a cause in Patch's remark, mentioned earlier, to the effect that insight into humor is
difficult, for what is comic to one century may not appear so to another.
But after inquiry into medieval comedy, one wonders if humor, or at
least its basis, is greatly different in the fourteenth and the twentieth centuries. In his study "Medieval Laughter,"\(^\text{23}\) J. S. P. Tatlock
cites examples of medieval humor in conversations and anecdotes in
which "the modern will recognize...the presence of people essentially
like himself, responding to quick-wittedness and perception precisely
as he would respond." Yet it must be granted that much medieval comedy
(and Chaucer's is no exception) requires for full appreciation some
knowledge of the social conventions which are a part of it. At the
same time, the humor, as in Chaucer's case, is often so applicable to
Anglo-Saxon culture generally that it can go beyond the boundaries of
its own time.

3. Scope and Significance of the Present Work. The present work
deals with only the comedy of the "Miller's Tale." The comic elements
of the "Tale" are discussed in relation to three theories of comedy:
the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, George Meredith's *Essay on Comedy*, and
Henri Bergson's *Laughter*. The "Miller's Tale" has been chosen for
examination because it is a fabliau, a type of story that is usually
comic, and because the "Tale" is generally believed to represent the
best of Chaucer's artistry. Similar studies might be made of other of
Chaucer's tales and poems, many of which would illustrate, as does the
"Miller's Tale," the technique and richness of the poet's comedy. In
fact, the early plan of the present work was to analyse the comic elements not only of the "Miller's Tale" but also of the "Reeve's Tale" and the "Nun's Priest's Tale"; but the first proved to contain so much comic material that the other two had to be omitted.

The three theories of comedy presented in this work have been chosen because (1) they cover a wide span of time, (2) they represent three diverse cultures, and (3) they are among the more comprehensive and outstanding theories of comedy in the western world. Among Greek theories other than the Tractatus Coislinianus is that of Plato found in the Republic, which condemns comedy. Aristotle's discussion of comedy in the "Poetics" is slight in comparison to the scope of his ideas on tragedy. The ideas in the Tractatus Coislinianus, however, seem to be deduced from Aristotelian theory and present some specific ideas that follow from the brief statements on comedy in the "Poetics."

In the Tractatus Coislinianus and other so-called classical theories, laughter is considered the psychological effect of comedy, whereas modern theory regards laughter, not as effect, but as a constituent of comedy itself. To most modern theorists, laughter and comedy are one and the same; therefore, they seek, in their analyses of comedy, the psychological mechanism at work in the comedy.

Among other classical theories that might have been used in the present work is Cicero's On the Laughable, which, however, is less valuable as theory in itself than memorable for the examples of comedy it cites. Probably the next noteworthy theory, again with classical orientation, is that of Hobbes, whose definition of comedy as "sudden glory" is commonly known. His ideas, however, are essentially like the Aristotelian ones. Kant's theory of laughter, "an affectation
arising from strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing," leaves out many levels of the comic experience. Herbert Spencer derives his theory from Kant but extends his explanation into physiology. Schopenhauer's theory is important in the history of comic theory, but its applicability is made difficult by its extreme subjectivity.

Oriented more toward literature than philosophy, Hazlitt's ideas on comedy might have been used to analyse the "Miller's Tale," but much of his theory, like Schopenhauer's, falls into subjectivistic principles. The objectivity that Meredith grants comedy and that he uses in the presentation of his theory makes the Essay on Comedy easily applicable to the study of a literary work. His point of view, nevertheless, is still classical in that laughter is for him an effect of comedy. The theory is limited also by its Victorian insistence on good taste and a delicacy that can never offend, which insistence causes it to overlook basic comic elements like farce, slapstick, and behavior lacking in gentility.

By the use of Henri Bergson's Laughter, in addition to the Tractatus Coislinianus and Meredith's Essay on Comedy, two purposes are accomplished. First, the orientation in Bergson's theory changes to that of the modern, that is, from the effect to the psychology of comedy. Secondly, this theory expands in many directions to explain both general and particular elements of comedy. Originally Freud's theory of wit had also been intended for consideration in this work, but the other three theories proved to have so extensive an application to Chaucer's comedy that it was necessary to forgo using Freud.

It is soon apparent, as Bergson himself admits, that no one theory
can explain all comedy. By means of theories from different times and from different philosophical and cultural points of view, the "Tale's" various comic elements may be identified, or perhaps explained. In addition, analysis of a Chaucerian poem according to ancient and modern criteria may reveal both the timelessness and the timeliness of its comedy. One may facetiously apply Arnold's ninety-nine-year standard to judge the continuing value of a work of art, but one may also seriously consider whether a poet's ideas and his apprehension of the life of his day may have any value for other times. As the comic view of life has often been equated with the reasonable view, and Chaucer's comedy bears out this equation, the study of his comic poetry may give insight into the mind and behavior of men of his time and, at the same time, reflect a basic sameness in the ideas and foibles of western man, ancient, medieval, and modern. But more important than any of these philosophical and psychological reflections, the analysis of Chaucer's comedy sharpens one's awareness of the fact that his poetry is a continuing source of comic pleasure. Chaucer's comedy "is not for an age, but for all time."
CHAPTER I
THE TRACTATUS COISLINIANUS

Students of literature have often turned to the Greek classicists in general and to Aristotle in particular for models, for standards of analysis, and for better understanding of the poetic art of many periods. Aristotle's theory of tragedy, for example, has probably been referred to more than any other critical work; unfortunately his extant writings on comedy are not so rich a source for study. From early Aristotelian tradition, however, comes a statement of comic theory, the Tractatus Coislinianus, of unknown authorship, that has relevance to Chaucerian comedy. Either a fragment or a condensation of a more complete theory of comedy, this work, which for the sake of convenience will be referred to as the "Tractate," raises some problems which have given scholars opportunity for speculation about the origin and the correctness of the extant form. It is not within the scope of this paper, however, to consider questions of authorship and text. The extant form of the "Tractate" presents an outline of "mimetic" or "dramatic poetry," especially comedy.

1. Definition of Comedy. Comedy is defined in the "Tractate" as an "imitation of an action that is ludicrous and imperfect, of sufficient length, in embellished language." The manner of presentation is "by persons acting" and not "through narrative; through pleasure and laughter effecting the purgation of the like emotions. It has laughter for its mother."
The definition of comedy is of less importance to the purpose of this paper than the elements which make up the definition, for the "Miller's Tale" is surely comic. The action of the "Tale" is obviously ludicrous. The meaning of "imperfect" can probably best be understood in contrast to Aristotle's definition of tragedy, which requires that the action be complete. If, for example, the action of the tragedy Oedipus Rex is "how Thebes rid itself of a curse," this action is presented and completed in the drama. On the other hand, the action of the "Miller's Tale" cannot be stated in a completed sense. "How the clerk tricked the carpenter" is a close summary of the action, but the clerk is also tricked in the conclusion, and this addition renders the action imperfect. "Of sufficient length" indicates that the comedy must encompass enough material and time to tell its story, to make its point. The embellishments of language will be taken up in detail in the discussion of the "Tale." That the manner of presentation is to be "by persons acting" and not "through narrative" does not make the theory inapplicable to the dramatic narrative of the "Miller's Tale." The "Tractate" deals with comic drama. But comic drama and comic narrative, especially Chaucer's narrative, partake of enough of the same comic elements to make the theory of one relevant to the other. Little need be said of the comic purgation, which is more easily understood than its parallel in tragic catharsis. "It has laughter for its mother" is a concise, metaphorical way of expressing the psychogenesis of comedy. Comedy is born out of laughter. Man laughs naturally, instinctively. He finds pleasure in laughing and therefore creates situations and ideas at which he can laugh. The Miller himself illustrates the process. He has had enough of "noble" stories. In
his drunken—if you will, primitive—state, he wants to laugh and therefore tells of a comic situation.

2. Sources of Laughter. Next the "Tractate" discusses the sources from which laughter arises: from diction or expression, and from things or content. The elements of diction which contribute to comedy are: homonyms, synonyms, garrulity, paronyms, diminutives, perversion, grammar, and syntax. The content which can provoke laughter includes assimilation, used either toward the better or the worse; deception; the impossible; the possible and inconsequent; the unexpected; the debasing of personages; dancing that is clownish or pantomimic; the neglect of great things to take the worthless; the lack of sequence in the story.6

The "Tractate" only lists these causes of comedy. Detailed interpretation of each point might be made; but in the application of the "Tractate" to the "Tale," the meanings may become apparent.

The treatise goes on to make an important distinction between comedy and abuse. The latter "openly censures the bad qualities" of men, whereas comedy is more subtle and makes "game of faults in the soul and in the body."7

"As in tragedies there should be a due proportion of fear so in comedies there should be a due proportion of laughter."8 The "due proportion" requirement is important in its effect on the classification of works which fall into the gray area between tragedy and comedy. It appears from the "Tractate" that a work not tragic in its conclusions and yet having in it very few or no comic elements cannot be classified as comedy.

3. The Substance of Comedy. The "Tractate" discusses the sub-
stance of comedy as consisting of six parts. The first of these is the plot, the "structure binding together the ludicrous incidents." Second are the characters, which are buffoonish, ironical, or impostors. The third part is the "dianoia," that is, the "element of intellect, the faculty in the agents of saying what can be said, or what is fitting to be said, for the ends of comedy, in a given situation." This element "is manifest in everything the poet makes the agents say to prove or disprove a special point." The intellectual element involves both opinion and proofs, the latter including oaths, compacts, testimonies, tests, and laws. Opinion in comedy is the counterpart of the weighty maxims of tragedy. In tragedy opinion is expressed in "the well-planned invention characteristic of true eloquence," whereas the persuasions of comedy are "more superficial and adventitious."

4. The Diction of Comedy. Diction is the fourth part of comic content. "The diction of comedy is the common, popular language. The comic poet must endow his personages with his own native idiom, but must endow an alien with an alien idiom." Melody and spectacle, the fifth and sixth parts of comedy, are not within the province of narrative poetry. The remainder of the "Tractate" deals with the divisions of Greek comic drama and the distinction of Old, New, and Middle Comedy.

Summary. The "Tractate" defines comedy as a ludicrous action, inconclusive in comparison to tragic movement, but having sufficient length to make its point and presented with language effectively embellished. Comedy is created out of man's desire to laugh, which laughter is aroused by various kinds of diction, ideas, and behavior. In addition, although man's ludicrous behavior may be part of the content of
comedy, his faults are not openly censured, as in abuse, but instead are subtly treated so as to give rise to laughter.

The substance of comedy is made up of plot; character, which is either buffoonish, ironical, or deceiving; "dianoia," or the intellectual element; diction, which is from the "common popular language"; melody; and spectacle. All of these elements, except melody and song, will be shown to have relevance to the comedy of the "Miller's Tale."

The "Tractate" outlines comprehensibly, if incompletely, a theory of comedy which may be applied to a medieval fabliau. In turning to Chaucer's own age for a similar theory of comedy one finds only a simple explanation: a story with a happy ending. In a discussion of the derivation of the word comedy, Dante states that it "is so called from 'comos,' a village, and 'oda,' a song; whence comedy is as it were a 'rustic song'. Now comedy is a certain kind of poetical narration which differs from all others. It differs, then, from tragedy in its subject-matter, in that tragedy at the beginning is admirable and placid, but at the end or issue is foul and horrible....Whereas comedy begins with sundry adverse conditions, but ends happily." Dante goes on to say that the language of tragedy differs from that of comedy; "that of tragedy is high-flown and sublime, while that of comedy is unstudied and lowly." This quality of language in comedy is like that expressed in the "Tractate."

Perhaps Dante's simple definition of comedy was sufficient for Chaucer and other medieval artists; at any rate, they never wrote a detailed theory. Though Chaucer expresses in the "Monk's Tale" what is essentially Dante's theory of tragedy, he writes nothing
of comedy. Because of the lack of critical material in Chaucer's age, it is necessary to turn to previous and subsequent years for principles of analysis of the poet's comedy. The intention in the following chapter is to analyse some of Chaucer's comic technique by applying the "Tractate" to the "Miller's Tale."
Chapter I has presented the "Tractate's" theory of comedy, which in the present chapter will be seen in relation to the comic elements of the "Miller's Tale."

A. Elements of Diction.

1. Homonyms. The "Tractate" states that laughter arises from various kinds of diction. The first is the use of homonyms which, however, are not common in the "Tale"; perhaps, as Aristotle suggests, they are of more use to the sophist than to the comic poet. Yet we do find Chaucer placing in close context the words "clomben" and "clom." He describes three main characters, John, Nicholas, and Alisoun, climbing to the loft and each exclaiming "clom!"—a "word imposing silence, like 'mum'!"

2. Redundancy. In explaining why Nicholas instead of Absolon has won Alisoun's favor, the Miller uses a proverb, "...Alwey the neye slye/ Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth." By definition a proverb expresses a truth or fact of common experience. Yet the Miller introduces the saying with three synonyms of the word truth: "Ful sooth in this proverbe, it is no lye,/Men seyn right thus...." His efforts to establish the truth of the truth become comic in their redundancy, the second type of comic diction.

3. Garrulity. Garrulity is a third device of comic diction. The Host illustrates this quality in the "Prologue" of the "Miller's
In his exuberance over the "Knight's Tale," he repeats praise of his own plan of telling tales: "This gooth aright....For trewely the game is wel bigonne." The genial Host is patting himself on the back. His loquaciousness allows him to ask, "Lat se now who shal telle another tale," when he has probably already decided that the Monk is next according to rank. The Host's talkativeness is an intrinsic part of his hospitable, friendly, and comic character.

Chaucer uses the device of garrulity in the character of the Miller. The audience is well aware from the description that the Miller is inebriated. His condition, moreover, makes him talkative and causes him to explain that he is drunk and that he can diagnose his state from his symptoms.

John, the carpenter, displays the most obvious comic garrulity. When he learns that his lodger, Nicholas, appears to have been badly affected by his studying, John carries on for some time, citing reasons and examples of the danger of mental exertion and concluding that Nicholas "shal be rated of his studyng." Later, Nicholas wants to pledge him to secrecy before revealing the "conseil" he has received. John spends four lines, repeating himself, to say, "...I nam no labbe."  

4. Paronyms. A fourth element of comic diction is the use of paronyms. Paronyms are formed by adding to or taking from a word or, as Cooper suggests, "by first dropping some part of a word and then adding something to what remains." In the description of Alisoun, the Miller praises "...hir body gent and smal." The word Chaucer usually employs to describe attractive women is "gentil;" the term, in fact, is conventionally applied to vernacular heroines. In the "Parliament of Fowles" Chaucer uses "gent" to describe the goose, whose
attitude toward love is anti-courtly. "Thus in applying the stale adjective 'gent' to Alisoun's body the Miller seems to be regarding her from a point of view less ideal and esthetic than realistic and pragmatic."¹¹ This slight modification of a word contributes to making Alisoun a character of comedy rather than of romance.¹⁵

Also in the description of Alisoun, Chaucer uses the paronym, as defined by Cooper, to play with rimes. The heroine's eye is "sikerly...likerous..."¹⁶ John utters a similar rime in his solemn judgment on the state of the world, "...now ful tikel sikerly."¹⁷ The word-play at this point serves as a signal that the audience is not to take John seriously.

Another use of the paronym which adds to the gay and comic tone is the modification Nicholas makes on his name when he describes how John will greet him: "...'Hayl, maister Nicholay! ...for it is day."¹⁸ The form allows Chaucer to play on a triple rime. But, when the "Nicholay" form appears again, it seems to be used only for the convenience of rime:¹⁹

They seten stille wel a furlong way.
"Now, 'Pater-noster,' clom!" seyde Nicholay,

5. Diminutive. The fifth type of comic diction is the diminutive. Cooper explains the term to include (a) the changing of the form of the noun, as in "birdie," (b) the use of endearments, as in "sweet Audry," and (c) the application of epithets, as in "bully Bottom."²⁰ Chaucer does not make use of the first method, (a) changing the form of the noun in using diminutives. But he does make extensive use of the other two.

(b) Two terms of endearment, "lief" and "deere," recur notably.
The synonym of "lief," "deere," is used by each of the major characters, except John, with various connotations. Absolon calls Alisoun his "deere lady" when he first sings under her window. His tone is far more endearing and sincere than it is when he addresses her later as "sweet leef." Nicholas speaks of the secrecy about the flood as being "Goddes owene heest deere," the words suggesting the connotation of "cherished." Alisoun addresses her husband as "deere spouse," and Absolon calls Gerveys his "Freend so deere." Both of the latter expressions are the kind of automatic diminutive often associated with a request. Finally, in telling the "Tale," the Miller parodies the way in which John worries that his "hony deere" might be drowned in the flood.

In his efforts to check the Miller's eagerness to tell a tale, the Host addresses him as "my leeve brother," and the tone is one of exasperation and irony. The Miller addresses the Reeve with a similar phrase, "Leve bother Osewald," but the exasperated tone is doubtlessly tempered somewhat by drunken joviality. Nicholas addresses John as "myn hoost, lief and deere" before he tells the carpenter of the vision of the flood. His tone is earnest, but hardly sincere. Absolon calls Alisoun his "sweet leef" as he stands below her window with hot colter in hand and with intentions not loving. The clerks address each other as "my leeve brother" when they agree that John is mad. The same diminutive occurs in the opening lines of the "Prologue," as noted above. Perhaps in the clerks' usage, as in the four previous expressions of "lief," the tone is not wholly sincere. Thus, it appears that Chaucer employs the diminutive "lief" when the tone is not sincere and "deere" when the expression is straightforward.
(c) The third type of diminutive, defined as a word formed from another word for an endearment indicative of character, is the epithet. Although Chaucer is not accustomed to using epithets, he uses "hende" eleven times referring to Nicholas. According to the New English Dictionary, the word is a "conventional epithet of praise, very frequent in Middle English poetry." Its meanings include "pleasant in dealing with others; courteous, gracious, kind, gentle, nice." Its earlier meanings of "handy, at hand" were extended to "skillful," "clever," and "pleasant."

Beichner suggests that Chaucer chose the word as characteristic of Nicholas "because it does have several meanings which would occur to the audience as the tale is told. Things happen because Nicholas is 'hende'!" Chaucer first introduces "hende Nicholas" as a clerk who knows "deerne love and solas." Both the latter terms are ambiguous enough so that the meaning of "hende" appears to be the frequent and "conventional epithet of praise." The poet soon explains, however, that Nicholas is a boarder in Alisoun's and John's house and the early meaning of the word, "near at hand," comes into view.

"Hende" Nicholas literally displays his handiness when he catches his love and holds her by the "haunchebones." "Upon the threat of Alisoun to call for help, however, Nicholas immediately changes his technique and becomes 'hende' in the polite sense of the epithet or 'pleasant, gentle, courteous.' At least he becomes so in Alisoun's eyes, for she "loveth so this hende Nicholas/ That Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn." To consummate the love Nicholas has only to be "hende" in the sense of "expert," "skillful," and "clever" enough to contrive a way to deceive the carpenter. Nicholas takes the Miller's
advice to "ber thee wel"; and while Absolon moans about love, the "hende" clerk makes plans for the fornication.

The subsequent uses of the diminutive "hende" can bring to mind any and all the various shades of meaning. John's use of the word in "Me reweth sore of hende Nicholas" is probably synonomous with the catch-all "nice" and, perhaps, "clever." "Hende" Nicholas shows that he is clever and skillful when he sighs and asks for drink upon coming out of his pretended trance. He is equally clever in warning John to "work all by conseil" and not "after thyn owene heed." For John to follow his admonition and instructions so carefully indicates that Nicholas is "hende" in the sense of agreeable or pleasant, as well as clever. Nicholas is "at hand" and is delighted when Absolon gives the unfortunate kiss. But the clerk is 'hende' once too often.

Bent on avenging Allisoun's insult to his dignity, Absolon returns...with a hot coulter. By this time, however, 'hende' Nicholas has risen and is at hand, and being clever he thinks he will improve upon the coarse trick performed by Allisoun. He is, in fact, so clever and at hand that he deals himself "crude and effective poetic justice." He is not daunted for long, however; for he appears as "hende" as ever in making a fool of John by claiming that the old man is mad.

Chaucer makes not quite so extensive, but equally effective, use of the diminutive "joly" in reference to Absolon. The effect of the recurrent coupling of the adjective with the name is similar to that of "hende" in bringing to mind more than one connotation of the word. The ambiguity of "joly" results from the fact that the term is "applied with equal frequency to men and women, but with Absolon the points of
jollification are more feminine than masculine. The epithet establishes the idea that Absolon is a dandy.

6. Perversion by Voice. Perversion by voice or by other similar means is another device of comic diction. The Miller provides an example of perversion of diction by voice and general demeanor when he begins his protestation of drunkenness with an imitation of the Knight. "'Now herkneth,' quod the Millere, 'alle and somel!'" The Knight bids the company before he begins his tale to "herkneth what. I seye." The effect of the Miller's imitation is a ludicrous perversion: the Knight's "noble" tone and tale contrasts with the Miller's coarse speech and bawdy tale.

Alisoun's retort to the amorous Absolon is "it wol nat be 'com pa me.'" Her denial indicates that she feels contempt and annoyance, which feelings are apparent in the tone of her voice and pervert the sweet meaning of the expression, come-kiss-me.

7. Grammar and Syntax. The "Tractate" lists grammar and syntax as a final element of comic diction. Chaucer quotes a proverb in which the syntax makes a pun:

An husbande shall not been inquisitif
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.

That is, a husband should not inquire about "divine mysteries or his wife's privy parts. The word is so glossed by Skeat for B3905, and since the drunken Miller is speaking of cuckoldry the obscene pun is unmistakable." To see the "unmistakable" pun, one must pervert the grammar and supply another possessive; for the syntax does not strictly allow the "obscene" reading. Thus, Chaucer allows the reader to be obscene; Chaucer is not so, and neither is the Miller. This pun,
one of the few in the "Tale," is gross; the "Reeve's Tale," on the other hand, includes numerous puns. If punning takes subtlety of mind, perhaps the comparative absence of puns in one tale and the presence of them in the other is a reflection on the character and intelligence of each teller.

B. Content of Comedy. After enumerating kinds of comic expression, the "Tractate" discusses the content from which laughter arises.

1. Assimilation toward the worse or the better, can be equated to the terms burlesque and mock-heroic. Assimilation of what is better to what is worse constitutes burlesque; the worse assimilated to the better is mock-heroic. In the "Miller's Tale" Chaucer makes use of the former in that he applies conventions of the nobility to a lower class. In the "Prologue" of the "Tale" the poet establishes that the "Knight's Tale" has been a noble romance, "worthy to drawen to memorie." In doing so, Chaucer prepares to assimilate the story toward the worse, to tell an ignoble tale with a similar plot involving a love triangle.

The Miller begins the conjunction of worse and better by daring to connect himself with the Knight. The drunken fellow who swears profusely and whose lack of courtesy prevents him from even doffing his hat brags that he "kan a noble tale.../ ...which...wol now quite the Knyghtes tale."

As was mentioned earlier, the Miller makes a pompous introduction, in imitation of the Knight, to the explanation of his drunkenness and to the nature of his tale, "how that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe." The Miller's eagerness to tell a tale after his own liking shows "his down-to-earth scorn for the refinements of courtly romance. His attitude conforms to his social position." Obviously, he has been irritated
by the elevated tone of the previous tale, and "retaliates with his own ribald version of love" that frequently burlesques the courtly conventions.

Chaucer uses the device of assimilation skillfully in describing the main characters of the "Tale." He sprinkles the "characterizations and conversations with clichés borrowed from vernacular versions of the code of courtly love—phrases of the sort we are accustomed to meet, on the one hand, in Middle English minstrel romances, and, on the other, in secular lyrics such as those preserved in Harley MS 2253—but phrases that are not encountered elsewhere in the serious works of Geoffrey Chaucer."¹

The description of Alisoun is an example of the poet's borrowing of clichés from the courtly code. When applied to Alisoun, that is, assimilated toward the worse, these clichés seem to hit the mark and bounce away; for the down-to-earth carpenter's wife is not and will not be a noble lady. Brewer aptly summarizes the technique:

Chaucer's Alisoun is described with the same care as that with which he described the Duchess Blanche, though with infinitely greater art, and to vastly different effect. Thus she has the conventional and fashionable beauty of a white forehead, but this is how Chaucer praises it:

Her forheed shoon as bright as any day,
So was it wasshen when she leet hir werk. (3310-11)

She wears an apron white as morning milk, plucks her eyebrows, and has a lecherous eye; she sings like a swallow(J),

She was a prymerole, a piggesnye,⁶⁴
For any lord to leggen in his bedde,
Or yet for any good yeman to wedde. (3268-70)

There never was 'so gay a popelote or swich a wench' (both of these are 'low' words). She is...a village popsy with a well-washed, luscious, vulgar (and genuine) allure. Chaucer does full justice to the allure as to the vulgarity.⁶⁵

The mixture of courtliness and vulgarity makes Alisoun's
portrait comic, especially to a courtly audience. "Chaucer has kept the mould" of the conventional method of describing feminine beauty "and thrown into the winds the stock details that fill it. And he has gone for his similes not to books but straight to the English countryside."66

Although Alisoun's actions are of the country rather than of the court, the love encounters are described with conventional phrases, or with a burlesque of these phrases. Nicholas woos her roughly and directly. His supplication to the object of his love is quick and direct: love me secretly or I will die, he says. That he will die is very doubtful, but he will not be put off, "Lemman, love me al atones."67 Contrast this abruptness with all the rigamarole Palamon and Arcite go through, or with the long agonies of Troilus, who, without Pandarus' help, would still be dying of unexpressed love.

Alisoun, unlike a high-born lady of romance, quickly capitulates. "...she struggles when firmly in his grasp, and promises only to cry out in the future."68 Alisoun is anti-courtly in that she yields without coyness, trials, or oaths of faithfulness.

Chaucer adapts the highly stylized language of courtly love to an inappropriate milieu for comic effect. For example, the Miller describes Absolon as the village fop trying all too hard to be a courtly lover, or at least to affect the outward appearances of one. Standing under Alisoun's window, Absolon declares his love: "I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete."69 Donaldson calls this the "Miller's own audacious contribution to the language of love." The passage "demonstrates the ease with which Chaucer, employing a sort of merciless logic, can move from a wholly conventional image involving animals to
one wholly original and devastating." A similar, though less devastating, comic effect is achieved in the comparison of what the Knight and the Miller would have their rejected suitors do. Palamon and Arcite are told they might as well "go pipen in an ivy leef." The Miller will have nothing so soft and small as a pipe, "Absolon may blowe the bukses horn." When Absolon begs for Alisoun's favors, for her "ore" or mercy, he is conforming to the lyrical tradition. "...doun set him on his knees/ And seyde.../ Lemman thy grace, and sweet bryd, thyn oore!" Donaldson says that while "ore" was used frequently by the love sick in lyrics, Chaucer uses it only here. "The immediate similarity but impending differences between Absolon's situation and the situation of the average lyric lover" illustrates the technique of assimilation of the better toward the worse.

Another way in which Chaucer reinforces the Miller's connection with the Knight and true courtly romance is with the feast of love, conventionally described in medieval romance. "Readers of English romances, including...Chaucer's own can anticipate with some accuracy the terms in which the feast is going to be described....In the 'Miller's Tale' the feast is, of course, of the metaphorical kind, consisting in the consummation of an adulterous love; and the obscene Miller, with his vast talent for realism, adapts the hackneyed old phrases most aptly to the situation." While the carpenter snores and groans in the tub in the loft, Nicholas and Alisoun enjoy the old fellow's bed:

Ther was the revel and the melodye;  
And thus lith Alison and Nicholas  
In bissynesse of myrthe and of solas.  

"At this feast the carpenter's snores furnish 'melodye' while his wife
and her lover experience the 'solas'—that seemingly innocent word for delight which here receives the full force of Chaucer's genius for devaluation—the completion of a logical process that began when we first heard it said of 'hende' Nicholas that 'of deere love he koude and of solas.' In Chaucer's hands devaluation, that is assimilation toward the worse, becomes a lively comic element.

2. Deception, the second cause of comedy in the "Tractate," motivates much of the action of the "Tale." The love-triangle of a young wife, old husband, and amorous clerk always implies deception and cuckoldry. The whole of Nicholas' elaborate plot is designed to deceive the carpenter; and John easily oblige and even unknowingly assists in the deception. He does all the work in preparation for the flood, including "pryvely" sending tubs to his inn and hanging them "in the roof in pryvetee." The frequent recurrence of the words "privily," "privity," and "privy" makes apparent the theme of secrecy and deception. Nicholas deceives John at every turn, including the accidental and disastrous deception, brought about by the clerk's cry for water, that the flood is upon them. Alisoun warns Nicholas to be "pryvy." Absolon asks "prively" after John and knocks "pryvely" at Alisoun's window in his effort to deceive the husband and make an assignation with his wife. When Nicholas comes to the window, "pryvely" trying to fool Absolon, a beautiful double deception is at work. Absolon in turn deceives Nicholas by greeting him, not with a kiss, but with a red-hot brand. Deception in the "Tale" is an essential comic element; for Nicholas, Absolon, and John, to a greater or lesser degree, all deceive and are deceived.

3. The Impossible. A third element of comedy is the impossible.
Nicholas' entire plot is based on John's acceptance of an impossible vision of an impossible flood. Also, the timing of the action of the "Tale" is too close and involved for actuality. Absolon woos Alisoun on the night Nicholas fornicates with her. Absolon's revenge on Alisoun, through sheer timing, is received by Nicholas, whose cry for water puts John accidentally into action. The reader can accept all of these impossibilities because the poet skillfully builds around them an unbreakable wall of undeniably concrete detail.

4. The Possible and Inconsequent. Chaucer does not make use of the "Tractate's" fourth part of content, the possible and inconsequent. The poet weaves the "Tale" so closely that he cannot and should not admit inconsequential or irrelevant material for comic effect.

5. The Unexpected. The fifth part, the unexpected, he does use, and to good effect. In the "Prologue" of the "Tale," disregarding the Host's plan that the Monk follow the Knight, the Miller unexpectedly announces that he will tell the next tale. Further, that the Miller is a coarse chap is well established, a fact that may lead the reader to expect that he will anatomize Alisoun in describing her. If this is the expectation, the Miller disappoints it. Moreover, the Miller uses several terms that would be found in a corporeal description and applies them to clothing. For example, "whit as moorne milk," an expression usually used in reference to the body, is applied to Alisoun's apron.

The Miller makes use also of the unexpected in the sense of anti-climax. Like other lyricists, he is finding it difficult to encompass the beauty of the lady in words:

In al this world, to seken up and doun

So gay a popelote, or swich a wenche.
What is expected is that the poet will proclaim her beauty or goodness. Instead, he employs the unexpected and anti-climatic word "wench," which "in Chaucer, when it does not mean servant-girl, means a slut...." 

6. The Debasing of Personages. This technique illustrates another source of comedy, "from the debasing of personages," or, as Cooper explains it, "fashioning the personages in the direction of the worthless." Aristotle's analysis is pertinent: tragedy shows men as better than they are, comedy presents them as worse. The Miller, for example, represents the worse. "Dronken" and "al pale," he can hardly sit on his horse. He lacks all sense of courtesy and swears vehemently. His interruption of the Host's plan of the tales in order to "quite the Knyghtes tale" tends to debase the Knight by associating nobility with low character. Women are another subject the poet directs toward the worthless. The "Tale" presents an amusing portrait of the "unstable desires and ingenious depravity" of women and expresses the "popular cynicism toward sex, as witnessed by the Miller's remark, '...Leve brother Osewald,/ Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold.'" 

The character John suffers much debasing. He is described as old and foolish enough to marry a young wife; for his "rude wit" prevents his knowing Cato, who speaks against such marriage. The Miller voices this description, but the words are inappropriate to him whose wit is also rude. It is apparent that the voice is Chaucer's, not the Miller's, addressing an audience educated enough to know Cato and to appreciate the joke.

In asserting his superiority to him, Nicholas also debases the carpenter:
A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle,
But if he koude a carpenter bigyle. 93

John himself contributes to his degradation when he displays his fear and his scorn for learning by describing the evils that befall one who pries into "Goddes pryvetee." He exclaims, "Ye, blessed by alwey a lewed man/ That nought but only his bileve kan." 94 The carpenter, however, shows a scant knowledge of the Bible, the foundation of his "bileve" when Nicholas asks him if he has heard of Noah. John replies, "Yis...ful yoore ago," and indicates that his knowledge of Noah and the flood is based only on the comic rendition of the story in the mystery plays. 95 All the material which tends to debase John serves at the same time to establish him as the kind of man to believe Nicholas' impossible tale. 96

7. Clownish Dancing. The "Tractate" lists the use of clownish dancing as a comic element. Though this part of comedy is obviously intended to belong to drama, the description of Absolon's dancing is suggestive enough to contribute to the comedy in the same way that actual dancing would in mimetic art.

In twenty manere koude he trippe and daunce
After the scole of Oxenforde tho,
And with his legges casten to and fro. 97

Robinson questions whether the reference to Oxford dancing, like perhaps Stratford French, is to be taken satirically. 98 But in view of Absolon's foppish appearance and aspirations to gentility, it is conceivable that Chaucer is using the comic device of a clumsy Oxford clerk trying to imitate the dance of court.

8. Neglecting the Great. The eighth cause of comedy is listed as "When one of those having power, neglecting the greatest things, takes the most worthless." 99 To the Greeks "one of those having power"
probably meant a king or person of high rank. In the "Miller's Tale" none of the characters has the power of rank, but Nicholas has the power of education. Moreover, he neglects great things and takes the most worthless. He uses his knowledge, not for betterment of himself or others, but for carrying out a scheme of cuckoldry. His use of education makes him a foil to the clerk of the "General Prologue," who is also a "poure scoler." "That clerk, not yet ordained, but centering his interest in logic, loved Aristotle and his philosophy and cared nothing about fine clothing nor musical instruments (sautrie) for his pleasure. His whole life was devoted to books, learning, and scholarship. Though the 'hende Nicholas'...was continuing his study of liberal arts, the comparison with his fellow student is now through contrast. His whole interest is in their commercial or immediate vocational value for him; or it is their use in forwarding his 'deerne love' and thus achieving his 'solas.'

Nicholas has more interest in astrology than in art or philosophy. He uses his knowledge of the science to establish himself as a weather prophet, and thus to convince John that the flood is coming. Nicholas dabbles in astronomy, a study John considers to be delving into God's secrets. John's opinion makes him fear for his boarder's sanity and, at the same time, allows him to believe in the clerk's vision. Nicholas' use of music, his playing of the psaltry, is not for edification but only for pleasure. Chaucer mentions early in the poem that Nicholas keeps the instrument conveniently on top of the cupboard in his room. Its use does not become apparent until after he has completed his plotting with Alisoun to trick her husband, at which time he takes up the psaltery "And playeth faste, and maketh melodie." Nicholas'
use of knowledge, in his neglect of the better for the worse, becomes a burlesque of academic learning.

C. Comedy and Abuse. The "Tractate" next points out that comedy differs from abuse in not openly censuring bad qualities. The Host, for example, is not serving comedy when he says, "The Millere is a cherl, ye know wel this." The attack is too direct for comedy. To be comic the "joker" must "make game of faults in the soul and body." Chaucer shows John as a jealous old fool with a pretty young wife. That he is old and still amorous and that he is aware that he may be a cuckold is all implied in the statement, "He most endure, as other folk, his care." In this description Chaucer maintains a delicate balance between the sentimental and the ridiculous to achieve an effect which is comic.

The poet can also make fun of man, instead of abusing his faults, by using ambiguity. In describing Alisoun, Chaucer calls her "propre and sweet and likerous." "Likerous" can mean appetizing or wanton. Chaucer's use of the word earlier in the poem, "And sikerly she hadde a likerous eye," suggests the latter meaning. If she is wanton, the poet softens the fault with the complimentary adjectives, "propre" and "sweet." Thus, the ambiguity makes for comedy and avoids open censure.

A similar technique is elaborately carried out in the description of Absolon. The Miller does not come out and say that Absolon is a fop; instead, with oblique reference, he shows the faults of the soul and body. Absolon is described as having curly, golden hair. In the Middle Ages the beauty of the Biblical Absalom suggested more than simply beauty. Biblical commentators thought of Absalom's hair as signifying some kind of excess. Poets thought of his beauty as being feminine; for in the catalogue of types in the "ubi sunt" poems,
Absalom was used as a type of beauty with reference to both men and women. "Chaucer therefore acted deliberately when he gave the parish clerk of the 'Miller's Tale' the dubious honor of the name of Absolon, for none could have been more appropriate for the effeminate dandy which he created."^107

The poet creates him as an effeminate character by describing him in terms that a minstrel poet would apply to a pretty girl. "His rode was reed, his eyen greye as goos."^108 Chaucer reserves grey eyes for ladies. "His rode," or peaches-and-cream complexion, places Absolon in the almost exclusive company of Middle English damsels."^109 Chaucer speaks of his surplice as being "As whit as is the blosme upon the rys."^110 The simile as "white or 'red as rose on ris' is one of the clichés found in descriptions of women."^111 In addition, Absolon has the dubious honor of being the only character in Chaucer spoken of as being "lovely."^112 His description shows him as a "realistic small-town dandy, a parish clerk...who is in love with all the fair women of the parish..."^113 but is more concerned with the ritual of love than with the winning of it. Chaucer makes game of Absolon's faults, and he does so with a subtlety that avoids abuse and creates a lively comic character.

D. Character.

1. Absolon. Of the three types of comic characters listed in the "Tractate" (buffoons, the ironical, and impostors) Absolon comes closest to being a buffoon. He is basically an innocent person, not aware of the impression he makes when he "flaunts his flamboyant hairdo, his modish shoes, his gay clothing in public."^114 He is a fool in the
way he tries to simulate the courtly lover, for his actions are so awkward they appear clownish. "He is as inept and public as Nicholas is skilled and secret. His inexperience leads him to try everything, first a serenade under the lady's window which effectively warns the husband, then intermediaries, gifts, money,"\textsuperscript{115} even public performance: "He pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye."\textsuperscript{116}

2. Nicholas. Nicholas, paradoxically, appears innocent, but his innocence is only superficial.\textsuperscript{117} He is, then, in character an impostor. The Miller first describes him as being "lyk a mayden meke for one to see,"\textsuperscript{118} but he is not meek to act. Moreover, Nicholas lives "Allone, withouten compaignye"\textsuperscript{119} and gives the appearance, and appearance only, of living a chaste studious life. "This sweete clerk" often spends his time singing the annunciation hymn, \textit{Angelus ad virgenem}.\textsuperscript{120} However, he is actually a "deerne" lover "of mystifying charm, dabbling in astrology, sweet as a root of liquorice, with a hidden life of the senses not quite for certain swallowed in sensuality."\textsuperscript{121} Like Absolon and any courtly lover, he is "ful fetisly ydight with herbes swoote."\textsuperscript{122} Nicholas only affects the outward appearances of gentility; for his rough approach to love is not courtly. Absolon, on the other hand, both affects the appearances of and tries to practice courtly love, with clownish results. Nicholas is obviously skillful in concealing his "sleigh" and "privee"\textsuperscript{123} nature; for the carpenter, hearing of his trance, can say, "Me reweth score of hende Nicholas."\textsuperscript{124}

Although Nicholas generally appears "sweete" and "meke," in Alisoun's company he drops much of the pose. In his encounters with her he becomes "ful subtile and ful queynte,"\textsuperscript{125} more in his true character.
3. Alisoun. Alisoun does not fall into the category of the buffoon, the impostor, or the ironical character. She is a character in comedy, but she is more the instrument than the source of comedy. Nicholas' fantastic plot is inspired by his desire to love her. Absolon's pseudo-courtliness becomes absurd in relation to Alisoun's down-to-earth attitudes. John's marriage to her and love for her causes him to be foolishly jealous and concerned for her welfare.

4. John. John is, of course, the buffoon. He is a dupe, and he is without the self-knowledge that would make him the wise buffoon of Falstaff's kind. Several times, however, his expressions are unconsciously wise or ironical. He says philosophically, "A man woot litel what hym shall bityde," unaware that he will demonstrate the truth of the maxim. He believes that the world is "ful tikel sikerly," not knowing that he establishes that he is in the frame of mind to believe in Nicholas' vision of a second flood. John is foolishly kind to Nicholas and foolishly in love with Alisoun. In loving his wife, he goes against the courtly tradition that love is found only outside marriage. Moreover, the old should be wise, but the old wealthy carpenter is a fool; the young, poor clerk is clever; the entanglement of buffoon and impostor makes for comedy.

E. Plot. In addition to character, the substance of comedy consists of plot, "dianoia," diction, melody, and spectacle. The comic plot, ("the structure binding together the ludicrous incidents") is essentially stated by the Miller in the "Prologue": a legend of a carpenter and his wife and how a clerk "set the wrightes cappe."
From this basic plot, all the incidents of the "Tale" follow and are tightly connected. Tillyard speaks of the plot as having "mathematical perfection" with its "great stroke of surprise" and its outcome which inspires "feelings akin to those of religious wonder."^130

F. "Dianoia". The "dianoia," (that is, opinions and proofs) of comedy is the "intellectual element...composed of general statements (such as maxims) and particular efforts to prove, disprove, magnify, minify, and the like."^131

Opinion in the "Miller's Tale" is often expressed proverbially. The Miller tries to persuade the Reeve that his tale is not intended to defame any man or his wife, for "Who hath no wyf, he is no cockewold."^132 He goes on to explain that the way to avoid being a cuckold is to avoid inquiry into the question:

An husband shal nat been inquisitif
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wife.133

John takes up the first of this proverb as a justification for much of his action. His abiding by the maxim makes his gullibility acceptable.

Chaucer uses a proverb to justify his inclusion of "harlotrie" in the Canterbury Tales: "...men shal nat maken ernest of game."^134 "Alwey the nye slye/ Maketh the feere leeve to be loth" expresses a reason for Nicholas' success with Alisoun when Absolon fails. With tongue in cheek, Nicholas explains to the foolish John why he wants the old fellow himself to make preparations for the flood: "'sende the wise, and sey no thyng."^135

1. Oaths. Oaths are listed as a particular part of the "dianoia." In the "Tale" numerous oaths of the blasphemous kind are spoken by all the characters, usually to emphasize or reinforce a
statement. For example, Gerveys emphasizes his curiosity about the reason Absolon should want a hot coulter by exclaiming, "Ey, Criste's foo! What wol ye do therwith?" Absolon appeals to "Jhesus love," as well as "the love of me" in trying to persuade Alisoun to kiss him. The Miller proves that he has heard enough romance when he strongly swears, "By armes, and by blood and bones," that he too knows a noble tale.

2. Compacts. Compacts are a component of the "dianoia." The "Tale" has two basic compacts, both of which are essential to the action. At the outset of Nicholas' plotting against John, Alisoun agrees to tell her husband that she has not seen the clerk all day, that he will not answer her call, and that he must be ill. Nicholas instigates the second compact, this time with John, that the carpenter will maintain absolute secrecy about the flood and his arrangements for it, and that he will not so much as look at his wife when they are all sitting in the loft. The straightforward and plausible quality of these compacts helps to make the action that results from them acceptable to the audience.

3. Testimony. John provides an example of testimony, the third element of the "dianoia." He sighs that "The world is now ful tikel, sikerly," and in affirmation states

I saugh today a cors yborn to chirche
That now on Monday last, I saugh hym wirche.

To prove to John that he must not act after his own mind, Nicholas quotes in evidence, "Werk al by conseil, and thou shal nat rewe." Chaucer makes clever use of testimony and of poetical economy in the conclusion of the "Tale." Nicholas and Alisoun convince the village
folk that John is mad by telling that he feared a second great flood was coming and that he went so far as to buy tubs, hang them in the loft, and beg his wife and boarder to sit in them. In short, they use all that Nicholas told him to do in affirmation of his madness.

4. Tests or Ordeals. Tests or ordeals are another means of comic proof. In comedy, low comedy especially, these ordeals are usually physical. When Absolon tries to prove his ability as a lover, he is put through the ordeal of Alisoun's most unpleasant kiss. The test proves to the would-be lover that he has been a fool to believe love ideal, and in his disgust he rejects love "forever."

5. Law. Nicholas makes use of a law, the last element of "dianoia," to persuade John of the importance of not so much as looking at Alisoun on the night of the flood. He applies the Church's canon against excess of the flesh and concupiscence of the eyes. "...bitwixte you shal be no syme, Namoore in lookyng than ther shal in deede."\[1\] Nicholas' use of a law from church doctrine is especially appropriate in the light of John's ignorant and superstitious faith. The "dianoia," includes, then, the various processes, both mental and physical, which cause characters to take action and which make their action credible to the audience.

G. Language of Comedy. The "Tractate" states that the "diction of comedy is the common popular language" and that "the comic poet must endow his personages with his own native idiom...."\[3\] This requirement of language levies against the use of elevated "poetic diction" in comedy. The "Miller's Tale" has the quality that Donaldson attributes to all Chaucer's works, that "of uniting perfectly simple English words
with extraordinary ease into genuinely poetic language of a kind that makes the phrase 'poetic diction' seem entirely too highflown to be apt. In the "Tale" Chaucer manages to use the "common popular language" in the context of poetry by three means. In the first place, as has already been shown in reference to other elements of comedy, Chaucer uses diction of the vernacular convention "in new and sometimes startling contexts." In doing so he at once parodies the convention and makes the language of love appropriate to the character of the Miller. For example, the Miller describes Absolon as sorrowing in love as "dooth a lamb after the tete." Alisoun is compared to a "piggesnye," meaning either a kind of flower or a pig's eye. Her portrait throughout is "Chaucer's reduction of the worn-out ideal, expressed by the worn-out phrases, to its lowest common denominator of sexuality." Thus, her beauty is not compared to the daisy or rose, conventionally used to describe beauty; instead the poet says of her:

Fair was this yonge wyf, and therewithal
As any wezele hir body gent and smal.

"Weasel," Lowes believes, is Chaucer's own image.

Another example is in "fetisly," a word Chaucer uses to describe the Prioress. Elsewhere the word appears only in "contexts which render highly suspect the particular sort of eloquence they suggest," as, for example, when Nicholas is described as "Ful fetisly ydight with herbes swoote." What Donaldson calls Chaucer's "ironical use" of the conventional idiom makes that idiom appropriate to the Miller and his tale and at the same time makes a "criticism of standard English poetic diction."

Another element of diction that renders the language popular is the use of proverbs. Common people, like those in the "Tale," often
use a proverbial phrase to reinforce a sentiment or idea. Moreover, in the "Tale," the proverbs are well suited to the characters who speak them. The Miller's proverb in the "Prologue," "Men shall not been inquisitif/ Of Goddes pryvetee or his wyf," almost certainly has obscene connotations. The carpenter says the first line of the couplet with pious overtones. Nicholas assumes to be learned in quoting the Bible. Here it may be well to mention that many of these utterances are not entirely appropriate to the character of the Miller. Donaldson suggests that in this tale, as in others, "there are two voices: the Knight, the Miller, the Reeve, and the rest are speaking, but they speak with the voice of Geoffrey Chaucer, with his skill in language and meter. One does not suppose that the Man of Law could talk in rime royale." Nor could the Miller speak in couplets. Nevertheless, Chaucer does endow his characters with their own idiom. John, ignorant and contemptuous of learning, corrupts the word astronomy. Even allowing for Chaucer's variety in spelling, one doubts whether "astromye," is acceptable Middle English.

Lastly, Chaucer uses colloquial English in his narrative. For example, he employs graphically, in describing John's fall from the loft, what was probably a current expression: "he fonde neither to selle,/ Ne bread ne ale." Robinson explains the meaning as, "He did not stop to trade on the way." Chaucer adds to the conversational quality of the diction with frequent oaths and with interjections like "clom." He also uses to good advantage the demonstrative adjective "this" in the colloquial narrative. The expressions "This Alisoun" or "This carpenter" appeal subtly to the reader's whole previous knowledge of the character by letting the name carry its own associations.
"The effect conveyed is, roughly, the hopelessness of defining such a character, and an obscure tickling about the 'herte roote' at his carryings on." It may be concluded that Chaucer's comic diction is the common popular language, refined by a perceptive mind, and that his characters speak in language appropriate to them within an artistic context.

H. Melody and Spectacle. As the last two parts of the content of comedy, the "Tractate" lists melody and spectacle, both of which, pertain exclusively to mimetic poetry, and are not to be expected in the "Miller's Tale."

I. Types of Comedy. Finally, the treatise lists the three kinds of comedy: "Old, with a superabundance of the laughable"; "New, which disregards laughter and tends toward the serious"; and "Middle, which is a mixture of the two." Chaucer warns his readers what kind of comedy they will find in the "Miller's Tale," in effect, Old Comedy. "...men shal nat maken ernest of game," he declares at the end of the "Prologue." And what is better game than a story of "harlotrie" involving a young wife, an old husband, and clever clerks? For those who might enjoy only New or Middle Comedy, Chaucer suggests, "Turne over the lief and chese another tale.""156

Conclusion. The aim of this study has been to demonstrate the way in which the theories of comedy presented in the "Tractate" are illustrated in the "Miller's Tale," and at the same time to suggest that the "Tale" contains comic elements of such sound and enduring nature that they would have appealed to the critic-author who wrote the "Tractate" centuries before Chaucer was born. The Greek theory, how-
ever, is inadequate as a complete analysis of the comedy of the "Tale." The most obvious reason for its inadequacy is that the "Tractate" (an incomplete work as extant) offers little definition of its own term. This is in one sense an advantage for the critic, who, of course, has great freedom of interpretation. At times, though, one wishes that the "Tractate" were more explicit, especially in matters of comic character and plot.

The "Tractate" lists elements of comedy without discussing why one laughs or what responses comedy can provoke. This lack leaves the theory within the realm of poetic art and does not extend it to psychology and sociology. If one studies numerous other theories of comic art, one finds that psychology and sociology are included and are often illuminating, as will be shown in the present work in the discussions of Meredith and Bergson. In relation to the "Miller's Tale," a theory of comedy should take into account the obscene, which the "Tractate" does not. Finally, the "Tractate" does not include the attitude of the comic poet. Understanding this attitude is especially necessary when the reader must project himself back six hundred years and imagine the personality and the society from which the comedy grows to appreciate it fully.
George Meredith's *Essay on Comedy* (1877) is the product of wide literary knowledge, critical insight, and creative talent, exercised by a major literary figure. It is, therefore, an important critical work in English letters.

A. **Social Conditions for Comedy.** Meredith approaches the subject of comedy by means of a discussion of the social conditions under which good comedy is produced and thrives. The society productive of comedy must be made up of cultivated men and women whose ideas are alive and whose perceptions are quick. Moreover, they must maintain a high level of intellectual activity; and there must be a fair degree of social equality between the sexes.  

Even in a society where intellectual activity and equality of sex prevail, comedy may find enemies in two types of people: the agelast and the hypergelast, or the Puritan and the Bacchanalian, respectively. The agelasts, "non-laughers," are "as dead bodies, which if you prick them, do not bleed," and who dignify their dislike of laughter with moral righteousness. The hypergelasts, on the other hand, exercise no discrimination over their laughter; and they are enemies of comedy, Meredith says, because "to laugh at everything is to have no appreciation of the comic of comedy."  

Meredith describes as another foe of comedy the people who have
a "sentimental objection to face the study of the actual world," who wish to set themselves apart and live in a world they suppose ideal. Their desire "to be an exalted variety" puts them, however, "under the calm, curious eye of the Comic Spirit" to be probed for what they are, for they violate the rational, common-sensical view of life that is the Meredithian ideal.

B. The Function of Comedy. Meredith's description of the type of society productive of good comedy leads to the idea that comedy has a rational basis, appealing to the mind through ridicule of folly. In addition, Meredith believes that civilization is founded on common sense and that the "vigilant comic" is the "first born of common sense.... Folly is the natural prey of the comic."

Derived from common sense, comedy, says Meredith, has its origins in a calm and tolerant humanity; never does the comic come from impatience, contempt, or narrow-mindedness. In addition, the view of the world that comedy presents is objective and realistic, with the aim of showing men how they behave "whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious,...fantastically delicate," or whenever they are "self-deceived or hoodwinked,...drifting into vanities... and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in sound reason, fair justice...." In order to ridicule these faults, the comic poet works within the society he describes and addresses men's intellects, showing them "the operation of the social world upon their character." In other words, Meredithian comedy is founded on reason and common sense, and has the purpose of ridiculing man's folly.

C. The Comic Character. From this idealistic basis, it follows
that the comic character, instead of being painted with "raw realism," should be generalized into a "permanently human" type. Instead of being highly individualized, the comic character should represent common human traits and faults. Idiosyncrasy, therefore, should not be depicted in all its peculiarity but should be modified to touch the general experience of society.

1. The Comic Heroine. Meredith gives special emphasis to the heroine of comedy, describing her as a "woman of the world, not necessarily heartless for being clear-sighted; "...they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot. Comedy is an exhibition of their battle with men and of men with them." Moreover, the comic poet, unlike the sentimentalist, dares to show men and women coming close together in social life and in their attitudes toward life.

2. The Comic Hero. Meredith sets down no specific pattern for the comic hero, as he does for the female counterpart. One may assume, however, that the hero should be capable of meeting the wit of the lady and should have enough sophistication to approach and join in the social life of the worldly heroine.

D. The Society of Comedy. Just as the nature of the comic character determines the nature of comedy, the type of society in which men and women live affects the material of the comic poet. Meredith believes that "A simply bourgeois circle will not furnish" adequate material for comedy, "for the middle class must have the brilliant, flippant, independent upper for a spur and a pattern." In its relations with and aspirations toward the brilliant, flippant
The middle class is the object of much comedy, for as Meredith explains, "...the middle class presents the public which, fighting the world, and with good footing in the fight, knows the world best.... Cultivated men and women who do not skim the cream of life, and are attached to the duties, yet escape the harsher blows, make acute and balanced observers." Thus, Meredith suggests, through their awkward, earnest efforts to hold or to advance their place in society, the middle class furnishes much material for comedy.

E. The Idealistic Basis of Comedy. In Meredith's theory, comedy should throw no infamous reflections on life but instead should be deeply conceived to expose folly and to vindicate common sense, rightness, and justice. Its wit, moreover, should further this vindication by admitting comic devices, like the pun, only when they have significance and interest. In addition, the moral of comedy should be at the heart of the organic structure, rather than constantly mouthed by one character or made to "hang like a tail." It should also be noted that Meredith's basis for comedy excludes farce as a comic element, for with its exaggerated physical action irrelevant to character, farce is "too gross for comedy."

The idealistic basis of comedy provides an explanation of the capacity of an audience to accept the deception to which a character of comedy is usually subject, without having that character appear a complete dupe: the unrealities of both plot and character are overcome by sympathy with the ideal. "The idealistic conception of comedy gives breadth and opportunity to comic genius, and helps to overcome the difficulties it creates." In addition, the idealistic nature of the comic poet's work appears "in the sharp light of that sudden
turn" which is so essential to comedy; for then "humanity is livelier than any realistic work can make it."\textsuperscript{18} It is this heightened liveliness which, according to Meredith, provides much of the pleasure of comedy.

F. The Language of Comedy. To carry out comedy's rational appeal and ridicule of folly, the language of comedy, like that required by the "Tractate" and by Dante, should be pure and simple; for such style allows the source of wit to be clear reason.\textsuperscript{19} Reason and common sense are always the Meredithian goal.

G. The Subjects of Comedy. Since the Meredithian goal of comedy is to vindicate common sense, it follows that certain subjects are especially suited to comic treatment, for example, self-deception, vanities, absurd policies, short-sighted planning, demented plotting\textsuperscript{20}—all of which violate sound reason. The advantage of comic treatment of such subjects is apparent if one compares the tediousness of arguing the foolishness of say a lecherous, old man to the effectiveness of comic presentation of the same. The one is likely to be pedantic and moralistic, the other to be a lively exhibition of human folly. Or to discuss the folly of being dull is almost to have the fault; but comedy can expose the error well. "The laying of a dull finger on matters of human life is the surest method of establishing electrical communications with a battery of laughter."\textsuperscript{21} From his discussion of folly as the especial subject of comedy, Meredith concludes that comic perception is a spirit giving aim to the powers of laughter, but warns that the spirit is not to be confused with the laughter.\textsuperscript{22}
Humor, Satire, and Comedy. Meredith makes some significant distinctions among humor, satire, and comedy. Humor plays with contrasts; it places two opposing natures side by side, often juxtaposes feelings and intellect, and sometimes results in a suggestion of the tragic. Humor may lack discretion and may be given to excessive sentimentality; that is, it has affection and pity for what it exposes. Satire is distinguished from humor in that satire is not so kindly, for it has the moral purpose of showing mankind its faults by "driving into the quivering sensibilities." Like humor, however, satire looks for the grotesque, and exposes man's ridiculousness under various social conditions. Finally, Meredith explains that comedy is differentiated from satire by being more humane, for the most part limiting its ridicule to man's pretentiousness. Comedy differs from humor in having a greater objectivity, presenting with subtlety and thought an "interpretation of the general mind. To understand and like comedy, you must have a sober liking of your kind and a sober estimate of our civilized qualities." The ultimate criterion of true comedy is whether it provokes "thoughtful laughter." By means of this laughter, the folly of pretentiousness, inflation, dullness, and the vestiges of rawness and grossness all are corrected. For Meredith comedy is the "ultimate civilizer, the polisher, the sweet cook."

Summary. Meredithian comedy may be said to grow out of an intellectually alive and cultivated society in which men and women enjoy some degree of social equality and have a comparatively similar view of life. Based on an appeal to reason and common sense, comedy has as its purpose the ridicule of folly: it exposes man when he
appears affected, pretentious, or vain. The vehicle for this vindication of reason is the comic character, who can best perform his function if he is typical rather than highly individualized; for as a type he can touch the general experience of society. The part of society that provides the greatest source of comic material is that of the middle class whose frequent aspirations to higher echelons render it foolish and whose strong foundation in, yet recurrent excursions from, common sense illuminates the idealistic basis of comedy. In addition, this basis requires, in the first place, that any comic device or moral be an intrinsic part, not an appendage, of comedy; and, in the second place, the basis excludes farcical action as too gross for comedy. From the idealistic basis it also follows that the language of comedy be simple and reasonable and that the subjects of comedy be found in man's excessive and foolish behavior.

Meredith goes on to differentiate comedy from humor and satire by explaining that humor has affection and pity for what it exposes, whereas satire is more harsh and moralistic. Comedy reserves its ridicule for man's pretentiousness, exposing it by subtly and objectively provoking "thoughtful laughter." It remains to be seen to what extent the Meredithian theory applies to the comic elements of the "Miller's Tale."
CHAPTER IV

THE ESSAY ON COMEDY AND THE "MILLER'S TALE"

A. Social Conditions for Comedy.

1. The Social Outlook of the Comic Poet. In Meredithian theory the social attitude of the comic poet is as important as that of the men and women for whom he writes. Chaucer's tolerant perception enables him to accept life with equanimity.

Ecstasy, exaltation, and inward illumination he seems not to have known, and he does not give. His was no casement opening on seas of perilous thought. His gaze was on this world, such as it is. It is to his praise that he saw so much of it and reported it so faithfully, its changes and chances, the curiosities of human behavior, while he stood back from its painful anxieties and tragic suffering with no desire to penetrate their dark recesses. Instead of 'Le monde, c'est terrible' he said 'Swich is this world'. It may be, it may well be, that his tolerance, his Laodiceanism reflects his personal unrest, his unwillingness to accept the violence and viciousness he could not help seeing, his protection against the climate in which he had to live. His gift was not for tragedy but for comedy, and one notes that he rarely handles subjects which are distressing or painful. What we learn from Chaucer is that men and women in his day had much the same foibles and follies as now, and within the range of fourteenth-century opportunity the same vices; whereby we can see ourselves more clearly.

Although one cannot state conclusively what attitudes Chaucer had toward life, Baum includes in the above paragraph much that is plausible in relation to Chaucer's poetry. At any rate, Chaucer is capable of the keen and objective observations which result in good poetry.

2. Intellectual Activity. As an almost lifelong member of the royal court, and as a poet who wrote for the approval of members of that court, Chaucer addressed what was undoubtedly the most
intellectually alert group in England. From the point of view of the present day, perhaps, or by absolute standards, this group may not seem strikingly intellectual; but by the standards of the fourteenth century, the group had reached a high level of intellectual development. To be sure, the medieval criterion for literacy was facility in reading and writing Latin; and the majority of the court group may not have possessed this facility. Reading and writing were, after all, occupations of clerks, not of warriors and courtiers. Nevertheless, many of these people could read and write English; and all of them habitually listened while poets read or recited. The fact that they were willing to listen to Chaucer read his poems is testimony to their intellectual alertness. "It was in such courts that the English language was formed as a literary tongue, quite apart from written literary work. Courts and castles were regular schools of manners."\(^2\) To such a group, the coarseness and gaucherie of the lower middle-class society depicted in the "Miller's Tale" would almost certainly have appeared foolish and laughable. As a matter of fact, it was in precisely this kind of group, in which people were intellectually alive and had leisure to appreciate diversion, that comedy (in the Meredithian sense) would have had a perfect opportunity to develop.

3. Equality of the Sexes. The question of the equality of the sexes in medieval society is debatable. First, academic learning was not often encouraged for women of any social class; but it is "probable that more of them could read and write than men, especially in the upper classes at the period of romances of adventure....Then, as now, the women were the main readers of romances and the main church goers."\(^3\) Also worthy of note is the fact that women could inherit property and
title; but they could not sit in parliament. A medieval woman, like the Wife of Bath, was not without spunk; for she could and would fight back if she felt abused. She was not a subdued slave, like a Turkish woman, even if she was subject to a husband's will and sometimes his beating. And as is often the case, the greatest freedom was within the highest and the lowest classes; nevertheless, overall there was enough give and take between men and women to allow their attitudes and actions, in relation to each other, to be a subject of comedy.

B. The Function of Comedy. Meredith's definition of the function of comedy as the ridicule of folly gives his theory broad application to the "Miller's Tale," especially to its principal male characters.

1. Nicholas. Nicholas is a clever clerk who allows his ability to "wax out of proportion" and to be "at variance with [his] profession." He uses his academic knowledge to the practical end of weather forecasting when he should occupy himself with more scholarly pursuits. Having convinced John of his astuteness as a weather prophet, Nicholas capitalizes on the carpenter's gullibility and his own cleverness to plan an assignation with Alisoun; and later, when Absolon comes to Alisoun's window on the night of the assignation, Nicholas drifts into vanity, as his desire to be clever causes him to act without common sense. The "vigilant comic" spirit displays Nicholas' folly, punishing him with physical pain and with the upsetting of his plan. Nicholas' folly is that of being "overblown" as he violates the "unwritten but perceptible laws..." that bind men "in consideration one to another."

2. Absolon. Absolon is the "natural prey of the comic" because he is "affected, pretentious,...fantastically delicate," and "self-
deceived\textsuperscript{8}; moreover, his courtliness violates common sense because it is not a natural manner of behavior for him or for his social class. He acts pretentiously in that he, a simple parish clerk, who should be interested in religious matters, tries to be a worldly lover; yet his effeminacy, his interest in sweet smells, his squeamishness suggest a delicacy unsuitable to parish clerk, man, or lover. Deceiving himself into believing that he is a fine courtly lover, capable of winning his lady, he is exposed in all his affectation by Alisoun, the exponent of common sense. The unpleasant kiss she grants him is a particularly appropriate punishment, for it is completely abhorrent to his squeamish nature.

3. John. Of the three male characters, John receives the most severe ridicule because his folly, ignorance, is so gross a violation of common sense. John goes to the extreme of placing his faith in ignorance and of regarding learning as a dangerous endeavor. Because of this faith, one imagines that Chaucer, apparently often engaged in bookish learning, might enjoy showing the folly of the carpenter's position. John's religious beliefs are based on the axiom

\begin{quote}
...blessed be alwey a lewed man
That nought but oonly his bileve kan.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

But "his bileve" is more a faith in ignorance than a faith in God; for his knowledge of God and religious teaching is foolishly small, as witnessed by his acceptance of Nicholas' feigned vision of the flood and his plans to prepare for it. Moreover, John redoubles his folly when he continues to believe in the flood after his fall from the loft.

With the three male characters, then, Chaucer uses comedy in the Meredithian sense; that is, to exhibit Nicholas' excessive assuredness,
Absolon's fantastic delicacy, and John's extreme dullness.

C. The Comic Character. Meredith requires that comedy present an objective and realistic view of life, but he does not believe that the ideal comic character should be painted with what he calls "raw realism." By this he means that the comic character should be a general type displaying the manners of the age, not a highly individualized personality, since the idiosyncratic cannot be "permanently human."\(^{10}\)

1. The Miller. Chaucer's comic characters in part contradict and in part accord with the Meredithian theory. Chaucer describes the Miller as a typically coarse, crude fellow who, as one would expect from a person of his nature, swears, drinks, and is dishonest; yet at the same time, the poet makes a special effort to establish the character as not just any coarse person, but as Robin, the miller with a large wart on his nose, who plays the bagpipes, and who beats down doors with his head. Curry points out, however, that the Miller follows a physiognomic type, having a close correspondence between personal appearance and character, which at the same time detracts "nothing from the lifelike qualities...rendering them vivid, natural, and significant to anyone with the medieval point of view."\(^{11}\) In other words, though the combination of traits that Chaucer presents in the Miller is not "permanently human" in the sense that one is often likely to meet such a person, Chaucer has taken idiosyncrasies from certain medieval physiognomic principles and, having been wise in choice and sure in pen, makes the character more than a mere type. In effect, with the Miller, Chaucer takes the idiosyncratic and makes it "permanently human" through his creation of a lifelike, memorable character.
2. The Characters of the "Tale". The characters of the "Tale" itself conform more closely than does the Miller to Meredith's theory. John, for example, is a typical old fool who has unwisely married a young and pretty wife, while Absolon is the amorous parish clerk, often presented in fabliaux; Nicholas is the eternal sophomore, having more wit than wisdom, eager to love and willing to trick. Although Chaucer describes these characters in such vivid detail that one is "sometimes betrayed into mistaking the image for the flesh," they do not have the highly individualized quality, the "raw realism" of the Miller.

3. The Comic Heroine. Meredith describes the ideal heroine as a "woman of the world, not necessarily heartless for being clear-sighted." One may say of Alisoun that she is not worldly in the sense of being well acquainted with the upper class, but she is at home with and knows her own social stratum. Her clear-sightedness is suggested by her apparent motive in marrying John (Chaucer states that John is rich and old), for she subordinates love to wealth in order to enjoy its material advantages. In her favor is the fact that she is not the instigator of the plot against John, even though she is the willing follower. As Brewer points out, "Alisoun is not simply the type of a lustful and unfaithful wife. Chaucer avoids the mistake of the analogues. One analogue makes her a prostitute. This loses all the comic capital of the deceived husband and the need for secrecy. In another analogue she intends to receive three lovers in succession, which degrades a story that in any case is necessarily poised on a precipice above a slough of mere grossness." Although the kiss Alisoun grants Absolon is gross, her character generally is not so coarse; as a rule she is only a lively young wench, more ready to
satisfy physical desire than to be old John's devoted wife.

Speaking of the comic heroine as a woman who uses her wits, and who is "not a wandering vessel crying for a captain or a pilot," Meredith suggests his dislike of the weak, clinging women, lacking in common sense, who appear in much of the fiction of the nineteenth century. Moreover, he objects to the heroine who is "the pretty idiot, the passive beauty, the adorable bundle of caprices, very feminine, very sympathetic...." In the "Taley" Alisoun is a woman with some wit and much common sense as well as physical appeal, who uses her faculties to get what she wants without caprice or clinging. She is not idiotic or passive in her first encounter with Nicholas, for she meets his direct approach with an equally direct, but purposely temporary, rebuke. She jumps away from his grasp "as a colt doth in the trave..."

She seyde, I wol nat kiss thee, by my feyl
Do wey youre handes for your courteisye!

Alisoun gets results, for Nicholas softens his approach, and she in turn responds accordingly. Her common sense tells her to be cautious because her husband is jealous and watches her carefully; therefore, she advises her lover to "wayte wel and been privie." Alisoun shows common sense, likewise, in her choice of a lover, for if her love is to be illicit, she is wise, for the sake of convenience, to love the "nye slye" Nicholas rather than the "ferre" Absolon, despite all the latter's attempts to win her in a courtly manner.

In discouraging Absolon with the misplaced kiss, Alisoun uses her wits, perhaps too well, when her annoyance and disgust at his affected courtliness cause her to reject him. But as her rejection
of Absolon is not ladylike, her acceptance of Nicholas also lacks the usual feminine coyness and meditativeness. As Stevenson explains, "The women of the fabliaux do not deny their lovers after the fashion of St. Cecilia and are not slow and cautious in accepting them as was Criseyde. Indeed, the way in which the husband shall be fooled is the only restraint upon lust. Alisoun's husband...is made to believe that a second flood is coming, and his preparations for the event keep him out of the way." Alisoun favors Nicholas, if for no other reason, for his removal, by his carefully made plan, of the one restraint upon lust.

Alisoun's common sense, clear-sightedness, and ability to get what she wants in the world all conform to the Meredithian pattern for the comic heroine. Also in accord with the comic theory are John, Absolon, and Nicholas, for they display both the manners of their age and the kind of foolishness that is permanently human. Although the Miller, the teller of the "Tale," has many of the characteristics of a typical coarse fellow, Chaucer combines these traits in a way that is more peculiar and individualized than the Meredithian theory allows.

D. Comedy as a Battle of the Sexes. Suggesting that comedy is an exhibition of the battle of the sexes, Meredith might certainly find support for his theory in the "Miller's Tale." In the first place, Alisoun is shown in conflict with her unsuitable husband, with an unwanted suitor, and with her accepted lover. In addition, as the object of three men's passion, she brings about conflict among the men and exposes the folly of their efforts. At the outset, Nicholas forms plans to trick John. Then, wanting to court Alisoun, Absolon
is eager to learn and take advantage of the possibility that John may be out of town, but the situation does not have the outcome that the parish clerk desired. Absolon, however, revenges himself unintentionally on Nicholas when the latter tries to get Absolon to repeat the coarse kiss. Jealous, but desiring to harm no one, John has a sincere interest in Alisoun's welfare when he hears of the coming flood; but his solicitude only brings his downfall and injury. While the men foolishly work against and punish one another in Alisoun's name, she uses common sense and avoids involvement in the battles she provokes. "Only Alisoun, whose distinctions are physical and whose responses uncomplicated, who represents in effect the feminine ideal in the Miller's world, is at the end unscathed." 20

E. Social Relations of Men and Women in Comedy. Comedy shows men and women working against one another, but at the same time, the comic poet allows men and women to appear close together in social life and in their impressions of life; thus, "when they draw together in social life their minds grow liker." 21 Nicholas and Alisoun illustrate this idea clearly. Both characters are young, irresponsible, interested in satisfying physical desire; and their similar outlook on life allows them to unite in plotting first against John and then against Absolon. At the same time, Absolon and John are also like their adversaries in their common desire for physical gratification. The "Tale" may then be said to support the theory that comedy shows men and women in battle against each other; but, one might add, in this tale both sexes fight for essentially the same cause.

The close social life of men and women in the "Miller's Tale" becomes especially apparent in contrast to their relationships in the
"Knight's Tale." Emily, of the "Knight's Tale," has almost no social interaction with either of her suitors, for she lives exclusively in the world of the chaste gentle lady, while they live in the world of fighting and chivalry. Paradoxically, as the knights prepare to fight even to the death to decide who shall win her love, she prays to remain chaste. Comedy, in contrast, tends to break down the isolating walls of formality and convention that cause men and women to adopt different and conflicting views of life.

F. Social Conventions in Comedy. Developing the theory that conventions of society provide the comic poet with much of his material, Meredith suggests that the habits peculiar to the upper class become comic when practiced by the middle class. As the "Miller's Tale" illustrates, when the practices of courtly love are placed in the milieu of the bourgeoisie, the gentility which would otherwise camouflage some of the baser aspects of the convention is neglected, and as a result the foolish artificiality is exposed. It is for this reason that the characters of the "Tale" make "acute and balanced observers," for they are of the middle class and are persons with a vigorous hold on life, who participate in the duties yet, for the most part, escape the worst burdens, and who through their aspirations show up both their own foolishness and that of their social betters.

G. Idealistic Observations of Comedy. For Meredith the observations of the comic point of view are aimed at exposing folly and should neither arise from mere frivolity nor cast base reflections on life. Applying this principle to the "Tale," one sees that the poem ridicules
a foolish carpenter and satirizes the courtly poses of lovers in a common love triangle, thereby exposing their folly. The Miller himself, however, finds comedy in base aspects of life, in cuckoldry and coarse behavior, of which Meredith does not approve. The observations of the "Tale" may be considered "idealistic" in the Meredithian sense insofar as they point out the folly of illicit love; but Chaucer's own statement, "men shal nat maken earnest of game," should be kept in mind, for it suggests that the "Tale" is intended to produce laughter, not to teach a lesson. "A story such as this has to be told without forcing us back on our normal moral feelings. Adultery in real life is too much a cause of suffering and evil."\(^2\) The very subject matter of the "Tale" suggests that it is intended more to tell a good story than to expose folly or to warn against it.

1. **Poetic Economy.** If the "Tale" does not have the idealistic basis which Meredith recommends, it does have the economy and unity that the theorist requires of comedy. For example, the only apparent pun in the "Tale," "An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf/ Of Goddes pryveete, nor of his wyf" (discussed in Chapter II of this work), has significance both in relation to the speaker's character and in relation to his tale. Moreover, the moral of the story does not "hang like a tail;"\(^2\) rather it is implicit and so commonplace that one can easily ignore it. Its essence is that in love there is much folly, and its proof is shown in the quick listing of punishments suffered by the three foolish lovers.

2. **The Idealistic Basis and Comic Sympathy.** In attempting to explain how the idealistic basis of comedy can overcome unrealities of plot and character, Meredith assumes that the audience will be
sympathetic, and consequently ready to accept unrealities, if the comedy vindicates rightness and justice. Chaucer renders the fantastic situation in the "Tale" credible by making John, the brunt of the joke, a stupid character. Also, it is the tight control that Chaucer has over the characters and plot that allows John to be deceived at every turn, without appearing unreal or pitiable in his stupidity. The poet's technique is to maintain a limited view of character and situation. "We must not consider the husband too sympathetically. If he, especially, of all the characters is intimately realized, the comedy will become tragedy. This kind of comedy depends on limitation of view, and all the characters are carefully controlled."^25

The plot, too, is based on the improbable, but at the same time is controlled to gain the audience's acceptance. In the dénouement, for example, the timing and sequence of events are more perfect than one expects in reality; but Chaucer has carefully prepared for the conclusion by including a multitude of details about the physical surroundings and the time of events, all of which lend an illusion of reality to the improbable. We find in Chaucer a demonstration of Meredith's idea that the poet's power is seen "in the sharp light of that sudden turn,"^26—a dénouement that shows in a moment the interlocking and the outcome of the characters' efforts, and makes character appear at its liveliest.

While the suddenness of the "Tale's" dénouement may serve to illustrate the Meredithian principle of poetic power, at the same time the turn displays the farcical action which the theorist considers "too gross for comedy." Meredith would doubtless accept the plot and characters of the "Tale" as praiseworthy up to the incident of the
branding; but in this incident the action turns to farce—coarse and exaggerated physical action of a kind that could not be admitted to polite Victorian society. Moreover, the conclusion neither avoids casting some base reflections on life, nor presents a fair or complete vindication of rightness and justice. Therefore one may conclude that the "Tale" accords with the Meredithian theory of comic sympathy insofar as it laughs at folly, abides by poetic economy, and to a small extent vindicates justice. But when it admits farcical action, coarse behavior, and base attitudes, the "Tale" loses the idealistic basis Meredith assigns to comedy.

H. Language of Comedy. The Meredithian principle of comic sympathy involves also the language of comedy; for the diction must not only be pure and simple, but also show good breeding. In addition, Meredith condemns diction that is obviously or artificially made comic. As a result, he says that good comic language is like a "running brook, with innumerable fresh lights on it at every turn of the wood through which its business is to find a way. It does not run in search of obstructions, to be noisy over....Without effort, and with no dazzling flashes of achievement, it is full of healing, the wit of good breeding, the wit of wisdom." 27

Although one would have difficulty proving that the "Tale" throughout has the wit of good breeding and wisdom, the language has the virtues of subtlety and of wit with significance. Included in the previous chapter of this work is a discussion of how in the "Tale" Chaucer parodies the vernacular convention to make what Donaldson calls "a criticism of standard English poetic diction." 28 Like Meredith,
Chaucer apparently considers hackneyed, stylized language worthy only of parody. Moreover, in the language of the "Tale," one is never aware of the poet's "search of obstructions, to be noisy over," for the diction is effortlessly comic.

I. Subjects of Comedy. Meredith states that there are subjects which can be treated much more effectively in comedy than in any kind of serious presentation, and that these pertain primarily to man's foolish behavior, as for example, the foolishness that can be part of old age. In the "Tale" this folly is exemplified by John who is old yet inappropriately passionate. His lack of wisdom in marrying a young girl could be argued seriously (as Chaucer says Cato has done), but as the "Tale" itself illustrates, comic treatment of the subject renders it far more vivid and lively. Another subject Meredith considers excellent for comedy, dullness, is also illustrated in the character of John, who because he is dull can accept Nicholas' story of the flood. (Dullness will be mentioned later in relation to Bergson's idea that unawareness is a cause of comedy.)

J. Laughter and Comic Perception. Discussing the suitable subjects of comedy, Meredith differentiates between laughter and comic perception. Laughter is the undiscriminating and unrestrained response to any part of life that strikes one as amusing, whereas comic perception has behind it the standard of the ideal which gives laughter a corrective function. To illustrate, the Miller's response to the love triangle he describes would be simply unrestrained laughter, but a person with greater acumen can see more than a licentious situation. Chaucer, for example, sees the folly of imitating one's betters by the
use of worn-out phrases and over-stylized manners. It is this perception that allows him to satirize and perhaps ultimately to effect change in the language and manners.

K. Humor, Satire, and Comedy. As Meredith defines humor, satire, and comedy, the "Miller's Tale" fits, for the most part, into the last category. The emphasis in humor is the bringing together of feelings and intellect, and the "Tale" avoids both of these to show instead action and situation. Satire, says Meredith, penetrates deeply and harshly into man's faults and idiosyncrasies; Chaucer's satire, not harsh, is closer to burlesque than serious satire. It is readily apparent that Chaucer might have written a severe satire of bawdry, displaying the immorality of the characters and their actions. As the pivot of the "Tale's" action, Alisoun would have been an especially good target for satire, but Chaucer does not satirize her in any way, not "for her morals or anything else."30

The "Tale," does include some elements of satire (as Meredith defines the term) in the depiction of an exaggerated fault to point up man's ridiculousness in various social situations. In Chapter II the descriptions of Alisoun and Absolon and of the two suitors' approach to love make a parody of popular tales of romance and thereby subject romance to the "harsh, naturalistic criticism of the fabliau."31 The motivation for the satire lies in the fact that by the fourteenth century the minstrel's romance had become an accumulation of hackneyed and redundant detail—current absurdities of which Chaucer makes fun.32 In addition, the "Tale" satirizes the manners of courtliness in showing, for example, how Absolon, knowing that a good courtly lover must stay up all night wooing his lady, prepares for his night's activities by
planning in the daytime to "slepe an hour or tweye". A further
illustration is in the tradition that the lover must lose his appetite
as a symptom of his condition. Trcilus, for example, is described in
the initial throes of love, suffering from loss of appetite and sleep:
"And fro this forth tho reft hym love of slep,/ And make his mete his
foo...." Though Absolon

Hath in his herte swich a love-longynge
That of no wyf took he noon offrynge—
he feels no need to do without sleep and food. Also worthy of note
in the above couplet is its anticlimactic effect which reinforces the
burlesque of the convention.

As Chapter II of this work has shown, courtliness is subject to
further burlesque treatment through the character of Nicholas, who
mouths some of the expressions of courtly love, but whose approach
to love is far too rough and precipitous to be in keepin with the
code. It is for this reason that Muscatine suggests that "The court-
liness in the 'Miller's Tale' is never given full traditional value.
It is never a norm, always an idiosyncrasy." Another object of satire is gullible John, for his ignorance is
exaggerated and made foolish without the kindliness that Meredith
requires of comedy. Many small incidents in the "Tale" are made to
play on his ignorant faith and lead him to his fall, as for example,
his having recently seen a body being taken to church serves to strong-
then his fear that some ill has befallen Nicholas. In addition, John's
use of the night-spell and his poor knowledge of the Noah story display
the superstitious ignorance that makes him foolishly gullible and allows
him to have an unwavering belief in the imminence of the flood. According to Meredithian theory, this kind of exaggeration of a fault is satire; Chaucer's use of satire, however, is in the service of fun and is not the "moral agent" that Meredith requires it to be.

One may conclude, then, that the "Miller's Tale" is comedy, as Meredith defines the term, in displaying man as foolish when he acts pretentiously: Absolon affects courtliness, Nicholas has too much confidence in his own cleverness, John relies on ignorance. Moreover, Meredith describes comedy as impersonal; and though in the "Miller's Prologue" and the "Tale" Chaucer becomes enthusiastic, he never lacks objectivity as he exposes the folly of his own class as well as that of classes above and below him.

L. The Comic Poet As Philosopher. Meredith's ultimate criterion for true comedy is whether it provokes "thoughtful laughter;" thus, for him the philosopher and the comic poet see life similarly and are equally unpopular with those who wish to view life uncritically. The comedy of the "Miller's Tale" may be said to expose the folly of dullness with "thoughtful laughter." Essential to the "Tale," rawness and grossness are not so much exposed as they are used to provoke a hearty laugh. Nor is the "Tale" intended as the "ultimate civilizer, the polisher, the sweet cook"; in fact, in going from the "Knight's Tale" to the "Miller's," Chaucer seems to turn deliberately from "'sentence' to 'solas,' from art in the service of serious conviction to art in the service of fun. The plot of the 'Miller's Tale' is as fantastic as that of any romance, but Chaucer as usual brings the characters to life and makes the setting realistic. The difference
from, say, the 'Troilus' is that 'matter,' or plot, and presentation are at one, and that there is not even mock 'sentence'.... In the 'Miller's Prologue' the poet warns that "men shal nat maken ernest of game," and Baum offers a reason for this attitude: "Life is filled with a certain gaiety, even foolish gaiety, if we will only take it so and not always look on the serious side. This attitude colors all the bawdy tales of the Canterbury Pilgrims...." While Meredith allows life's foolish gaiety, he does not sanction the "realistic exhibition of a vulgar society" like that seen in the end of the "Tale"; for such bawdry was not acceptable to polite Victorian society.

Conclusion. In its principle that comedy is the ridicule of folly, the Essay on Comedy has broad application to the "Miller's Tale," for both plot and character in the poem display man's foolishness. The love triangle of the plot suggests the folly of love's indiscretions, while the pretentiousness of each of the characters subjects him to ridicule. Moreover, the characters follow the Meredithian pattern in that they are more typical than they are highly individualized; and as heroine, Alisoun, too, may be said to conform closely to Meredith's ideal. A character in the Canterbury pilgrimage, the Miller is more particularized than he is a type, and his idiosyncrasies are so well integrated that they combine to make a memorable, lifelike character.

The "Tale" supports Meredith's idea that comedy is a battle of the sexes as the two clerks trick and are tricked by each other and by Alisoun. In addition, the life of the men and women in the "Tale" has the close social interaction and outlook that Meredith demands.
more in comedy than elsewhere. The social conventions of men and women of various social classes provide much of the material of comedy, especially when, as in the "Tale," the middle class is shown in its imitation of the nobility.

Having as its purpose the ridicule of folly, comedy has for Meredith an idealistic basis which excludes base observations, superfluous devices, and farcical action. While the "Tale" exemplifies fine poetic economy in diction, plotting, and character, it does show some base reflections of life and concludes with a lively scene of farce. Some of the subjects treated in the "Tale"—old age, dullness, pretentiousness—are, however, within the Meredithian theory, as is Chaucer's ridicule of hackneyed romance traditions.

As Meredith defines the terms humor, satire, and comedy, the "Tale" may be said for the most part to be comedy with some satire. That satire is not the harsh, moralistic kind Meredith describes, but is instead the burlesque of foolish, hackneyed conventions.

The goal of Meredithian comedy is to achieve the urbanity that provokes "thoughtful laughter." Although the comedy of the "Tale" has a certain urbanity in that one needs knowledge of the courtly conventions for a full appreciation, and it has appeal to the mind rather than the emotions, it has none of the "sentence" (to apply a medieval word) that the term "thoughtful laughter" can suggest. Moreover, by including bawdry, coarseness, and farce, the "Tale's" comedy is not intended as the "ultimate civilizer, the polisher," that provokes "volleys of silvery laughter," but is instead the jocose comedy of the loud guffaw and the hearty laugh.
CHAPTER V
BERGSON'S LAUGHTER

A. The Function of Comedy. In his essay Laughter (1900) Henri Bergson, like Meredith, protests against the stiffness and sameness that the social conventions of an industrial culture seem to impose on life; and both authors are concerned with the comedy of manners, the kind of comedy they believe can upset this monotony of outlook. As Bergson puts it, man in an industrial society loses his "vital impulses," his individuality, when he becomes appended to a machine. Thus, where Meredith has comedy expose man's folly, Bergson suggests that laughter, or rather comedy, shows man that ready-made gestures and values impose an all too automatic, mechanical, clock-work arrangement on life, even though life's everchanging aspects demand a high degree of adaptability on the part of man. Arousing man when his ability to adapt has become lost in the mechanics of society, laughter, then, is for Bergson a social gesture intended to make man recognize and use the "vital impulses" necessary for a rich life. Bergson stresses in particular two aspects of laughter: first, laughter requires an absence of feeling; and second, laughter appeals to the intelligence alone.

1. Laughter: The Absence of Feeling. In his effort to show that comedy as a social gesture necessitates the absence of feeling, Bergson says that laughter arises in the indifferent and disinterested, and that "laughter has no greater foe than emotion. I do
not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with
pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we
must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose
silence upon our pity." It appears, then, that the laughing res-
response to a person or situation momentarily excludes an emotional or
sympathetic response; moreover, from this idea follows Bergson's
theory, essentially like Meredith's, that the appeal of comedy is
to pure reason and intelligence.

2. The Appeal of Comedy to Reason. Bergson seeks to explain
the relationship of intelligence and the comic by suggesting that
life and society require man to maintain a "constantly alert attention
that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with
a certain elasticity of mind and body," which enables him to adapt
to ever-changing situations. Lack of elasticity or of adaptability
is a denial of reason, which manifests itself in absentmindedness,
physical obstinacy, rigidity of senses and intellect, deviation
from the usual mental state, or the presence of imaginings. Moreover,
all these states reflect a response to life that is automatic rather
than vital, mechanical rather than rational.

3. Comic Vice. Out of this rigidity of intellect, this
inability to adapt, comes comic vice, for the vice from which comedy
arises is not deep within the soul of the character, as is a tragic
vice; instead the vice "is brought from without, like a ready-made
frame....It lends its own rigidity instead of borrowing...flexibility." Whether in actual life or in comedy, the fault of inadaptability of
mind and body is not, says Bergson, a moral sin, but an eccentricity
into which the slightly unconscious man has slipped unaware and
which, as a ready-made social frame, tends to simplify his character. Though vice in comedy is intimately associated with the characters, it maintains its independent existence, dragging them down or pulling them by strings as though the characters were puppets. In addition, the predominance of vice is related to the artistry of comedy, for "the art of the comic poet consists in making us so well acquainted with the particular vice...that in the end we get hold of some of the strings of the marionette...and actually work them ourselves; this it is that explains part of the pleasure we feel."  

4. Automatism. Automatism, another aspect of mental and physical inadaptability, is laughable in its close relationship to absentmindedness and to the puppet quality, for a character is comic in proportion to his own ignorance and unawareness of himself. When a character displays automatism in any of its forms, laughter, the "social gesture," corrects his manners, rigidity, eccentricity.

5. The Comic Element in Forms and Movement. Comic rigidity reflects itself in both mind and body but has a special application to bodily forms and movement. In his discussion of the comic element in forms and in movements, Bergson explains that a potentially comic deformity is one that a normal person could successfully imitate, for through the imitation the normal person enjoys the pleasure, mentioned earlier, of seeming to control the puppet-like actions of the comic character. Deformity, moreover, is closely related to physical rigidity in that the comic expression can show no other form but is molded into a permanent grimace. The comic deformity, it should be added, does not imply ugliness so much as it indicates inelasticity and physical obstinacy.
a. **Movement.** Bergson explains the comic in movement by the principle that the human body in motion is "laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine." In addition, the suggestion of mechanism is both clear and subtle, consisting in an illusionary glimpse of a machine working inside a person, denying him the power of his own individual vitality and intellect.

b. **Imitation of Gestures.** Another aspect of movement that is laughable is the imitation of gestures, for such imitation exposes the automatism that the mimicked person has in his being. Imitation of gestures is especially laughable if the movements are those of an ordinary activity, such as sawing wood or ringing a bell, since the simplicity of the movement makes the mechanical quality frankly evident and all the more laughable.

c. **Repetition.** Repetitious motion is an important part of comedy and is laughable, Bergson suggests, because life should not repeat itself. Therefore, two identical faces, two like series of events, or two closely similar speeches imply that life is mechanical or imposed on by the uniformity of automation, and is consequently a cause of comedy.

6. **Sources of the Comic.** Bergson's discussion of the relationship between mechanical, puppet-like appearance and thought is summarized in the statement that comic art consists in the presentation of "an obvious clockwork arrangement of human events, while carefully preserving an outward aspect of probability and thereby retaining something of the suppleness of life." The comical is therefore "something mechanical encrusted on the living." According to Bergson, the comic is not, as has often been suggested, the result
of surprise or contrast, for the surprise only brings to the attention what is comic. Man has forms imposed on him by society; nature is often tampered with and altered by these forms; and it is the resulting contrast between man as he essentially is and man as the machine society makes him that makes for comedy. The actual source of laughter is the mechanics of society imposed on the living man, not one's surprise at suddenly discovering the contrast; the surprise is merely the outward expression of the discovery.

   a. Physical Suppressing Spiritual. Another source of the comic which has its roots in the unnatural or mechanical response to life is any incident that calls attention to the physical aspect of a person when a spiritual quality is involved. This confusion of mind and spirit may take several forms, one of which is that a person may appear embarrassed by his body and, as a result, unintentionally cause the body to take precedence over the soul. Or the manner of action in a situation may be made more important than the matter. By this technique the comic poet often ridicules a profession, as, for example, when a lawyer shows little concern for justice but is preoccupied with the formalities and outward appearances of his profession. Thus, by contrasting what is ridiculous professionally or spiritually with something that is ridiculous physically, the comic poet establishes a relationship between physical defect and moral infirmity. The infirmity, it should be stressed, is usually not a deep fault but, like the comic vice, is instead a lack of social awareness, an eccentricity from automatism.

   b. Comedy of the Mechanical Person. Another source of the comedy of mechanized life is in the person who, because of his
unthinking actions, gives the impression of being a thing. As in the previous sources of comedy, here the person is laughable because he lacks the elasticity of mind and spirit that society requires of him as a human being and seems reduced to a mere object.

B. Comedy in Situations. To explain the comedy in situations, Bergson generalizes his theory of the comedy of form and movement, that is, laughter arising from the mechanical imposed upon the living. He says that "any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives... the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement," as, for example, when an idea is expressed, repressed, and expressed again like a Jack-in-the-box. Or a situation is comic when a character believes he is acting in it freely, though from the audience's point of view he is only a puppet controlled externally.

In his analysis of the comic situation, Bergson concludes that the difference between a serious and comic situation is that in the former man's will is free, whereas in the latter the freedom is only an illusion which barely hides the strings that pull the puppet-like character.

The Action of Comedy. The action of comedy again illustrates the mechanical quality that can be imposed on life, for the course of comic action seems either obviously predetermined or controlled from without. An analogy can be made to a snowball gathering momentum and size as it progresses to its end, for the details of the comic situation all come into the central controlling plot and rush headlong to a final collapse. The action may also take a different, perhaps even more amusing course, if the movement of events is
reversible or circular. These types of action display a kind of absentmindedness on the part of life, as if events were not mindful of their course.\textsuperscript{15}

2. \textbf{Elements in the Comic Situation}. Within the total action of comedy are contained the individual situations, which may derive their comic quality from various sources. Three elements that Bergson describes as contributing to the comic situation are repetition of events, inversions, and "reciprocal interference of series."\textsuperscript{16} The first, repetition, is easily understood by its mechanical quality, the simple repeating of an act or situation. Inversion usually implies a reversal of roles, as, for example, when the child teaches the parent, or the young prove wiser than the old. The third element, "reciprocal interference of series," involves a situation that "belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time."\textsuperscript{17} Reciprocal interference occurs when two characters, or a character and the audience, give very different meanings to the same situation or piece of information, or when a situation is at once applicable to animal and human life, ancient and modern events, or humble and noble actions. The dual interpretations, seen simultaneously or one at a time, and dependent on point of view, make for comedy.

\textbf{C. Comic Diction}. Although the comic elements in situation contribute much to the basic material of comedy, it is with words that the comic poet can display his art. The poet's use of words as a comic element, (his wit) "is the gift for dashing off comic
scenes in a few strokes—dashing them off, however, so subtly, so delicately, and rapidly, that all is over as soon as we begin to notice them."18 To analyse how the poet makes his strokes subtle and delicate is difficult, but the direction and effects of these strokes can be examined and stated comparatively simply. Describing one kind of comic diction, Bergson says that "a comic meaning is invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase-form."19 The comedy is caused by the circumstance that the person making such an utterance displays automatism in his insistence on fitting together what belongs apart. A second kind of comic diction results when the poet makes a character take literally what is meant figuratively, for this use of words reflects the character's rigidity of mind and his unawareness of circumstances. Related to these two forms of wit is the technique of transposing solemn language to a familiar usage, and vice versa. In fact, Bergson suggests that "A comic effect is always obtainable by transposing the natural expression of an idea into another key,"20 whether it be to degrade (parody), elevate, or exaggerate. As in the two previous techniques, this last provides comedy through the fitting together of unrelated ideas so as to reveal the character's automatism, rigidity, and absentmindedness.

D. The Comic Character. Consistent with his presentation of vice, form, situation, and diction, Bergson's analysis of the comic character follows his basic principle that mechanical rigidity gives rise to the comic. Showing that comedy grows out of the character's superficial appearance and takes little interest in the deeper
personality, Bergson reinforces the idea, stated earlier, that comedy is an absence of feeling. The comical individual, automatically going his own way without regard to society or his fellow beings, seems to show little feeling, which appearance allows the audience to view him without compassion. His display of absentmindedness, moreover, causes the audience to laugh. Neither the comic poet nor the audience place his faults under moral scrutiny, but instead observe him to correct his unsociability; the extremely moral person may, in fact, be comic because his zeal implies the rigidity and unsociability that render him a subject of laughter. On the other hand, vice in a character may also be comic as long as the fault does not arouse one's feeling. The poet achieves this absence of feeling in the audience by isolating the emotions within the soul of the character in a way that renders any emotional display unrelated to his acts and thereby makes any feeling seem inappropriate and shallow. That is, the character's emotion is manifested only in puppet-like movements, with the effect that he passes close to real feelings without touching them, without being touched, and without even being aware of his proximity. Again, this apparent lack of awareness of his own and society's deeper essence makes for comedy.

1. **Gestures.** In dramatic art the mental state of a character is projected into actions which allow one to see the nature of a character's mind, for, as Aristotle explains, actions are the measure of men's minds. Comedy is interested not in the inner workings of the mind but only in superficial appearances. Therefore, in order to keep the emphasis away from the actions (as the operations of the mind), comedy makes use of gestures: attitudes, move-
ments, language. The primary difference between action and gesture is that the former is intentional and engages the entire person, while the latter is unconscious, habitual, or instinctive. Whether a character is morally good or bad is not important in comedy, for his unsociability, rather than his mental or moral state, makes him comic. Moreover, the seriousness of the situation of comedy does not matter so long as the poet concentrates on the machinery of life instead of the morals, and thereby avoids arousing the spectator's emotions. In summary, one may say that in comedy there must be unsociability in the characters and insensibility in the audience.

2. Automatism in Character. Another essential part of the comic character, related to his unsociability, is automatism. His automatism takes the form of an absentmindedness which causes him to overlook some aspect of his nature, for example, his gullibility or his affectation. In doing so, he takes on a ready-made appearance and becomes typified by the peculiar characteristic of which he is unaware.

Comedy's depiction of typical characters has relevance to a basic difference in the effects of comic and non-comic art. The latter often presents a truth which is universal but which may not be apprehended directly, while, in contrast, comedy presents its generalities directly. Comedy depicts characters one has already met, presents types, and even creates new types where they are needed. Whereas the poet, say, of tragedy gets his material from the study of his and other men's souls, the comic poet's observation is outward and external, with the result that the characters he creates represent generalities and are automatically responding types.
3. The Ideal Comic Character. From his analysis Bergson concludes that the ideal comic character has its origin deep within the human make-up but manifests itself only superficially and idiosyncratically. The character's idiosyncrasy, moreover, is invisible to the actual owner but visible to others, with the result that the character appears rigid and unsociable. He is unsociable primarily because he looks after his own interests, and though a part of society, becomes, in his unawareness of himself and of his surroundings, insufferable to society. Bergson suggests that the comic personality is capable of being tacked on to all vices and many virtues and that all the comic qualities are summarized in one human failing—vanity. Like Meredith, Bergson considers it the province of comedy to correct the failing with laughter.

E. The Source of Comic Rigidity. Bergson attempts to get at the roots of comic rigidity, which he sees as a component of vanity, by suggesting that many comic situations may be described as "a character following up his one idea," despite recurrent interruption. The vanity in such action is apparent, for the character thinks so highly of his endeavor that he continues in it even when society would have him know it is somehow inappropriate. Bergson equates the absurdity which results from the character's persistence to that experienced in dreams, wherein the real and the impossible blend in an illusion.

Summary. Comedy is to be found in the automatism established in life, for life demands incessant change. Moreover, society can survive only if men are sufficiently flexible to adjust to each other.
Hence laughter is a **social corrective** which condemns and seeks to reform the comic figure.

In addition, Bergsonian comedy requires an absence of feeling, appealing to the intelligence alone. Directed at arousing man when he lapses into unawareness or shows a lack of flexibility, comedy seeks to restore man to the vital impulses which enable him to lead a rich life. Whenever man denies or fails to recognize his essential being, he exhibits comic vice. In comedy vice appears to be externally imposed rather than internally rooted, and the vice controls the characters by making them unadaptable and automatic in behavior.

Bergson generalizes the character's automatic behavior to explain the comedy of form and movement, wherein imitation and repetition are comic because they suggest mechanism. This imposition of something mechanical on the living being is for Bergson the essence of comedy; and the art of the comic poet displays this mechanical quality of some men. The poet of comedy can point out the contrast between the essential man and the mechanical man by creating characters who concentrate on physical matters when they should be concerned with matters of the mind, or who are so mechanized that they appear to be mere things.

Comic situations and actions also have this combination of life-like appearance and mechanical arrangement which (as with the comic vice) is externally controlled. Through repetition of events, reversal of roles, and "reciprocal interference of series" the action in situations becomes comic.

Comic diction also reflects unawareness and inadaptability; that
is, an absurd idea may be put into a well-accepted form, a figurative meaning may be taken literally, or solemn language may be used in an undignified context—all of which reflect rigidity and absent-mindedness.

The comic character is lacking in both self-awareness and the ability or desire to adapt in changing situations. His rigidity manifests itself in automatic gestures and in unsociable behavior and has its roots in the all-inclusive human failing of vanity. Moreover, because of vanity, the character will persist in an endeavor even after recurrent interruptions should have made him aware of its absurdity. His persistence, nevertheless, only heightens the illusion of the machine at work in the living being, which illusion is the cause of laughter.

Bergson himself admits the difficulties in attempting to derive every comic effect from one formula, which in his theory is "something mechanical encrusted on the living." Yet this student is in agreement with a recent commentator on the Bergsonian theory who states that "It is astonishing how many aspects of comedy can be brought under his hypothesis and clarified by it."26
CHAPTER VI
BERGSON’S LAUGHTER AND THE "MILLER’S TALE"

The Tractatus Coislinianus has been shown to describe various of the comic elements in the "Miller's Tale," and Meredith's theory to apply to the "Tale" insofar as the poem is an exposé of folly. Bergson's essay, Laughter, expresses ideas not totally different from the two previous theories; and it sheds new light on comedy and brings out comic elements in the "Tale" that have not yet been described in the present work.

A. The Absence of Feeling. As has been said in Chapter V, Bergson introduces his essay with the idea that comedy requires an absence of feeling, for pity and sympathy quickly put a stop to laughter. Laughter, moreover, arises from an objective view of life that is possible only through use of reason and intelligence. The entire genre of the "Miller's Tale" is based on principles of reason and intelligence similar to those Bergson expresses, for, as Hart says "the fabliaux were not psychological studies; yet dealing... with comic disappointments, comic contrasts between expectation and fulfillment, between illusion and reality, they had inevitably to emphasize, though not study deeply, the elemental passions of love, greed, jealousy, hatred....Love of the baser sort, was the mainspring of most of the action." In the fabliau, then, plot, movement, and intrigue are always more important than psychological
state or emotions; moreover, comedy of the fabliau and comedy in general takes a disinterested view, appealing to reason and intelligence by contrasting the norm of intelligence and morality with stupidity and vice. The comic poet presents stupidity and vice objectively so as to emphasize only their superficial manifestations, never to study them deeply, for such study would arouse feeling, the foe of laughter.

In the "Miller's Tale" Chaucer interests the mind and suppresses pity by placing around each of his characters a battery of concrete details of surroundings, movements, and appearances. For example, the description of John, the most likely object of pity, is limited to superficial qualities: he is rich, old, a carpenter; he keeps boarders, has a young wife, and is jealous. The poet does not present the mental states, such as John's motives, his hopes, or his emotions. If some of John's characteristics, which the poet gives early in the poem, do not clearly suggest that the carpenter is not mentally alert, Nicholas soon explains that any clerk can deceive a carpenter and implies that carpenters in general and John in particular are stupid. Having presented this stereotype, Chaucer has laid the foundation for the comic situation in which stupidity, no matter how pitiable, suffers the brunt of the joke.

Nicholas' suggestion that the carpenter is stupid is soon confirmed by John himself when his deviations from the norm of intelligence appear in activities which serve to "put affection out of court and impose silence upon...pity." For example, John praises ignorance and illustrates the dangers of study by describing how a clerk, preoccupied with his study of the stars, fell into a
"marle-pit." 4 His illustration is comic for two reasons: (1) he demonstrates his complete unawareness of any but the physical manifestations of intellectual endeavors; (2) his example has about it the comedy of truth, in that it presents the stereotype of the scholar, so caught up in mental adventure that he is neither alert to his physical surroundings nor sociable. John's attitude toward learning and his "marle-pit" illustration demonstrate rigidity of character, a comic element which will be taken up in more detail in "B" below.

John "reweth sore of hende Nicholas" when he believes that the clerk's studiousness has brought him harm; but the measures John takes to help the clerk again show ignorance, and help to suppress the audience's pity for the carpenter. John's reaction to Nicholas' trance, in keeping with the carpenter's anti-intellectualism, is to use violent physical action. With the help of his apprentice, John knocks down the door of Nicholas' room, shakes "hym harde...by the sholdres myghtely," 5 and shouts at him—all of which action in its inappropriateness reinforces John's stupidity and establishes him as capable of believing in Nicholas' fantastic story about the coming of the flood. Later, when John is sincerely concerned for the welfare of his wife, his well-established stupidity and his complete gullibility suppress the audience's compassion for him. In addition, the audience is not allowed to take John or the situation seriously, for instead of delving into deep emotional responses, the poet stresses (with the use of minute detail) the efforts the carpenter makes to protect Alisoun, Nicholas, and himself from the flood. By emphasizing material objects and John's activities in
assembling them, the poet carefully avoids an emotional response and instead stimulates interest with description, "rich with an expressive superfluity of specification" like the one below:

He gooth and geteth hym a knedying trogh,
And after that a tubbe and a kymelyn,
And pryvely he sente hem to his in,
And heng hem in the roof in pryvetee.
His owene hand he made ladders thre,
To clymben by the ronges and the stalkes
Unto the tubbes hangynge in the balkes,
And hem vitailled, bothe trogh and tubbe,
With breed and chese, and good ale in a jubbe,
Suffysyng right ynogh as for a day.

••••
And on the Monday, whan it drow to nyght,
He shette his dore withoute candel-lyght,
And dressed alle thyng as it sholde be.

John, however, is not the only character for whom the poet must repress the audience's compassion, for Absolon could be pitiable when he unpleasantly kisses Alisoun, or Nicholas when he suffers pain at his branding by the irate Absolon. Having built his hopes on the possibility of obtaining a kiss from his sweetheart, Absolon has tried hard to earn the reward by sending gifts, performing as an actor, and serenading his love. Alisoun, however, has used his efforts to make a fool of him—"she maketh Absolon hire ape"—and the kiss is certainly the ultimate unkindness with which she can return his favors. Nicholas has, of course, been instrumental in Alisoun's rejecting and tricking Absolon, but his involvement does not negate the fact that the hot iron is a severe and painful punishment, even if it is deserved. In addition, John's fall from the loft causes him to break his arm; yet the poet prevents pity at these painful incidents by narrating them with gusto and with close detail. Chaucer moves quickly from the branding to the carpenter and keeps
up the pace, passing over the broken arm as only another detail, something John caused himself with his own socially unacceptable behavior.

B. Comedy and Reason. With the minimization of compassion or feeling in comedy, the criterion for judging action and character becomes reason, and any deviation from the accepted norm of reason is the subject of laughter. John demonstrates this principle when, after his fall, he continues to believe (against common sense and reason) in the imminence of the flood. His set belief illustrates Bergson's theory that life and society demand an "alert attention" and "an elasticity of mind and body" that enable man to adapt to changing situations. Moreover, lack of elasticity, rigidity of intellect, presence of imaginings—all of which John demonstrates—deny the "alert attention" required by society and are consequently subject to laughter.

The comic character's lack of reasonableness is shown in his rigidity and unsociability. This unreasonableness is demonstrated in the "Miller's Prologue" when the Miller interrupts the plan of the tales, insisting that he speak next instead of the Monk. At this interruption, the Host tries to dissuade Robin with a reasonable argument, "lat us werken thriftely," according to plan. The Miller, however, is not adaptable, is not concerned with his social conduct; and his resulting obstinacy makes him comic:

"By Goddes soule," quod he, "That wol nat I; For I wol speke, or elles go my wey." In contrast, the Host shows elasticity of mind by resigning himself
to Robin's will with a statement that accords with Bergson's theory of the foolish or comic: "Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome."^13

Like the Host, the poet displays tolerant flexibility when he gives in to the Miller's story of "harolytre" with a shrug and a refusal to take responsibility for the "Tale." Instead, he presents an alternative to those rigid souls who do not wish to hear an immoral tale:

...Whoso list it nat yheere,
    Turne over the leef and chese another tale.
    Blameth nat me if ye chese amys.^14

On the surface this warning "means no more than that if a virtuous reader choose amiss (that is, to read a bawdy tale) it is not Chaucer's fault, because other fare has been provided. But...'cheese amis' is ambiguous: it might mean one thing to the virtuous reader and to Chaucer another. It could mean, 'If you're such a fool as to skip what you, if you had any taste, could see after a few lines was going to be one of my best stories, blame your own foolish and prudish self, not me for having thrown dust in your eye.'^15 Tillyard's analysis suggests that Chaucer's comedy appeals to the reasonable mind, not to prudishly and rigidly moral feelings. Also notable is the fact that the ambiguity that Tillyard points out in "chese amys" illustrates Bergson's idea of "reciprocal interference," a comic element to be discussed at some length later in the chapter.

Chaucer reinforces the idea that comedy appeals to reason in his often quoted statement, "...men shal nat maken ernest of game"; that is, a too earnest attitude makes for the rigidity which denies intelligence and objectivity. One sees the principle illustrated
in the poet himself, who is often praised for his tolerance, a quality which depends upon reason and objectivity and which allows him to take the comic viewpoint in his writing. An eighteenth-century writer, Horace Walpole, restates, in what has become an aphorism, Chaucer's attitude toward the comedy of life, and in doing so supports Bergson's idea that comedy appeals to reason: "This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel."

C. Vice. The appeal of comedy to the mind allows vice to become a comic element; the vice of comedy, however, does not appear to be of deep origin, as is the contrasting tragic flaw; instead, the comic vice has its roots in the lack of self-awareness that causes unsociability and the "unrestrained absurdity of the basic plot which helps to make the tale innocuous. The story is not used as an opportunity to talk about adultery; the adultery is the end, the joke is the means to the end, and Chaucer concentrates on the joke, though he does not forget the end."¹⁶ Thus Chaucer's use of vice is to provoke laughter, not to reflect on morality.

It is the vice in each character, as well as the situation itself, that contributes to the "comic absurdity" of the plot, for with each character the vice "is brought from without, like a ready-made frame....It lends its own rigidity..."¹⁷ and tends to simplify the character.

1. The Carpenter. John's vice (his ignorance and folly) controls his actions, and ultimately drags him down. John's first fault from ignorance is that he does not know Cato's axiom, "man shold wedde his simylitude."¹⁸ In using the axiom, the poet
facetiously suggests that this knowledge would have prevented John's marriage to a young woman and that his ignorance has put him in a position to be a cuckold. Just smart enough to realize that he is a likely victim of unfaithfulness, John is, as a result, very jealous—though jealousy itself is another violation of reason. His jealousy, moreover, does not discourage his deceiver, but seems only to challenge him to fool John well by playing on his ignorance and love with an impossible vision of the flood and with plans supposed to protect Alisoun from danger. In the conclusion of the "Tale" (when John, again out of ignorance, continues to believe in the flood) the audience has become "so well acquainted with the particular vice..." that it seems to "get hold of some of the strings of the marionette...." Moreover, this close acquaintance of the audience with the vice both renders the fault acceptable and heightens the pleasure of comedy.

2. Absolon. Absolon's vice is his "love-longynge," in that he is not motivated by love, that deep and vital emotion; instead, he suffers from "love-longynge" which in the course of the "Tale" takes on the meaning of desire and pursuit of love for its own sake. This form of love makes him scrupulous about his appearance and conduct; this scrupulosity, however, only enhances his effeminacy and causes him to appear more foppish than gallant.

In addition, Absolon's manner of love amusingly juxtaposes religious and secular love. He is a parish clerk, whose duty is to sprinkle holy water from house to house and collect a small fee from each householder, but his "courteisie" (that is, his attempt at courtliness) causes him to take no fees from the ladies. His efforts
to emulate the actions of a courtly lover illustrate how, as Bergson suggests, a comic vice imposes itself like a "ready-made frame," lending rigidity to the character, for Absolon goes through all the procedures of courtly love, carefully following a rule book. That is, he dresses fastidiously, uses breath sweeteners, sings, dances, sends gifts to his love, performs for her, and sues with a go-between. To list his activities makes him appear to be a fine courtly lover until the "Tale" makes clear that it is not the object of love that preoccupies him, but the activities involved in the suit of love.

The object of love, Alisoun, is obviously an appealing girl, but she is not to be won with courtly ritual; her refusal of court, moreover, makes Absolon's "love-longynge" more ridiculous, for in pursuit of love he puts on the costume of courtliness, inappropriate to him and ineffectual in winning the girl, and remains so engrossed in the activities of courtliness that he is oblivious of his unfitness and will not change until it is too late.

3. Nicholas. Like many peculiarities of man, Nicholas' vice is also his virtue in that Nicholas is above all "hende." The series of connotations this epithet takes on have been discussed in Chapter II. In the present chapter, "hende" has particular pertinence to comic vice, as the word suggests cleverness. Nicholas first implies that he is clever when he asserts his superiority to John early in the "Tale" by declaring that any clerk should be able to deceive a carpenter. In addition, Nicholas is described as "hende," clever, in that he is "sleigh and privee," characteristics that prove significant in his plan for the assignation with Alisoun.

Nicholas proves also that he is clever in matters of love, as
well as of deception, or at least that he is more "hende" than
Absolom, for Nicholas approaches Alisoun on an uncomplicated,
physical basis that is appropriate to her character. Nicholas, then,
is clever enough to win the girl's favor, and can also devise a
workable, though extravagant plan, to consummate the love. His
cleverness, moreover, seems to overcome good judgment and makes
him go beyond the requirements of his scheme to add flourishes.
For example, his plan does not necessitate that, upon recovering
from his feigned trance, he order the carpenter to fetch him drink,
but drinking the ale of the man he is deceiving is comic proof of
virtuosity.

His plan, supposedly to save Alisoun, John, and himself from
the flood, is carefully and cleverly designed to ensure secrecy,
without which the scheme would fail. This secrecy is projected in
John's preparations for the flood, preparations which Nicholas has
warned must be kept concealed, and which, it should be noted, keep
John out of the way of the lovers. In addition, the chaste aloof-
ness which Nicholas admonishes John to maintain in the loft on the
night the flood is to occur allows the young couple to sneak away
and enjoy the carpenter's bed. Nicholas' cleverness, however,
finally turns on him when, deciding to repeat Alisoun's trick on
Absolon, Nicholas is caught unaware by an incident for which he had
not planned, and his involuntary reaction, the cry for water,
undoes the work of his clever mind. Nicholas' cleverness, therefore,
is an integral part of his character, but as in Bergsonian theory,
the cleverness as a comic vice maintains an independent existence,
controlling him and pulling him down by causing him to be "hende" once too often.

4. Alisoun. Alisoun does not demonstrate comic vice in the same way as the three male characters, as her function is to bring their vices to the fore. For example, she arouses John's senile passion and jealousy and helps exhibit his ignorance; she makes apparent the foolishness of Absolon's "love-longynge"; and she inspires Nicholas to prove, too well, his cleverness. Alisoun, then, provokes and responds to the comic vice of each of the men.

D. Automatism. Several of the characters in the "Tale" display the quality which Bergson calls automatism, a comic element which manifests itself in a puppet-like appearance and in a lack of self-awareness.

1. Knave. John's knave is automatic or puppet-like as he goes to knock on Nicholas' door after John tells him:

"Go up....
"Clepe at his dore, or knokke with a stoon.
Looke how it is, and tel me boldely."22

Almost as if John (or perhaps one should say Nicholas, for the clerk is the actual cause of the action) were pulling the strings of a marionette, the servant goes up and stands at the chamber door. John has told him to call or knock, but Robin does both "as that he were wood,"23 making his actions like those of a machine in which the momentum of mechanical motion must cease before it can stop.

The knave, however, finally becomes aware that his noise is of no avail and that if he is to "Looke how it is" when Nicholas will not open the door, he will have to stoop down and peer into the cat's
hole at the bottom of the door:

An hole he found, ful lowe upon the bord,
Ther as the cat was wont in for to crepe,
And at that hole he looked in ful depe.24

The audience is sure to visualize Robin, whom the poet describes
as a "strong carl for the nones"25 and therefore not small, bending
low in an awkward imitation of the cat whose door he is borrowing.
Then, having gazed upon the "capyling" Nicholas, the knave returns,
again with puppet-like obedience, to his master to tell him "In what
array he saugh this ilke man."26 One notes that the knave registers
no emotional response upon seeing Nicholas' condition. The knave,
then displays automatism with its denial of intelligence and emotion
and its movement that both lends itself to imitation and suggests a
machine.

2. John. John goes through a series of automatic motions,
similar to those of Robin, when he shakes Nicholas and shouts at him,
begging that he "Awak, and think of Cristes passioun!"27 Then,
following a ritual that shows he is controlled by his superstitious
ignorance, he goes as if moved from without to each side of the house
in turn and to the threshold of the door to say the "nyght-spel,"
a charm curiously combining heathen and Christian allusions. Charms
like the one in the "Tale" were prayers, often of the Church, but
burlesqued and corrupted or adapted for sorcery. Like most of the
common people who superstitiously said the charms as prayers,28 John
is apparently not aware of any blasphemy in the charm, and his faith
in its protective powers reflects the unreasoning and simple ignorance
which makes him comic.
John continues to act automatically as he busily goes about collecting tubs, making ladders, and stocking provisions in anticipation of the flood, for never does he stop to consider whether or not he is acting wisely, nor is he aware that he is gullible and foolish in carefully carrying out Nicholas' orders.

3. Absolon. As unaware and automatic in his behavior as John, Absolon does not realize that his attempts at courtliness are only a puppet-like imitation of the art of courtly love; for example, he prides himself on his dancing ability, not conscious that his ability to "trippe and daunce" is deprecated by being "the Oxford version of Continental grace." In addition, he sings loudly in a falsetto voice, not realizing how inappropriate the treble tones are to manly courtliness. At night Absolon sings "in his voys gentil and smal" under Alisoun's window and is so engrossed in the ritual which prescribes the serenade that he does not consider that he will awaken the husband as well as the girl. Like a Continental lover, he "rometh" at night; but very different from his French counterpart, he must "swelt and swete" and catch up on his sleep before a night of roaming. Muscartine summarizes Absolon's unconscious inappropriateness as a lover in the statement that "the courtly delicacy of speech and toilette have become in this small town provincial version the anal-retentive, squeamish spotlessness registered in Absolon's portrait (3312ff) and punished with terrible aptness at the end." As it arouses laughter, his punishment, moreover, suggests the Bergsonian idea that laughter is a social gesture, arousing the automatically responding person from his deficiency of social awareness, which deficiency Absolon displays blatantly.
4. **The Miller.** The Miller is another figure who is comic because of his automatism and lack of self-awareness—in this case caused by drunkenness. Before beginning his "Tale," the Miller feels compelled to "make a protestacioun" of his drunken state, not realizing that his condition is obvious from his pallor, from his unsteadiness on his horse, and from his general lack of "curtesie." Puppet-like and unaware of themselves in their behavior, the knave, John, Absolon, and Robin may summarily be said to be comic largely through their automatism.

E. Form and Movement.

1. **Deformity.** The Miller's drunken state illustrates also the comedy of form and movement, for drunkenness is a kind of deviation from the normal human condition and is a deformity that lends itself well to imitation. The inebriate is laughable, too, in that his movements appear to be controlled by some force other than his senses, making the body suggest a mindless machine. As has been said, the Miller almost topples from his horse, probably without realizing his danger, and he is rigid and unreasonable in his insistence on telling a tale. His entire behavior seems unusually senseless and mindless.

Also related to the comedy of form and movement is Absolon's foppishness, which is comic because it is a deformity that a normal person can successfully imitate. In addition, pretending to be in a trance as he sits upright staring into space, Nicholas provides another example of this comic element, especially amusing because the audience knows that he is a normal person cleverly and intentionally imitating a mental deformity.
2. Mechanism. When the poet lists all Absolon's various activities, from letting blood to playing the guitar, the quick catalogue is suggestive of the manner in which the character performs these tasks, without thought or purpose, so that the audience experiences what Bergson calls an illusional glimpse of a machine working inside a person.

The machine is again at work at the door of Nicholas' room. John's knave, "a strong carl," gave the door a mighty heave and "into the floor the dore fel anon"; shortly after, however, when Nicholas had recovered and drunk the "myghty ale," the poet states, "This Nicholas his dore fast shette." How the door, so recently on the floor, can now be tightly closed is subject to explanation, for which there are at least three possibilities. The first is that Chaucer simply overlooked the discrepancy; but in a story in which the poet includes so much concrete and careful detail, this idea is unlikely. Muscatine provides a second explanation by suggesting that the door is part of the "naturalness" of which the poem is carefully made up; that is, the door is only a minor factor in the action, but it is peeked through, "cried and knocked at, then heaved off its hinges, then prayed by, then shut fast....The very smallest scraps of image and action are handled thus consequentially, even when they are entirely unnecessary to the gross plot."

A third possible explanation is that the comic element of mechanical movement is operative, showing that if the knave with brutish, mechanical power can knock down the locked door, Nicholas can with an equally mechanical motion pick it up and shut it again. In effect, the actions of Robin and Nicholas in knocking the door down and picking it up
again deny the body its usual human limitations and in doing so suggest its mechanical quality.

Having already been shown to be machine- or puppet-like as he carries out Nicholas' orders in preparation for the flood, John is additionally mechanical and comical when, in the dénouement, he demonstrates the Bergsonian idea that the human body in motion is "laughable in exact proportion as the body reminds us of a mere machine." Telling John that when the flood comes, he is to cut the cord holding his tub so that he will then float out of the loft, Nicholas establishes a pattern of movement in John that is as set as would be the cutting and fitting of parts into a machine. When John hears the cry for water, his immediate response is to say that the flood has come, to sit up, and "withouten wordes mo" (words imply thought), to cut the cord to his tub with an axe, exactly as he was told to do. The resulting fall, moreover, represents mechanical movement in its complete denial of human will by the supremacy of an outside force.

3. Gestures. Both Nicholas and Absolon demonstrate the comedy that arises from imitation of gestures, which imitation Bergson says is comic because the duplication implies that the original movement is only mechanical. Nicholas, for example, imitates how he, John, and Alisoun will merrily float in their tubs and call to each other on the morning of the flood. Bergson considers imitation of an ordinary activity, like this exchange of greetings, especially laughable, for the simplicity of movement makes the mechanical quality all the more evident.

In addition, both Nicholas and Absolon imitate the gestures of
courtliness, each with a different effect. Since Absolon's imitation has already been discussed in some detail in relation to comic vice and automatism, little will be added here, except that his imitation of the gestures of a courtly lover makes apparent how mechanical the convention has become. Moreover, if Chaucer's intention is to burlesque courtly love, he chooses his vehicles well, for on the one hand is Absolon, who subscribes to every detail of the code, and on the other hand is Nicholas, who occasionally gives lip service to a few courtly phrases when they expedite his cause. When, for example, Alisoun is hesitant for a moment, primarily out of fear of her husband's jealousy, Nicholas finds it advantageous to cry for mercy in love, to speak sweetly, to serenade, and to kiss his love. The only rule of courtly love that he observes sincerely, however, is secrecy, and that is a necessity; yet Nicholas, who follows convention only opportunistically, wins the girl. Nicholas' success shows how comedy approves of the use of wit and reason in relation to society and its conventions and laughs at the lack of thought that makes a character like Absolon follow convention mechanically.

Absolon's "sincere" practice of the gesture of begging for mercy rewards him with a very unpleasant kiss, and it is this juxtaposition of his and Nicholas' methods and successes in imitating courtly gestures that at once heightens the comedy and ridicules the convention. Moreover, in making Absolon and Nicholas gesture after courtliness, the Miller reflects his own lack of appreciation for convention and causes his natural vulgarity to stand out, especially in contrast to the Knight's courtly idealism, so recently presented in the sequence of the Tales.
4. Repetition. Another aspect of the comedy of form and movement is repetition, which the "Tale" illustrates in the episode of the unpleasant kiss. After Alisoun has caused the misdirected kiss, Nicholas thinks so well of her trick that he wants to repeat it himself and perhaps improve upon it. Bergson theorizes that, since life should not repeat itself, we have a tendency to laugh at repetition. Therefore, the audience laughs at Nicholas' unsuccessful attempt to reperform the kiss. The "Tale," it should be noted, provides only this example of the comedy of repetition. The comedy does not illustrate either the repetition of form, as in identical physical appearance, or of movement, as in slap-stick action.

F. Sources of the Comic. Bergson develops his theory of comedy through his description of comic vice, movement, and form to the central principle that the primary source of the comic is the presentation of "an obvious clockwork arrangement of human events" which retains the appearance of lifelike flexibility. This principle can be applied to the plot of the "Miller's Tale," in which the many details are arranged so as to be essential, working parts of the machinery, yet at the same time retain an illusion of flexible vitality. At the outset the poet explains that the rich old carpenter boards a student whose special interest is astrology and whose study enables him to predict rainstorms. These easily acceptable and seemingly innocuous details about the carpenter and the clerk prove to be a key to the workings of the clock; for having established himself as a weather forecaster, Nicholas is able to persuade his host of the imminence
of the flood and thereby set the action in motion. In their credibility, these facts also lay a foundation of believable probability from which the poet can move to the more improbable circumstances necessary for the clockwork arrangement and comedy of the plot.

In his early description of Nicholas, Chaucer also mentions that the clerk lives "Alone, without any companye," echoing in a different context the phrase of the Knight, perhaps by chance or perhaps to mimic the Knight's expression. In the "Knight's Tale," Arcite bemoans the loneliness of the grave, considered especially sorrowful when life has been without love. Nicholas' aloneness, however, proves to be an essential detail rather than merely a lover's complaint; for by living alone the clerk is able to shut himself in his room for two days without interference and to pretend to have the vision of the flood. Thus, the small, seemingly insignificant details of the poem are made as important to the comic plot as, to continue Bergson's analogy, the smallest springs are to the clock.

1. Surprise. The events of the "Tale" all lead up to the situation where Nicholas and Alisoun are in bed and Absolon is beginning to serenade outside the window. Tillyard's description of the situation is noteworthy:

Alisoun tells him \(\text{Absolon}\) to go away, but he persists, and our whole attention is then fixed on the ensuing farce: the carpenter snores remote from our attention. Absolon begs at least a kiss, and is granted one, but not of the kind he expected. Vowing revenge, and cured for good of his amorous imaginings, he borrows a hot iron from the blacksmith and returns for another kiss. This time Nicholas comes to the window, to get the hot iron clapped to his buttocks. And then the miracle happens; and the different pieces of plot fly together; for Nicholas in his pain yells for water, the carpenter starts out of his sleep, hears the cry, thinks the Flood has
come, and cutting the rope, crashes down on the floor beneath. The surprise...is sublime. It is as if, for a fraction of a second, the heavens opened and we saw all the gods watching the trivial and ridiculous human comedy below. Tillyard's statement that the "surprise...is sublime" comes close in meaning to Bergson's idea that surprise itself is not comic, but it allows a sudden insight into how comic life is; for all the closely enumerated details of John's house, of Oxford and the village life, of the characters' movements are in the turn of the "Tale" suddenly subsumed in an elevated view of ridiculous and trivial life.

2. Natural Man and Social Man. According to Bergson, life becomes ridiculous, a source of comedy, when society imposes its forms on man, tampering with his natural being, for then comedy arises from the contrast of man as he essentially is and man as society makes him--mechanical man. Likewise, man is comic when he is unsociable through lack of awareness of society's demands.

a. John. John would doubtlessly like to consider himself a natural man, at least one unspoiled by knowledge, who lives by the motto "God blesses the ignorant man." Perhaps, however, his ignorance itself has been corrupted by a dangerously small amount of knowledge; for it is his slight acquaintance with Biblical teachings that allows him to believe in the second flood, and it is his partial knowledge of Church doctrine that makes him superstitious, especially about true learning. Thus, the Church's ideal that exalts ignorance tampers, in John's case, with the natural man, that is, the John who would doubtless have better sense without his code of ignorance. John, in return, corrupts the Church by his lack of understanding of its doctrines and practices. The comedy of this situation may be said
to arise from two Bergsonian principles, a social institution tampering with the natural man, and the man displaying unsociability by being only partly aware of the demands of society.

b. Nicholas. Nicholas presents the antithesis of the old and stupid carpenter in that the clerk is the young, educated product of society. He is comical because he uses his natural ability to learn only what seems to him most practical, practicality being determined by the usefulness of the knowledge in getting Nicholas what he wants from society—a good time and love. Therefore, the use Nicholas makes of knowledge is comic because his lack of wisdom causes him both to misdirect his natural abilities and to disregard society by working exclusively to further his own ends.

c. Absolon. Absolon is the most striking example of natural man superficially altered and mechanized by society; he has taken the structure of courtly love and has tried to fit his mind and body into it. He is laughable in his clear exemplification of the manner in which the mechanics of society (in this case the techniques of courting) can impose themselves on man without becoming an integral part of him. Muscatine describes the clerk's love as "the native version of imported Continental courtliness. More congenial to the setting, it is also funnier than Continental love would have been, for it is exposed to the laughter of the sophisticated, who know better, as well as of the Miller's kind, who know worse. But it remains crushingly conventional, and the stylistic vehicle for the comedy of love in the farrago of convention and naked instinct that is Absolon's courtship of Alisoun." In the end, by contrast, Absolon demonstrates clearly how imposing
convention on man's naked instinct makes for comedy. Thoroughly
disgusted with love and its foolish rituals, he acts instinctively,
brandishing a hot iron in reprisal for Aliscun's coarse act. Absolon's
rejection of social convention is so sudden and complete that he is
no longer a mechanical man put in motion by society; but he remains
comic through his eccentric and unsociable behavior.

d. The Miller. Another example of the alteration of nature's
form is found in the Miller, whose indulgence in drinking ale, a
social custom, has affected his physical condition in that he is
pale and has little sense of balance. Moreover, his drunkenness has
amusingly made him lose any social consciousness he might have had,
for he swears without restraint (ale, has probably only aggravated
his usual licence); he has no regard for the agreement to tell tales
in order; and he threatens to go his own way if he is not allowed to
speak. With the Miller, then, the contrast of the essential man and
man governed by the mechanics of society is given double play in that
his indulgence in the social pleasure of ale has been carried to such
excess that he becomes unsociable. In the Miller and Absolon, a
relationship between social form and comic vice is apparent, for
both form and vice seem to get hold of and control the character
when he is unaware of their influence on his natural being.

e. Alisoun. Of the four characters, Alisoun alone is not
mechanical in her actions, for she follows her instincts and desires
and has little concern for social forms unless they are important to
her well-being. For example, she marries to gratify a desire for
material comforts, remains unfavorably impressed by conventional
courtliness, and gives her "love" on a simple physical basis; she does not allow society to control her actions, and only she survives the comic tale without harm.

G. Physical Suppressing Spiritual. Comedy arises when the physical aspect of a person is emphasized over the spiritual element in matters such as love, learning, and religion.

1. Love. As is typical of the fabliau, the love involvement of each character in the "Tale" is presented to emphasize love's physical manifestations, or as Muscatine describes the characteristic: "...the stock triangle of the fabliau—the lecherous young wife, the jealous husband, and the clever clerk (here two clerks)—is a self-assertive vehicle for the purest fabliau doctrine, the sovereignty of animal nature."\[46] The Miller himself abides by the doctrine of his "Tale," for as a bluff and sensual character, he "lives in a world whose highest intellectual attainment is the practical joke; hence his tale with its lip-smacking portrait of Alisoun, its emphasis on bodily function, its mockery of delicacy and squeamishness in the picture and fate of Absolon."\[47] As his character demands, then, the Miller sees in Absolon's attempts at love only the physical manifestations of a foppish daintiness. For Nicholas, too, the Miller describes a kind of daintiness in the clerk's interest in sweet smells, as he is

_Ful fetisly ydight with herbes swoote;_  
_And he himself as sweete as is the roote_  
_Of lyccrys, or any cetewale._\[48]  

But where Absolon's delicacy proves a hindrance, Nicholas' "fetisness" is part of his being "hende" in love—clever and pleasant;
but in both cases the two clerks' pursuit of love is described through the senses instead of the soul. It becomes obvious that the Miller considers only the physical manifestations of the courtly code; e.g., the lover is to appear physically attractive and agreeable, to the total disregard of the spiritual ennoblement that is also important in conventional love. That the Miller's own attitude toward love is exclusively down-to-earth and practical is seen in the "Prologue" where he expresses his view of the matter:

Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold.

An housbond shal nat been inquisityf
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.49

The poet projects much of this pragmatic and sensual attitude into the character of Nicholas by making the clerk straightforward and precipitous in his approach to love and by describing the girl uneloquently as an appealing "wezele" with "body gent and smal."50 Her portrait, a parody of the conventional courtly description,51 presents only a physical description for which the Miller very unconventionally depends on animal images, whereas a portrait in keeping with true courtliness would employ elevated diction for the lady's appearance and would, as in Troilus and Criseyde and the Romaunt of the Rose, present the workings of love on the lady's emotions and mind.

It is apparent that the characters of the "Tale" are more earthbound than spiritual, a condition that allows the Miller to describe appropriately the endearments Nicholas gives Alisoun by listing them in quick series, thereby causing a contrast between the elaborate and involved spiritual proceedings of courtliness and the clerk's expediency as he "thakked her about the lendes well," "kiste hore
The clerk's actions are comical in that they are mechanical gestures rather than sincere expressions of deep love.

Nicholas' technique of love is, however, agreeable to Alisoun, for the animal imagery applied to her reflects her nature as well as Robin's coarseness. Her portrait and attitude toward love show her as a gay, lively animal, not a complicated woman of Criseyde's kind. But her willingness to give love differs from the courtly code only in form; that is, she is not slow to capitulate, as the genteel lady must be; she is not interested in the flowery ritual of courtship. Yet as Donaldson points out, "...by the fourteenth century at least the aim and end of courtly love was sexual consummation, however idealized it may have been made to appear, and of the various factors upon which the 'ars honeste amandi' depended for its idealization the conventional language associated with it was not the least important." Therefore, if the spiritualization of courtly love depended largely on conventions of language, the love in the "Miller's Tale" may be said to emphasize the physical by shifting its idiom to a more expedient and base orientation. Nicholas may use the courtly lover's plea, "Lemman, love me al atones/ Or I wol dyen," but he is already hugging his lady "by the haunchebones." Alisoun's hesitancy to love, short-lived at that, is based only on apprehensions about her husband's jealousy. Never is she deterred by wanting to pray to Diana or by pondering the consequences of love, and it is her lack of concern for these spiritual matters that makes her attitude comic.
Absolon's actions show he is only in love with love, desiring to go through the motions of courting and to assume the attitudes of the lovesick. He is involved psychologically only with the ritual and not with the object. It is even doubtful that he wants to consummate the love, for he may be too squeamish for carnality. But whether or not this is the case, Alisoun, with her disregard for convention, is not a suitable object for his love. Absolon's great concern for ritual prevents serious emotional involvement as well as awareness that he has been made Alisoun's "ape." Absolon's punishment, the kiss, strikingly contrasts the very gross physical code of the other characters and his delicacy (if not spiritual concern) until the kiss. In Bergsonian terms, Absolon may be said to be embarrassed by the body; hence his great interest in fastidious appearance, which leads him to emphasize his own physical eccentricities and the outward manifestations of love and thereby comically allow matter to suppress spirit.

2. Learning. In his attitude toward learning, John provides an example of the confusion of mind and matter, for as an ignorant carpenter who meets the world exclusively with manual dexterity, he seems incapable of appreciating the more subtle uses of the mind. His highest intellectual endeavor is to learn a few religious forms, of which he does not know the significance; his attitude toward learning, moreover, shows particularly his confusion of mind and body. He sincerely believes that using the mind brings harm, and uses as proof both the clerk who fell into a pit while studying the stars and Nicholas, whose study has put him in a trance. Using violent
physical action as a remedy for Nicholas' apparent mental aberrations, John behaves in a manner analogous to that of a man trying to beat down a disagreeable abstract idea with a stick, and thereby illustrates the Bergsonian comic element of inappropriate concentration on the physical world.

3. Religion. As concerns religion, the "Tale" presents a comic blending of the physical and spiritual, as is first seen when John admonishes Nicholas to "thynk on God, as we doo, men that swynke." John's own thinking on God, however, is never more than a mechanical response with a few inappropriate phrases or inaccurate ideas. (The charm he repeats is partially pagan; he knows the story of Noah only from its comic version in the mystery plays.) Nicholas' response to John's admonition, moreover, shows the clerk's complete lack of concern for religious matters, for he does not think of the deity, but, instead, requests a drink of ale. In addition, when he recounts his pretended vision, the only spiritual matters Nicholas mentions are the need for secrecy, "Goddes privitee," and John's unquestioning acceptance of the plans to prepare for the flood. Nicholas' presentation, however, plays effectively on John's gullibility and ignorant fears and is also very much in keeping with Nicholas' character: thus, he knows exactly what elements of religion will serve his cause with John. Always depending exclusively on practicality even when matters of love, religion, and learning deserve an ethereal approach, Nicholas' blend of spirit and matter in the "Tale" as an important comic element.

4. Ridicule of Professions. The behavior of Nicholas and
Absolon in relation to love, religion, and learning provokes the questions of how appropriate their actions and attitudes in these matters are to their clerkly professions, and how their professional behavior contributes to the comedy. Bergson discusses the comedy of a person who is little interested in the matter of his vocation and concentrates on the manner, that is, "the letter aiming at ousting the spirit."\(^{58}\) Nicholas' attitude toward learning illustrates this source of comedy in that he has no devotion to learning and scholarship for intellectual pleasure, but instead approaches his study to learn what he can to expedite his love affair. Moreover, as was said in Chapter II, Nicholas' attitude toward and use of learning makes a burlesque of academic knowledge.

Neither the scholar-clerk like Nicholas nor the parish clerk like Absolon was required to be celibate,\(^{59}\) but the latter goes to the extreme of using his churchly position to further his "love-longynge" when he refuses "for curteisie" to take offerings from the village women. His fastidious appearance, moreover, is inappropriate to a clerk who should concentrate on the spirit and not be interested in the flesh. In the characters of Nicholas and Absolon, then, Chaucer ridicules the student who is little interested in learning and the parish clerk who uses his office to further his desires for romantic love.

\textbf{H. Comedy of a Mechanical Person.} The eighth source of comedy is a character who appears to be little more than a mechanized object because of his lack of mental and physical adaptability. In the "Tale" an example of this comic element appears when John describes the clerk
who walked in the fields to study the stars and fell into a pit. The picture that the incident brings to mind is that of a mechanical man wound up and walking, oblivious of direction or obstacles in his path, who falls when his mind fails to warn him of the hazard. According to Bergsonian theory, the clerk's unawareness, inadaptability, and socially eccentric behavior provoke laughter, intended to arouse him.

I. Comedy in Situation.

1. Illusion of Life. An essential element of comedy in general and of the "Tale" in particular is the comic in situations, which Bergson describes as an arrangement of acts and events that is at once lifelike and mechanical. This element is operative in the "Tale" through the poet's creation of an illusion of life with close detailing, precise co-ordination, and quick narrative which, nevertheless, grow out of a plot that is distinctively mechanical in its arrangement of events.

On closer examination one sees that Chaucer wastes no time in developing the situation and in presenting the characters of the comedy with many minute details, which prove to have significance. As has already been said, Nicholas' studying astronomy, predicting the weather, and living alone appear upon presentation to be innocently descriptive details which later enable the clerk to convince John that the second flood is coming. Also worthy of consideration is Chaucer's use of secondary characters to distract the audience with new action and at the same time to reinforce the credibility of the immediate situation. The actions of the knave, Robin, when with strength and noise he pounds the door of Nicholas' room, provide amusing contrast
to the clerk's quiet gazing behind the door. Moreover, the description of this situation of useless noise and motion helps to prepare for the unreasonable ideas that are to follow. "The detailed and concrete way of relating incidents may be calculated to stress the comedy of the situation..."\(^{61}\) and to make acceptable the clockwork arrangement of the plot.

Many other carefully contrived parts give the story the verisimilitude necessary for the effectiveness of the fabliau: John's providing Nicholas and himself with a large quart of "myghty ale", John's concern that his wife might be drowned in the flood, and Robin, the apprentice, seeking to find if Nicholas were ill, searching until "an hole he found."\(^{62}\) Also important to the lifelike quality of the "Tale" is the setting, of which Lowes says: "...the specific setting of the tale is the carpenter's house, never described but building itself up by degrees before us...."\(^{63}\) Chaucer mentions "the height of the window from the ground (an important point), the hole...big enough for a cat to pass through. We are conscious of the whole life of the village, as we see Absolon about his business and pleasure or when the carpenter mentions with just the right touch of consternation that a man has just been carried dead to church whom last Monday he saw at his work."\(^{64}\) This careful detailing of properties and minute description of activity and circumstance as such details are needed is typical of the fabliau genre; but the "Miller's Tale" "seems to explain everything. That the town is Oxford explains...the presence of a clever clerk....That John the carpenter is made a 'riche gnof' in the very first statement explains his securing a pretty, young wife."\(^{65}\) The total effect of Chaucer's detailed narrative is to
present a situation that has the illusion of life but which really is made up of interacting parts working mechanically.

2. **Illusion of Free Will.** Not all of Bergson's examples of comic situations are found in the "Tale," for the poem does not include the element of one recurrent incident or idea being expressed and repressed after the manner of a Jack-in-the-box, nor the vacillation between two decisions. The nature of the "Tale's" action, a quick progression of activities, is best described as the comic situation in which the character believes he is acting freely but is actually a puppet.

John may be seen, for example, as Nicholas' puppet. As if the clerk willed it, the carpenter inquires after the clerk's health, and Alisoun, according to plan, motivates the action by telling that Nicholas has been shut up in his room and will not answer to call. John's fear of God is played upon when Nicholas becomes the shrewd mediator between God and John. John is convinced as he makes his preparations that he is carrying out God's plan to save him, his wife, and Nicholas from the flood. Yet the audience sees John from Nicholas' point of view as a foolish old man who can be influenced to build the trap that will catch him. "His very pride in handling the practical details—in buying the tubs and making the ladders with his own hand—makes it easy for Nicholas to brand him in the end as the mad instigator of the precautions against the flood." The situations involving John could lose their comic quality if the character were acting on free will instead of on a mere illusion of freedom. Even when John cuts the cord holding his tub, he is only a puppet whose
strings Nicholas has inadvertently pulled.

3. Action. The accident that causes Nicholas to shout for water illustrates Bergson's theory of the snowball action of comedy, for with careful economy all the details and events of the "Tale" come into a central, controlling situation from which they turn for the quick dénouement. All the action leads up to the situation with Alisoun and Nicholas in bed, Absolon at the window, and John in the loft, at which time (to use Bergson's analogy) the snowball has gathered all it can and it must now either rush to collapse or reverse itself and return to its starting point. When Nicholas tries to outdo Alisoun's trick, the situation reverses itself; for Nicholas, heretofore the controller, loses his control over the circumstances. "Only with the arrival of Absolon does he overreach himself. Then the burning need for water, which he did not foresee for all his skill foretelling, draws from his "myrie throte" no Angelus ad virginem; his careful arrangements come tumbling about his ears, and the 'deerne' love ends in a public altercation before the neighbors." 68 Having inadvertently foiled his rival by curtailing Nicholas' night of "solas" with some lively and painful commotion, Absolon is at the same time cured of his "love-loynge," for "Of paramours he sette nat a kers." 69 In addition, where before the carpenter had suffered only under Nicholas' low esteem, John has now become the village fool, considered mad for believing in and preparing for the flood, punished physically and socially, proving when his efforts turn against him that "Al his kepying and his jalousye" 70 have been in vain. Thus, the "Tale's" dénouement aptly fits Bergson's description of comic action.
Situation: Repetition and Inversion. The primary elements that make up the Bergsonian situation have been presented in the introductory chapter as repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference. As has been said, the first of these (repetition of events) occurs in the "Miller's Tale" only in relation to the unfortunate kiss where the re-performance is only attempted, not accomplished. The second element (inversion of roles) is suggested by the basic situation of the clever young clerk getting the better of a foolish old carpenter. Youth teaches the aged when Nicholas gives John information about the flood and, like a paternal figure, blesses the carpenter as he undertakes to carry out Nicholas' instructions. Nicholas' blessing, "Go, Godde thee speede!" is especially comic because John does not realize that he is being encouraged to bring about his own doom. His complete unawareness makes the technique of reversing the usual roles of youth and age an effective comic device.

5. Reciprocal Interference. Chaucer makes extensive and effective use of the third kind of situational comedy ("reciprocal interference of series," a situation which lends itself at once to two independent interpretations). In the "Miller's Prologue," Robin first confronts the audience with the comedy of reciprocal interference by countering the righteous Reeve's objections to his tale with the proverb, "Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold." The Miller's statement answers part of Oswalds' objection that it is a sin and folly "To apeyren any man, or hym defame," and at the same time implies "if the shoe fits, wear it." The Miller goes on to apply
the axiom to the Reeve and himself by revealing that they both have wives and to suggest the wisdom of not inquiring after one's state of cuckoldry. The Reeve's righteous attitude is especially hypocritical, for he later tells a bawdy story in retaliation for the "Miller's Tale." The effect of the Miller's statement about wives and cuckoldry is a multiple: it is a legitimate response to the Reeve, and it reflects Robin's coarseness and the Reeve's hypocrisy.

As another example of reciprocal interference, also in reference to cuckoldry, the Miller explains that John worries about his wife's faithfulness because he is old and she is young and pretty, and that John's error in choice of spouse can be attributed to the fact that

He knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude,
That bad man sholde wedde his simylitude. 

Tillyard suggests the various implications that are attached to this couplet:

The gravity with which he [the Miller] suggests that if the carpenter had had the advantages of reading Cato he might have avoided his error is perfect comedy; and radiating from it are the ironic propositions that the working class ought to read Cato and the like, because these are the only means of access to the mother-wit which is the common heritage of the fold, and that those who read Cato never by any chance fall into the carpenter's error. Further, Chaucer insinuates, 'I know I am a bookworm and adore theoretical wisdom, but I laugh at myself for it,' and 'I hope some of my readers may not know that I am laughing at myself but may make fools of themselves by thinking themselves wiser than I am and calling me obtuse and academic.'

With these lines, then, Chaucer makes a tongue-in-cheek praise of learning, laughs at his own love of books and makes fun of the pretentiousness of those people who call themselves wise.

When Robin, the apprentice, sees Nicholas "capying upright" in his room, the situation has two different meanings reciprocally attached to it. Robin soon tells his master of Nicholas' condition,
which John immediately blames on the clerk's study of astronomy—his attempts to "know of Goddes pryvetee." At the same time that John expresses concern for the clerk and warns against learning, the audience is aware that Nicholas is not ill but probably gleefully imagining the effect of his "trance" on the old fellow and perhaps even deciding how he will order John to fetch him drink when he comes to the room. The comedy of this situation derives from John's attaching one meaning to Nicholas' behavior when at the same time the clerk and the audience know the actual source and significance of it.

Another example in which John's interpretation of a statement differs from the audience's is Nicholas' great emphasis on secrecy, inspired by the fact that John appears willing to believe anything in the name of religion. The proof of this state of mind is in John's unquestioning acceptance of the fantastic vision and of the need to follow the clerk's instructions exactly, especially to maintain absolute secrecy. Nicholas and the audience know, however, that the instructions are designed to help the clerk in his love for Aliscun and that secrecy is necessary only because the townspeople, if they were to hear of the vision, would not be so gullible as John. Therefore, Nicholas' intention to

...speke in pryvetee
Of certeyn thing that toucheth me and thee.
I wol telle it noon oother man, certyn,

is full of double meanings, for John does not know that the "thing" will affect Nicholas and him very differently; nor does he realize why Nicholas will certainly not tell it to any other man. As well informed as Nicholas, however, the audience can find the dual inter-
Nicholas presents another situation which has amusingly ambiguous implications, in explaining how, on the morning of the flood, they will float merrily in their tubs,

And thanne shal we be lordes al oure lyf
Of al the world, as Noe and his wyf.78

This description is open to different interpretations as to who actually will be lord of the situation and the wife—for Nicholas' analogy, Noah and wife, allows for only one man to have power. John, of course, is not bothered, since it does not occur to him that anyone but himself will be Noah, or that Nicholas is trying to be lord of both the situation and the wife.

Another source of reciprocal interference occurs in the audience's knowing that Nicholas, not God (as John believes), is the mind behind the plan; for example, in the name of the deity, John agrees to hang the tubs far apart in the loft and to avoid looking at his wife when Nicholas proclaims, "This ordinance is seyd."79 Nicholas, however, has failed to mention that the ordinance is his own, not God's as he implies, and is designed to keep John from knowing of the assignation. Again, John is ignorant, though the audience is aware of the total significance of the situation—the result being that comedy arises from the simultaneous presentation of two points of view.

A further example of this comic element is provided by the cry for water after the branding. For Nicholas this shout means that he is in acute physical pain, while for John the word is a warning that the flood has come, that it is time to cut the cord holding his tub; the result, however, is as catastrophic to him as was the event
that prompted Nicholas to yell.

Absolon also contributes to the comedy of reciprocal interference in that, his appearance, discussed in Chapter II, is that of an effemin- nate dandy though he considers himself to be a capable lady's man. Although he is probably basically innocent, unaware that his dress and conduct have an exhibitive quality, he wears shoes that suggest two symbols, one of which implies depravity of character. Absolon is described as having "poules wyndow corven on his shoes,"\textsuperscript{80} which design, according to Skeat, Robinson, and Manly, is a symbolic reference to the windows of St. Paul's Cathedral. Whitbread, however, suggests that Chaucer knew an immoral connotation of the shoe design, for shoes "à la poulaine" were attacked by the clergy and the court in medieval times because their shape terminated in a phallic symbol. "The shoes Absolon wore are thus seen to bear double meaning: the design was like a cathedral window, in keeping with the man's ecclesiastical office (3312); in turn it came near enough a phallic symbol, as near as he dared to the erotic devices worn on the shoes of prostitutes and libertines, to satisfy his pose as a gay dresser (3339ff.). By recalling the immoral 'poulaines' and making the window design a window of St. Paul's Cathedral, Chaucer produced a neat play of words."\textsuperscript{81} Whitbread implies that Absolon is a bit of a libertine himself in wearing the shoes, but with his naive approach to love and his extreme disgust at and rejection of love after the kiss, his innocence seems likely. Moreover, if he wears the shoes without knowing their obscene significance, he is, according to Bergsonian theory, all the more comic through his ignorance and unawareness. The Miller would, of
course, enjoy showing up the innocence of Absolon by making use of the dual interpretation.

The comic element of reciprocal interference may again be illustrated in the "Tale" if, as Harder suggests, Chaucer's audience saw in Absolon the characteristics of a small town parish clerk and also a representation of Herod of the mystery plays, the double significance effecting a burlesque of the pageants. Harder points out that so cosmopolitan a group as the Canterbury pilgrims was certainly familiar with the plays, and that the Miller indicates that he knows the plays when he tells of Absolon acting the part of Herod:

Somtyme, to shew his lightness and maistrye,
He playeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye. 62

This role would provide the clue toward Absolon's function in the fabliau; that is, "he was to be the comic character, just as Herod is treated in the mystery plays as the performer of buffoonery, spectacle, and diabolical action." 63 In addition, Harder mentions that the "nimbleness of Absolon made him a perfect actor for the riotous Herod of the mystery plays. The audience would have recognized Absolon as the one to be hoodwinked, the naive coxcomb waiting to be turned into a fool, but not without the revenge upon which the dénouement of the story hangs, a jest in keeping with the coarse side of Chaucer's Miller." 64 It should also be noted that the Miller tells his tale to disparage the Reeve, who was a carpenter, and that the guild of carpenters was responsible for the Noah pageant. The Miller himself is associated with Pilate when "...in Pilates voys he gan to crie." 65 Therefore, by presenting in the "Tale" a situation that can reciprocally belong to the fabliau triangle and to a parody of the mystery play of
Noah—a reasonable choice if the jest is to slander a carpenter—
Chaucer burlesques the Biblical story and makes "subtle thrusts at
the grossness of the plays." 86

In the "Miller's Tale," then, Chaucer uses the various kinds of
comic situation (repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference),
and the extensive use of the third makes his fabliau obviously ludicrous,
as in relation to the cry for water, and subtly laughable, as in the
significance of knowing Cato and in the suggestion of the mystery
pageants.

J. Diction. From reciprocal interference, Bergson derives his
theory of comic diction: words become laughable when they belong
simultaneously to more than one series of meaning. Comic diction may,
according to Bergson, be explained as fitting an absurd idea into a
well-established phrase form, taking literally a statement that is
meant figuratively, or, and this is especially applicable to the
"Miller's Tale," transposing the solemn or elevated into the familiar
with the effect of degradation and parody. In the "Tale" the conven-
tional languages of religion and love become the subjects of parody.

1. Parody of Religious Language. The Miller provides the
first example of transposing a solemn expression into a familiar key
when in the "Prologue" he quotes the proverb:

An housbond shal nat been inquisitif
Of Goddes privete, nor of his wyf.

The juxtaposition of God's solemnity and man's obscenity suggests the
speaker's lack of awareness or concern for the difference between
matters physical and spiritual. Chaucer uses the phrase "Goddes
"privetee" in the "Tale" itself, and, as Dempster queries, "Is it by chance that Chaucer twice uses this same phrase..., putting it here in the mouth of the victim himself and later in words addressed to him?" But whether by chance or by design, the first use and the repetition in inappropriately familiar and commonplace contexts make the phrase contribute to the comedy.

In several instances the diction of religion is used in reference to love, a common characteristic of courtly language, which in the "Tale" is comic through transposition to a bourgeois milieu and through reciprocal interpretations. For example, when Nicholas tells John that he will have "as greet a grace as Noe hadde," John accepts Nicholas' meaning to be religious grace, but a second meaning is possible if one accepts Harder's theory that the "Tale" is a parody of the mystery play. In the play Noah is constantly fighting with his shrewish wife; his grace from his wife's love would be equivalent to grace that John receives from Alisoun. The diction in this case is comic through its transposition from a religious to a secular meaning. John's misinformed references to Noah and Nicholas' blasphemous use of the Biblical story are further examples of the transposition of the solemn to the familiar for comic effect.

Another comic interchange is made between words which suggest the saving power of religion and of love; wherein John accepts the religious meaning when Nicholas implies the connotation of carnal love. Pretending to be God's mediator, Nicholas declares that he has been given the power to save Alisoun, John, and himself from the flood in much the same way that God saved Noah. Nicholas repeats with double significance, "Thy wyf shal I wel saven, out of doute."
He will, in reality, do more than "save" Alisoun from the imagined flood, he will enjoy love's salvation with her; and his earlier statement that he will save "withouten mast and seyah" has more significance than John realizes. Through its transposition of religious language to common, even coarse, contexts, the "Tale" illustrates in several instances the Bergsonian principle of comic diction.

2. Parody of the Love Idiom. Chaucer makes an extensive parody of the conventional language of love when he transposes the elevated diction of court to the bourgeois setting of his "Tale." This comic element has already been discussed in Chapter II under the heading "Content of Comedy," for the "Tractate" and the Bergsonian theory present essentially the same idea; however, a few additional examples of this kind of comic diction can be given.

a. Alisoun. The comedy in the diction that describes Alisoun depends upon acquaintance with the convention, for in her portrait Chaucer transfers the elevated courtly idiom to a lowly carpenter's wife to make, according to Brewer, a "rhetorical joke, the point of which is the absurdity of describing a carpenter's wife, a wanton village wench, as if she were a heroine, a noble and ideal beauty." Brewer goes on to say:

There is probably also some element of social satire here. Chaucer is writing for a courtly audience. He is a snob. Thus her very name is that of the lady of a famous song in the Harley Lyrics. It is also the name of the Wife of Bath. The indications are that like many once fashionable names it had declined in the world, and was regarded in Chaucer's circle as 'middle-class'...at once vulgar and pretentious. Alisoun's hair is not described; her forhead, however, is bright as day—but only when washed after she has finished her work (3310); hardly praise for a true heroine, who was always aristocratic. Her eyebrows are curved, black, and thin—very typical adjectives. They were thin because they were 'ypulled' (3245).....Again,
her eye for which so many words might have been found is 'likerous' (3244). Her hue is bright gold as any lady of romance, but it is compared to a new-minted 'noble' (3256), a gold coin worth 6s. 8d. (What is Alisoun's price?): Her breath is indeed sweet, not as incense, rose, or honey, but as mead, 'bragot' or stored apples (3261). Chaucer never mentions the breath of his other heroines... Alisoun's body is noble and slender like some heroines, but also like a weasel's (3234). Her voice is hardly melodious, it is loud and eager as a swallow's (3257), which has no song. Alisoun's clothes are also part of the joke, and she could 'skip and make game' as well as any kid or calf; this is the equivalent of the comely dancing of a true courtly lady.92

Donaldson also comments on Chaucer's technique of bringing the elevated down to the lowly as enabling him "to evoke for the reader the hackneyed context, with all its associations...while at the same time the poet can make literal use of the phrases' meaning in his own more realistic descriptions."93

b. Absolon. The portrait of Absolon, like that of Alisoun, may also be said to illustrate the Bergsonian method of comic diction. The epithet "jolly" which identifies him has the comic virtue of referring either to men or women and therefore helps to underline his effeminacy. Moreover, Absolon is a simple parish clerk, but Chaucer has him affect high fashion in matters of love. "He is suffering from love-sickness, by his own account; e.g., from his speech beginning with line 3698:

Wel litel thinken ye upon my wo,
That for youre love I sweete ther I go.
No wonder is thogh that I swalte and sweate;
I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.

Much to the point also is the way in which he appears to echo aristocratic love-poetry when he is about to give the 'misdirected' kiss. He says 'I am a lord at alle degrees;/ For after this I hope ther cometh moore.'94 Absolon's use or misuse of courtly language becomes
especially comic in view of the fact that obtaining a kiss is the first step in a successful courtly love affair, usually a great reward to the lover, instead of the coarse punishment Absolon receives.

c. Nicholas. Absolon is not alone, though, in attempting high-flown language and falling short of the goal. As Gardiner points out, "One main theme of courtly love is the necessity of secrecy; and Chaucer sounds this note early in the 'Miller's Tale' by making Nicholas 'ful privee' (3201) and master of 'deerne love' (3200). The rather striking phrase 'deerne love' is used twice, as if to emphasize Nicholas' quasi-aristocratic ways, and Alisoun, too, knows the fashion: 'Ye moste been ful deerne, as in this cas' (3297). Secrecy was considered necessary in any illicit love-affair, no doubt, even a bourgeois one, ... when Chaucer mentions 'deerne love,' he uses a term which may remind us of Criseyde and her world and seem comically out of place...."96

In addition, Donaldson compares Chaucer's use of "deerne love" with the use by the Harley Lyricists to show that in the lyric poems the "deerne" quality of love is ennobling, as the need for secrecy made the love more difficult. The critic points out that Chaucer generally uses "secre" in reference to the love of his heroes; in fact, Nicholas alone is "deerne." In Old English, the word sometimes had the connotation of justified secrecy and sometimes reflected secret sin, but long before Chaucer's time "deerne love" had the potentiality of what it becomes in Nicholas, "a device for getting away with adultery, if not really a sort of excuse for indulging in it. Therefore Nicholas' aptitude parodies an ideal already devalued through misuse
in the vernacular and since even in its most exalted form the courtly
code of secrecy might be described as crassly practical, his aptitude
also parodies the more genuinely courtly lovers of the Harley lyricists."^97
From Donaldson's comments, as well as from those of the other critics
mentioned in this section, one may see how the "Miller's Tale" exemplifies
the Bergsonian principle of comic diction, that is, the transposition
of the elevated to the familiar.

K. The Comic Character. Bergson's analysis of the comic character
incorporates almost all the elements of comedy that he has heretofore
presented—absence of feeling, automatism, rigidity, and unawareness.
Because many of these qualities have already been discussed in relation
to the characters of the "Tale," only a brief analysis will be made
here.

1. John. John exemplifies what Bergson would call the rigid
personality, for the carpenter is ignorantly set against learning
and is absolutely inflexible when once convinced of the imminence of
the flood; he even disregards the opinion of the townspeople as he
goes his own seemingly mad way. His fall from the loft teaches him
nothing, for he continues the unlearned devotion to his belief, a
devotion which indicates both rigidity and unsociability. Nevertheless,
in his concern for his wife's safety and his eagerness to try to save
her, John comes daringly close to being a sympathetic character; but
the poet upholds the comedy by presenting only the superficial mani-
festations of his character. "The character of the old husband is
as remarkable for what is left out as for what is put in. Great care
is taken to make him a clear, but decidedly background character.
Thus we are briefly told of his age and jealousy. We see his blend of respect and contempt for Nicholas' learning, his simple conceit of the practical man. We are made aware of his unthinking piety and good intentions. This is sufficient to make him real enough for the stratagem to have point, but not enough to make us think in terms of real life about the true pathos and bitterness of his situation.\(^98\)

The comic poet suppresses pathos and bitterness in the character of John by emphasizing his gestures rather than actions in order to suggest mechanical automatism, rather than mental processes. John, for example, wants to help Nicholas when the latter appears ill, but the poet is careful not to show in John any deep emotional response or thought. Chaucer describes only the superficial, automatic symptoms of John's feeling—his shaking the clerk, his running about the house saying the night spell, his fetching drink, and his mechanical following of Nicholas' instructions. In effect, John's body is in motion but never his mind, and the resulting comic automatism and unawareness typify him as the foolish, jealous old husband, close indeed to Bergson's ideal comic character.

2. Absolon. Absolon, too, fits into qualities of the Bergsonian comic character, for, first, he demonstrates rigidity as he persistently courts Alisoun despite her unresponsiveness and scorn. Secondly, Absolon, even more than John, is presented superficially, not analytically. As Harder points out, "The Miller's description of Absolon is external, (3314-24), but much of his character is apparent. His clothing is indicative of a vain person, fastidious about detail in his appearance. His...red hose, light blue kirtle, and robe—'whit as is the blosme upon the rys' all indicate he is a dandy.\(^99\)
His dandified quality is part of his vanity which causes him to affect the manners of the courtly code, though he can never be a true courtly lover, but only a parish clerk gesturing after the manners of the code. Brewer says that "Had he lived in the present day he would doubtless have been brilliantined like a cricket-hero, and have flaunted a big tie with a bathing-beauty pattern on it. As it was the fourteenth century, he had to be content with the pattern of St. Paul's windows cut on his shoes." Whether Chaucer intends Absolon to be intentionally obscene or to be innocently an exhibitionist is not clear; his character, at least is very much in keeping with the Bergsonian ideal. That is, Absolon has a fault of either physical or deep psychological origin which manifests itself in his foppish appearance; moreover, he is obviously unaware that he makes a foolish, unmasculine impression, primarily because he has the all-inclusive and self-blinding vice which Bergson calls vanity.

3. Nicholas. Nicholas does not meet all of Bergson's requirements for the ideal comic character: because he is not rigid, but cleverly adaptable. His secretiveness, moreover, suggests a sharp social awareness, if only of ways to deceive society profitably. Even Nicholas' unsustained gestures of courtliness seem to be a momentary opportune abiding by the code. Approaching Alisoun with a courtly appeal for mercy, he uses at the same time a technique far more precipitous than courtliness allows, for he knows that the conventional code will not be effective in winning her. Nicholas, then, is not unaware of himself and circumstances, as Bergson suggests the ideal comic character should be, but he is unsociable in the selfish use he makes of his
acuity. Despite his differences from the Bergsonian ideal, he is a comic character; and he is especially comic when the very quality which allows him to be aware of and usually in control of the situation—his cleverness—finally turns back on him and makes him the victim of the branding. As his plot moves smoothly along, he becomes caught up in its machinery, forgetting that cleverness is not his exclusive property; and because he has held control of the situation for so long, his sudden surprise and punishment is especially comic. His cry for water is the unconscious gesture of a character who has overlooked his own fallibility, and in doing so, has demonstrated his vanity.

4. Alisoun. As suggested earlier, Alisoun is more one who evokes comedy than a comic character herself. Nevertheless, she is essential to the comedy as the motivator of the three male characters. Of the four main characters in the "Tale," John and Absolon come closest to the Bergsonian ideal of the comic character; Nicholas becomes comic when his vanity finally turns on him, but he does not have the general rigidity and automatism of the carpenter and the parish clerk. Not comic in herself, Alisoun puts the three male characters into combat by causing each to display that essential comic vice, vanity.

I. The Source of Comic Rigidity. From his discussion of the nature of the comic character, Bergson concludes that the source of comic rigidity, and the principal cause of comedy, is the character's insistence on pursuing one idea. John illustrates this theory by his continued belief in the imminence of the flood; Absolon's determination
to be a courtly lover leads him into a situation antithetical to his squeamish nature. Nicholas' desire to be above all clever causes his punishment. Bergson makes the result of the characters' vain persistence analogous to a dream, for the inevitable clash of each character's monomania causes an impossible situation which has about it an illusionary probability.

**Conclusion.** Through quick action, typical characters, and basic emotions, the fabliau in general and the "Miller's Tale" in particular follow the Bergsonian theory that comedy requires an absence of feeling and appeals to man's social awareness and reason. In the "Tale" Chaucer effects these characteristics of comedy by maintaining a quick pace in the movement of the plot, by emphasizing physical surroundings over emotions, and by showing and playing on the characters' vices. Comic vice in the Bergsonian theory, and as illustrated in the "Tale," is a social fault rather than a moral one and is caused by some aspect of the character which is rigid and automatic. This rigidity also involves form and movement and makes the character, like the drunken Miller, display a deviation from the natural form or, like the foppish Absolon, appear as a mechanical puppet.

Bergson's definition of the source of the comic, "something mechanical encrusted on the living," is illustrated variously in the "Tale." The plot, for example, is clearly a mechanical arrangement, yet it is easily acceptable. Furthermore, the behavior of John, Absolon, and Nicholas shows how man can abuse his own nature and the conventions of society and thereby appear comic.

Many of the comic elements that develop from Bergson's basic
formula are also found in the "Tale." Chaucer uses extensively and effectively the element that has physical matters suppressing the essential spirituality involved in love, learning, and religion. He uses, too, the Bergsonian element of ridicule of professions by showing an irreligious clerk, an insincere student, and a stupid carpenter.

The "Tale" comic situations have the Bergsonian virtue of a mechanical arrangement in which the characters present an illusion of free will and action when they are actually only puppets carrying out the mechanics of the plot. According to the theory, comic situations arise from repetition, as seen in the attempt to repeat the unpleasant kiss; from inversion of roles, as exemplified when the young Nicholas teaches the old John; and reciprocal interference, which occurs in several instances. Young Nicholas, for example, illustrates this last element in his explanations to the older man John, and in his unintentional cry for water. Also, much of Absolon's behavior and dress may be seen as the comedy of reciprocal interference.

To a large extent the diction of the "Tale" follows Bergson's principle of transposing the solemn to the familiar; both religious language and the idiom of love are abused and parodied in the bourgeois context of the fabliau.

Bergson describes the ideal comic character as being unsociable and rigid in some aspect of his nature, lacking self-awareness, and behaving mechanically. Moreover, the comic character has above all the vice of vanity which plays on his character to make him a type. This theory adequately accounts for the comedy of characters like Absolon and John, but does not wholly account for that of Nicholas.
As Stolnitz points out, Bergson's theory explains how one laughs at the unsociable and rigid person but not how one laughs with a character toward whom one may enjoy an empathic experience. Here the requirement for an absence of feeling seems to lose its validity. Moreover, the comic figure who is full of life and gusto, who perhaps denies many moral principles, yet who wins the audience over, is not entirely rigid and mechanical. Nicholas is one of these roguish fellows who has both great ingenuity and flexibility. Stolnitz describes such a character as "extremely inventive in contriving how to get into mischief" and how to get away from sober authority. This kind of behavior, too, gains audience sympathy and prevents condescension.

Despite this inadequacy in the Bergsonian theory the essay accounts for much of the comedy in Nicholas' as well as in the other characters' behavior. All the characters of the "Tale" are comic primarily because they persist in following up their ideas after circumstances, had they been properly aware of them, would have warned them to desist. A part of their basic vanity, this persistence helps to create the impossibly mechanical situation that appears so probable, and that is so basic to the comedy of the "Miller's Tale."
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A. In this work three theories of comedy have been applied to Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" in an attempt to analyse the comic elements contained in the "Tale." The first theory, the Greek Tractatus Coislinianus, defines comedy as the "imitation of a ludicrous action," presented not for purposes to abuse, but to arouse laughter. Laughter has its sources in both the content and in the diction of comedy. The first, content, includes such elements as bringing together the worse and the better; the use of deception, the impossible, or the unexpected; the use of clownish dancing; and the choosing of the worthless. The second, diction, becomes comic through the devices of homonyms, synonyms, garrulity, paronyms, diminutives, perversion, grammar, and syntax. The component parts of comedy are six: plot, character (ironical, buffoonish, or of an impostor), intellectual element, diction (that of the common popular language), music, and spectacle (the last two are not to be expected in narrative poetry).

The application of this theory to the "Miller's Tale" has shown that the fabliau contains many of the comic elements outlined in the "Tractate." The diction includes homonyms, various synonyms of the word truth, and garrulous speech, the last being illustrated by the Host, the Miller, and the carpenter. Paronyms are found in the anti-courtly description of Alisoun and in the inappropriately solemn judgment that John makes on the state of the world. Diminutives
are used extensively (especially "lief," "deere," and "hende") often ironically or mechanically. The Miller demonstrates (1) perversion by voice (when he mockingly repeats some of the Knight's expressions) and (2) the comic device of causing syntax to form a pun.

In its content, the "Tale" illustrates assimilation of the better to the worse, that is, burlesque, in using conventional courtly idiom to portray the appearance and actions of the uncourtly bourgeoisie. Deception, the second cause of comedy, motivates much of the "Tale's" action as the clerk plots to deceive the carpenter. The clerks' plan for the deception, based on a fantastic vision of the second great flood, contains the third cause of comedy, the impossible. The fourth part, the impossible and inconsequent, is not found in the "Tale's" closely woven structure. But the fifth element, the unexpected, is used for an anti-climactic effect in Alisoun's portrait and in the dénouement. The Miller in his drunken state and John in his ignorance illustrate comic debasing, the sixth comic device. And Absolon's dancing is suggestive of the seventh, clownish dancing. The comedy of a worthless choice is demonstrated by Nicholas' use of education, which effects a burlesque of academic learning.

Chaucer avoids abuse (which the "Tractate" rules out of comedy) by subtly suggesting the ludicrous qualities of his characters; that is, Absolon is never called a fop, but the terms in which he is described make his effeminacy evident. Of the three types of comic character, he, like John, comes closest to being a buffoon, while Nicholas may be called an impostor. Alisoun fits none of the comic types since she, for the most part, motivates the others to be comic instead of being so herself.
Of parts which make up the substance of comedy, the plot—"structure binding together the ludicrous incidents"—is summarized in the Miller's statement that he will tell of a carpenter and his wife and how a clerk fooled the carpenter. Made up of opinion and proof, the second part of comedy, the intellectual element, is expressed in the "Tale" through proverbs, blasphemous oaths, compacts (John's pledge of secrecy is particularly important), testimony (John's belief in the flood is used to prove him mad), ordeals (the unpleasant kiss), and law (Nicholas pretends he is abiding by religious law in order to insure secrecy in his fornication).

The requirement that comedy employ the common popular language is well met by Chaucer as he unites "perfectly simple English words... into genuinely poetic language" to make a burlesque of conventional idiom. Included in this simple idiom are proverbs and phrases "worn-out" from too frequent usage in the vernacular. Finally, the "Tractate" defines three types of comedy, of which the "Tale" is most like the Old, with a superabundance of the laughable.

Although it presents a practicable theory, the "Tractate" has some inadequacies in failing to define its own terms, in failing to consider the cause of laughter and the effects comedy can have on society, and in overlooking the basic attitude of the comic poet.

B. The Meredithian theory of comedy is especially explicit concerning the social conditions under which good comedy is produced and thrives; that is, a society which is intellectually alert, amenable to social equality between the sexes, and willing to look at life critically. In such a society the function of comedy is the ridicule
of folly, directed at man's deviations from sensible, reasonable, and just behavior. This function is not unlike that defined in the "Tractate" as the imitation of ludicrous behavior.

Meredithian comedy addresses the intellect and describes the operation of the social world upon man's character. The comic character must be depicted as a general type rather than a highly individualized personage, so that he may appeal to society as a whole. The comic heroine should be a worldly woman, capable of following both her wits and her heart, as she engages in the eternal battle of the sexes which is basic to comedy. The Meredithian hero, one infers, must partake of qualities which allow him to meet and complement his feminine counterpart. The society in which this conflict of the sexes takes place is usually that of the middle class, which becomes comic as it imitates and aspires toward its betters. In addition, with its hard work and earnest efforts, this middle group affords the acute and balanced observations characteristic of comedy. The observations of Meredithian comedy are directed toward the vindication of common sense, rightness, and justice, and at the same time require the poet to maintain a close artistic economy that precludes farce as a comic element. In addition, the sympathy that the idealistic basis creates helps the poet overcome unrealities in the plot and the characters and allows him to give free imaginative play to his comic genius.

As in the "Tractate," Meredithian theory requires pure and simple language and makes the source of wit clear reason. The content of this language is the expose of man's dullness, rawness, and folly. As in the "Tractate," the consideration of folly is not harsh and
biting, for such treatment in the Greek theory is abuse and in the Meredithian is satire. For Meredith, satire is a moral agent that searches out the grotesque. Humor also looks for the grotesque but has pity and affection for what it exposes. Comedy differs from satire and humor in being more objective and subtle, interpreting and appealing to the general mind.

The society Chaucer addressed was intellectually alert and enjoyed the equality of the sexes which allows men and women to view life similarly—requirements which Meredith believes are necessary for comedy. Chaucer has the necessary objectivity and perception that enable him to see the whole of life with equanimity, and to laugh easily but with discrimination. The "Tale" itself fulfills the purpose of comedy as it ridicules the folly of an "overblown" student, of an affected clerk, and of an ignorant carpenter. The condition that the characters present a general type is carried out in the case of all the characters of the "Tale." The teller of the "Tale," a character in the pilgrimage, is more an idiosyncratic than a typical personage. He is made up, however, of qualities suggestive of a crude, coarse fellow, though the combination is more peculiar and lifelike than typical.

The character of Alisoun perfectly displays the qualities of the Meredithian heroine, for she is worldly and clear-sighted enough to marry for wealth, she is not heartless and capricious when she gives her love to Nicholas, and she appears emotionally independent in her behavior. Chaucer presents her, moreover, as a participant in the comic battle of the sexes, in conflict with her husband and two
suitors and as the cause of strife among the three men. She alone emerges from the battle unscathed, perhaps demonstrating the advantages, at least in the Miller's world, of uncomplicated, physical responses. In the close interaction of characters, especially of Nicholas and Alisoun as they plot together, it becomes evident that comedy breaks down the social formalities. These formalities, moreover, provide the comic poet with much of his material when, as in the "Miller's Tale," the bourgeoisie attempts to imitate the habits of the gentility and thereby illuminates the foolish artificiality in these habits.

The Meredithian principle that comedy cast no base reflections on life is not followed in the "Miller's Tale," for Chaucer admits coarse behavior and cuckoldry as comic elements. But as it ridicules the folly and consequences of illicit love, the "Tale" may be said to accord with Meredith's idealistic basis. The "Tale," however, is intended to produce laughter, not to illustrate a moral.

In addition, the idealistic basis helps the poet to overcome the unrealities of plot and character through the vindication of common sense. In the "Tale," the principle is especially apparent in the carefully controlled and limited view the poet gives of John. A similar control is exercised over the improbabilities of the plot by emphasis on and interest in minute and concrete details. In the dénouement, Chaucer demonstrates brilliantly the poetic power "in the sharp light of that sudden turn;" yet he violates another part of the Meredithian theory by admitting farcical action. Chaucer, then, abides by the idealistic basis of comedy in demonstrating folly, practicing poetic economy, and, to a small extent, vindicating justice.
But in presenting farcical action and coarse behavior, he deviates from the theory. This same relationship may be seen in Chaucer's use of language. His wit has the Meredithian virtue of subtlety and the purpose of criticizing hackneyed poetic diction; but since Chaucer employs coarse language, the theory becomes inapplicable.

In considering the foolishness in old age and dullness, the "Tale" exemplifies Meredith's idea that such subjects are rendered vivid and lively through comedy. In addition, the "Tale" for the most part may be classified as comedy as opposed to humor and satire. It does, however, satirize the over-stylized manners and language of courtly romance, especially through the behavior of Absolon and Nicholas. In the depiction of John the "Tale" satirizes gullibility and ignorance, but does so more for the purpose of fun than for the morality which is included in Meredith's definition.

The ultimate purpose of Meredithian comedy is to provoke "thoughtful laughter," which purpose is realized through an objective, critical view of life. Moreover, Meredithian comedy is intended to expose and remove society's grossness. Chaucer has the Meredithian objectivity, but he carries it further than the theorist by admitting life's foolish gaiety, its vulgarity, and its bawdry—none of which would be well received by Meredith's Victorian society.

C. Aware of man's increasingly mechanical responses to life's ever-changing situations, Henri Bergson presents a theory of comedy which makes man's automatic and unsociable behavior the source of comedy. Laughter arises when something mechanical is imposed upon the living being, and that laughter is intended to prod the automatic
person into alert, sociable behavior. In addition, this laughter is objective, requiring the absence of feeling and appealing to the intelligence alone. Here Bergsonian comedy is close to Meredithian, for the latter also is objective, appeals to reason, and assigns the emotional response to humor. The appeal of comedy to reason in Bergsonian theory is based on the principle that society demands a constant alertness and adaptability to its changes.

Bergson explains comic vice as a ready-made social frame that the unalert man has permitted to simplify his character. This vice, moreover, gives him a puppet-like quality which, in his unawareness, subjects him to the social corrective, laughter.

The mechanical quality also serves to explain the comedy of form and movement, for the human being becomes comic whenever he appears automatic in countenance or behavior. Thus, grotesque appearance and imitative and repetitious actions may be sources of comedy. Moreover, whenever automatism causes the physical quality of a person to suppress the more important spiritual element, laughter results. In this manner, too, the comic poet may ridicule both professions and the person who appears reduced to a mere object.

The comic quality in situations is explained by the basic formula of the mechanical imposed on the living. The comic situation is mechanically arranged, but presents an illusion of life. The total action to which the situations contribute is also mechanically predetermined or controlled from without so that all the situations come into the central plot to be reversed in the end. The individual situations are comic because of repetition, reversal of roles, or
reciprocal interference—the last being a situation that affords at once two independent interpretations, depending upon one's point of view.

Diction becomes comic when inappropriate words are put into well-established forms, when literal and figurative meanings are mistaken, and when the solemn is transposed to the familiar—all of which reflect unawareness and rigidity on the part of the character.

The comic character displays rigidity and unsociability in all his behavior, and it is these superficial appearances, not his deeper moral traits, that are the concern of comedy. Thus, the poet does not portray actions (which reveal man's mind), but gestures (which are unconscious and habitual). He shows the characters in their automatism and in their vanity—that vice which includes all others and causes the rigidity which makes the characters persist monomaniacally in their course of action.

Bergson's theory accounts for much of the comedy in the "Miller's Tale," for in this fabliau Chaucer presents much of man's unsociable and mechanical behavior. He suppresses the audience's feelings by concentrating on physical surroundings, movement, and appearance. When emotions are suppressed, the standard of judgment is reason, and deviations from reason become the source of laughter. Thus, both the Miller's unreasonable drunkenness in the "Prologue" and John's unthinking behavior throughout the "Tale" are comic. In addition, comedy's appeal to reason allows vice to be a comic element, for comic vice is not a moral taint, but social unawareness, unreasonableness, or rigidity. Ignorance, the basis of the code John lives by,
is also the vice that eventually gets hold of him and pulls him down. Cleverness has the same effect on Nicholas, causing him finally to outsmart himself. "Love-longynge" governs Absolon's behavior and makes him follow an inappropriate set of rules which render him rigid and unsociable. Alisoun cannot be said to represent any of the three comic types mentioned in the "Tractate," and she does not appear to have the comic vice associated with the Bergsonian character; her primary function in the comedy is to bring out the vices of the three male characters.

The knave Robin, John, and Absolon display the Bergsonian automatism through their puppet-like appearance and their lack of self-awareness. Absolon's "love-longynge," his affectation, and his foppishness are deformities that a normal person could successfully imitate. Nicholas demonstrates not only the theory but also the practice of this comic device as he consciously imitates the behavior of a person in a trance. Mechanical movement is shown in relation to the door of Nicholas' room, which is knocked off its hinges only to be picked up and locked again in such a way as to suggest the mechanical quality of the human beings performing these tasks. Comic movement through gestures is illustrated in Nicholas' imitation of how he and the other characters will act during the flood. In addition, Nicholas and Absolon imitate the gestures of courtliness; Nicholas, though he imitates them consciously when they will further his purposes, but Absolon's imitation is unthinking and suggests his lack of awareness.

The plot of the "Tale" represents the major source of Bergsonian comedy, that is, a clockwork arrangement of events which maintains a life-like appearance. Moreover, the mechanical encrusts itself on the living in the neat overlapping of Absolon's coming to court
Alisoun on the night of Nicholas' assignation with her and in the dual significance of the cry for water.

This mechanical encrustation can also affect the individual character by altering the natural man. John is corrupted into rigid superstition through his misguided following of Church doctrine. Nicholas directs his abilities to learn toward unworthy goals. Absolon is superficially altered and mechanized by his attempts to practice courtly love. Having abided too ardently by the social custom of drinking ale, the Miller has changed his natural physical appearance. The responses of each of these characters have been imposed from without; but in contrast, Alisoun follows her instincts and desires and in doing so remains unharmed.

The mechanical quality of the characters causes them to suppress the spiritual element inherent in matters of love, learning, and religion. In matters of love the fabliau as a type of story emphasizes the physical rather than the psychological aspects. Moreover, the Miller, the teller of the "Tale," is a character who is not interested in the ennoblement and gentility love can inspire; therefore he describes only Alisoun's appealing physical characteristics and her willingness to follow her instincts. In his story, the Miller mocks and punishes Absolon's daintiness and squeamishness toward physical matters, and he projects into Nicholas his own pragmatic, sensual view of love.

The spirituality of religion is suppressed by John's inaccurate religious beliefs and by Nicholas' opportune use of these in his plot against John. Nicholas also allows expediency and practicality to
overcome any devotion to learning and scholarship he, as a student, might have. And Absolon, the parish clerk, is more interested in earthly love and in his appearance than he is in matters of the church. Thus, the "Tale" illustrates the Bergsonian theory of physical elements suppressing spiritual concerns.

The situations in the "Tale" exemplify the principle of mechanically arranged events that maintain a lifelike appearance through close detailing, exact coordination, and quick narrative. Although the characters are puppets of a carefully contrived plot, they present an illusion of free will. John in particular exemplifies this comic element as he appears voluntarily to carry out Nicholas' plot, although he is at all times a victim of predetermined circumstances.

The overall action of the "Tale" illustrates the Bergsonian analogy of a snowball, for all the events come into the pivotal situation of Nicholas' cry, at which they reverse themselves: Nicholas' night of love is curtailed, Absolon rejects love forever, and John's jealousy earns him the reputation of madness.

The various elements in the comic situation are repetition (the attempt to repeat the misdirected kiss), inversion (youth teaches the aged), and reciprocal interference. The last is illustrated several times in references to cuckoldry where more than one interpretation is apparent and by Absolon's attire, which may have both an innocent and an immoral significance.

The diction of the "Tale" is comic primarily through the poet's transposing the solemn language of religion and love to familiar and even coarse contexts. The Bergsonian comic character is seen
most clearly in John, who is rigid and unsociable because of his ignorance and his devotion to foolish beliefs. Although he at times comes close to pathos, feeling for him is suppressed by the emphasis on mechanical gesture rather than intentional action. Absolon, too, is inflexible and unsociable as he gestures after the manner of courtliness and is unaware of his ridiculous appearance. Nicholas is not always rigid; in fact, he adapts very quickly to changes in situations. But like John and Absolon, he has the Bergsonian comic quality of vanity and persistence in one idea. Alisoun is not highly comic herself, but she is an inspiration to the vanity of the three men. Encouraging the vanity and its resulting persistence, she brings about the clash which, in its mechanical arrangement and lifelike appearance, is the basis of Bergsonian comedy.

In the conclusion to Chapter II of the present work, the "Tractate" was said to bring out many of the comic elements in the "Miller's Tale," but to be inadequate for a complete analysis of the "Tale's" comedy. The reasons for this inadequacy are that the theory (1) is not definitive in its use of the terms plot and character, (2) does not consider the relationship of the poet and his comedy to society, (3) does not discuss the psychological causes of comedy, and (4) does not account for the obscene as a comic device.

The theories of Meredith and Bergson provide adequate definition of their own terms, and these terms have broad application to the "Miller's Tale." Meredith's description of the comic hercine applies closely to the hercine of the poem, and Bergson's theory of character explains the male characters, except where it fails to account for
Nicholas' roguish flexibility. Meredith approaches his analysis of comedy and the nature of the comic poet through a description of the society that produces them, while Bergson equates comic behavior with unsociability and intends laughter as a social corrective. Meredith is more explicit than Bergson in describing the comic poet: he must be objective and reasonable in order to see man's folly. Bergson implies the need for objectivity, social awareness, and flexibility; and from the viewpoint of both theorists Chaucer seems to be a true comic poet.

Meredith says little of the psychogenesis of comic behavior, but Bergson tries to explain it by his basic theory of mechanical rigidity in the personality; the character persists when he should not, and he is unaware of himself and others. None of the theories explicitly account for the comedy arising from Chaucer's use of obscenity and coarseness; in fact, Meredith's idealistic basis for comedy categorically excludes coarse devices. Bergson might say that obscenity is comic as it reflects unsociability and unawareness, and such an explanation, though incomplete, would not be out of keeping with the tenor of the "Tale."

Finally, in measuring the poet and his tale against the criteria in these three theories, it is apparent that Chaucer's poetry is by more than one standard richly comic. The applicability of the "Tractate" suggests that Chaucer's comedy would have had appeal for men who lived long before him, and whose philosophy of life was very different from that of a medieval Christian. Insofar as the "Miller's Tale" ridicules folly, Meredith's theory accounts for its comedy.
Because it admits farce and coarseness, however, much of Chaucer's comedy does not represent the Victorian Comic Spirit. But in considering those elements that must be excluded to have the "Tale" meet the delicacy of the Victorian standard, it must be noted that the purpose of the fabliau was laughter first, and truth and verisimilitude only secondarily. "Virtue and intelligence are not amusing; hence vice and stupidity are the inevitable choice."¹ Thus, The Bergsonian theory that equates comedy and unsociability (unsociability being the manifestation of stupidity and vice) provides an explanation for almost all of the "Tale's" comic elements. In relation to both ancient and modern times, then, Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" is an abundant source of comedy.

Although taste in comedy varies from age to age, "it depends still more upon the momentary point of view, upon the mood induced by the author's treatment of his subject, and it is easy to exaggerate the difference between ourselves and the audience of the thirteenth century. It is no less easy to exaggerate the contrast of morals and manners of the society which they seem to reflect with the morals and manners of our own contemporaries."² Here Hart's statement suggests part of the value in a study of Chaucer's comedy. When Chaucer portrays some of the customs and foibles of his day, it becomes apparent that they are essentially "the small virtues and petty vices which we call human."³ Thus, analysis and understanding of comedy and comic elements provide insight into man's mind and behavior.

The humanistic interest in the fabliau must not, however, cause one to overlook its comic artistry. In writing the "Miller's Tale,"
Chaucer's technique, "like the technique of a dramatist, was directly and absolutely controlled by his public. Consciously and constantly aiming at the comic effect, subject for some two hundred years to immediate and emphatic criticism, the fabliau inevitably came to be the best narrative art of the Middle Ages."  

Turning to another critic, one finds high praise of Chaucer's artistry in the fabliau: "Chaucer did not descend to the fabliau; he raised it."  

Perhaps in the idea of having to "descend" to a comic form lies a reason for the comparative lack of study devoted to comedy, both in matters of comic theory and of comic literature. In contrast, tragic poetry and theories explaining it have received extensive attention. But certainly the "Miller's Tale" is as poetical in its own way as any serious or tragic work.  

There is no reason why the comic should not be as poetical as the serious....In narrative poetry, as with dramatic, the poetic delight lies partly in the aesthetic pleasure aroused by the formal qualities of the story itself—the interrelation of cause and effect, character and action. There is delight in the creation of situation, character, and setting, whereby our experience of life is enriched; we see more of the world, and, it may be, understand more, through the medium of imagination. Added to these the pleasure of hearing vivid speech in metrical form.... The 'Miller's Tale' is rich in all these pleasures. Unless it is asserted that only a restricted number of thoughts and emotions are allowable to be expressed in poetical form, the 'Miller's Tale' is poetry. It is, moreover, perfect, as greater poems, say the Troilus or the 'Knight's Tale' are not. There are no lapses into frigidity, no inharmonious shifts into another mood.  

Curiously and unfortunately, the Troilus, the "Knight's Tale," and numerous of Chaucer's basically non-comic poems have received more critical attention than the comic tales, probably because serious poetry is thought to have some inherent moral purpose or value. Nevertheless, analysis of Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" reveals keen and often profound observations on behavior, and also grants artistic pleasure through imaginative, unified, and vivid poetry.
NOTES

Introduction

2. Ibid., p. 258.
3. Ibid., p. 266.
4. Ibid., p. lxi.
5. Ibid., p. 266.
6. Ibid., p. 427.
7. Ibid., II, p. 269.
Chapter I


2. Cooper, p. 224.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., p. 226.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., p. 185. Cooper makes this explanation of the "dianoia" in reference to Aristotle's "Poetics," for both works use the term in a similar way.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.


15. Dante Alighieri, The Letters of Dante, ed. and trans., Paget Toynbee (Oxford, 1920), p. 200. It is illuminating to compare Dante's definition of comedy with parts of the "Tractate." In the latter comedy must have a "due proportion of laughter" (see above, p. 3), whereas Dante would classify as comedy any work with a happy ending.

16. Ibid., p. 200 f.

17. See above, p. 4 and note 13.
Chapter II


4. 3392-93.

5. 3391-92.

6. 3116 ff.

7. 3120 ff.

8. 3137-40.


10. 3509 ff.


12. 3234.


15. "...on the level of terms like 'weasel,' 'loins,' 'gore,' 'colt,' and 'pig's-eye,' the portrait describes the delectable little animal who is not to be won by a protracted artificial wooing." Charles Muscates, "Chaucer and the French Tradition" (Berkeley, 1957), pp. 229-30.

16. Helge Zekirr suggests that if this repetition is intentional, it constitutes a pun. Critics for years denied Chaucer the pun, but more recent research has shown the poet to be a frequent user of puns. "Rhetorical Word-Play in Chaucer," *PLA*, LXIX (1924), p. 250. See also Paul F. Daw, "Chaucer's Puns," *PLA*, LXXI (1956), pp. 225-48 and LXXIII (1958), pp. 167-70.

17. 3429.

18. 3572-80.

19. 3638-40.

31. Donaldson points out that Chaucer uses "hende" only twice elsewhere in works indisputably his. In the Roman de la Rose the word is used twice in a description of "amiable folk associated with the garden of the Rose; but thereafter it is spoken only by the Host...when he calls upon the Friar to be 'hende' to the Summoner; and by Alice of Bath, who expresses with it the charm possessed by her fifth husband-to-be, jolly Janlin, who is a spiritual sibling of Nicholas if there ever was one. It is clear from these uses, as well as from the even more eloquent lack of its use in any genuinely courtly context, that for Chaucer 'hende' had become so déclassé and shopworn as to be ineligible for employment in serious poetry...But by the same token it was highly eligible for employment in the 'Miller's Tale.'" Pp. 123-24.


34. 2200.

35. Beichner says that "placing the seducer in the household of the married couple...is a good stroke. It gives Nicholas an advantage over his rival, Absolon, in proximity to the lady of their fancy!" P. 151. Donaldson attributes the cause of Nicholas' success in love to the quality of being "hende," and points out that the Miller, analyzing his love-triangle in proverbial terms, remarks that always the 'rye sly' (the sly dog at hand, Nicholas) displaces the 'feire leece' (the distant charmer, Absolon)." P. 124.

36. 2272-79.

37. Beichner, p. 152.
Cooper's description of diminutives is pertinent: "Diminutives may be endearing, caressing, ludicrous, or contemptuous, two or more of these qualities often being strangely mingled in the same epithet." P. 235. Donaldson considers the use of "hende" in relation to Nicholas as suggesting in the character "nothing more than a large measure of physical charm that is skillful at recognizing its opportunities and putting itself to practical sexual use." The critic goes on, one imagines with tongue in cheek, and objects that this usage is "sorry degradation for an adjective that had been accustomed to modifying some of the nicest people in popular poetry...." P. 125.

Perhaps Nicholas' character is without the more complimentary aspects of the word "honde." If that is the case, the contrast of his actual character with the pleasant connotations that remain around the word is an example of the comic technique, assimilation toward the better. See below, p. 15., for further discussion of this comic element.

40. Cooper, p. 225.
41. 3462.
42. 3497-92.
43. 3526-30.
44. 3742.
46. Ibid.
47. 3632.
49. Cooper, p. 225.
50. 2136, 855.
51. 3709.
54. 2162-64.
56. Cooper, pp. 240-41.
57. 3111-12.

59. 3126-27.

60. 3143.


62. Ibid., p. 57.

63. Donaldson, p. 121.

64. Donaldson shows that the Miller follows convention in comparing Aliscun to a flower. For example, one of the Harley Lyrics has the line "The primerole he passeth, the perwenke of pris." However, in the "Miller's Tale" the accompanying item is not a periwinkle but a "piggesneye," "something which, while it may be a flower (perhaps appropriately enough, a cuckoo flower), remains, unmistakably, a pig's eye." Pp. 133-34.


67. 3280.

68. Brewer, p. 143.

69. 3704.

70. Donaldson, pp. 135-36.

71. 1838.

72. 3387.

73. 3722-23, 3726.

74. Donaldson, p. 137.

75. Ibid.

76. 3622-23.


78. 3622-23.
153.

79. "Privily" is used five times, "privity" six times, and "privy" two times.

80. 3295.

81. 3662, 3676, 3802.

82. Brewer comments that "the plot is a common folk tale, but none of the analogues in any way rival Chaucer's telling of the tale. There is, for example, a kind of poetry of absurdity in the way the carpenter is taken in by the tale of the tub. Some of the analogues miss this completely; others attempt the impossible task of making the trick itself seem reasonable. Chaucer creates his carpenter the very kind of man to believe such nonsense." P. 141.

83. 3236.


85. 3252, 3254.

86. Donaldson, p. 133.

87. Cooper, p. 225.

88. Ibid., p. 250.


90. 3120-25.

91. Stephenson, p. 53.

92. 3227.

93. 3203-22.

94. 3450-56.


96. See above, note 82.

97. 3328-30.

98. Robinson, p. 685.


101. 3306.
102. 3182.
103. Cooper, p. 225. The emphasis is mine.
104. 3214.
105. 3315.
106. 3214.
108. 3317.
110. 3221.
112. 3342. Donaldson, p. 128.
114. Owen, p. 52.
115. Ibid.
116. 3362.
117. Owen points out that the Miller's two lovers, like the Knight's, are paradoxically differentiated, but instead of the subtle distinction found in the "Knight's Tale," "the contrast is blatant." P. 52.
118. 3202.
119. 3204.
120. 3219, 3216.
122. 3205.
123. 3201.
124. 3462.
125. 3276.
126. 3450.
127. 3428.
129. 3141-42.
131. Cooper, p. 265.
132. 3152.
133. 3163-64.
134. 3186.
135. 3598.
136. 3782.
137. 3717.

138. Herbert Starr states that "the most intense of all oaths are those by some part of God's body." He also notes that this type of oath, the "anatomical" oath, is used in Chaucer almost exclusively by the low classes and never by the aristocracy. "Oaths in Chaucer's Poems," Philological Studies, West Virginia University Bulletin, IV (1943) pp. 52, 46.

139. 3414-18.
140. 3428-30.
141. 3530.
142. 3590-91.
143. Cooper, p. 226. See above, p. 4.
145. Ibid.
146. Ibid., p. 129.
147. 3234-35.
148. Lowes, p. 177.
150. Ibid., p. 119.
Chapter III

2. Ibid., p. 76.
3. Ibid., p. 76.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 262.
8. Meredith, in Williams, pp. 267-68.
9. Ibid., p. 262.
11. Ibid., p. 93.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 89.
14. Ibid., p. 90. This statement on the role of the middle class in comedy is also applicable to the nature of the comic poet: witness both Chaucer and Shakespeare.
15. Ibid., p. 27.
16. Meredith, in Williams, p. 266.
17. Meredith, ed. Cooper, p. 112.


22. Ibid., p. 134. This idea shows a relationship to the statement in the "Tractate," comedy "has laughter for its mother." Both theories suggest that comedy evokes and channels the natural will to laugh.

23. Ibid., p. 134.


Chapter IV


3. Ibid., p. 227.

4. Ibid., p. 617.

5. Ibid., p. 625.


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. 2455-56.


15. Meredith, ed. Cooper, p. 93.

16. 3284.

17. 3294.

18. 3292-93.


22. Ibid., p. 90.


27. Ibid., pp. 98-99.


29. As will be shown in Chapter V, Bergson believes that comedy requires the absence of feeling.


31. Donaldson, p. 139.


33. 3685.

34. Book I, 484-85.

35. 3349-50.

37. Meredith, ed. Cooper, p. 156.

38. Ibid., p. 141.


40. Brewer, Chaucer, p. 141.

41. Baum, p. 19.

42. Meredith, ed. Cooper, p. 84.

43. Meredith, in Williams, p. 268.

Chapter V


3. Sypher, p. xii. "...Bergson is really writing about comedy, not merely laughter."


5. Ibid., p. 72.

6. Ibid., p. 70.

7. Ibid., pp. 70-71.

8. Ibid., p. 73.

9. Ibid., pp. 74-84.

10. Ibid., p. 79.

11. Ibid., p. 83.

12. Ibid., p. 84.

13. Ibid., p. 93.


15. Ibid., p. 117.
Chapter VI


4. 3460.

5. 3475-76.


7. 3620-3635.

8. 2389.


11. 3131.

16. Ibid., p. 123.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., p. 130.

19. Ibid., p. 133.

20. Ibid., p. 130.

21. This observation (which I have paraphrased from Bergson, p. 153,) shows a close relationship to Aristotle's emphasis, in the "Poetics" on action over character.


23. Ibid., pp. 167-69.

24. Ibid., p. 171.


12. 3132-33.
13. 3135.
14. 3177-78, 3191.
17. Bergson, p. 70.
18. 3349.
20. 3349.
22. 3431-3433.
23. 3436.
24. 3440-42.
25. 3469.
26. 3447.
27. 3476.
29. Muscatine, p. 228.
30. 3360.
31. 3694, 3703, 3685-86.
32. Muscatine, p. 228.
33. 3137.
34. 3120 ff.
35. 3236-43.
36. 2471, 2499.
37. Muscatine, p. 225.
38. 3567 ff., 3815 ff.
39. 3577-70.
40. See my discussion of the burlesque elements, Chapter II, under the heading "Content of Comedy."
41. 3304-06.
42. Bergson, p. 83.
43. 3204.

44. Tillyard, p. 90. Also worthy of note in this context are the comments of Germaine Dempster: "In the kiss-and-burn episode, dramatic irony plays at the expense of Alisoun's two lovers, each in his turn. Absolon comes to the carpenter's house in high spirits. By making him center his hopes on a kiss, Chaucer brings in a little humorous irony that perhaps half redeems the coarseness of what follows. In the last scene, the joke played by circumstances is a joke on the lovers: not only does Nicholas' desire of playing a trick on Absolon cause his own misfortune, but the contrivance of making the carpenter sleep under the roof is followed by just that experience that makes the contriver cry for water. The agent, Absolon, knows nothing about the situation, and the cry is just the one that must inevitably cause the carpenter to discover the true relations of the lovers. Chaucer does not seem to have made any remarkable contribution to the rather complicated web of ironical contrasts in this farce." "Dramatic Irony in Chaucer," Stanford University Publications, IV (1932), p. 282.
45. Muscatine, p. 227.
46. P. 224.

48. 3205-07.
49. 3152, 3163-66.
50. 3234.

52. 3304-06.
54. 3230-81.
55. 3279.
56. 3389.
57. 3491.
58. Bergson, p. 94.
60. 3457 ff.
61. Schaar, pp. 141-42.
64. Brewer, p. 112.
67. Owen, p. 53.
68. Ibid., p. 52.
69. 3756.
70. 3851.
71. 3592.
72. Bergson, p. 123.
73. 3147.
74. 3227-28.
75. P. 88.
76. 3454.
77. 3423-95.
78. 3581-82.
79. 3522.
80. 3318.
82. 3393-94.
83. Harder, pp. 194-96.
84. Ibid., p. 196.
85. 3124.
86. Harder, p. 196.
87. 3454, 3558. Dempster, p. 37.
88. 3560.
89. Harder, p. 196.
90. 3561.
91. 3532.
95. Muscatine, p. 37.
96. Stillwell, p. 694.
98. Brewer, Chaucer, p. 143.
100. Brewer, pp. 143-44.
Summary and Conclusion

2. Ibid., p. 214.
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