"Of Goddes pryvetee nor of his wyf": Confusion of Orifices in Chaucer's Miller's Tale

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Other critics have connected the word "pryvetee" in the Miller's Tale, referring to both human genitalia and secrets, to the Biblical story of Moses seeing God's "back parts" (*posteriora*).[1] There appears to be general agreement that the complex of secrets, genitalia, and divinity points to many levels of meaning in the Tale, including a parody of the Knight's Tale[2] and an invocation of theological commonplaces such as the Holy Family.[3] I would suggest an even more challenging and terrifying, certainly blasphemous and heretical reading of the Tale's meaning, taking a different tack from Frederick Biggs and Laura Howes to tie Chaucer's purposeful confusion to epistemological questions and, in turn, gender issues. This train of thought inflects the word *pryvetee*'s purposeful confusion between "secret" and "genitalia" with a Biblical story in Exodus 33: God, after hiding Moses in a rock's cleft, shows him His back parts. Augustine's commentary on the Biblical episode illuminates the Tale's connections between (and confusion about) the body and knowledge. The Tale's confused orifices—backsides taken for mouths—parody the Bible story's concern with the unseen and seen, and Augustine's understanding of the Bible story as an allegory of the means and limits of human knowledge. By successfully concatenating divine and female "pryvetee," the Tale plays with concepts of bodily knowledge by alluding to divine genitalia. Combining confused orifices—holes—and the desire to "know" in its varied intellectual and bodily meanings with purposeful punning on "secret" and "private parts" leads to a blasphemous conclusion—or purposeful lack of conclusion—about God's private parts. Alison's escape from injury in the Tale forms part of this complex of meaning. The connection between divine knowledge and the knowing of women's secrets—so powerful a theme in the Wife of Bath's Tale[4]—here finds a different "end."

"Pryvetee" first appears in the Tale's prologue as the Miller advises the Reeve, and everyone else who is listening, "An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf."[5] Twice more in his tale the

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Miller repeats the phrase "Goddes pryvetee": first, in John's nervous apostrophe to Saint Frideswyth after he has been advised of Nicholas's plight (I.3454); and then in Nicholas's caution to John while telling him about the impending flood (I.3558). The word "pryvetee" and its variants, such as "pryvely," appear seven more times, describing various secret communications, such as Alison's advice to Nicholas to be secretive around John (I.3295) and John's telling Alison about the plan with the tubs, a "pryvetee" of which "she was war, and knew it bet than he" (I.3603–4). The word and its variants become a leitmotif through the tale, alerting us to the comedy inherent in domestic secrets and the misprision and misuse of divine ones, no matter how mistaken they—the characters or the secrets—may be. Significantly, the leitmotif begins by yoking "Goddes pryvetee" with that of a "wyf": divine secrets join women's secrets. The Miller's introductory link between God and wife suggests a way to read the Tale's complex of confused orifices and bodily knowledge.

The Tale's narrative concern with bottoms—Alison's, Nicholas's, John's concern for Alison's, Absolon's preoccupation with Alison's—suggests that Chaucer's audience could catch, each time the Tale uses "pryvetee," the word's other meaning: not only "secrets," as above, but "private parts" or genitalia[6]—how to know a boy from a girl. Earlier critics of the Tale may have shied from so indecent a pun, but current criticism accepts and trades on the pun's vitality.[7] The pun on "secrets" and "private parts" provides feminist critics a way to unmask the patriarchal strategies embedded in this Tale specifically, and in the fabliau mode generally.[8] Those strategies are themselves connected to epistemological questions, as Burns asserts:

> In many key instances fabliau women's speech reveals the extent to which male protagonists' claims to absolute knowledge are based on an anxiety about sexual difference, calling into question the authority of the fabliau narrator's pretense of knowing women. (39)

Feminist critics have noticed the Tale's anxieties about gender definition, and others have investigated the material practices and ideologies associated with the body and gender in the Middle Ages.[9] In the theological sphere, perhaps the most challenging problem—one which motivated its own feast day and affected artists' renderings of the infant Jesus—is the corporeal nature of the Son of God. Orthodoxy uses the "proof" of Jesus's corporeality, the very basis of the Corpus Christi feast, to face heterodox threats to the role of Christ's literal body in salvation ideology. Besides this basic theological issue, bodily knowledge in a "scientific" sense was a topic of discussion in the Middle Ages, analyzing what the body "proves" through its five senses and how the body's senses can be, and are,

fooled.[10] Without belaboring an obvious point, it is important to recognize this intellectual intersection between the facts of knowledge gained through the body and the role of the body in Christian salvation ideology. Only when we remember the body's role in the production of knowledge and salvation can we appreciate the complex intellectual joke Chaucer makes by conflating the body, knowledge, and divinity. In this light we can evaluate the literary weight of the Miller's Tale's pun on God's private parts.

In her treatment of the Miller's Tale Laura Kendrick provides clear examples of fourteenth-century visual artists' preoccupation, not with God's, but with Christ's genitals.[11] Those genitals prove Jesus's corporeal nature and, as Kendrick says,

> In such paintings, the Christ Child no longer needs to hold a scroll symbolizing the Old Testament in his hand to remind us that he is the incarnate Word, that the text of his flesh is the key to understanding God's intentions. The transparent veil reveals the nude body behind it or falls away to discover God's *pryvetee* in a material, physical representation of the abstract sense of St. Paul's words. (13)

Kendrick points out that "God the Father's private parts were as taboo in the late fourteenth century as today" (11). Nevertheless, artists' concern with Christ's genitalia cannot help, trinitarianally speaking, but make a theologically aware audience think of God's bottom, if only to banish as quickly as possible so rude a thought. Humor about human "private parts"—the very essence of the Miller's Tale's confused orifices, mouths and bottoms—and the invocation of God's "privity," comparing it to that of a "wyf," spectacularly de-sublimates *pryvetee*'s pun on "secret" and "private." Recognizing the pun contrasts the human desire for certainty with the absolute depth of divine knowledge in a linguistically playful, if doctrinally disturbing, way.

It is in this context of calibrating the text's playful and disturbing pun on God's privates that the Biblical story of Moses seeing God's backside, and Augustine's analysis and use of the Biblical passage, provides further meaning for Chaucer's Tale. God has a face that no one can see and live, according to Exodus 33. After the Israelites' apostasy and Moses's smashing of the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, Moses and God "make up":

> Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And he [God] said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious,

> and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the Lord continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back parts [*posteriora mea*]; but my face [*faciem*] shall not be seen" (Exodus 33: 18–23).[12]

Notice that, in an episode wherein Moses cannot see God's "face," the hidden and secret are conflated with seeing—and knowing (or *not* knowing)—God's "pryvetee": His face, and by extension His front side, are off-limits to human sight and knowledge. Moses's knowledge of God cannot be complete; human knowledge is different from divine knowledge. Significantly, what Moses *does* get to see—and know—are God's back *parts*. The Latin plural, for a punning mind, is important. *Posteriora mea* can be euphemistically glossed as the singular "back" only by ignoring grammatical number and human anatomy. Certainly those back parts include legs and shoulders, but "back parts" inescapably suggests buttocks, what we call the backside.[13] Moses can see God's backside, but he cannot see—or know—God's face or His front side. Moses's expressed desire to see and to know God can be only partially met.

Not surprisingly, and in line with a general tendency towards decorum (an attitude that characterizes Augustine's time as much as that of early Chaucer critics, if not our own), Augustine counsels in his *Exposition on the Book of Psalms* a figurative interpretation of God's backside, admonishing his reader not to think literally but allegorically:

> And from these words there ariseth another enigma, that is, an obscure figure of the truth. *When I have passed by,* saith God, *thou shalt see My back parts;* as though He hath on one side His face, on another His back. Far be it from us to have any such thoughts of that Majesty! . . . But forasmuch as the Lord was about to take flesh in due time, so as to appear even to fleshly eyes, that healthfully He might cure the soul within, since thus it was needful that He should appear, foretelling this . . . By *His Face* He meant His former estate, and in a manner by His back parts, His passing from this world by His Passion . . . .[14]

Augustine, like the Miller's Tale's early critics, intends to cut off any speculation on God's bodily form, including his private parts, front or back, by allegorizing the incident, and warning his audience not to think about God's body. The warning, while needed, can hardly be heeded, since even the readers of exegesis are situated as bodily creatures, created in God's image, and their greater theological sophistication, such as a

belief in a unified Trinity, only adds to an inability to "forget" God's body. In other words, Augustine's reading of the passage, far from diminishing the importance of these corporeal themes, such as the linking of knowledge to the body, foregrounds the very centrality of God's body, as fourteenth-century painters had foregrounded Christ's genitals. Almost in spite of himself, Augustine's rationale participates in and depends on the necessity of human, bodily understanding to explain the Incarnation and salvation history.

Augustine was obviously aware of this inherent contradiction between the need to explain salvation in terms of a real body and, owing to Trinitarian orthodoxy, the importance of keeping God disembodied. He includes in *On the Trinity* the same warning he had given in his commentary on Psalm 138—not to take "backside" too literally:

> For we should not become so enveloped in the murkiness of the flesh as to think that the face of the Lord is invisible but His back is visible . . . Far be it from us to think any such thing of Him in the form of God! Far be it from us to think that the Word of God and the Wisdom of God has a face on one side and a back on the other, as the human body, or that it undergoes any change at all either in appearance, motion, time, or place![15]

That attitude, of course, reveals Augustine's desire to cleanse the episode of a meaning it too easily—and inescapably—has. Instead, Augustine counsels an allegorical reading: "By *His Face* He meant His former estate, and in a manner by His back parts, His passing from this world by His Passion." For Augustine, God's face typifies his divine nature, his back parts typify the Passion, and the allegory of God's passing his hand over Moses refers to the two periods of history, before and after the crucifixion. Since the Passion could not have happened without Christ's corporeal nature, we can complete the syllogism that Augustine suggests despite himself: God's backside symbolizes Christ's corporeality. Elsewhere Augustine more explicitly calls God's behind a metaphor for Christ's flesh. In his commentary on Psalm 120, Augustine makes the following equation: "What are His back parts? *and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us*"; and, after a disquisition on bodily resurrection, "What meaneth, see His back parts? Believe in His resurrection."[16] *De Trinitate* also connects God's backside with Christ's body.

> And as a matter of fact the words which the Lord later says to Moses . . . are commonly and not without reason understood to prefigure the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the back parts are taken to be His flesh, in which He was born of the Virgin and rose

> again, whether they are called back parts [*posteriora*] because of the posteriority of His mortal nature, or because He deigned to take it near the end of the world, that is, at a later period.[17]

Equating God's backside with Christ's flesh fills out Augustine's earlier allegory of God's back parts; after all, what makes the son the Son is his flesh.

Warnings against literalist reading, coupled with equating fleshly nature with the backside, make the rude humor of the Miller's Tale all the more delicious as well as blasphemous—even though Christ has a backside, we are not supposed to think about it, either. On the other hand, the backside seems ubiquitous in medieval art. As the backside typifies the flesh, so bottoms provide profane humor in much art of the Middle Ages. Art historian Michael Camille notes this humor in manuscript margins and misericord faces.[18] The success of the backside as a metonymy for human flesh depends on theological sources, such as Augustine's exegesis, for its suggestiveness and power. The body, the flesh, and the bottom are not far removed from the most elevated theological discussions, even in Augustine's warnings against such literal thinking.

In letter 147, explaining to Paulina the difference between bodily and inward sight, Augustine deals with "seeing is believing," and, in trotting out the passage from Exodus, obliquely refers to God's backside as a figure for the church:

> Again, in ancient times, in the case of the faithful servant of God, Moses, who was destined to labor on this earth and to rule the chosen people, it would not be surprising that what he asked was granted: that he might see the glory of the Lord, to whom he said: "If [I] have found favor before thee, show me thyself openly." He received an answer adapted to present conditions, that he could not see the face of God, because no man could see Him and live; thus God made clear that the vision belongs to another and better life. In addition to that, the mystery of the future Church of Christ was foreshadowed by the words of God. Doubtless, Moses represented in himself the type of the Jewish people who would believe in Christ after His Passion, and that is why it says: "When I shall pass, thou shalt see my back parts," and the rest which is there said, by an admirable mystery which foretells the Church to come. But it would take too long to discuss this now.[19]

As in his other commentaries, Augustine equates God's front and back with the Old and New Law. Considering the length of the letter, Augustine's reluctance to elucidate his equation of the church with God's

backside is surprising. Perhaps his lacuna serves the same purpose as his warnings in other commentaries not to take God's back and front literally.

More important for our purposes, this letter of Augustine's treats the concept of knowledge and human reliance on the senses with a brief disquisition on the metaphor of "seeing":

> Although there are five senses in the body—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—of these, sight is attributed especially to the eyes, but we use this word also of the others. Not only do we say, "See, how bright it is,' but also "See, what a noise," "See, what a smell," "See, what a taste," "See, how hot it is."[20]

The confluence in Augustine's letter between his invocation of the Exodus story (along with his unusual lacuna) and his meditation on how bodily senses provide knowledge reveals his association of the Exodus story with the realm of human knowledge, located for Augustine in the power to "see" as both word and action. In his allegorical renderings, Augustine connects the passage from Exodus with the role of the literal body, especially sight, in human understanding. Augustine's letter 147 explains to Paulina the difference between bodily and inward sight, in an attempt to answer her question whether God can be seen by bodily eyes; he also treats the difference between spiritual and corporeal sight in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*.[21] In both works, Augustine uses the passage from Exodus to explain spiritual sight, and to assess the body's role in attaining knowledge. When Augustine thinks "body" and "sight," he thinks of the Biblical passage from Exodus, with its shimmering, if inappropriate, image of God's *posteriora* and uses the confluence of seeing and knowing in his attempt to explain the differences between spiritual and bodily sight. Again, the body is foundational to and used for human understanding, even as spiritual understanding is the orthodox goal.

If for Augustine, the passage in Exodus figures God's "back parts" as a metaphor for corporeality, His face for divinity, and Augustine fits that corporeality into the larger question of relying on the body's senses for knowledge, Chaucer's humor plays upon Augustine's exegesis by emphasizing bottoms and using confused body parts to "expose" the limits of human knowledge. Nicholas and Absolon learn to their regret that the human backside does not provide incontrovertible knowledge of person, place, or thing. Chaucer makes laughable the importance of vision to knowledge by subverting visual and bodily knowledge in the Tale: bottoms are taken for faces in more than one instance. Furthermore, the Tale, like Augustine's exegesis, uses conflated senses to illustrate confounded human knowledge. The synesthesia Augustine

outlines to explain the power of sight in the passage from Letter 147 cited above echoes in the Tale's final episode, the blinding fart:

> This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart
> As greet as it had been a thonder-dent,
> That with the strook he [Absolon] was almoost yblent;
> And he was redy with his iren hoot,
> And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot. (I.3806–10)

Absolon, who had earlier kissed Alison's behind, thinking it her face, here exacts his revenge, having prepared a hot poker. But Nicholas, Alison's lover, humorously takes Alison's place at the window and receives Absolon's punishing stroke, with only a fart between Absolon's arrival and Nicholas's burned bottom. The passage alludes to four of the five senses, from smelling and hearing the fart, to its capacity to blind, and then to the sensation of burning. The one sense this passage avoids had been the center of Absolon's earlier mistake when he kissed Alison's backside "ful savourly" (I.3735). Blind as he is, Absolon still makes his way to his fell purpose, misdirected as it may be, while Nicholas has his own vacuum of understanding, having misunderstood Absolon's intent. Chaucer uses sensual confusion to poke fun at the limits of human knowledge in the same way that Augustine uses linguistic synesthesia—seeing a smell—to foreground how humans use and abuse sensual vocabulary to recognize—or kick against—knowledge's limits.

We do not need Augustine's exegesis to see that the Miller's Tale emphasizes the body: no surprise for a *fabliau*. Nicholas grabs Alison's haunch bones (I.3279), and balances his own on the shot window (I.3803). Alison's white apron sits "Upon hir lendes, ful of many a goore" (I.3237). Absolon's talents include body care: "Wel koude he laten blood, and clippe and shave" (I.3326). The Tale depends on bodily desire for its inception, and on backsides for its humor. More importantly, the Tale consistently makes fun of the limits of human knowledge, from John's misunderstanding his wife, his boarder, and the Bible, to Absolon's confusion regarding backsides and love. But the greatest confusion in the Miller's Tale does not just come from flesh; it comes more specifically from holes.

Holes show up everywhere in the Tale's details, from architectural holes—windows (I.3694, I.3708) and doors (I.3432)—to the cat hole John's servant uses to spy on Nicholas (I.3440–41). Clothes have holes: the windows on Absolon's shoes (I.3318), the gores in Alison's apron (I.3237). And bodies have holes: the lovers' kissing mouths (I.3305); Absolon's singing mouth, sweetened with cardamom and licorice (I.3690); Alison's

kissed anus (I.3734–5) and Nicholas's burned one (I.3812). These orifices are confused: cat holes become peep holes, windows become doors, mouths become anuses and anuses become wounds.[22] The Tale's humor depends on this confusion to direct our attention to the incompleteness of human knowledge and amplify the meaning of the Tale's indecent puns on God's and a wife's "pryvetee."

A hole—an aperture or opening—appears in the Bible episode in Exodus 33. God tells Moses the conditions under which he may see His backside: Moses will stand in a "cleft of the rock" as God's "glory passes by." "Cleft of the rock" translates the Vulgate's *foramen petrae. Foramen* is "an opening or aperture produced by boring, a hole" and, in late Latin, "a cave."[23] The Biblical story, then, also has its hole. For Augustine in *On the Trinity,* however, it is not a hole, but a watchtower, from a textual confusion in the Old Latin Bible between *specula* and *spelunca.* Augustine's watchtower could have prompted the power of his association between the Exodus 33 story and the importance of sight to human knowledge, as evidenced in his meditation on sight in Letter 147. Whether *formamen, spelunca,* or *specula,* Moses's "hidey hole"—a place where looked-for knowledge is circumscribed, only partially given, despite (or because of) human desire—seems of a piece with the many holes in Chaucer's Tale and the humorous limitations of and confusions about many of them.[24]

Augustine never explicitly refers in his commentaries to what Moses cannot see, God's secret, private parts and, while paradoxically insisting on the backside as a figure for the flesh, simultaneously warns the reader: "Far be it from us to have any such thoughts of that Majesty!" Augustine's warning reminds the reader of the Miller's Tale of its Prologue's advice to "chese another Tale," a paradoxical kind of insistence, foregrounding that which it ostensibly counsels against, as does Augustine's warning. The object of Augustine's warning is both God's front side—utterly hidden, secret, forbidden—and God's backside—circumspectly but dangerously a figure for human fleshly nature. The nature of Augustine's warning—its link between the body and knowledge—provides a telling parallel to Chaucer's own warning about reading an obscene Tale with many confusions about bottoms and holes.

Chaucer transforms Augustine's decorum into the Miller's joke. But the Miller himself reveals his own ignorance of anatomy, in particular female anatomy, when he confuses the "holes" of Alison's female body.

> Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole,
> And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,
> And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers

> But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers
> Ful savourly, er he were war of this (I.3730–35).

Which hole? Alison's sense of balance would have to be rather remarkable were she to hang only her anus, and not her vagina, out the shot window. But, since Absolon gets a mouthful of hair, he apparently didn't kiss her backside and miss her vagina, as the Miller has with his singular noun.[25] While Nicholas is obsessed with Alison's private parts, and the Miller, in telling his tale, shifts continually between holes and "pryvetee," the Miller himself reveals his confusion about, and maybe even his ignorance of, female anatomy. The Tale thus hints at the impossibility of a man knowing a woman's private parts, as well as her secrets—as did the yoking of "Goddes pryvetee" with that of a "wyf." Elaine Hansen and E. Jane Burns generalize the Miller's confusion into that of patriarchy, and lament another patriarchal appropriation of women's bodies. But the Miller's confusion about Alison's private parts, as noted by both critics, echoes the Miller's, Moses's, and indeed everyone's, ignorance of God's private parts.

The episodes at the shot window with their intentional confusions of holes and bodies parody God's display to Moses, making us all too aware of the limits of human knowledge. What is the secret knowledge God keeps from us? Karma Lochrie and Elaine Hansen base their readings of the Miller's Tale on patriarchy's hidden paradigm of male homosocial bonding, where women exist only as a means of exchange between men. For Lochrie, God's privity equals this once-secret patriarchal strategy: "'Goddes pryvetee' is really the subject of Nicholas's plan to fool John, who knows better than to inquire into it (I.3454)" (298). Yet, as Burns points out, the thing not "known" in the Miller's Tale is Alison's "front." Nicholas "privily" grabs her apron-covered "queynte" as she, keeping her orifices confused, tells him he can't have a kiss (I.3275–87). Later, Absolon mistakes her behind for her face, and the Miller tells us about the singular hole she hangs out the window (I.3732). On the one hand, Alison's "front" is well-known, as welcoming as can be (but not as welcoming as that of the Tale's analogues[26]); on the other, it is as mysterious to the reader's eye as is God's, and baffles the Tale's other characters as well. The unknowability of "Goddes pryvetee" in Exodus—the face refused to Moses or, more tellingly (by analogy to the "back parts"), the "front parts" of God—becomes the ostensibly self-evident, yet persistent mystery of Alison. The Miller's Tale thus blasphemously—and deliciously—elevates Alison's private parts and their unknowability to the level of God's. Lochrie notes Alison's disappearance by the end of the poem, but I suggest that another disappearing character is ever present: God. The Tale's parallel between a wife's secrets and God's—and a wife's privates and God's—subverts complacent masculinity as does the Tale's hilarious

narrative, especially in the case of Nicholas's punishment. As the Exodus story, and even Augustine's exegesis makes clear, God's privates—his front parts—are beyond man's comprehension. Could the confusion of mouths, bottoms, and other holes, along with the unknowability of a wife's as well as God's privates, imply that His too might be feminine?[27] In a Tale saturated with a confusion about holes and their purposes and meaning, can we be so sure how many holes God has, even as we are surely not supposed to think of such things, or read such tales?

The Miller's Tale doesn't mention, even euphemistically, the male genitalia: instead the Tale, either despite or because of all its confused orifices, mystifies the male anatomy.[28] The movie rating system used in the United States until recently said the same thing: only a visible penis earned a movie an X rating.[29] Western culture has surrounded the penis with fearsome sanctity for centuries. We can read that fearsome sanctity in God's refusal to let Moses see Him: no human can see his face and live. The earthly version of God's front is Christ's genitalia, and that appurtenance is celebrated in fourteenth-century art. The Tale equates the mystery of God's privates not with Nicholas's, but with a "wyf"'s, Alison's, the one character in the Tale who receives no punishment. While the Miller's Tale from the very first mention of "pryvetee" punningly elevates female genitalia to the level of the divine, at the same time it humorously alludes to Augustine's exegesis concerning the limits of human knowledge as foundational to the identity mechanisms of the human frame, beginning (and ending) with the difference (or lack thereof) between male and female. The Miller's Tale gives its readers the mystery and power of unknowable woman: the mystery of her orifices, utterly confusing even to the ostensibly initiated, and the mystery of her power, situated, unlike (or like) the divine's, in a triumphant "Tehee."

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NOTES

1. See Frederick M. Biggs and Laura L. Howes, "Theophany in The Miller's Tale," *Medium Aevum* 65.2 (1996): 269–79, and their very kind note. My appreciation to Elizabeth Scala for her exceptionally perceptive criticism of this essay and invaluable assistance, and to John Rumrich, editor of *TSLL*.

2. See *A Variorum Edition of The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,* Volume II (*The Canterbury Tales*), Part 3: the Miller's Tale, ed. Thomas W. Ross, 37–41 for a general overview of the relationships between the Knight's Tale and the Miller's Tale.

3. See, for instance, Robert Kaske, "The *Canticum Canticorum* in the *Miller's Tale*," *Studies in Philology* 59 (1962): 479–500.

4. For a tantalizing reading of such secrets, see Karma Lochrie, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Murderous Plots and Medieval Secrets," in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), 137–52. For the most important feminist reading of sacred flesh, see Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

5. Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Miller's Prologue," *The Riverside Chaucer*, Third Edition, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), fragment I, lines 3164–65. All further citations of the Miller's Prologue and the Miller's Tale are taken from this edition.

6. See "privete" in the *Middle English Dictionary*, part of the online *Middle English Compendium* (accessed February 21, 2001, http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx). The word's primary meaning as "secret" appears as early as the *Ancrene Riwle* and continues with fourteenth-century citations from Chaucer, Gower, the Wyclif Bible, and Richard Rolle. Meaning "genitalia," the word appears, among other places, in the Monk's Tale, the Wyclif Bible, and the "Charters of the Abbey of Holy Ghost," all from the late fourteenth century.

7. Peter Beidler usefully surveys the fortunes of the Miller's Tale in his article "Art and Scatology in the 'Miller's Tale,'" *Chaucer Review* 12 (1977): 90–91. Besides Howes and Biggs's study, see Katarina Wilson, "Hagiographic (Dis)Play: Chaucer's 'The Miller's Tale,'" *Auctor Ludens: Essays on Play in Literature*, eds. Gerald Guinness and Andrew Hurley (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1986), 37–45; Thomas J. Farrell, "Privacy and the Boundaries of Fabliau in the *Miller's Tale*," *ELH* 55 (1989): 773–95; and Britton J. Harwood, "The 'Nether Ye' and its Antitheses: A Structuralist Reading of 'The Miller's Tale,'" *Annuale Medievale* 21 (1981): 5–30.

8. E. Jane Burns's assessment of bodily jokes in fabliaux locates male authors' references to female genitalia within a frame of ignorance about female sexuality: Burns adopts Irigaray's model of patriarchal strategies to silence woman through the "penis eye." See "A Close Look at Female Orifices in Farce and Fabliau," Chapter One of *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993). Similarly, Elaine Tuttle Hansen's assessment of the tale starts with its misogyny: she sees the tale as both misrepresenting female sexuality and, because of male fear of the feminine, replacing the female with the male, as Nicholas replaces Alison in the final scene: "By deflecting attention from Alisoun's threatening self-exposure as he does—blurring the focus to begin with by the use of the word 'hole,' and then replacing Alisoun altogether—the Miller mystifies and averts the threats that any representation of female sexuality seems to entail: the feminization of the man who tells 'queynte' stories, as well as both the homoerotic and self-mutilating aspects of male competition for the 'queynte' of a woman" ("'Women-as-the-Same' in the A-Fragment," Chapter 8 of *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992], 236). Karma Lochrie sees the tale's triangular relationships as evidence of patriarchy's "secret" mode that makes "woman" exclusively the result of men's economic transactions ("Women's 'Pryvetees' and Fabliau Politics in the Miller's Tale," *Exemplaria* 6 [1994]: 287–304).

9. The body as a category of literary investigation has motivated a great number of feminist studies in the 1990s. Besides Beckwith, *Christ's Body* (see note 4), see also the essays in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, eds.

Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York : Columbia University Press, 1997); *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

10. One of many places to find this issue explored, albeit somewhat later than the Miller's Tale, is the work of Nicholas of Cusa: see the new edition of his works, *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations*, volumes 1 and 2, ed. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000).

11. "Reading for *Sentence* versus Reading for Solas: A Broadening Example," chapter one in Laura Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 5–19. Kendrick's argument relies on Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

12. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1991) with the insertion of "back parts" to reflect the Latin plural. The Vulgate reads, "Qui ait: Ostende mihi gloriam tuam. Respondit: Ego ostendam omne bonum tibi, et vocabo in nomine Domini coram te: et miserebor cui voluero, et clemens ero in quem mihi placuerit. Rursumque ait: Non poteris videre faciem meam: non enim videbit me homo, et vivet. Et iterum: Ecce, inquit, est locus apud me, et stabis supra petram. Cumque transibit gloria mea, ponam te in foramine petrae, et protegam: tollamque manum meam, et videbis posteriora mea: faciem autem meam videre non poteris," *Biblia sacra: iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, eds. Boniface Fischer and Robert Weber (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983).

13. It is also possible that verses 20 and 23 use *faciem* as a euphemism for penis, in light of the Biblical prohibition against seeing a father's naked penis; so Noah curses his son Ham for seeing his father's nakedness (Genesis 9:20–28).

14. *Expositions on the Book of Psalms* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1857), vol. 6, 197–98; Migne *PL* 37: 1788–89: "Et ex his verbis natum est alterum aenigma, id est obscura quaedam figura rerum. *Cum transiero, posteriora mea videbis*, dicit Deus; quasi ex alia parte habeat faciem, ex alia dorsum. Absit a nobis tale aliquid de illa Majestate sentire . . . Sed quia erat Dominus opportuno tempore carnem suscepturus, ut oculis etiam carneis propter salubritatem curandae intus mentis appareret, quando ita apparere opus esset . . . Faciem suam dixit, prima sua? et quodam modo posteriora sua, transitum de hoc mundo passionis suae."

15. *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, C.SS.R. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 89; Migne *PL* 42: 866, "Neque enim tanto carnis nubilo debemus involvi, ut putemus faciem quidem Domini esse invisibilem, dorsum vero visibile; quandoquidem in forma servi utrumque visibiliter apparuit; in forma autem Dei absit ut tale aliquid cogitetur: absit ut Verbum Dei et sapientia Dei ex una parte habeat faciem ex alia dorsum, sicut corpus humanum, aut omnino ulla specie vel motione sive loco sive tempore commutetur."

16. *Book of Psalms*, vol. 5, 478; Migne *PL* 37: 1609–10, "Posteriora ejus quae sunt? *Et Verbum caro factum est, et habitavit in nobis* . . . Quid est, Vide posteriora ejus? Crede in resurrectionem ejus."

17. *The Trinity*, 85; Migne *PL* 42: 863, "Non incongruenter ex persona Domini nostri Jesu Christi praefiguratum solet intelligi, ut posteriora ejus accipiantur

caro ejus, in qua de Virgine natus est, et mortuus, et resurrexit; sive propter posterioritatem mortalitatis posteriora dicta sint, sive quod eam prope in fine saeculi, hoc est, posterius suscipere dignatus est."

18. *Image on the Edge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 40–46.

19. *Letters,* trans. Sr. Wilfrid Parsons, S.N.D. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1953), 200; Migne *PL* 33: 610–11, "Quanquam et illi fidelissimo antiquo famulo Dei Moysi, mirum nisi in hac terra laboraturo, populumque illum adhuc recturo concessum est quod petivit, ut claritatem Domini videret, qui dixerat: *Si inveni gratiam ante te, ostende mihi temetipsum manifeste.* Accepit enim in praesentia congruum responsum, quod faciem Dei videre non posset, quam nemo videret, et viveret; hoc modo significante Deo alterius potioris vitae illam esse visionem. Deinde in verbis Dei, futurae Christi Ecclesiae mysterium figuratum est. Gestavit quippe Moyses typum populi Judaeorum, in Christum passum postea crediturí; ideo dictum est illi, *Cum transiero, posteriora mea videbis*: et caetera quae ibi dicunter, mirabili sacramento praenuntiant Ecclesiam post futuram, unde modo longum est disputare."

20. *Letters,* 176; Migne *PL* 33: 599, "Nam cum sint quinque corporis sensus, cernendi, audiendi, olfaciendi, gustandi, tangendi; visus quidem in eis praecipue oculis attributus est, verum tamen hoc verbo utimur et in caeteris. Non enim tantum dicimus, Vide quid luceat; sed etiam, Vide quid sonet, Vide quid oleat, Vide quid sapiat, Vide quid caleat."

21. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis,* Ancient Christian Writers no. 42, trans. John Hammond Taylor, S.J., vol. 2 (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 217–19; Migne *PL* 34: 245.

22. The description of Alison as a weasel also fits the theme of confused orifices: "Some say that they [weasels] conceive through the ear and give birth through the mouth, while, on the other hand, others declare that they conceive by mouth and give birth by ear," *The Book of Beasts,* ed. T. H. White (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1954), 92.

23. "II. Transferred in genitive, *an opening, hole, cave* (late Latin): petrae Vulgate Exodus 33:22; id. Jeremiah 13:4," *A Latin Dictionary,* eds. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879, imp. 1975), s.n. "foramen." Intriguingly, but probably not aptly, R. E. Latham's *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources* (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1965) includes a 1473 use of *foramen* to mean "window-pane."

24. The King James/Revised Standard Version's translation of *foramen* or *spelunca* as "cleft" tries to negotiate the confusion among these words' meanings and ends up inadvertently giving us the image of a backside's cleft.

25. Hansen also notes the ambiguity of the word "hole" (226) and helpfully explicates the words "hole" as well as "eie" in Middle English.

26. The *Variorum* includes four analogues, in all of which the wife has two or three lovers, including, for the "Italian novellino," "a Genoese, a priest, and a smith" (5–6).

27. The joke here seems related to the "no thing" assessment of the female anatomy by the male, a most frequent pun in Shakespeare's plays, not to mention Freudian analyses.

28. Peter Beidler notes that Alison's equipoise and Absolon's cry of "a beard!" contrast the part of Nicholas's anatomy, besides his "toute," that would have

confronted Absolon at the window (95–96). Hansen takes this picture one step further and points out how close Nicholas comes to castration in the final scene (235). Beidler's and Hansen's essays alert us to the male privates as important "hidden" parts of the Miller's Tale.

29. For an informative history and analysis of the "visible penis," see Linda Williams, *Hard Core : Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

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