**“...half so greet was nevere Noes flood”: Memory, Prediction and Chaos in Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*.**

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Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale* is a well-known fabliau, and demonstrates several of the characteristics associated with that genre, including: a number of bawdy scenes; an illicit love triangle between the carpenter, his wife, and their lodger, Nicholas; a second suitor in the form of Absolon; and an unlikely set of resolutions. The reading audience at least is alerted to the profane content of the *Tale* before it properly begins: though the Miller himself proclaims that he will tell a “noble tale for the nones” (I.A.3126), Chaucer, or Chaucer’s narrator, warns readers of the text to instead expect a “cherles tale” (I.A.3169), urging us to “[t]urne over the leef and chese another tale”(I.A.3177) if we are likely to be offended, or if our tastes are moral or religious.[[1]](#footnote-1) The tale is certainly bawdy, at times rude, and mostly hugely enjoyable; however, as is the case with many of his works, it also offers more serious reflections on the world in which Chaucer was writing. This paper offers some perspectives on ideas of chaos, prediction and memory in this text, looking at some of the ways in which the *Miller’s Tale* represents and theorizes uncertainty and flux that was very often a feature of real life in England in the fourteenth century. I will also think about Chaucer’s attitudes, some of which are expressed in this text, to the ways in which people attempted to counteract chaos and catastrophe, and ways in which cultural ideas and ‘memories’ were encountered by ordinary people.

If the reader of *The Canterbury Tales* imagined by Chaucer in the prologue to the *Miller’s Tale* indeed has the stomach for a churlish story, that reader is plunged, not immediately into a scenario that is sexual and profane, but rather into the private world of Nicholas, the “poure scoler” (I.A.3190) who is the lodger-guest of the carpenter and his young wife in Oxford. Chaucer of course needs to establish the love-triangle or love affair that is central to the action of the fabliau, and much of the time devoted to the description of Nicholas and his academic and intellectual interests – an episode that covers some thirty lines of the opening of the *Tale* – contains details that allows the action of the story to move along. An awareness of Nicholas’ interest and expertise in astrology and prediction is required by the reader in order for the plot to function correctly; Nicholas, with his credentials established, will ‘predict’ a flood of biblical proportions so that he can find time and space to commit adultery with Alison. Chaucer could have achieved this in the space of a couple of lines, but instead he asks us to notice certain aspects of the character of Nicholas and his ‘art’, registering what I argue is a suspicion with the art of prediction – astrology – based on theories of astronomy.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this opening section Chaucer takes us on a tour of the chamber of Nicholas and, as such, of his inner, private world, one which seems orderly and logical but which we are encouraged to regard with suspicion.

Nicholas’ chamber, on one level, to be well-aspected and orderly: we read that he elegantly adorns it with sweet-smelling herbs (I.A.3205), and that on shelves “couched at his bedded heed” (I.A.3211) his possessions are neatly arranged; they include “his Almageste, and bookes grete and smale, / His astrelabie, longynge for his art, / His augrym stones layen faire apart (I.A.2308–10)”.[[3]](#footnote-3) In addition Nicholas has a linen press “ycovered with a faldyng reed” (I.A.3212) and his psaltry, or lyre, is position high above, presumably on the wall. However, Chaucer’s textual foray into the chamber, ironically, uncovers a world of secrecy and suspicion. While Nicholas apparently openly displays many of his possessions and the tools of his trade on shelves, aspects of his life remain closed, perhaps symbolically registered for the reader by the mystery surrounding the red-clad linen cupboard. His careful, deliberate ordering of his room is offset both by the secrecy surrounding and the chaos that results from his art, specifically the practice of astrology. Nicholas had been a university student of arts (the curriculum of which included logic);[[4]](#footnote-4) but as Chaucer indicates “al his fantasye / Was turned for to lerne astrologye” (I.A.3291–92). The implicit contrast here between the arts, including logic, and the more obscure practice of astrology is reinforced by the fact that Nicholas has allowed his interests to be guided by “fantasye” – fancy or desire – rather than by any apparent motivation to discover or learn. Moreover Chaucer – or his narrator, more specifically – casts some doubt on the veracity or validity of this practice; Nicholas is able to perform

... a certeyn of conclusiouns,

To demen by interrogaciouns,

If that men asked hym, in certein houres

When that men sholde have droghte or elles shoures,

Or if men asked hym what sholde bifalle

Of every thing ... (I.A.3193–98).

The detail supplied here is characterised by lack of distinction and definition, which I argue reveals Chaucer’s desire to present such practices as suspect, lacking in efficacy and empirical grounding. The indistinct practices: “certyen conclusions ... interrogaciouns”, that lead to predictions and outcomes lack specificity, but are instead unexplained, indistinct and mysterious. Indeed this lack of openness (that we might be tempted to read into Nicholas’ love of orderly display) extends to the character of Nicholas himself; we read that he is an expert in “deerne love” and that he is “sleigh and full privee” (A.I. 3200, 3201); moreover he shuns company (3204). These details, combined with the sense that, although the tools of his trade are on display on his shelves, his various books, and in particular his copy of Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, is inaccessible to all but the learned (reinforced by the fact that the carpenter’s “wit is rude” [A.I.3227]) combine to build rather a contradictory picture of the clerk.[[5]](#footnote-5) Moreover, the term *Almagest* had come, by the later Middle Ages, to be applied to any work of astrology, so the authority of the book possessed by Nicholas remains uncertain.

The closed nature of the lodger may be compared to the more open, if ostentatious, Absolon. Nicholas is both forthcoming and secretive in his dealings with Alison, the young wife of his landlord; Chaucer, while remarking on the “subtile and ful queynte” ways of clerks, has Nicholas act in a manner that is at once secret and rash (to say the least), when he “prively caughte hire by the queynte” (3275–6). Nicholas’ ability to be open and private or sly, apparently at the same time, is a quality that we do not discern in Absolon, his love rival and the parish clerk. Absolon, in short, likes to be seen. He is deliberate and careful about his appearance (in ways in which mirror the care that Nicholas takes with *appearance*), ensuring that his hair stands out like a fan (3315) and his blue and white clothing ensures that he is distinctive. He loves to dance (“[a]fter the scole of Oxenforde tho”, 3319), and to play his cithern, and is described as a “myrie child” (3325). Accordingly, his courtship of Alison is showy and ostentatious, and is undertaken in plain sight; we read that Absolon openly gazes at her while censing[[6]](#footnote-6) and that, at the first opportunity, he seeks to satisfy his “love–longynge” (3350) by making for the house of the carpenter, standing under the window, and declaring his love for Alison, in a very open, public way:

He syngeth in his voys gentil and smale,

“Now, deere lady, if thy wille be,

I praye yow that ye wole rewe on me,”...

Fro day to day this joly Absolon

So woweth hire that hym is wo bigon.

He waketh al the nyght and al the day;

He kembeth his lokkes brode, and made hym gay;

He woweth hire by meenes and brocage,

And swoor he wolde been hir owene page;

He syngeth, brokkynge as a nyghtyngale (3360–77).

The emphasis on Absolon’s voice and on his public (and presumably heartfelt) declaration of love contrasts with Nicholas’ physical and sexual insistence on his own lust as well as on his sly and devious behaviour. Where Absolon is verbally insistent, Nicholas is physical and forthcoming with Alison’s body (he “thakked hire aboute the lendes weel”, 3304). Absolon uses his body and his voice, however, to declare his love, even attempting to impress the young wife by participating in a guild drama: “Somtyme, to shewe his lightnesse and maistrye / He playeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye” (3383–5).

Nicholas, however, continues to embody privacy and secrecy, both in his trickery of John the carpenter in sexual terms and his supposed duping of friends and customers as a reliable astrologer. In fact, his method of luring John into his chamber is to increase his state of isolation, and to instruct Alison to say that she believed him to be ill. The naive carpenter is so concerned about Nicholas that he sends his knave upstairs to check on his lodger. Nicholas has ‘staged’ a scene in which he sits upright in his bed, “capyng upright / As he had kiked on the newe moone” (3444–45).

**Mystery**

The reference to Absolon as Herod not only foregrounds the fact that his courtship is primarily verbal, or at least privileges his voice (Herod was traditionally, of course, a loud, ranting figure on the play-waggons) but it reminds us that Chaucer’s audience (in all of its complexity) and his characters, however “rude” they may be, were accustomed to experiencing stories from the Old and New Testaments as mystery (or guild) plays, at Easter or sometimes Christmas, enacted by members of the local *mistères* or guilds.[[7]](#footnote-7) The inevitable chaos and predictability that were the nature of such plays is well-documented: serious, didactic stories from the Old Testament as well as episodes from Christ’s life from the New Testament were performed, in ways that were at once predictable and unpredictable. Predictability lay in the fact that the stories were familiar, and the cycles and conditions of performance regular; unpredictability would have centred on the response of the audience, and the potential for comic moments, as well as the lack of a set ‘script’ in many instances.

Ideas of belief, memory and prediction are linked here in quite profound ways. John believes in this staged event to such an extent that he reckons Nicholas has fallen “with his astromye / [i]n some woodnesse or in some agonye” (3451–52). Rather than placing his faith in astrology, John is an advocate of blind faith and a declared preference for ignorance of things to come:

Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee.

Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man

That noght but oonly his bileve kan! (3455–47).

John, having quickly related the story of another astronomer who fell into a clay pit whilst looking at the stars (and, by implication, who failed in his quest to see the future), resolves to relieve Nicholas of his studies, and has his knave break down the door of the chamber that, up until now, has been sealed and secret, revealing Nicholas sitting still as stone, as if in a trance. The behaviour and attitudes of John, the landlord-carpenter are, however, contradictory: despite his absolute assertion that no man should have any knowledge of “Goddes pryvetee” – that mere men should not dabble in things that are beyond their comprehension or control – and his blind faith in God, he proceeds to banish any bad spirits through incantations and by saying “the white *pater-noster*” in a moment in which Chaucer acknowledges not simply the carpenter’s lack of sophisticated insights but in fact the common crossing ground between the language and practices associated with medieval folklore and magic and catechism:

Awak, and thenk on Christes passioun!

I crouche thee from elves and fro wightes.”

Therewith the nyght-spel seyd he anon-rightes

On foure halves of the hous aboute,

And on the tresshfold of the dore withouteL

“Jhesu Crist and Saint Benedight,

Blesse this hous from every wikked wight,

For nyghtes verye, the white *pater-noster*!” (3480–85).

These mysterious and half-accurate preventive measures, as well as the carpenter’s willingness to listen to the “pryvetee / of certyen thyng” (3493–4), disclosed to him behind the firmly-shut door of Nicholas’ chamber, reveal the confusion and chaos that characterises his belief-system as well as his interest in prevention and protection, despite his earlier statement in relation to God’s will; but they also pre-empt and prefigure the chaos that will inevitably follow Nicholas’ warning and prediction.

**Nicholas and Prediction = Chaos**

Nicholas, until this point in the *Tale*, has been associated with privacy, mystery and secrecy, and descriptions of his practices and science are loaded with terms and adjectives that encourage us to view him and his practices with suspicion. Indeed his moment of revelation – which will lead to chaos – is itself performative but it is also confused. Physically Nicholas acts the part of someone who has seen a vision, or has been entranced, for the benefit of his host, but his words display the same confusion and mixing of faith and secular practice that we see used to comic effect in John’s ‘blessing’ of the room. Nicholas asks John to listen to what he describes as “Cristes counseil” (3504) (revealing it to him even as he asks him to keep it secret, l. 3505), but he goes on to claim that he has used astrology to predict a flood – much more serious and “great” than that of Noah, claiming to have foreseen the disaster:

I have yfounde in myn astrologye,

As I have looked in the moone bright,,

That now a Monday next, at quarter nyght,

Shal falle a reyn, and that so wilde and wood

**That half so greet was nevere Noes flood**.

This world,” he seyde, “in lasse than an hour

Shal al be dreynt, so hidous is the shour.

Thus shal mankynde drenche, as lese hir lyfe.” (3514–21).[[8]](#footnote-8)

This close relationship between astrology and providence was not unusual in the Middle Ages, but it was carefully managed and the two concepts were generally treated differently and separately.[[9]](#footnote-9) Natural astrology was considered to be non-threatening, and was mostly associated with information regarding climate, crops and general prosperity, and with the application of astrology to medicine, but judicial astrology for humans was frowned upon by the medieval Church as a heathen practice. At the beginning of the *Tale* we hear that Nicholas seems mostly to be involved in the practice of natural astrology, advising customers and friends on mundane matters like the weather. But here, he uses weather predictions, mixed with an insistence that he imparts Christ’s will, to formulate a dangerous precedent that will serve his own sexual desires. The clerk weaves an improbable story that predicts disaster but that lacks important detail (such as the reason for the imminent flood) and that suggests a solution that is as elaborate as it is chaotic; even as he unfolds the details of his plan, he tells John that neither his serving-maid nor his knave may be spared for reasons that are linked to “Goodes pryvetee” (3558); however, he is able to predict, as accurately as if he has consulted an almanac, that the water will have subsided “[a]boute pryme upon the nexte day” (3554).

Why does John the carpenter fall for this ruse, given that he allegedly harbours great doubts about the arts in which Nicholas dabbles? The consistent overt and subtle references to the mystery dramas throughout the *Tale* can probably in part answer that question. The solution proposed by Nicholas certainly has a surreal, staged quality to it, asking us to imagine a scenario in which Nicholas, Alison and John are hoisted above the world, as if on the higher levels of a stage, in wooden tubs which have been fashioned by the carpenter. Certainly the Carpenter, who is “rude” (3227) (and who indeed has to be reminded by clever Nicholas of Solomon’s advice: “’Werk al by conseil, and thou shalt nat rewe’” [3531]) would have gleaned much of his knowledge of the Bible from the cycle dramas, and the story of Noah, or “Noe”, and the flood is one that would have been familiar even to John. Noah plays were a key aspect of many of the cycles, and versions are certainly preserved from the York, Chester, Towneley and in N-Town cycles, and Noah is frequently depicted in these plays as a carpenter. Indeed the Miller-narrator’s comments on John’s reaction to this are revealing:

Lo, which a greet thyng is affeccious!

Men may dyen of ymaginacioun,

So depe may impressioun be take.

This sely carpenter bigynneth quake;

Hym thynketh verraily that he may see

Noees flood come walwynge, as the see

To drenchen Alisoun, his hony deere (3611–17).

The concern for John is all for his young wife, Alison, but the flood he imagines and that he believes will engulf the world is “Noees flood”, not a new threat or a potentially calamitous natural phenomenon related to natural astrology, but something that has previously occurred, both in a performed sense on a regular basis, but also in the collective cultural memory of the people. This imagined recurrence of the biblical Flood prefigures the chaotic, unpredictable and apocalyptic end of the world (which in this case has been predicted by Nicholas), and anticipating, of course, the Last Judgement and the associated uncertainty.[[10]](#footnote-10) The comic manner in which several of the mystery plays present the story of Noah is referenced here (notably Noah’s wife’s refusal to enter the ark), and several other allusions to the plays occur: the “nyght-spel” is familiar from the Townely cycle, and it is noted that John the carpenter would have been familiar with story of the Harrowing of Hell from the mystery plays.[[11]](#footnote-11) When, in the final ‘scene’ of the *Tale*, the carpenter wakes from his sleep he thinks: “Allas, now comth Nowelis flood!” (3818) ...

The result of the trick that is played on the “sely” carpenter is of course, chaotic, but it is also comic, having the quality of a theatrical or staged event. There is even a ready-made audience present, roused by the cries of Nicholas and Alison:

The folk gan laughen at his fantasye;

Into the roof they kiken and they cape,

And turned al his harm into a jape (3840–42).

The privacy and secrecy that has been a feature of the *Tale* is in the end overturned, quite literally; but the suspicion with which Chaucer seems to regard the ways in which humans attempt to counteract unpredictability and chaos lingers. The attraction to spells, incantations and easily-peddled solutions and quick answers is satirized and presented to a contemporary audience not just in Chaucer’s work but, by implication, in the cycle plays with which even the uneducated were familiar. Indeed such practices as associated with clever agents, such as Nicholas, who are predictably private and vague, but also with the trusting and equally-predictable characters like John the carpenter, and his equivalents in the dramas.[[12]](#footnote-12) People would have undoubtedly found themselves laughing heartily at everyday truths when they attended cycle dramas, but they mostly would have continued to place their trust in the uncertain and shadowy arts associated with prediction.

1. All quotations from Chaucer in this paper are from Larry D. Benson (ed), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the Middle Ages, astronomy was seen a set of theoretical principles, while astrology was its practical application. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “augrym stones” are counters for use on an abacus. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 68 n. 3191. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Note on the *Almagest*; the carpenter is described as “rude” in the context of his predicted cuckolding by Alison, his eighteen-year old wife, where it is stressed that he “knew not Catoun” (A.I.3227) who would have advised that men should marry an equal; but this is highlighted by Chaucer closely following his description of Nicholas’ bookshelves and, by implication, his book-learning. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (perhaps a doubling here, since Nicholas also uses scents, in his case perfumed and sweet herbs) and later Absolon chews mint to make his breath seem fresher, (ref). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This reference also reminds us of the Miller, the narrator of the tale, perhaps a guild member himself who, in his Prologue, interrupts the Host Harry Bailey drunkenly and “in Pilates voys” (I.A.3124). We are also reminded of course of *Hamlet*, in which the travelling players are ...

   harrowing of hell, 3512 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Nicholas bases his predictions on lunar astrology, and on the well-known instability associated with the moon; but he also references dismal or canicular days, in which tradition Monday was considered unlucky. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 847 n. 3538–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 846 n. 3512. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The night spells is usually spoken by one of the shepherds in the Towenley cycle, for example (p. 846, n. 3480). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)