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"TO ALISOUN NOW WOL I TELLEN AL MY LOVE-LONGING": CHAUCER'S TREATMENT OF THE COURTLY LOVE DISCOURSE IN *THE MILLER'S TALE*

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Vern L. Bullough explains in *Medieval Masculinities* that the concept of the "superiority of the male" was so prevalent during the Middle Ages that even a woman could raise her status and role in society by acting as a man (34). Medieval society, Bullough continues, "had drawn up distinct gender behavior for men and women, but because women were such low-status creatures, their attempts to gain status by becoming more masculine, were condoned and encouraged" (42). When critics of Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* describe Alisoun as masculine, therefore, they are often referring to her ability to demonstrate masculine traits in an effort to survive in a society where women were encouraged to adopt "'masculine' ways of thinking, even 'masculine' ways of action" (34). Martin Blum, for example, in "Negotiating Masculinities," believes that Alisoun's "take-charge attitude makes her the most successful and the most masculine character in both erotic exchanges. She is rewarded for being the most successful 'man' of the tale" (37). David Lorenzo Boyd discusses in "Seeking 'Goddess Pryvetee'" Alisoun's "potentially masculinizing" body and notes that this body ultimately leads to Nicholas—not Alisoun—being punished for committing adultery (250). Linda Lomperis believes that Alisoun is "a man in woman's clothing" and suggests that several of her actions and decisions are made "as a means of achieving social legitimacy" (255). Such critics celebrate Alisoun's ability to survive and prevail because she possesses male characteristics or chooses masculine actions.

It is important to analyze Alisoun's behavior and physical traits in terms of their tendency toward male identity, because

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doing so demonstrates the way women in medieval society transgressed the boundaries imposed by their female identity in order not only to survive but to prevail. It is my contention, however, that it is equally important to analyze Alisoun's identity as a woman. In doing so, I would like to celebrate Alisoun's promotion of a female identity that exists as an alternative to the conception of the "ideal" woman promoted by the dominant discourse. My interpretation of Alisoun's identity is thus aligned with critics like Jordan who conceive of Alisoun as "a desirable woman despite her animal nature" (87). It is my belief that Alisoun is free to establish her identity on her own terms *because* of her "wilde" (117), unruly nature.

The notion of identity has been a curious one fraught with ambiguity and evasiveness ever since Lacan's revisions of the Freudian account of the id/ego construct minimized the efficacy of the classic psychoanalytic movement which "had treated with undue respect the idea that the self or the ego was the seat of personal identity" (Bowie 75). Lacan, in other words, completely disrupted the possibility of a concrete, fixed, stable identity when he asserted that "no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification," and that "language signifies *something quite other* than what it says" (1045–51). Lacan's subject is irremediably split by language, yet both Freud's id/ego construct and the doomed quest for fulfilling signifiers initiated at Lacan's mirror stage emphasize the fragmentation and conflict inherent in an individual's identity and perception of that identity. Judith Butler, in "Imitation and Gender Subordination," states, like Lacan, that "the prospect of *being* anything, even for pay, has always produced in me a certain anxiety because to claim that this is what I *am* is to suggest a provisional totalization of this 'I'" (1514–5). Butler believes, however, that *meaning* arises and is constituted through performance; the predicates, in other words, precede the subject. Analyzing identity in terms of a framework in which a self or identity emanates from actions is particularly useful when examining the *The Miller's Tale* because, as Lomperis explains, "*The Miller's Tale* seems to locate questions of identity specifically in the mode of performance" (248). Using this framework when considering Alisoun's identity as related to her rejection of Absolon is helpful since, according to Jo Ann McNamara, gender is often seen as "an ephemeral,

culture-ground style of self-presentation" (3). This article's focus will consider the identities of both Alisoun and Absolon and will conceive of these identities as emanating from the various predicates they choose.

The connection, I believe, between the meaning constituted through performance and the meaning constituted through a role one chooses to enact is equally important when analyzing *The Miller's Tale.* Anne Laskaya states in *Chaucer's Approach to Gender in the 'Canterbury Tales'* that "the codified beliefs about gender which existed within powerful institutions [during the Middle Ages] were tremendously influential, just as our own culture's beliefs about democracy or equality are highly influential" (15). Absolon tries desperately to perform his identity according to the codified beliefs of which Laskaya speaks. Laskaya outlines the four main medieval discourses of ideal male behavior—the discourse of heroic masculinity, Christian masculinity, courtly masculinity, and the discourse of the intellectual male. Absolon is interested, in particular, in enacting the role of the courtly lover in hopes that his identity as a courtly lover, and consequently as a culturally sanctioned man, will emanate from the enactment of this role. Of the four discourses, Laskaya asserts, the masculine discourse of courtly love placed special emphasis on the value of women in that it mandated that "the lover-knight hold women as the source of inspiration, the worthy cause of hardship, and as a superiour reason for action in the world" (17). Absolon chooses Alisoun as the object of his love. Alisoun, however, resists Absolon's attempts to force her to enact the role of a courtly lover. It is my contention that through this resistance, Alisoun emerges as a woman who successfully performs her identity on her own terms. Her success simultaneously calls into question Absolon's ability to perform the identity of the "ideal" man promoted by the dominant cultural discourse.

Absolon enacts the role of the courtly lover so as to establish his identity as a courtly lover. Absolon, in other words, chooses predicates in accordance with the role of a courtly lover in hopes that his identity as a courtly lover, and consequently as a culturally sanctioned man, will result from his actions. He chooses Alisoun as the object of his love and believes "for curteisye, he seyde, he wolde noon" (248). He, therefore, prepares himself to se her—"He dembeth his lokkes brode, and made him gay" (271),—wakens himself "for paramours" (251), and "forth he gooth; jolif

and amorous" (252). He sings under Alisoun's window, "Now, dere lady, if thy will be,/I preye yow that ye wol rewe on me," (258–9), and plays his guitar for her as he courts her. He calls to Alisoun "What do ye, hony-comb, swete Alisoun,/My faire brid, my swete cinamome?" (595–6) and asks of her "Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!/Wel litel thenken ye upon my wo,/That for youre love swete ther I go" (597–9). Absolon assures Alisoun "Y-wis, lemman, I have swich love-longinge,/That lyk a turtel trewe is my moorninge;/I may nat ete na more than a mayde" (602–4). He sends her "piment, meeth, and spyced ale,/And warfes, pyping hote out of the glede;" (275–6) and because "she was toune, he profred mede/For som folk wol ben wommen for richesse" (277–8). Absolon is in many ways successful at choosing predicates in accordance with the courtly lover role he wishes to equate with his identity.

Blum believes, however, that Absolon is mistaken "about his own notion that impersonating a lover is an adequate substitute for actually being one" (45). Butler's theory offers wonderful insights as to why this is so. A person, Butler asserts, chooses certain predicates so that the respective identity will become established. The act of repetition, however, is required for this subject to maintain its identity, yet if an identity "is compelled to *repeat itself* in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity, then this is an identity permanently at risk, for what if it fails to repeat, or if the very exercise of repetition is redeployed for a very different performative purpose?" (1522). Absolon, Butler's theory infers, will need to *constantly, repeatedly, always* act in a way that confirms his identity as a courtly lover if he is to maintain this identity, yet "that there is a need for repetition at all is a sign that identity is not self-identical. It requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk of becoming *de*-instituted at every interval" (1522). Thus, Absolon, according to Blum, impersonates a courtly lover by choosing his predicates in accordance with this role, but Absolon cannot successfully equate the role with the identity because doing so requires that he *constantly, repeatedly, always* enact this role in a totalizing way. According to Butler's theory, anyone who desperately needs to grasp onto any secure, static identity will find him or herself constantly in despair. Even if one is able to constantly, repeatedly, always act in a way that confirms a certain identity—this in itself is a wretchedly difficult

task—the simple *nature* of this *need* for repetition indicates the vulnerability of that identity. Butler's theory offers little hope to Absolon because Absolon tries so hard *to be* a courtly lover and believes that he *is* a courtly lover; it only, however, takes one action chosen not in accordance with this identity to shatter the much-coveted, stable, courtly lover identity.

Absolon, in other words, fails to consistently act in accordance with his desire to establish and maintain his identity as a man who successfully enacts the discourse of courtly love. Absolon speaks with a voice that is "gentil and smal" (257) like a "nightingale" (274). He coughs "softe with a semi-soun" (594) and is "squaymous/Of Farting, and of speche daungerous" (234–5). Moreover, his physical traits and choice of dress is highly effeminate:

> Crul was his heer,/and as the gold it shoon,
> And strouted as a fanne large and brode;
> Ful streight and evene lay his joly shode.
> His rode was reed, his eyen greye as goos;
> With Powles window corven on his shoos,
> In hoses rede he wente fetisly.
> Y-clad he was ful and smal and properly,
> Al in a dirtel of a light waget—
> Ful faire and thike been the poyntes set—
> And therupon he hadde a gay surplys
> As whyt as is the blosme upon the rys.
> A merry child he was, so God me save. (210–22)

Perhaps most seriously, however, Absolon fails to consistently enact the role of the courtly lover because he cannot successfully execute his male authority over the female object of his love.

Kara Virginia Donaldson asserts in "Alisoun's Language" that *The Miller's Tale* "exposes the use of male discourse to interpret and control women's discourse and bodies" (140). Masculinity in the middle ages, Laskaya confirms, "involved exerting power and control over women" (30). All discourses of ideal male behavior, according to Laskaya, "assum[ed] that power in some form and masculinity or maleness are synonymous" (30) to the extent that "the premium medieval culture placed on male governance meant that physical force could be used, and often was used, to attain power" (20). *The Miller's Tale* acknowledges the efficacy of physical force as an organizing force when the Miller states that

"som folk wol ben wommen for richesse,/And som for strokes, and some for gentillesse" (278–9). Absolon's duty, therefore, if he is to establish and maintain his identity as a courtly lover, and consequently, as a culturally sanctioned man, is to control the object of his love at all costs, even if physical force must be used as a controlling force. Absolon, even before he approaches Alisoun, has no misconceptions about his duty to use physical force to attain power of Alisoun if need be. The Miller notes that "if she has been a mous,/And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon" (243–4). Absolon, in other words, is prepared to use physical force as an organizing force in order to consistently act in accordance with the identity he desires to establish and maintain.

Absolon does not foresee any problems, however, because he assumes that Alisoun will choose her predicates in accordance with the identity of a woman who is the object of a courtly lover. Absolon imagines meeting Alisoun for the first time and envisions that her predicates will nicely align with the identity he has ascribed to her:

> So moot I thryve, I shal, at cokkes crowe,
> Ful prively knokken at his windowe
> That stant ful lowe upon his boures wal.
> To Alisoun now wol I tellen al
> My love-longing, for yet I shat nat misse
> That at the leste wey I shal hire kisse.
> Som maner confort shal I have parfay.
> My mouth hath icched al this longe day;
> That is a signe of kissing atte leste. (572–80)

Edward C. Schweitzer states in "The Misdirected Kiss and the Lover's Malady" that Absolon suffers from self-deception because of the assertion made in *The Miller's Tale* that "the lover, deluded by his senses and overpowered by his imagination, expects to find perfect happiness in a woman of flesh and blood" (229). Absolon is certainly overpowered by his imagination in this scene, and he therefore does not recognize that his identity is extremely precarious because Alisoun may actually *not* choose her predicates in accordance with the identity of a woman who is the object of a courtly lover. Blum writes that "Absolon's self-definition as a male is entirely based on this notion of performing the part of the courtly lover" (44). My opinion differs from that of

Blum, however, because I believe that Absolon's identity as a courtly lover, and consequently, as a culturally sanctioned man, requires not only that *Absolon* constantly, repeatedly, always enact the role of a courtly lover, but also that *Alisoun* choose her predicates in accordance with the role of the object of a courtly lover. Absolon's identity is also, therefore, largely based upon Alisoun's desire and ability to choose her predicates in a way that confirms Absolon's identity.

Alisoun demonstrates that she is capable of enacting the role of the object of the courtly lover. Laskaya states that in the Middle Ages, "first and foremost, the dominant cultural discourse surrounding femininity encouraged the perception of women as physical objects, as bodies" (33). "On the one hand," Laskaya explains, "woman was placed on a pedestal and praised for her physical beauty or her virginity; on the other hand, she was reviled as a grotesque and lascivious temptress who could lead men to hell" (33). The courtly love discourses, however, according to Laskaya, "accord[s] women a central role. It places women at the center of the male protagonists's world, thereby resisting ecclesiastical preferences for virginity and the Church's harsher view of active human sexuality" (17). Thus, the discourse of courtly love, like the dominant cultural discourse, placed an emphasis on women's beauty and bodies, yet this discourse also sanctioned women's sexuality. In this sense, therefore, Alisoun chooses her predicates in a way that emphasizes that she is capable of establishing her identity as a woman who is the object of a courtly lover. She acts on her female sexuality and is "likerous" even while in church (242). She dresses in a way that calls attention to her beauty and to her body: "Fair was this yonge syf, and therwithal/As any wesele hir body gent and smal./A Ceynt she werede barred al of silk; A barnclooth eeek as whyt as morne milk/Upon hir lendes, ful of many a gore." (125–9). It is, in fact, her beauty and body that first attract Absolon: "And many a lovely look on hem [the wyves of the parish faste] he caste,/And namely on this carpenteres shif:/*To loke on hire him thought a mery lyf./She was so propre* and swete" (239–42; my emphasis). Alisoun, in other words, chooses several predicates that establish her ability to perform the identity of an ideal object of a courtly lover.

Alisoun, however, while choosing certain predicates that demonstrate her ability to establish her identity as an ideal object

of a courtly lover, also uses the limited power ascribed to her by this discourse in order to assert her feminist stance that women need not choose predicates in accordance with the roles imposed on them by the discourses of male behavior. According to Laskaya, "the primary virtue women were to cultivate, besides chastity, was obedience; in no way were women to assert themselves as equals to men" (42). The courtly love discourse varied only slightly. The discourse of courtly love still objectified women, yet "its fictions placed women above men and assumed women appropriately made decisions which governed men's lives" (17). Nevertheless, though women acted as governors over men's lives in this discourse, they, paradoxically, were still instructed to be subservient to men. Within courtly love narratives, Laskaya explains, "women were imagined to exert control over their lovers for a time; but, as in most romances, women were also being instructed finally to give the lover what he wanted, what he had 'earned'." (42). Alisoun, however, while choosing various predicates in accordance with the role of the object of a courtly lover, also chooses many predicates *not* in accordance with the role of the object of a courtly lover. In doing so, Alisoun resists Absolon's determination to force her to enact the role that a culturally sanctioned female would traditionally enact within the discourse of courtly love. Her refusal to enact this role signifies her refusal to confirm Absolon's identity as a courtly lover, and consequently, as a culturally sanctioned man. Alisoun, instead, asserts her own independence and establishes her identity on her own terms.

Absolon's identity requires that he consistently act in accordance with the role of the courtly lover; it is therefore necessary that he control the object of his love and force her to obediently enact her role as object of a courtly lover. Alisoun, however, resists his attempts to force her to obediently choose her predicates in accordance with this role. Her first predicate chosen not in accordance with the role Absolon has ascribed to her involves her love for Nicholas. Alisoun "loveth so this hende Nicholas,/That Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn;/He ne nadde for his labour but a scorn./And thus she maketh Absolon hire ape,/And al his ernest turneth til a jape" (283–7). Alisoun's love for Nicholas, according to the Miller, necessitates her rejection of Absolon. Such rejection renders Absolon's identity as a courtly lover precarious, if not impossible. Alisoun *must* cooperatively

choose her predicates in accordance with the role of object of a courtly lover if Absolon is to establish his desired identity; making Absolon her ape most assuredly transgresses the boundaries of what the predicates the role of object of a courtly lover will allow.

Absolon approaches Alisoun's window, hoping to replicate the scene he previously played out in his mind. Alisoun, however, in addition to loving Nicholas, chooses another predicate in an effort to resist his insistence that she enact a role that will help him establish and maintain his desired identity as a courtly lover. She orders him to "Go fro the window, Jakke fool,/As help me God, it wol not be 'compa me'" (605–6). She reminds him that this predicate inevitably stems from the uncooperative first predicate—"I love another, and elles I were to blame,/Wel bet than thee, by Jesu, Absolon!" (607–8)—and threatens to choose another predicate that will exacerbate her already harmful resistance to his attempts to force her to enact the role of the object of a courtly lover: "Go forth thy wey or I wol caste a ston,/And lat me slepe, a twenty devel wey!" (609–10). Alisoun makes clear that she refuses to enact or passively submit to the identity Absolon attempts to force upon her.

Absolon, however, understands how necessary it is to control Alisoun if he is to establish and maintain his desired identity. He, therefore, insists that she align her actions with his need to establish and maintain his identity as a courtly lover through his own actions. Alisoun's predicates, thus far, do not align with the courting scene Absolon had previously envisioned. He is shocked "that trewe love was evere so yvel biset!" (612) and orders Alisoun "thanne kisse me, sin it may be no bet,/For Jesus love and for the love of me" (613–4). Absolon absolutely cannot conceive that she not enact her proper role as object of a courtly lover. Absolon therefore does not understand the significance of her promise to kiss him only if he will go away. Absolon, rather, sees this promise as her submission to the identity he demands she perform, and he therefore refers to her as his "lemman" (616). Absolon labels her his lover as if he had conquered her resistance and forced her into her proper role as a culturally sanctioned female lover operating within the discourse of courtly love. He gets down on his knees in preparation for the predicate that will establish his identity as a courtly lover (her kiss) and proudly announces "I am a lord at alle degrees" (620–1). Absolon believes he had

established his identity as a lord because Alisouns has agreed to choose the predicate that will confirm this identity for him. Absolon's imagination, as he envisions that "after this I hope ther cometh more" (622), causes him, as before, to assume Alisoun will continue to choose her predicates in a way that maintains his identity. He refers to her again as his "lemman, thy grace, and swete brid" (623) as if confirming both her identity as the product and demonstration of his ability to control the object of his love and his identity as a culturally sanctioned man.

Alisoun, however, is less interested in choosing her predicates so as to confirm Absolon's identity and is instead more interested in choosing her predicates on her own terms. She, therefore, opens the window and summons Absolon, who "gan wype his mouth ful drye" (627). Alisoun, however, in yet another successful attempt to choose predicates in violation of the role Absolon insists she enact, "at the window out she putte hir hole" (629). Absolon, "him fil no bet ne wers" (630), follows her lead, and in doing so, simultaneously acts in a way that confirms her agenda rather than his own: "with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers/ Ful savourly, er he was war of this" (631–2). The irony here is fascinating. Absolon tries to force Alisoun to choose her predicates so as to confirm his identity, but Alisoun chooses her predicates in a way that inevitably results in Absolon choosing a predicate (kissing her) that is highly destructive to the identity he desires to establish and maintain through his control of Alisoun.

Absolon instantly realizes the severity of his own chosen predicate. He cries "'Fy! allas, what have I do?'" (636) and "goth forth a sory pas" (638). All hopes of establishing his identity as a courtly lover have been shattered and his desire to court Alisoun has now all but disappeared. "His hote love was cold and al y-queynt;/ For fro that tyme that he had kiste hir ers" (651–2) and "Of paramous he sette nat a kers" (653) to the extent that "he was heeled of his maladye" (654). Absolon realizes that despite all his efforts to carefully enact the role of a courtly lover, one particularly destructive predicate chosen not in accordance with this role has rendered his desired identity utterly unattainable. Absolon now turns his attention toward choosing his predicates for a completely different performative purpose. Enraged, he—"And on his lippe he gan for anger byte" (642)—and "to himself

he seyde, 'I shal thee quyte.'" (643). He vows to seek revenge: "'Allas!/My soule bitake I unto Sathanas,/But me wer levere than al this toun,' quod he,/'Of this despyt awroken for to be'" (646–9). Realizing he cannot establish and maintain his identity as a courtly lover, yet still hoping to establish and maintain his identity as a culturally sanctioned man and Alisoun's identity as a culturally sanctioned female, Absolon determines to use physical force as an organizing force in order to conquer Alisoun and to force her to recognize her identity as his subservient object. Absolon's own identity as a culturally sanctioned man—if not a courtly lover—will therefore be established.

Absolon now chooses his predicates with a new performative purpose and a somewhat modified, but still desired, identity in mind. He once again denounces "paramours" (655), but even as he plans to use physical force as an organizing force, his predicates subvert the identity he wishes and is trying to establish. Ironically, Absolon "weep as dooth a child that is y-bete" (656) as he makes his plans to use physical force as an organizing force. He walks away in search of a weapon, but does so with "a softe paas" (657) and an "esily" (661) knock. Nevertheless, Absolon does manage to choose several predicates in an effort to establish his identity as a culturally sanctioned man capable of controlling his object through physical force. He borrows a "hote culter" (673), returns to the carpenter's house, and knocks on Alisoun's window.

Absolon once again enacts the role of the courtly lover, "right as he dide er" (686), but does so—not to establish his identity as a courtly lover—but rather, to trick Alisoun so that he may force her to perform the identity of his subservient object. He calls to her "God woot, my swete leef,/I am thyn Absolon, my dereling" (689–90) and pretends that he is a courtly lover and that she is the object of his courtly love. He tells her, "'Of gold, I have thee brought a ring—/My moder yaf it me, so God me save—/Ful fyn it is, and thereto wel y-grave" (691–3) and once again asks for a kiss. Whereas Alisoun's first "kiss" would have established Absolon's identity as a courtly lover and Alisoun's identity as object of the courtly lover, this second "kiss," Absolon hopes, will at least establish his identity as a culturally sanctioned man and her identity as a culturally sanctioned female (his subservient object).

Alisoun, however, in charge of performing her identity on her own terms, refrains from going to the window so that it is Nicholas—not her—who chooses the predicates for which Absolon was prepared. Nicholas therefore suffers the consequences of the punishment that was meant for Alisoun. Nicholas opens the window and extends his rear end as Alisoun did previously. Absolon, still pretending to enact the role of the courtly lover, cries to Alisoun in the language he previously used to confirm her identity as his object: "'Spek, swete brid, I noot nat wher thou art'" (702). Absolon, however, must contend with Nicholas's defiant predicates this time. It is Nicholas, therefore, who suffers the outcome of Alisoun's refusal to enact the role that would establish and maintain Absolon's identity as a culturally sanctioned man.

Absolon has, once again, failed to successfully enact the role of the ideal, culturally sanctioned man. Absolon is therefore conspicuously absent from the rest of the tale, almost as if his identity as *anything*, let alone as a courtly lover or culturally sanctioned man, has been completely erased. Absolon disappears from the narrative the moment he fails, for the second time, to force Alisoun to enact the role of the culturally sanctioned female. The tale immediately shifts to Nicholas's reaction to the "iren hoot" (706) and the focus from this moment until the close of the tale is entirely upon the flood. At the end of the tale Absolon is missing, but Alisoun, after protecting herself by remaining passive while Nicholas suffered the consequences of her refusal to enact the role of the culturally sanctioned female, is very busy choosing predicates in accordance with her identity as a woman who will not be controlled. She leaps out of bed and runs through the streets with her lover, yelling "'out'" and "'harrow'" (722). She, with Nicholas at her side, shouts at the carpenter and tells "every man that he was woon,/He was ahast so of 'Nowelis flood'" (730–1) until "every wight gan laughen at this stryf" (746). By the end of the tale Alisoun has convinced the entire town that her husband is crazy. She has demonstrated that she will not be controlled or forced to enact the role of a culturally sanctioned female and she has proven that she is capable of choosing her predicates in a way that allows her to establish her identity on her own terms.

Absolon's moments of failure to signify Alisoun's moments of triumph. Absolon insists that Alisoun choose her predicates in a way that confirms his desired identity, but Alisoun demonstrates through her resistance that she and she *only* will decide what identity she will perform. Alisoun, therefore, picks and chooses her predicates in accordance with her own definition of womanhood. She chooses to operate within the dominant cultural discourse by dressing in a way that emphasizes her female body and beauty. She subscribes to the traditional female behavior established by the discourse of courtly love in that she acts on her feminine sexual impulses. Yet Alisoun refuses to absolutely perform the identity of a culturally sanctioned female because she will not allow herself to be controlled. She will not submit to male discourses' promotion of physical force as an organizing force. She will not choose her actions for the sole purpose of establishing "ideal" male identity. Perhaps most importantly, Alisoun chooses her predicates so as to establish her female identity on her own terms.

Absolon's identity is far less certain, if it exists at all. Absolon's absence from the end of the tale, I believe, suggests the destruction that inevitably results when a man in the Middle Ages attempted to absolutely define himself according to the rules determined by the discourse of courtly love. This courtly love discourse of "ideal" male behavior, the tale makes clear, demands that men perform an impossible identity. A man who insists on defining himself solely according to his ability to constantly, repeatedly, always perform the identity required by the courtly love discourse will, *The Miller's Tale* reveals, ultimately fail and therefore cease to exist at all.

Absolon cannot survive because his sense of self and identity is entirely based upon his need to succeed at defining himself within the confines of what the courtly love discourse dictates. Alisoun, however, survives and prevails because she refuses to validate this discourse and instead insists upon defining herself apart from the culturally sanctioned female identity this discourse promotes. *The Miller's Tale*, therefore, is as much a commentary on the unrealistic nature of the courtly love discourse as it is an analysis of gender roles. The tale demonstrates what actually happens when men try to realize the identity the courtly love discourse mandates. The tale reveals the impossibility of

consistently choosing predicates in an effort to aspire to establish and maintain in any thorough and totalizing way the Medieval sense of the "ideal" male or female identity. Perhaps most importantly, *The Miller's Tale* illustrates the triumphant, strong, independent—if unruly—identity that women can perform when they step outside the dominant cultural discourse and define their sense of self and identity on their own terms.

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