

## The Reeve's Tale and the Miller

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One of the inner stories in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a frame story with tales told by pilgrims on their journey, the Reeve [either chief magistrate of a town or officer of a medieval manor], gives a description of a miller in his tale that reflects traits commonly ascribed to millers in literature and life over several centuries, stereotypic elements, which appear in early American colonial life as well. The Reeve tells his story to retaliate against another pilgrim, a miller, whose tale about an unhappily married carpenter has angered the reeve. Chaucer's prologue gives a description of the miller, which has some similarities with the miller figure the Reeve describes.

- The Miller's description from the *Reeve's Tale*  
[Middle English Version](#)  | [Modern English Version](#) 
- The Miller's Description in the *General Prologue*  
[Middle English Version](#)  | [Modern English Version](#) 

You will first have a series of questions about the miller in the Reeve's story; then you should find the points of comparison between the Reeve's miller Simpkin and the miller pilgrim in Chaucer's prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*.

### Questions

#### The Description of the Miller in Chaucer's Reeve's Tale

1. How do we know that the miller is status-conscious? What language does Chaucer use to convey the miller's vanity?
2. What kind of disposition does the miller have? Chaucer lets us know by description and/or example in at least three instances what the miller's character is like. What are these instances?
3. Is the miller accused of any criminal activities?
4. Because the mill was central to their existence, medieval people were very interested in mill technology and frequently were quite proud of a new mill in their area. Lack of understanding of technology breeds suspicion, whether justified or not. How do Aleyne and John, who are not millers, but students, try to prevent the miller from cheating them? How do their strategies reflect an understanding of mill technology?

#### The Description of the Miller in Chaucer's Prologue

1. Medieval people believed that people's appearance revealed their character, specifically which humor, and therefore which personality trait dominated. Describe the Miller: his form, color of hair, facial characteristics.

[See Curry in *PMLA* XXXV, No. 2 189-209, which collects the references from medical manuscripts on physiognomic features of miller and reeve revealing their character traits]

2. Line 563 indicates that he was about as honest as millers get, (*i.e.*, not very), since this line reflects the old proverb, "An honest miller has a golden thumb." What similarities do you see with the pilgrim miller in the prologue of the *Canterbury Tales* with the miller in the Reeve's tale.