

Mills and Millers in Old and New World Folksong

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Just as the technology of mills and milling crossed from the Old World to the New with the North American settlers, so cultural references to the prominence of that building and its purpose in everyday life also crossed over to the American colonies. Folksongs reveal the consistencies of mills, milling and millers between medieval and colonial culture in a wide variety of ways. The usual substance of these mill-related folksongs, originating in the British Isles and traveling with the immigrants over to North America, included not only the work of the mill, but also the figure of the miller. To a song, they paint this figure as one who is known throughout society as a selfish, grasping thief who takes advantage of anyone he can.

All classes were dependent on the millers' work, since it was a necessary step in obtaining bread, "the staff of life." Everyone who brought grain, whether of high estate or low, was grist for the miller's greed. Millers were most famous for short-weighting or overcharging the toll owed them for the use of the mill. [see also [Mill Laws](#) lesson]. Millers often refused to operate the mill under the eyes of their customers, to facilitate their short-changing of their patrons. The well-known expression, "Keep your nose to the grindstone" has lost its second part, which is as follows: "and keep your eye to the road." This section indicates that, when a miller saw approaching customers, he would stop mill operations until they were out of view once more.

The miller's negative reputation came to the New World along with mill technology. We have chosen selections from both literature and folksong to demonstrate the miller's unfortunate image. Our first example occurs in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* [see the [Reeve's Tale](#) lesson]. The others selected are folksongs whose origins go back to late medieval Britain, and were also well-known throughout the colonies. They show the miller in his nasty work, often in quite humorous ways. So widespread was the miller's terrible reputation in Colonial America that in an eighteenth-century document, a non-Moravian Pennsylvanian comments, with an air of surprise, on the uprightness of the Moravian millers in their business dealings:

By nature he had a somewhat rough and authoritative manner, which sometimes made it difficult for those who had contact with him or worked under his supervision. Halfheartedness and apparent unfaithfulness anywhere angered him very much. However, everyone will have to agree that he acted out of a faithful mind and heart.^[1]

Folksongs from the British Isles continue to paint a picture of the miller as a stingy, greedy thief. For example, a sixteenth-century Scottish song called "Newmill" tells the story of a peasant who goes to work at the mill of an unnamed "Maister B---," later referred to as "Maister Langnecks."^[2] However, his employment plans end early

because the room and board for the master's workers is so stingy, the peasant finds it unlivable:

"I hadna been a week come hame [from home]
When I could plainly see
The tables they were rather bare,
And they did not suit me.
The breid was thick, the brose was thin, [bread and oatcake]
The broth they were like bree [barley-water, rather than meat soup];
I chased the barley roun' the plate,
And a' I got was three."[\[3\]](#)

He also has reasonable complaints about his housing:

"Our humble cot, as you may see,
It stands both bleak and bare;
And the hen-house it stands west a wee
For to complete the square."[\[4\]](#)

Such close proximity, and downwind most likely, from the chicken coops would make for an unpleasant smell, to say the least.

However, the peasant points out that the miller lives quite comfortably indeed. When describing his poor meal, he says that "[t]he knife and fork were seldom seen/But in the carpet room," meaning that only the miller (and his family, if he had one) ate food substantial enough to require knife and fork (meaning meat), and that his dining room was well-set in tableware as well. He also describes the "black silk goons [gowns]" the miller buys for his wife with his ill-gotten gains, clothing most would consider "above the station" of a miller's wife. He goes so far as to accuse the master even more directly of his crimes:

"And Maister Langnecks is a man
Who can baith cheat and lee [both cheat and lie],
And tries to put his servants off
Without their penny fee."[\[5\]](#)

He also indicts the miller for his greedy nature:

"He wad [would] sell the water in his dam,
If ony ane [only anyone] wad buy."[\[6\]](#)

Obviously, though, not everyone was willing to submit to the miller's cheating ways. Peasants frequently used handmills, such as querns, in the home to avoid the miller's fee to grind one's grain. Another song from approximately the same time as "Newmill" is called simply, "The Quern-Lilt; or Grinding Song." Its existence reveals the commonness of this practice, even giving insight into the sounds and rhythms of

grinding grain for the day's food. Even the sound of the quern, the song says, is enough to ease the hungry stomach, just as funeral laments sooth the mourning heart and the lullaby stills the baby:

"The cronach stills the dowie heart
The jurram stills the bairnie;
But the music for a hungry wame's
The grinding o' the quernie."[\[7\]](#)

The image of the shifty, untrustworthy miller who enriches himself by stealing from those who use his mill to grind their grain appears to have been incredibly long-lived and widely-known, appearing in a number of the folksongs that made their way to Colonial America. One of the most long-lasting and widely-known songs, called "The Dishonest Miller," sums up his reputation both succinctly and humorously. In this song, the old miller lies dying, and calls his three sons to him to determine which one is best to inherit the mill and its business, with the question, "And if to thee the mill I give,/Pray tell to me what all you'll have." This question seems quite innocent, until the miller reacts to the first son's answer, that he'll steal one peck (the equivalent of a quarter-bushel) of every bushel he is given to run through the mill. The father expresses horror, and refuses him the mill ("Oh, son, oh, son, if this you do,/You will not do as I have done;/To you the mill I cannot give"), not because he promises to operate the mill dishonestly, but because he won't be operating it dishonestly *enough*: "To you the mill I cannot give/*For by those means no man can live.*" The second son promises to keep half of every bushel he mills, yet even that is not enough to meet his father's standards and earn his inheritance. Only the third son shows himself to be truly his father's son and therefore worthy of taking over the family business:

"Why, father, you know I'm your darling boy,
In stealing corn is all my joy;
I'll steal all the corn, and swear to the sack,
And whip the mill boy when he comes back."[\[8\]](#)

As horrid a picture as this paints of the milling profession, this song was known from Vermont to North Carolina, and moved with the westward expansion into Kentucky and Ohio.[\[9\]](#)

Other songs make the miller's reputation as greedy and stingy as it had been in the Middle Ages. "Gay Jemie, The Miller" tells of a miller who loses the hand of the girl whose hand he sought in marriage, just by insisting on the addition of one more grey mare to the dowry:

"Said Jem to her father, 'I've only one more regret
Although your daughter is lovely and fair,
I can't have your daughter,
I can't have your daughter,
I can't have your daughter without the grey mare.'

The money soon vanished out of his sight
And likewise Miss Katie, his joy and delight,
And then like a dog he was kicked out of doors
And ordered never to come there more."[\[10\]](#)

Jemie shows signs of lacking a true miller's vocation, as he immediately regrets his greed and its cost:

"Then Jemie, he tore his long yellow hair
And wished he had never,
And wished he had never,
And wished he had never stood for the grey mare."[\[11\]](#)

The eponymous "Jolly Miller" has no such reservations, claiming that "[n]o lawyer, surgeon, doctor/Ever had a goat from me, 'I care for nobody, no, not I,/And nobody cares for me."[\[12\]](#)

Another song, one known to have been brought over from the British Isles, makes an even harsher claim to the criminal nature of millers. "The Two Sisters" centers on jealous rivalry over a man between the two siblings, the younger having received a "gay gold ring" from a suitor the elder admired. The elder sister tricks the younger into going down to the wharf to "see the ships a-sailing about" where she pushes her rival into the sea. The younger girl does not end there, but rather swims as far as the miller's fish-pond. This might have been a happy ending, and the version which circulated by broadside in Britain as early as 1656, the final stanza says that "[t]he miller came out with his fish-hook/And fished the fair maid out of the brook."

However, the version recorded in America, recorded in the Southern Appalachians and Virginia, contains an additional two stanzas that cast millers in the familiar greedy light:

"He robbed her of her gay gold ring
And into the brook he pushed her again.
The miller was hung at his mill-gate,
oldest sister was burned at the stake."[\[13\]](#)

It is impossible to know whether this American addition implies that American millers were even more rapacious than their Old World counterparts, but it does change his role in the story from that of rescuer to avaricious murderer.

Notes

1. [\[back\]](#) Historic Bethlehem document on oil mills, p. 14
2. [\[back\]](#) "Newmill," from John Ord, *The Bothy Songs and Ballads of Aberdeen, Banff and Moray, Angus and the Mearns*. John Donald Publishers, 1974, pp. 257-58.
3. [\[back\]](#) Scot's translations courtesy of OED Online (<http://dictionary.oed.com>)

4. [\[back\]](#) "Newmill," *ibid.*, pp. 257
5. [\[back\]](#) "Newmill," *ibid.*, p. 248
6. [\[back\]](#) "Newmill," *ibid.*, p. 248
7. [\[back\]](#) "The Quern-Lilt; or Grinding Song," from Ord, *The Bothy Songs and Ballads*, p. 245.
8. [\[back\]](#) "The Dishonest Miller," from Mary Eddy, *Ballads and Songs from Ohio*. New York: J.J. Augustin, 1939, pp. 167-70; "The Miller's Advice to His Three Sons, On Taking of Toll," from [Book with "The Ballads" at the top; maybe Songcatcher in the Southern Mountains], pp. 240-42.
9. [\[back\]](#) *Ibid.*
10. [\[back\]](#) "Gay Jemie, The Miller" from Flanders and Brown, *Vermont Folk-Songs and Ballads*. Hatboro, PA: Folklore Assoc., 1968, pp. 62-3.
11. [\[back\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 63.
12. [\[back\]](#) "The Jolly Miller" arranged by Charles Fonteyn Manney from an early 18th century air [ISBN 4-95-64184-226], 1953, p. 8-9.
13. [\[back\]](#) "The Two Sisters," from ["The Ballads" book], pp. 164-5.