Newer Currents in Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Difference "It" Makes: Gender and Desire in the Miller's Tale

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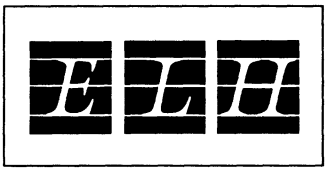

NEWER CURRENTS IN PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM, AND THE DIFFERENCE "IT" MAKES: GENDER AND DESIRE IN THE *MILLER'S TALE*

BY H. MARSHALL LEICESTER, JR.

PRETEXTS:

1. *La Psychanalyse, à supposer, se trouve.*[1]
2. Men still have everything to say about their sexuality, and everything to write. For what they have said so far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity/passivity from the power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a "dark continent" to penetrate and to "pacify." . . . Conquering her, they've made haste to depart from her borders, to get out of sight, out of body. The way man has of getting out of himself and into her whom he takes not for the other but for his own, deprives him, he knows, of his own bodily territory.[2]

I will begin with a text of Freud's, which will serve—at the beginning—as a horrible example of everything that is worst and hardest to take about what is, or used to be, thought of as psychoanalytic reading. It is a late text (1922) called "Medusa's Head," and it is short enough to quote entirely:

> We have not often attempted to interpret individual mythological themes, but an interpretation suggests itself easily in the case of the horrifying decapitated head of Medusa.
>
> To decapitate=to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother.

ELH 61 (1994) 473-499

> The hair upon Medusa's head is frequently represented in works of art in the form of snakes, and these once again are derived from the castration complex. It is a remarkable fact that, however frightening they may be in themselves, they nonetheless serve actually as a mitigation of the horror, for they replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of the horror. This is a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration.
>
> The sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone. Observe that we have here once again the same origin from the castration complex and the same transformation of affect! For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus, in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact.
>
> This symbol of horror is worn upon her dress by the virgin goddess Athena. And rightly so, for thus she becomes a woman who is unapproachable and repels all sexual desires—since she displays the terrifying genitals of the Mother. Since the Greeks were in the main strongly homosexual, it was inevitable that we should find among them a representation of woman as a being who frightens and repels because she is castrated.
>
> If Medusa's head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals, or rather if it isolates their horrifying effects from their pleasure-giving ones, it may be recalled that displaying the genitals is familiar in other connections as an apotropaic act. What arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself. We read in Rabelais of how the Devil took to flight when the woman showed him her vulva.
>
> The erect male organ also has an apotropaic effect, but thanks to another mechanism. To display the penis (or any of its surrogates) is to say: "I am not afraid of you. I defy you. I have a penis." Here, then, is another way of intimidating the Evil Spirit.
>
> In order seriously to substantiate this interpretation it would be necessary to investigate the origin of this isolated symbol of horror in Greek mythology as well as parallels to it in other mythologies.[3]

Though, as usual with Freud, this is complex, interesting and suggestive, it is also—as often with Freud—ruthlessly direct in the confidence with which it assigns meanings to the details of the myth. Despite the brief reservations expressed at the beginning and end, the passage is dominated by the image of the analyst as the man of authority who can tell you—try to stop him—what everything means and how it fits together. He forestalls objections to the more farfetched aspects of the interpretation—"if this is about castration, why does she have *lots* of snakes?"—with a technical rule drawn from

"analytical experience" the reader probably has not had, which asserts that it is routine for things to mean the opposite of what they say, commonly with the implication that it is a resistance—not *Freud's* problem—if the reader doubts it. If the last paragraph suggests that this authority-figure might sometimes recognize that generalizations like the one about Greek homosexuality could be more complicated than the piece as a whole accounts for, it is apparent that he does not let that stop him from the story he has to tell.[4] And that story is an awfully familiar one by now, because it seems to be the only one psychoanalysis knows. This familiarity would perhaps be all right if psychoanalysis did not also insist that all other stories were really just that story in disguise. One advantage of this short text, and one reason I have started with it, is that it sets out most of the important features of that story quickly and clearly. It is the story of the generic human child, what Freud characteristically calls "the little boy," perhaps adding "in the phallic stage," who is, if he is lucky, in the final throes of his oedipus complex, having just discovered that desires like the one he has for his mother can be punished in a particularly horrifying way. At the story's end he concludes that he had better stop competing with his father for her, identify with him instead and get another girl. It would not be hard to read the *Miller's Tale* that way, it could be thought of as Absolon's story, or even as Nicholas's, since neither of them escapes unscathed from the attempt, successful or not, to sleep with an older man's wife.

I am not trying to make fun of Freud here, though I am not trying to read the *Miller's Tale* that way either, or at least not to read it only that way. I am willing, though, to let this passage stand for now as an example of a set of tendencies that really are in Freud, even if they are not all that is there: I mean the way the biologism and the positivist "scientific" commitment to determinate and locatable meaning, tendencies that often render readers of societies and of texts uneasy, come together with a reductionism and male bias that seem pervasive in Freud's willingness to tell you what a woman means by reducing her to an essence, the genital mark of her sexual difference, and then to concentrate on what is important *for men* about that difference so reduced.[5]

To help the old man's image out a little, I might point out that there is something he knows about the little boy, and knows precisely because he is a psychoanalyst, that works against or in tension with the tendencies I have been describing: he knows that that boy's

sexuality is not an essence or nature he started out with, the way he did with a penis, but something he has to achieve—in part by the very processes Medusa represents and enacts. Freud knew that about little girls, too: "We find enough to study in those human individuals who, through the possession of female genitals are characterized as manifestly or predominantly feminine. . . . Psychoanalysis does not try to describe what a woman is—that would be a task it could scarcely perform—but sets about enquiring how she comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition."[6]

Freud is quite clear that from a psychological point of view what is odd is that there are two sexes rather than one or many. He is thus faced with both the biological fact of anatomical difference, and with the analytical fact that though it appears one must take up a position as either a man or a woman, "such a position is," as Juliet Mitchell says, "by no means identical with one's biological sexual characteristics, nor is it a position of which one can be very confident."[7] One's gender is not an essence but a construction, something that has to be achieved with difficulty and seldom with complete "success," whatever that would mean. In this situation, historical and other factors do tend to commit Freud to foregrounding the biological side of the contradiction, which is one reason why developmental stages that can be thought of as somehow genetic and inevitable are so important in his account. "Anatomy is Destiny," as he says in so many words, and though he is aware that there is something biologically fishy about the destiny in a developmental stage that can fail or go wrong, he does tend to give that side of things much less emphatic expression.[8]

It is here that the "newer currents" of my title come in. In response to what the first followers of Freud made of psychoanalytic reading, the work of Jacques Lacan, and particularly the feminist inflections and extensions of that work have not resolved the contradiction between biological difference and social construction or gotten rid of the difficulty. Since, as I see it, the concentration on the scandal of embodiment and the insistence on the impossibility of resolving the relation between what Freud called the biological instinct or drive and its mental representation is one of the crucial contributions of psychoanalysis, this failure is not to be held against it—and besides, I have agreed to suppose there is psychoanalysis. What these newer methods have done is to give the other side of the contradiction more direct expression, to focus more on the con-

structed character of the representations—linguistic, social, historical—that mediate instinctual drives, and the inescapable importance of that mediation. Thus, for Lacan, the unconscious (the IT of my title) is not something that is mysteriously (and metaphorically, biologistically) "inside" the heads of individuals, which somehow has archetypal contents called things like "castration" and "the oedipus complex," which are somehow "the same" for everyone. Instead, the unconscious is a *process in language*, a process in what Lacan calls the Symbolic: not just French or English narrowly understood, but any institutionalized organization of signs—gestures, facial expressions, kinship systems, economic status. What counts is precisely the detachment from bodies—from a determinate referent—that signification of any sort entails. Because a sign is not what it signifies, it prevents (or defers, as we say nowadays) direct access to the referent, and at the same time it creates the possibility of generating an indefinite number of other meanings in the gap. It is these other meanings, everything you do not mean to say when you use language that your language itself says, that are the unconscious. But language is not a natural fact like a rock or even a body. Language is a construction that is there before an individual subject enters into it—that is one thing Lacan means by saying that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, something that does not so much originate in the symbol-using of the individual "in here" in the mind but comes back to him or her from "out there" in language and the excess of meaning its structure necessitates. But what this implies is that to some important but difficult-to-specify degree the unconscious is both socially constructed and learned, as language is, and could therefore be different, as languages are.

An example would probably be welcome here, and the one I will use is a famous one of Lacan's, which I will take off on a bit—don't try to stop me—so as to bend it in the direction I want to go. Saussure's equally famous example of the arbitrariness of the signifier in the *Course in General Linguistics* is focused on language as an instrument of conscious, rational communication, and therefore does not dwell on the problematic character of the signified. Saussure is aware, and says so, that the signified is a concept, not a thing in the world, but his example blurs that distinction: it is a picture of a tree (fig. 1). By the simple expedient of writing the name of the picture in different languages below it, Saussure can make his point that there is no necessary connection between the name of a thing and the thing itself (or its concept), or, in his terms, that the signifier is

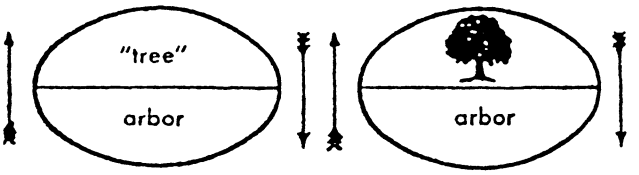

Figure 1.

arbitrary. In explaining his dictum that "the unconscious is structured like a language," Lacan puts the bar above the picture rather than below it, because he thinks the signifier is more important than the signified, and instead of a picture of a natural object he uses a man-made one, a door. This immediately stresses the constructed character of the signified, and stresses as well its participation in a set of structures and processes. A door is not just an inert item in the world but something you use to get into something or to shut something out—it leads you to think about where you want to go and what you want to exclude, to think about urge, drive, repression, desire. What interests me here is the way Lacan's style of exemplification always presses toward the presentation not of a stable instance but of a moment in a signifying practice or process. If Freud's tendency is to press toward positivist scientific models, chains of causality, "facts," Lacan's tendency is to ironize or complicate his strong interest in the symbolic by stressing the excess of signification his presentation conspicuously leaves unarticulated, as a reserve of further meaning.

Of course Lacan does not leave it at that. He draws not one door but two (fig. 2), and what he puts above the line is not "door" but: "Ladies," "Gentlemen" (actually, he puts "messieurs" and "dames" but *it is the same thing*, right?). This move at once introduces a number of further complications. First of all, it brings the question of desire down to the level of the drive, of something imperious to which one is subjected, not a matter of preference, and clearly involved with the body. Secondly, it stresses the involvement of that drive in a larger structure, an order within which the door has, and takes, and imposes, significance. In this case the structure is the whole ordering of gender itself; and while I think it is generally fair to say, with Anthony Wilden, that despite the radical implications of

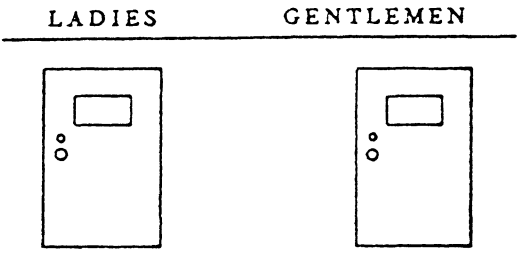

Figure 2.

his ideas, Lacan does not go beyond the values of the dominant ideology in considering gender-construction, it is from observations like this of Lacan's that feminist-inspired gender theory has seen its way to convert the biological determinism of older psychoanalytic reading into something more useful for its own purposes and interests.[9]

To show you what I mean, and to show as well what might be meant by the unconscious as the discourse of the Other in this situation, let me take advantage of the fact that you probably won't stop me now, to pursue some associations of my own to those doors for a moment. If there is a general law laid down by Lacan's doors, which divides persons according to the kinds of bodies they have when they seek what Lacan calls "the solitary confinement offered Western Man for the satisfaction of his natural needs away from home," the matter hardly stops there, even if we assume that in some mythical past it was the differences in the bodies that led to the making of the doors rather than the other way around.[10] Consider, for instance, the way some women sometimes use one of those doors and what is behind it, on dates: as sites to repair their public faces, to see to the maintenance of their femininity, and to conduct same-sex evaluations, perhaps of what used to be called an "unladylike" kind, about what is going on in relation to the men outside. They thus function as tacitly sanctioned behind-the-scenes supplements to official social life, where official gender-roles are constructed and tended in ways that men might like to know about—and this has more to do with the Miller's Alison than may at first appear. If I pursue the fantasy on the other side, I might reflect that men's rooms serve as sites of gay socialization, and in certain circumstances could function as places to affirm or explore variations in gender identity,

or as loci of anxiety about gender identity. This meditation suggests, I hope, something of the complexity of the other business we do when we go to do our business, but also something of the way the apparently clear split of gender division is continually, out there in the symbolic, surrounded by exceptions, complications, questionings and undoings of itself, and the way these various difficulties pose themselves immediately and continually in the present, not in any simple sense as repetitions of archaic or childhood experience and not in any simple sense as consequences of the unique development of individuals.

The other part of my title, "the difference IT makes," stresses the way post-Lacanian, feminist-inspired gender theory has come to see traditional psychoanalytic themes in the context of that version of the symbolic Gayle Rubin calls a "sex/gender system," a set of socially constructed signifying practices that are inscribed (usually non-consciously) on and in bodies.[11] This sort of reading focuses on the fact that sexual difference actively is not innate and is not stable, that it is never finished, and that that is where culture comes in. Sexual difference is something that somebody is always making, and if Freud makes it one way, and in terms of one kind of cultural system or organization of knowledge in "Medusa's Head," this other kind of reading is interested both in making it differently and in attending to the different ways difference is made by others in culture and history.

The question Lacan's example poses of what goes on behind bathroom doors is obviously of particular interest to psychoanalysis, and to feminism, but it is also of practical interest to what we call dirty jokes, and to what medievalists call fabliau—the sort of dirty joke the *Miller's Tale* is—especially if one remembers that the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* makes a point of the fact that the Miller likes to break down doors by running at them with his head (550–51).[12] I will come back to what sort of door is being battered later, but I would like to make the transition to the tale by arguing that stories like this, whatever we call them (I will use "fabliau"), are themselves sex/gender systems, part of the larger system of gender in the society the tale represents. Stories like this are often told behind closed doors, which means that in a sense they have doors—prohibitions—built into them. They lead to places as complex as Lacan's do, and one such place, as I have already suggested, is castration and the oedipus complex.

Given the implications of the Lacanian revision of Freud I

sketched above, the oedipus complex has received a fair amount of critical attention in feminist and feminist-influenced theorizing, because if you are interested in the oppression of women and what might be done about it then you are obviously going to be interested in the question of immutable biological inevitability versus potentially alterable social construction in the dynamic whereby gender identification and gendered object-choice are held to come about, especially if the original theorization of it, Freud's, is as resolute as it is in assigning a secondary status to women.[13] Without pretending to settle this question, I would like to look at the sort of oedipal construction the Miller's Tale in its setting is, and how it seems to function there.

In the context of the Canterbury pilgrimage the Miller's tale takes its meaning from the Miller's intervention in the orderly transition from the Knight as first teller to the Monk as next "proper" teller by rank (3109-35). The first door the Miller butts then is a class-barrier; but a Lacanian might call this sort of orderly social process "the transmission of the phallus," in order to stress how gender and authority are linked in such procedures, and it is no accident that the Miller's aggressive appropriation of the stage of competitive performance is an assault on the rights of what the Host calls "som bettre *man*" (3130; emphasis added). The difference the Miller initially wants to make is thus linked right away to questions of gender identity, and, thus, is already oedipal at least insofar as it is concerned with the definition and assertion of virility. The Miller wants to win something with his "noble tale," and while to say what he wants to win might take a long time, it is more than a dinner. Since he starts as an underdog, the Miller must demonstrate his superior worth by the superior force of his performance here and now, and in that project, we might say, his tale is his tool.

The traditional critical account of the tale fits this description quite well. It is generally praised for the brilliance of its construction, particularly the way the two plots of the misdirected kiss and the flood are brought together in the punchline "Help! Water! Water! Help, for Goddes herte!" (3815). We know that the Miller is not the first to have combined these traditional elements of the story in this way, and therefore that this punchline is part of his advance plan for the tale.[14] He thus has designs on the bodies of his audience—to make them laugh on cue. This makes the tale what Deleuze and Guattari, two of the most committed critics of the oedipus complex, call a "desiring-machine," a mechanism that pat-

terns desire, gives it a place and an object and a path to follow to attain the object.[15] According to this model an "improper" joke-machine like the Miller's tale is oedipal, built both to let loose "forbidden" desires—to talk about sex, to violate social boundaries—and at the same time to channel them toward the laugh, a final, involuntary and ecstatic "discharge," to use Freud's word in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. As Laura Kendrick suggests, this notion of a joke is itself an oedipal construction, because it constrains laughing at a joke to a "masculine," phallic, sexual pattern—that is what a *punchline* is.[16] The ambition of the story in context, the plot of its plot, so to speak, is to create an *ad hoc* community of complicity in social transgression in the now of performing, sealed and rewarded by the *coming* of that laugh. For the Miller to do this would be to win, to beat the Knight, and to do so by proving that he is a better *man*.

The place of the woman in such a story, as in the oedipus complex, is primarily as a sign of the kind of transgression the Miller is trying to get away with. We are asked to enjoy, and to admit we enjoy, an improper story about an improper woman more than the proper one we just heard from the Knight. The situation is also familiar to feminist analysis: patriarchy constitutes woman as the site on and for which men compete, in such a way that the competition, and the manhood that goes with it, is what is crucial, the object symbolic or contingent (that is a feminist reading of Medusa). Alison in this reading, is the McMuffin, a term that is intended to get at her conventional desirability, at her plot function as what Alfred Hitchcock called "the mcguffin" (the whatever-it-is that all the fuss is about, whose actual character does not matter as long as it causes the fuss), and at her conventional status, much played with in the tale, as a kind of fast food. This set of oedipal phallic and competitive generic motives also organizes the male characters in a quite traditional way, and one the criticism has struggled manfully to maintain. John, on this reading, is the merest device, the old jealous husband whose presence justifies the transgressive adultery and allows us to enjoy it without worrying, since such husbands conventionally deserve what they get. Nicholas and Absolon are the competitive center of the tale, whose activities can be loaded with content appropriate to the Miller's own competitive projects, for example, by using Absolon to make fun of the courtly lovers in the Knight's tale. The characters all occupy thoroughly traditional gender-roles, indeed they *are* those roles, humors or cartoons, not persons.

But this view of the tale and of the characters only goes so far in explaining what happens in the Miller's performance of it. As always in the case of the *Canterbury Tales*, it is necessary to distinguish as far as possible between the cultural gender semantics embedded in the generic form of a tale and the gender dynamics that emerge from the pilgrim's performance in and as Chaucer's text. If we want to see how the Miller makes difference, we have to be prepared to look at how he works with and makes use of the way fabliau makes difference. In the Miller's case this is especially important because the two are demonstrably not the same, and show themselves to be in conflict in the course of the tale. To get at this difference, I am going to adopt a method that is a kind of mirror-image of the one I ascribed to Freud earlier. I am going to assume that the oedipal structure and the numerous oedipal effects in the tale belong more to its generic unconscious, its social organization of gender, than they do to its teller. Because the Miller is subject to this symbolic, I will note these effects on and in him, but I will do so in passing—I will try to keep bringing them up in order to ignore them and concentrate on what *else* I think is going on in the performance.

The difference between the generic oedipal structures of the fabliau and the Miller's use of them is registered most clearly in the shifting quality of his attention to the characters, what Freud would call his *Besetzungen*. This word, usually translated "cathexis," refers to the attachment of a certain amount of psychic energy to an idea or a body-part or an object, but what it really means in German is an investment, both in the sense of occupying a town with your army and of putting your money in something in anticipation of a return, and both of these images describe the Miller's dealings with the characters, since he both takes them over and uses them for a variety of payoffs.[17] To trace the micro-movements of the Miller's voicing of the characters across the tale is to encounter a series of "wild" affects, little lifts and dips of desire and aggression and anxiety and enthusiasm that come and go according to logics different from the linear, phallic structure "proper" to the generic story. This discovery of unplanned pleasures and excitements in the telling is evident stylistically in the extra *brio* of particular moments of description, a well-attested feature of the tale at least since Muscatine, but the larger effect of the process is the production of *inappropriate identifications* with the characters, versions of them that come into conflict with the way they have to be for the purposes of the tale's generic consistency and its competitive use.

I want to take Alison as my central example, but I want to cheat a little by observing that a lot of this kind of strongly invested description of Alison does not remain *in* the description of Alison, but is distributed among the "inappropriate" characteristics of the male characters. The things that make those characters problematic for a straight fabliau reading can be traced, I would argue, to various aspects of the initial portrait of Alison that exceed the containment of fabliau conventions and attitudes. As a generalization, what begins as an implication of the Miller's language in the portrait of Alison ends as an aspect of one of the men in the rest of the tale. Thus, details of Alison's description that center around her center—the "ceynt" (sounds like "queynte") and "barmclooth" "upon hir lendes" (3235-37), the decorated purse "by hir girdel" (3250-51), and perhaps a pubic-hair reference in the description, "softer than the wolle is of a wether" (3249)—find their way very quickly into Nicholas, who desymbolizes them as directly as the Miller might like to: "And prively he caughte hire by the queynte" (3276).[18]

These aspects of Alison as the object of the Miller's phallic desire are balanced by the moments in Alison's portrait that describe her as pre-sexual, childlike and playful, "Therto she koude skippe and make game,/ As any kyde or calf folwynge his dame" (3259-60), because they make her look momentarily like an object not of desire but of *care*, of a parental, nonsexual attraction that is part of what the Miller feels when he imagines a fresh young woman, and that he locates—ambivalently, like all his other feelings about her—in John. Here it is perhaps more obvious what I mean by inappropriate identifications: despite his early stock-fabliau description as jealous, confining, and thinking himself "lik a cokewold" (3224-26), John is none of these things in the working-out. Far from keeping Alison "narwe in cage" he is well-known for going off to Oseney for "a day or two" (3668) leaving her at home with Nicholas, he does not react at all to a perfect opportunity to show jealousy the first time Absolon serenades Alison beneath the shot-window, and worst of all he nearly always betrays an apparently unselfish concern for the welfare of other characters, especially Alison, his "hony deere" (3617).[19] The amount of slandering against John in the criticism is extraordinary once you start to attend to it, and it registers the critics' resistance to recognizing the Miller's covert and ambivalent sympathy with a man whom he knows, as the critics also do, must be a fool to care for someone the fabliau has fated to betray him.

For most of the tale Absolon is associated with impulses at work in

such descriptions of Alison as "Ful brighter was the shynyng of hir hewe / Than in the Tour the noble yforged newe" (3255–56). If this image can be traced back to the *Schatz* in the *Kästchen*, the pubic purse of six lines earlier, it also pays interest on the libido invested there in the form of the brightness and the sense of pleasure it confers on both the lady (not just a part of her) and on objects in the world. It is thus an instance of what looks like a drive to sublimation, which finds a home in Absolon's consistent tendency to stay with the concealing decorative surface Nicholas strives to penetrate, and to defer direct sexual gratification for the pleasure he can get from investing in courtship.

There is one final set of characteristics in Alison's portrait that finds a place in the tale, and that also has a masculine representative to keep it alive. The characteristics are her resistance, rebellion and independence, and their masculine promoter is the Miller himself. This theme in the tale is founded in an ambivalence about Alison's reaction to the masculine gaze. There are two moments in the portrait where she is presented not merely as an object to be observed (however complexly or ambivalently), but as aware of being looked at, and these two moments are themselves opposed. The first is the moment when she makes eye-contact with the sexualized gaze that has been moving upward from her loins: "And sikerly, she hadde a likerous ye" (3244).[20] Her eye frankly returns the desire of the gazer, and no doubt is thought of as inviting what will become Nicholas's response. The second moment, however, seems to come out of that image of her as a young, apparently pre-sexual, animal: "Thereto she koude skippe and make game,/ As any kidde or calf folwynge his dame" (3259-60). Two lines later this image returns as, "Wynsinge she was, as is a joly colt" (3263), where the unself-conscious skipping becomes aware of the gaze. A jolly colt winces when it encounters something to shy at, and the following lines enforce this sense of resistance, first by giving Alison's image a certain defensive stiffness, "Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt" (3264), and then actual armor, a brooch "As brood as is the boos of a bokeler" (3266). This imagery is picked up in a specifically sexual context when Alison responds to Nicholas's grab: "And she sproong as a colt dooth in the trave,/ And with hire heed she wryed faste awey / And seyde, 'I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!'" (3282-84). One might note that the colt in the trave—a cage used to confine horses so they can be shod—associates Alison's condition of being held "narwe in cage" not with John but with Nicholas and his aggressive desire,

which was and is the Miller's too.

There are many reasons for this particular set of double signals about Alison's desire and her response to the desire of others that the Miller gives not only to us but to himself. No doubt there is a general anxiety about female indifference to male desire, and that anxiety seems shaded at points by something even closer to Medusa. Whatever part it is of Alison that is softer than the wool of a wether, a wether is a male sheep that has been castrated before it reaches maturity, suggesting that the thought of touching Alison has its scary side. But this is the kind of oedipal reading I want to note and dodge; instead I want to speak about the other desire at work in the social implications of the doubleness. These implications come out for me in the final lines of the portrait, "She was a prymerole, a piggesnye,/ For any lord to leggen in his bedde,/ Or yet for any good yeman to wedde" (3268-70). My problem with these lines is that I cannot tell what their tone is. On the one hand they can easily be read as the sort of stock putdown I think of as oedipal and generic, which situates the sexually available woman at a class level that invites contempt and represents male revenge on a woman for desiring her. On the other hand, the lines are so clearly an example of the kind of putdown the Miller himself has recently experienced from the Host, the sort of social-typing he seems all too familiar with, and against which the tale itself is a rebellion, that I cannot help wondering if there is not something sarcastic in these lines, something of the tone I hear in the Miller's "I am dronke" in his prologue (3138).[21] I have a hard time taking the prologue pronouncement straight because of the wicked way the Miller draws its consequences: "And therfore if that I mysspeke or seye,/ Wyte it the ale of Southwerk, I you preye" (3139-40). The Host, who has just been urging the Miller to let some better man tell a tale, is the owner of the Tabard Inn, which is in Southwark, and therefore the paraphrase of the Miller's apology runs: "Yes, boss, I am just a simple drunken peasant, and you shouldn't be surprised that I am uncouth, especially since it is the stuff you sell that has made me that way." If there is something similar in the lord/yeoman lines, then we can read a response to Alison that is to some degree sympathetic with *this* kind of caging of her, and might be prepared to be rebellious on her behalf, or at any rate to encourage her rebellion.[22]

I would like to explore this last possibility as a component of what seems to me the most original and striking difference the Miller makes in the tale, his substitution of Alison for Nicholas in the first

kiss-scene. As far as I have been able to determine, short of a bowdlerized German version in 1845, the *Miller's Tale* is the only extant rendering of this story that has the second lover kiss the *woman's* behind the first time—in the standard version it is the Nicholas-figure who offers his behind both times.[23] If, as Roland Barthes says, the sort of pleasure I am interested in here ought to "show its behind to the political father," the Miller offers the interesting variant of showing *her* behind to the political father, or at least to Absolon.[24] What can this mean?

I begin by observing that just before he kisses Alison, transported by the unexpected effectiveness of his courtly technique, Absolon delivers a line whose oxymoronic dissolution of estates boundaries has attracted critical attention and puzzlement: "I am a lord at alle degrees" (3724).[25] Just after the kiss, Nicholas reads Absolon's—or the Miller's—mind, by responding "A berd! A berd!" to what no one in the story has actually said, creating a weird breakdown of the boundaries between characters and narrator, here and there, story-world and pilgrim-world. Alison's "'Tehee!' quod she, and clapte the wyndow to" (3740), the tale's other, unexpected, and to me funnier punchline, which caps her competitive appropriation of the joke from Nicholas and the Miller's most active displacement of the traditional story, is thus the high point of an episode in which the tale's impulses toward transgression, boundary crossing, and confusion or dissolving of distinctions find their fullest expression.

And just what does Alison do here, and what does Absolon kiss?

> Abak he sterte, and thought it was amys,
> For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.
> He felte a thyng al rough and long yherd,
> And seyde, "Fy! allas! what have I do?
>
> (3736-39)[26]

It does not in fact sound like he has kissed an ass, but a cunt; Alison presents her difference in its most graphic (or tactile) form to Absolon. Alison and the Miller may be said to shove in Absolon's face the fact that he has not just been tricked into a shameful kiss, but into a shameful kiss of a woman. Absolon thinks he is about to kiss a face, therefore reads what he feels as a beard, therefore stresses yet again that this is a woman acting like a man—and this is what the language registers whether you know the traditional form of the story or not. The crossing and jumbling of gender lines here does not do away with sexual distinction. Instead, it shows a character making

use of the signs of one gender, which "belong" to her somatically, to effect the actions and motives conventionally associated with the other gender: she uses her "femininity" in a masculine, aggressive, indeed phallic, way.[27]

If Alison is playing a "masculine" role in this oddly "bisexual" fashion here, that does not mean that all the other complex characteristics originally associated with her in the portrait have been suppressed. They have been displaced—and, in fact, displaced onto Absolon. It has long been recognized that much of the satire in the portrayal of Absolon is conducted by feminizing him: here the man who acts too much like a woman is punished for both his gender- and class-treachery by having his feminization shoved in his face by a woman who acts like a man. That too is an oedipal reading, one that Freud's Medusa explains quite directly. At some level the tale here portrays a very familiar masculine scenario: the regressed infantile male who still does not want to know what is not down there on a woman, and who then goes on to react to the evidence of castration in classic fashion by proving that he has the phallus after all. In this reading, the violence of the language and the action is male hysteria.[28] The Miller wards off Absolon's castration apotropaically with Alison's snaky locks, simultaneously affirming his own maleness, affirming it again in Freud's other apotropaic mode by identifying with Absolon (who really does become the hero of the tale at this point) as his hot coulter goes home: "I defy you. I have a penis."[29] But once again I want to admit that interpretation and then bypass it, in order to examine the more interesting connections made by Absolon's description of himself just before the kiss: "I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete" (3704), because they echo the skipping kid or calf following its dam in Alison's portrait. Infantile, silly, and dangerous though they may be for Absolon, those childlike, skipping, presexual qualities were not negatively toned in Alison's portrait, and their displacement into Absolon did not entirely spoil them, because the Miller has invested more in Absolon than the plot's treatment of him can entirely conceal.

One index of this investment is that Absolon's portrait is in fact the longest in the tale by a good margin, another is that as performers he and the Miller have a lot in common, including an interest in theater and music.[30] If the Miller makes fun of Absolon, then he also finds it fun to make fun of him, to keep on describing the funny things he does. The bond between them comes out most plainly at this moment of Absolon's defeat, in a telling comment by the Miller: "Ful

ofte paramours he gan deffie, / And weep as dooth a child that is ybete" (3758-59). Absolon's weeping response is striking because it identifies retrospectively the nature of the pleasure he took in "paramours." I said earlier that his activity looks like sublimation, but I think that in fact that too is an oedipal interpretation, and that it is backwards. In retrospect it is not hard to see that his pleasure is not a re-channeling of an original goal-directed desire for sexual possession of Alison, but is derived from the skipping, "wynsing" activity of "paramours" itself, the acting and strutting and singing and role-playing for their own self-consuming sakes, concealed and protected by the *pretense* of working to get the girl. This is so patently true of so much of the Miller's own conduct of the tale, including but not limited to the portrayal of Absolon, that his moment of insight into the latter's feelings clarifies the associations of his own pleasure as well. It is the sort of pleasure that psychoanalysis conceives as stemming from a time before the self and the world were perceived as different, when the world was the plaything of one's projects, underwritten by the complete yet undemanding love of a mother who also was not differentiated from the self. This disgusting, unmanly and unrealistic condition is ordinarily described as infantile: immature, pre-oedipal and pre-genital, narcissistic, masturbatory. Feminist psychoanalytic theory, however, has noted that this kind of pleasure, after it grows up and goes through the oedipus complex, is also designated feminine, insofar as it is the pleasure of the castrated, what women are stuck with, who cannot come (or cannot be made to come) like men, in one determinate, legal place—the Freudian word for it is frigidity. The post-Lacanian word is *jouissance*, bliss, the word for the pleasure of orgasm even when it is not organ-specific and does not look like what patriarchy calls orgasm; whatever it is that comes when it comes. It is a sexuality that, because it is before the phallus is also *beyond* the phallus.[31] It is a sexuality that has encouraged feminists like Helène Cixous to take another look at it:

> What strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you cannot talk about *a* female sexuality, uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes—any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible.
>
> I have been amazed more than once by a description a woman gave me of a world all her own which she had been secretly

> haunting since early childhood. A world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic exploration of the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity. This practice, extraordinarily rich and inventive, in particular as concerns masturbation, is prolonged or accompanied by a production of forms, a veritable aesthetic activity, each stage of rapture inscribing a resonant vision, a composition, something beautiful.[32]

I am arguing that this is the pleasure and the fantasy Absolon (and behind him, Alison) represents "beyond the phallus," that is, *besides* his function in the plot of the fabliau. So conceived, this fantasy and this pleasure obviously underlie a lot more than Absolon's courtly love. They are behind Nicholas's freewheeling, world-creating imagination, and behind John's asexual care for Alison. Nostalgia for the fantasy is also at work in all the images in the tale of escape from society, from the constraining difference of others, and from the consequences of oedipal competition. It is in Absolon's weeping; it is in Nicholas's curious picture of the duck and the drake swimming merrily, the lords of a world swept clean and started over; and it is in the image of Robin (whose name I am not the first to notice is the same as the Miller's) and Jill, sent safely away from all the consequences that are about to break over the world of the tale and perhaps over the Miller as well if his joke fails.[33] They will not be back until it is over, and who knows what they will be up to while they are gone?

What I am trying to suggest here is that part of the animus behind Absolon's vengeful ferocity arises not from a challenge to his masculinity but from resentment at having to give up his attachment to a state of bliss—*jouissance*—associated with a state of the subject before gender is a fact or an issue, and that the Miller shares that attachment—it is in fact all over the tale in what I have called its "wild" affects and inappropriate attachments—though he does not wholly share the resentment. Both the rage and the sorrow—the nostalgia or the pain of loss—are at having to choose and to play the role of something as arbitrary as one's "proper" gender. The feminist critique of classical psychoanalytic gender-theory has not questioned the fact of sexual difference, but has concentrated instead on a critique of the social construction of what counts as sex, what the classical theory leaves out when it names the contents of the things the subjects called "men" and "women" can do with their desire, and the Miller feels the force behind that critique whether he knows it or not.

That the Miller maintains his role-distance, that he does not entirely share, or at least is not consumed by, the resentment he uses Absolon to express is indicated by the fact that he now proceeds to save Alison from Absolon's vengeance. The end of the tale returns to "proper" gender identity, and re-affirms in its ending the oedipal structure it has evaded in its unfolding. It is worth remembering in this return that Absolon knows whom he has kissed, that his "I shal thee quyte" (3746) is addressed to Alison, and that it is for whom—and what—he kissed before that his suddenly and appallingly realistic red-hot coulter ("Of gooth the skyn an hande-brede aboute" [3811]) is intended. And after all, what does the desiring-machine care who cries out "Help! Water!"?

"This Nicholas was risen for to pisse" (3798), and everything from this point on goes back to "normal" gender roles, the proper punchline, a dénouement that puts everything, more or less—if more or less shakily—back in its proper place. In another context I would want to talk about that shakiness, but here I will just note that one effect returning to the traditional model of the tale at the end has is to cover over and at least pretend to deny the Miller's gesture of extending and then retracting Alison's behind, to make it as if it had not happened. The gesture thus participates in the structure of negation I have been exploring, and to which Laura Kendrick has recently called attention in the tale: Freudian *Verneinung*, or the procedure that disowns a repressed wish in such a way as to continue to entertain it—"I don't know what that dream means, but it is not about my mother"—it is what I have been calling not letting that stop you.[34] In the *Miller's Tale* this is not an unconscious defense but a fundamental and pervasive technique, which the poem itself calls "Pilates voys" (3124), the voice that does something and washes its hands of it at the same time.[35] What I think is being denied and maintained here, and one of the things I think Alison as a figure of Woman means for the Miller, or that Alison and Absolon together (is it not odd how close their names are?) mean for him, is his own intimation of the constructed character of gender. This intimation is not unconscious or repressed, or at least not always, and it is not regarded with either conscious or unconscious defensive horror, or at least not always. As I have tried to show, the Miller's "bisexuality"—the ability to play any of the roles normally allotted by patriarchy to either of the sexes—is something he values in himself and others at least as deeply and at least as often as he condemns or denies it.

What then, finally, is the position of the woman in this tale? I said

that I wanted to make Alison my central example of the range of the Miller's identifications, and I still do. Insofar as the other characters are used as responses to her, she is what is behind or beyond them all, and therefore the most complex of them. Among these responses, as we have seen, are the oedipal ones that constitute her as Medusa and as sex-object. There are also the pre-oedipal ones that constitute her as mother and as child, or as the unbroken unity of the maternal dyad. She thus seems in these two appropriations both an oedipal, apotropaic image of everything the Miller "is" as a culturally constituted male (her castration guarantees his possession of the phallus), and also a desired image or agent or instrument of those aspects of himself that resist what passes for adult masculinity in his society. The latter is the meaning for which he seems to save her, and that remains as "encrypted," as Abraham and Torok might say, in the tale.[36] I want to conclude by pursuing this second aspect one step further.

One of the most striking things about Alison's presentation in the story after the initial portrait is how conspicuously and completely we are denied access to her "pryvetee," to what she may be thinking and feeling at the important junctures of the story. This begins when we are pointedly not shown how Nicholas managed to persuade her to agree to his suit after her initial resistance (3288-93), and continues as she is kept in the background during Absolon's initial wooing, Nicholas's plotting, the carefully unspecific "revel and the melodye" (3652), and the slightly oddly-phrased "bisynesse of myrthe and of solace" (3654), which sounds like work, with Nicholas in John's bed on the fatal night. Since much of this time is spent developing an image of John that is uncomfortably sympathetic in the circumstances, Alison's potential cruelty and ability to do hurt are, if anything, stressed. Her few enigmatic utterances, like "I am thy trewe, verray wedded wyf" (3609), or, to Absolon, "I love another—and elles I were to blame— / Wel bet than thee, by Jhesu, Absolon" (3710-11), are resonant, disturbing, and potentially more complex than generically they ought to be, because she is just real enough to make me wonder how she feels about all the men in the tale and about her own situation, such that she acts the way she does. The question of her motives and feelings, and of mine, begins to haunt the tale for me, and to become one of its hard parts—but there is not enough information given to resolve it.[37]

Similarly, when Absolon calls out the second time to what he thinks is Alison in order to get her to "kiss" him again, he says

"Speke, swete bryd, I noot nat wher thou art" (3805). His only answer is a fart, for which he has an adequate reply; but the question nevertheless continues to resound for me on its own in the tale, because I do not know where Alison is either, or even what she is. That word "bryd" is as compact a signifier for the sliding of signification itself with respect to woman in the culture and the tale as could be wished for, because of the way it is picked up, echoed, deformed and displaced throughout the poem. Of course, it means "bird," and is the usual middle English way of spelling and pronouncing it; as such it refers to the ways the tale constitutes, or tries to constitute, Alison as a natural creature and a representation of Nature. This is the appropriation of woman as what Lee Patterson calls, "the vitality and resourcefulness of the natural world."[38] But the first time Absolon uses the word, "My faire bryd, my swete cynamome . . . /Awaketh lemman myn and speketh to me" (3699-3700), he is echoing the Song of Songs, so the word also means "bride," adding both the religious appropriations of woman as the opposite of nature—spirit, the soul, the church—and more directly, the courtly appropriations of that sort of language to constitute woman as a secular cultural ideal. But when Nicholas, who has heard this, somehow magically reads Absolon's mind after the kiss, he says "A berd! a berd! . . . By Goddes corpus, this goth faire and weel" (3742-43). One thing "beard" means in Chaucer is a put-down, as condensed from the expression "to make someone's beard," to deceive or cuckold them, which connects it to "bourde," the more general word for jest or joke. "Bourde" in turn resonates with the homonym "burde," which just means "woman"—to produce the image of woman as falsehood, deception, and indeed as the sign of the very slipperiness of signification we are dealing with here, all of which is common in patristic antifeminist writing. But that chain of associations sits in this mix alongside the other meaning of "berde," a man's facial hair, which is the mistake Absolon makes, or *is* it a mistake since, as we have seen, Alison has here competitively—and literally—taken over a "masculine" character in perpetrating the joke. I can do this kind of psychoanalytic pun-reading because all these versions of Alison and of woman: worshipful, misogynistic, sign of nature, of nakedness, of truth, sign of culture, of clothes that conceal, of deception, active, passive, sign of woman, of mother, of father, of man, of bisexuality, are at work in the tale. Alison, the Miller, Chaucer, the Other, me; who, as we say these days, speaks?

The final instance of this multiple signification in the tale is in

many ways the most interesting and the most compelling, though also perhaps the most baffling. It is the mention of Alison in the summary couplets that tie up the tale and deliver it to what the Miller hopes is the laughter and applause of the pilgrims:

> Thus swyved was this carpenteres wyf,
> For al his kepyng and his jalousye,
> And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye.
> And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
> This tale is doon, and God save al the route!
>
> (3850-54)

The first of these characterizations is dismissive in the oedipal mode of the end of the tale: Alison is an appendage of the men, the object of their swiving and an invitation to masculine laughter and contempt. I do not think the part of the Miller that is using this tale to beat the Knight cares if women think it is funny. The second characterization, however, is extraordinarily vibrant: "And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye." The nether eye recalls the transgression of bodily and other boundaries and the mixing of categories of the central scene of the tale, and keeps them alive just at the moment when the tale is shutting down. On the one hand, the image clearly confounds upper and lower in a way that Freud still helps us read: by putting an eye in the middle of the "thyng al rough and long yherd" it makes a more perfect image of Medusa's head and her chilling, stiffening stare, and therefore it suggests the male anxiety that the put-down does not alleviate. This is what the image does culturally, which is to say, oedipally. In *this poem* it also refers us back to the portrait of Alison, first to the "*likerous* ye," and from there to the wincing jolly colt and all the other complexities of her uncomprehended characters as the woman who responds, resists, returns the gaze back upon the man who sent it out, in such a way that he cannot ignore that it is she, with her own feelings and projects, whatever they are, that is doing it.

I have twice quoted Helène Cixous in this essay, once at the beginning, just before Freud, and once in praise of masturbation. Those passages are drawn from her essay on the utopian possibilities and opportunities of women's writing. It is an essay about the possibility of an appropriation that would not have to recreate a mirror-image of the system it appropriates, about appropriation with a difference.[39] What Cixous is pointing out in "The Laugh of the Medusa," is that Freud's Medusa is really just another "mcmuffin," that is, a man in scary drag, a projection of masculine fears and

wishes and an enforcer of male sexuality, one of what Cixous calls "the sex cops."[40] But suppose she were a real woman? What might she want to do? What might she think of the ways men imagined her, the ways they pretended she made them behave? I think that both the Miller and Chaucer posed those questions (were afraid of them and were excited by them) before me; that is, I think that men have not simply been the robots of the oedipus complex, though clearly we have not done very well with it either. At the very least, however, I am in the wrong sort of body to try to answer the questions, and a laugh can have a lot of tones. It is probably time, or past it, for me to stop myself. I can say, though, that trying to imagine such a woman serves me as a figure for the difference the new psychoanalytic methods make in my reading. The image of Cixous's Medusa's laugh over and against the icy stare of Freud's is the figure of a literary psychoanalytic reading of psychoanalysis, because it posits more actively that Freud's too is a representation of a drive from within it, not a neutral description of one from the outside, and therefore that it could be different. Cixous uses the figure of a different kind of woman, a different construction of woman, not a new essence, to see that psychoanalytic theory itself is a construction subject to the kinds of questions psychoanalysis asks of any representation, questions like: what is the structure, as opposed to the content, of this representation? how did it get into this form, into this body? what action does it perform here? and above all, *what is its desire*?

In the face of all that is left to say, I will stop with a question I cannot answer, one that touches on everything I have not dealt with, or do not know how to, about what it means for a man to do what I have said the Miller does, Chaucer does, what I have been doing, since it makes a difference who says these things. If the *nether ye*, the *privitee* that gazes back were to find a voice, if the *swete bryd* spoke, would not that speaking be the laugh of the Medusa? And since Cixous does not say what that laugh might sound like, mightn't it sometimes be "tehee"?

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NOTES

[1] Jacques Derrida, "Le facteur de la vérité," *La carte postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), 441.

[2] Helène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *The Signs Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983), 281.

[3] Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rief, trans. James Strachey (New York: Collier, 1963), 212-13.

[4] This is in fact a quick description of one of the most common tropes of argument in Freud. His characteristic method is precisely to note all the possible objections to the line he is pursuing, not necessarily to answer them (though sometimes he does), but to bracket them and move on. By admitting the partiality of his formulations he often allows himself to pursue them more single-mindedly. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, 1975), catches some of the feel of this in his formulation of the pleasure of the text: "I know that these are only words, *but all the same. . .* " (46). The key intertext here is Freud's "The Genital Organization of the Libido" (1923), in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (note 3), 171-75, in whose snow you can track both Lacan and Barthes; see especially page 173.

[5] The best general critique of this set of tendencies in psychoanalysis is Derrida's in the opening pages of "Le facteur de la vérité," *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), 412-42, and 480-83. I pass over for the moment that this critique is directed specifically at Lacan, not Freud.

[6] Sigmund Freud, "Femininity," in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933), trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1965), 102-3. Freud had discovered what he thought of as the human predisposition to bisexuality as early as the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* of 1905, where he argues, as Janet Bergstrom puts it, that "the field of choice of both sexual object [what you want] and sexual aim [what you want to do with it] is defined as a continuum where the end points (male/female and active/passive) are ideal or theoretical. Freud's theory of bisexuality means neither 'either/or' (heterosexual or homosexual) nor 'both' (if that means two fixed choices)." "Sexuality at a Loss: The Films of F. W. Murnau," in *The Female Body in Western Culture, Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), 259-59.

[7] Juliet Mitchell, "Introduction—I" in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1982), 6.

[8] "Anatomy is Destiny" is from Freud's "The Passing of the Oedipus Complex" (1924), in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (note 3), 180. As Shoshana Felman points out, "Freud articulated his discovery through a metaphoric use of the conceptual framework of nineteenth-century science (thermodynamics, topology, and such)" (*Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987], 8).

[9] Anthony Wilden, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other," *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press), 179.

[10] Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, Or Reason Since Freud," *Écrits, A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 151.

[11] See Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210.

[12] Quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3d ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1987). Unless otherwise specified, quotations are from Fragment I.

[13] For a representative range of positions within what is now an extensive

literature, see Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 133-81; Felman (note 8), 99-159; Mitchell and Rose (note 7), 9-15.

[14] See the discussion of analogues in Stith Thompson, "The Miller's Tale," in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Gemaine Dempster (1941; rpt., New York: Humanities Press, 1958), 106-23.

[15] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: Viking, 1983), 1-50.

[16] Laura Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), 187, n. 7. Her chapter 4, "Dangerous Desires and Play: The Consolations of Fiction II," is perhaps the best discussion of oedipal structures in the *Miller's Tale* and in fabliau.

[17] See J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), *s.v.* "Cathexis," 62-65.

[18] Tendencies of this phallic-aggressive sort are present in Absolon as well, and are registered early in the couplet that describes his look at Alison: "I dar wel seyn, if she hadde been a mous, /And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon" (3346-47). What is interesting is that these tendencies are deferred to the end of the tale and don't get enacted until then.

[19] This is noted by Tracey Jordan, "Fairy Tale and Fabliau: Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 21 (1984): 91.

[20] See Kevin S. Kiernan, "The Art of the Descending Catalogue, and A Fresh Look at Alison," *Chaucer Review* 10 (1975): 1-16.

[21] See my comments on this theme in "The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*," *PMLA* 95 (1980): 217-18.

[22] See Robert P. Miller, "The *Miller's Tale* as Complaint," *Chaucer Review* 5 (1970): 151. These are the same lines Miller cites.

[23] Thompson (note 14), 120. See also Peter G. Beidler, "The Art of Scatology in the *Miller's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 12 (1977): 92-93.

[24] Barthes (note 4), 53.

[25] See D. S. Brewer, "Class Distinction in Chaucer," *Speculum* 43 (1968): 291-92, and Miller (note 22), 152, n. 12.

[26] See *The Miller's Tale. A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Thomas W. Ross, vol. 1, part 3 of *The Canterbury Tales*, general ed. Paul G. Ruggiers and Donald C. Baker (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1983), notes to lines 3732 and 3852.

[27] Beidler (note 23), calls it "unladylike" (93).

[28] See the discussion of male hysteria by Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), chapter 9 "Medusa's Head: Male Hysteria Under Political Pressure," 161-215, with commentary by Catherine Gallagher and Joel Fineman. It is perhaps worth noting that Hertz's use of Freud's article is more Freudian in the sense suggested above than my own.

[29] Note that this shift supports a structural reading of the fabliau (though not of the Miller's telling) that is close to Lacan's analysis of *The Purloined Letter*, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" in *The Purloined Poe*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), 28-54, in which the oedipal structure contains/creates a "place of the

phallus" that remains relatively constant while three of the main characters—first Nicholas, then Alison, finally Absolon—come to occupy it in turn. Each revolution of the system also can be seen as supplying sites for the other characters as well, so that when one occupies the phallic position another will be castrated/feminized, as in the reversal between Absolon and Nicholas here. I am less sure about the meaning of the third position in the system—first Absolon, then perhaps Alison—but I wonder if it could be allied with the three positions in Lacan's reading of Poe, and with the *politique de l'Autruiche* they outline. And what about John?

[30] What appears to be the end of Absolon's portrait comes at line 3338, giving him twenty-six lines of description as compared to Nicholas's thirty, John's eleven, and Alison's thirty-seven. In fact, however, the first scene under the shot-window, which looks like a return to the plot, is actually a pretext to continue describing Absolon's general style of behavior until line 3397 when Nicholas and Alison begin to plot their rendezvous. This gives Absolon a total of 72 lines of description.

[31] Jacques Lacan, "God and the *Jouissance* of ~~The~~ Woman," in Mitchell and Rose (note 7), 145.

[32] Cixous (note 2), 245-46.

[33] On "Robin," see Robert A. Pratt, "Was Robyn the Miller's Youth Misspent?" *Modern Language Notes* 59 (1944): 47-49. See also the discussion by Lee Patterson, "'No man his reson herde,' Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the Canterbury Tales," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 86 (1987): 478. The line I follow here was first suggested to me by conversations with Thad Curtz.

[34] Kendrick (note 16), 54 and n. 3. See also Laplanche and Pontalis (note 17), *s.v.*. "Negation," 261-63.

[35] Note that both the Miller, with his "I am dronke" apology (3136-40), and the general narrator, with his disclaimer of responsibility for the tale itself at the end of the *Miller's Prologue* (3171-86), enact this trope.

[36] Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonomy*, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986).

[37] It is clear that the tale both creates questions about Alison's motives and fails to resolve them. This is evident from the text's *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, both early and late. Ross's (note 26) note to line 3403 points out that there is an irresolvable crux in the manuscripts. The context is, "And hende Nicholas and Alisoun / Accorded been to this conclusion, That Nicholas shal shapen *** a wile / This sely, jalous housbonde to bigile" (3401-4). Ellesmere and its associated Mss read "him" here, followed by Skeat, Robinson and others, while Hengwrt and its associates, and therefore Ross, as well as Manly-Rickert, read "hem" (Ross, 178). There is a similar crux at 3406-7, "She sholde slepen in his arm al nyght, / For this was *** desir and *** also," where the manuscripts are divided between "hir and his" and "his and hir" (Ross, 179). In both cases it appears that the tale does not make it evident on other grounds which the reading should be, suggesting that the text's effect is to raise an issue it does not settle, which is, precisely, the issue of Alison's contribution to what is going on. The scribes thought we should know, but did not establish a consensus, and neither have later editors. Similarly, the question of just what is going on in the bedroom has elicited critical speculative desire without clearly satisfying it, and again the issue is Alison's subjectivity. Thus, Macklin Smith, "'Or I Wol Caste a Ston,'" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 8 (1986): 3-30, wonders if she has become bored with Nicholas by the time Absolon shows up, "Alison probably would not have

talked as well earlier in the night" (7), yet later in the same article he seems to think that she and Nicholas are making love while she speaks to Absolon (20-21).

[38] Patterson (note 33), 469.

[39] Cixous (note 2), 257-58, and the text surrounding the crucial statement, "Nor is the point to appropriate their instruments, their concepts, their places, or to begrudge them their position of mastery. Just because there's a risk of identification doesn't mean we'll succumb."

[40] Cixous, 247.