CHAPTER 1

Naturalism and its discontents in the *Miller's Tale*

One of the strangest moments in the *Miller's Tale* is the one in which Absolon, who has been waiting in the dark at Alisoun's window for a long-anticipated kiss, finds himself savoring the taste not of her mouth but of the "hole" she has so unceremoniously proffered. This moment will serve as a useful entry into the intersection between Chaucer's representations of erotic life and his philosophical poetics, and specifically into the way he combines an interest in the instability of hegemonic norms of gender and desire with interests in ethics, agency, and practical reason.

> This Absolon gan wype his mouth ful drie.
> Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole,
> And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,
> And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,
> But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers
> Ful savourly, er he were war of this.
> Abak he stirte, and thoughte 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?"
> (I.3730–39)

I begin with this moment partly because of its distance from the explicitly philosophical themes that crop up from time to time in Chaucer's poetry: in the place of epistemological subtleties or worries over the freedom of the will, the Miller offers us some dirty sex and a good joke. In fact, insofar as there is any conceptual content to the moment, it lies not in abstract philosophizing but in the way Absolon's ill-fated kiss expresses the deep *anti*philosophical animus of the Miller's

naturalism. As many critics have argued, here as elsewhere in the tale the Miller sets out to "quite" the *Knight's Tale* by deflating that tale's romantic and philosophical ambitions, baring the most basic natural facts of animality, bodiliness and desire which the Knight and his characters, and their surrogates in the *Miller's Tale*, seem so intent on sublimating.[1] On such an account Absolon, who throughout the tale has seemed more interested in adopting a theatrical posture of love-longing than in attaining any erotic payoff, is finally brought into intimate and unmistakable contact with "the real nature of what he sought"; and with this unveiling of the real object of human, or at least masculine, desire, the perverse displacements of desire operating in the lyrical complaints and philosophical speeches of the *Knight's Tale* are supposed to become compellingly clear.[2] This polemical function of the moment, and the force with which the tale in other ways sets out to give what Kolve calls "a counter-vision of human experience" to the Knight's, is more or less what prompted Muscatine to call the *Miller's Tale* a case of "fabliau . . . virtually made philosophical."[3] On Muscatine's account, and for critics such as Kolve who share that account's basic commitments, the tale achieves (or "virtually" achieves) philosophical status not because it has any direct philosophical content but because of the deftness and density with which Chaucer marshals poetic resources to capture a distinct view of human purposes and of how we ought to pursue them. Such an account is helpful, then, in foregrounding Chaucer's interest in the ethical and conceptual stakes of literary representation, and in suggesting that that interest is perhaps as important a clue to what makes his poetry philosophical as are the more overtly philosophical moments he sometimes includes.

In recent years, however, a challenge has been mounted to the Muscatinian reading of the tale, which requires a reformulation of those stakes and of how Chaucer engaged them. A number of critics with interests in gender and sexuality have begun to raise questions that disturb a naturalistic account of Absolon's kiss and of the *Miller's Tale* as a whole. What does it mean for Alisoun, who throughout the tale has functioned as a more or less passive object of desire, to present her "hole" to be kissed, and so to become at this fateful moment not merely an object but an agent? Just which hole does she put out the window, the one with lips and hair or the one in the middle of her ass? Why does

the Miller conflate these holes, and what does it mean for Absolon momentarily to conflate them with the hole in a bearded face? And how are we to interpret the fact that there are questions and conflations here at all, given the Miller's apparent insistence that there should not *be* any, since what this moment is supposed to reveal is a determinate, compelling, and naturally given object of desire?[4] Under the pressure of such questions, gender identity and erotic desire have begun to look considerably less natural than they have often been taken to be here, and for that matter less natural than the Miller seems to take them to be. I think that the earlier critical discussions of the tale's naturalism capture quite well the Miller's preferred self-understanding. But the more recent critical development points us to the further question of what *other* understandings circulate through the text, and of how Chaucer conceived the Miller's relation to them. In what follows, I will argue that the weird sexiness of Absolon's kiss expresses a mobility of desire and gender identification that is deeply unsettling from a naturalistic perspective, and whose very possibility naturalism must deny. This is part of what I mean in referring to "naturalism and its discontents," and understood properly, I think, it brings with it significant consequences not only for a reading of the *Miller's Tale* but for an understanding of Chaucer's project in the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

That kind of argument, however, sounds less like a philosophical one – or at least less like a philosophical one we might attribute to Chaucer – than one dependent on relatively recent developments in feminism, psychoanalysis, and queer theory. It will be a central project of this chapter and this book to argue that what a number of critics have found to be Chaucer's feminist, psychoanalytic, and queer affinities can be understood in a new way, and one more responsive to how Chaucer might have conceived them, by attending to a philosophical analysis of practical rationality familiar to Chaucer from Boethius, and familiar to him in its extension to matters of gender and sexuality from a number of places, most centrally the *Roman de la Rose*. At the same time, attention to the issues raised in feminist, psychoanalytic, and queer criticism throws into relief the ethical and psychological import of Chaucer's philosophical interests. One need not adopt any of the specific technical arguments of psychoanalysis or other modern theories to make out Chaucer's understanding of these matters. Remaining

agnostic with respect to such arguments, while pursuing an alternate path through some of the territory they mark out, can help us both to tell richer stories of the self-understanding of the past, and to understand more clearly what is at stake in accepting, modifying, or rejecting the theories through which our own culture seeks to understand itself.

The focus of this chapter will be on articulating more fully than the critical literature has so far the conceptual and affective structure of a naturalistic theory of desire, action, and identity. The Miller's commitment to such a theory, I will argue, serves as both a prop for and a disturbance to the normative masculinity the tale also embodies. But while both philosophical naturalism and the ideology of gender and desire with which it intersects in the tale will emerge in this discussion as sites of self-deception and misrecognition, my project will be less that of exposing ideological error than that of exploring what is compelling about naturalism and understanding what motivates it. In fact, I will argue that the very idea of such an exposure participates in the underlying assumptions that give naturalism its force.[5] What interests Chaucer in the *Miller's Tale*, I think, is the way naturalism expresses a picture of persons' relations to themselves and others that, however problematic, exerts a deep claim, and not only on the Miller. That claim will be of interest throughout this book; another reason I begin with the *Miller's Tale* is that it provides particularly condensed expression to a package of intuitions concerning identity, desire, and action to which Chaucer returns time and again in the *Tales*. And what gives those intuitions their power cannot be understood through an exclusive focus on gender and sexuality. No small part of naturalism's power stems from the way it links a set of normative intuitions concerning gender and desire to a broader theory of normativity as such, that is, a theory of what it means for the human creature, to adapt Paul's famous phrase, to "be a law to itself." Investigating the imaginative power of this broader theory can help us account for the pressures the Miller's conceptions of gender and desire are under, and pursuing an account of those pressures can help us understand how the ideological "regime of the normal" expressed in this tale gets constructed and inhabited. Further, an investigation of a naturalistic theory of normativity will land us squarely in philosophical territory, engaging problems in ethics and the theory of action concerning the relations of desire to its objects, to the actions of those who are

moved by them, and to the identities of those whose desires they are. What makes the *Miller's Tale* philosophical, I will argue, is Chaucer's use of poetic resources to explore such problems, not in the abstract form of philosophical theorizing, nor through the representation of a distinct and coherent worldview, but by staging the dialectical play of the Miller's troubled engagement with them, an engagement for which gender and sexuality provide the central scenes. Chaucer's main goal is thus not the clarity of a solution to philosophical problems but rather an appreciation of what makes those problems deep, and what roots them down in our practical lives.

I will begin, then, by returning to the "naturalism of exceptional force and vitality" which, however problematic, seems nevertheless to inform the entire tale.[6] If this at first takes us far away from the spectacular strangeness and complex eroticism of Absolon's ill-fated kiss, I hope that in doing so it will enable us to return to that moment, and others that are perhaps less spectacular but just as interesting, and see in them a strangeness that is both more unsettling and more familiar than we otherwise might imagine.

ON NORMATIVE NATURALISM

As Muscatine, Kolve, and others have argued, various features of the *Miller's Tale*'s mode of representation, including narrative structure, characterization, tone, and the use of descriptive detail, suggests a picture of the human creature as a happy animal inhabiting a world in which it is perfectly at home.[7] Unlike the *Knight's Tale*, which takes place against a barren landscape in which all human projects seem to need elaborate management and are constrained by loss, absence, and ultimately death – so that, as Theseus says at the end of the tale, it seems that our true home must be somewhere else – the *Miller's Tale* represents a world of wonderful plenitude and freedom, alive with sensual experience and youthful energy, a place in which immersion in the pleasures of the here and now is all anyone could want. The central figure in this world is Alisoun, the object of desire that sets the plot and all of the male characters in motion; and, as the portrait of her that introduces her into the tale suggests, she functions as both the single most compelling instance of a desirable natural object and as

a synecdoche for the plenitude of pleasures that the rest of nature offers: "She was ful moore blisful on to see / Than is the newe pere-jonette tree, / And softer than the wolle is of a wether" (I.3247–49); "Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth, / Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth" (I.3261–62). Alisoun's centrality to the plot's and characters' energies, the perfect natural sensuousness of her portrait, and her status as a readily available object of desire, "For any lord to leggen in his bedde, / Or yet for any good yeman to wedde" (I.3269–70), all go to suggest two of the main ways in which the tale represents a world perfectly fitted to its human inhabitants, a world that is, in Marshall Leicester's apt phrase, "the plaything of one's projects."[8] First, this is a place in which everything you could want seems to be ready to hand, present for the immediate gratification of desire. Second, it is one in which what you want is compellingly clear, and is made so just by the natural disposition of the world: unless you are a pervert or a fool, and an even bigger pervert or fool than even Absolon, what you want is Alisoun.

For now I want to pass over the masculine, antifeminist, and heteronormative bias in this picture; the Miller pretty clearly has such a bias, and how and why it matters – and, in particular, what makes it more interesting than a mere occasion for critical exposure – will, I hope, become clear later. What needs clarifying first is just what it means to describe this picture as a species of naturalism. Kolve puts the point well in saying that the tale represents "an animal world in which instinct takes the place that reason holds for man, a world in which instinct and necessity are one."[9] As Kolve's appeals to instinct and necessity suggest, his point is about the practical normativity of "the natural," the way nature is supposed to settle questions of what to do, and so to take the place, at least initially, not of reason as a whole but of practical reason specifically. The tale presents a picture of human life according to which desire and its objects are determined by a set of naturally given facts: the fact that such a creature as Alisoun exists, for instance, is supposed to be enough to settle the matter when it comes to male erotic desire, which is the Miller's central case. That much says, in effect, that nature determines both our ends – the goals towards which action aims – and our disposition towards those ends, the motivational structure by which they appear as goals for us. If instinct takes the place of reason in the tale, then, it does so first of all because according to the Miller's

picture there is no role for reason to play either in deciding what our ends are or in giving those ends a normative claim on us, in making them count for us.

The Miller's project of "quiting" the *Knight's Tale* to a large extent depends on the success with which he can make the practical normativity of "the natural" seem both self-evident and adequate to any needs reason might address. The Knight's narrative centers on moments like Palamon and Arcite's paralyzed love for the inaccessible Emily, the destruction of individual and civil concord to which that love drives them, and the transfixion of nearly everyone in the tale by their grief over Arcite's death. These are moments in which the world is anything but the plaything of our projects, moments in which the objects of our desires seem to call to us as though from behind some barrier or from infinitely far away. Such moments of privation and longing seem to the Knight and his characters to demand lyrical complaint or publicly edifying spectacle or efforts at philosophy, in each case as though the failure of desire to reach through to its object awakened a genuine need for several kinds of reflection: practical reasoning about what we really want or what we ought to do, and about how to make our beliefs about what to do effective at motivating us; but also speculative reasoning about who and what we are, about the nature of the world we inhabit, and about what it means that we suffer in the ways we do.[10] But as far as the Miller is concerned there can be no genuine needs here of any kind. If desires and their objects are transparent in just the way he thinks they are, then everything that counts about who we are and the world we live in must be transparent too; the reflective efforts of the Knight and his characters are not, as the Knight would have it, *responses* to privation, but ways of perversely *generating* a sense of privation where there is no genuine lack. The Miller, then, must make both practical and speculative reasoning seem excessive from a practical point of view, willful acts of self-mystification by a creature for whom nature has already provided all that happiness could require. Only then can the impulse to reflection shown in the *Knight's Tale* seem equivalent to its parodic appearances in the *Miller's Tale*: as the love Nicholas shows for his own gratuitous cleverness in deferring sex with Alisoun in order to concoct an elaborate plan to fool John; the ridiculous and self-regarding postures of Absolon as he sings silly love songs and plays Herod on a high

scaffold; and John's gullible worries concerning an end of the world that anyone can see is not about to come, a concern that diverts him from the cuckolding taking place nearly under his nose.

To achieve this further defeat of reason the Miller must do more than insist on the natural determination of human ends and their motivational transparency. For a world in which desires and their objects were naturally determined could still leave plenty of room for the frustration of happiness, even a world as rich and alive with desirable things as that of the *Miller's Tale*. We could face conditions in which it was not immediately obvious how to get what we want; then there would still, at the very least, be a practical role for reason to play in determining the means to our ends. Lyrical and philosophical reflection might not immediately be called for, but calculation would, and in the right (or wrong) circumstances the calculation required could be quite elaborate, and could still result in frustration. In the extreme case we could find ourselves with no means at all, and the objects of our desires would then remain tantalizingly out of reach, as Emily in her garden is for the imprisoned Palamon and Arcite. Such a condition would hardly allow for the glad animal spirits of the *Miller's Tale*; a creature determined by instinct in this way might just as well be nature's victim as nature's favored child. And what is worse, such a creature might easily form the *thought* of itself as nature's victim; then the door would be open wide to the complaint and speculation the Miller finds so nonsensical. For the creature that formed this thought would no longer merely suffer its frustrations as it were in animal fashion, just by coming up short in its reach for whatever it happens to want at the moment. It would have a conception of itself as a suffering creature, and this conception would add to its suffering in a myriad of ways, allowing for anticipation and fear of future suffering, despair of relief, and so on; such a creature might even, like Palamon in the *Knight's Tale*, come to envy the animals instead of identifying with them.[11] For the Miller's project to get off the ground, then, he must suggest not only that nature determines our ends and provides for their motivational transparency, but also that nature determines and provides the means to our ends. Then the connection between desire and its objects will look completely seamless, and there will be no gaps left for practical reason to fill and speculative reason to reflect on.

The Miller manages this further suggestion partly through a wealth of descriptive detail that lays the circumstantial groundwork for the most central and the most trivial acts in the tale, so that the question of means can never so much as arise. Absolon may be reduced to courting Alisoun through her window, but the window is conveniently placed at a height that allows a kneeling lover to offer himself for a kiss; when Alisoun wants to chase Absolon off, there is a stone lying about in her bedroom, ready to be thrown; when Absolon wants to play Herod, there's a scaffold handy for his dramatic posturing, and when he wants revenge, there's a nearby blacksmith to lend a hot blade; when John's servant Robin wants to know what is happening behind Nicholas's locked door, he can peek through the hole the cat uses to creep in and out; and so on.[12] This descriptive density has the effect of suggesting a world so full of means to our ends that it is ready made for human action. That is what drives the Miller's polemic against the Knight home, for in a world with the plenitude of utterly compelling pleasures that this one offers, and one so dense with all imaginable means to our ends, instinct can do all the work of mapping out a course of action, and there is no practical function left for reason to play. The proper thing to do in such a world is just to reach out and take what you want, as "hende" Nicholas does early in the tale with Alisoun when "prively he caughte hir by the queynte" (I.3276), and as he seems to forget in concocting his elaborate ruse.[13] And given the extent to which nature has prepared the way for human happiness, fitting the world so perfectly to human desire that there is no space even for the question of means to come up, there is no space either for the sense of privation and suffering that gives rise to speculative reasoning in the *Knight's Tale*. The direct target of the Miller's polemic is practical reason, then, because he thinks that by defeating the need for practical reason in the way he does he will provide all the argument he needs to insure the defeat of speculative reason as well. If there is any role left for reason to play in human life, it would seem to be restricted to the happy contemplation of our good fortune as creatures blessed by nature. This, in effect, is what the Miller means his tale to be: a celebration of the blessed natural state of the human animal, a narrative expression of the particular pleasure we can take, as reflective creatures, in contemplating our inhabitation of a world that gives us everything we could

want and ample opportunity to get it, a place in which there could never be a question about who we are or what we should do.[14]

I have meant the above account of the Miller's naturalism to be a way of spelling out the underlying conceptual commitments of his basic understanding of himself and his project in the tale. These commitments have been recognized in some form by many critics, and as I have already suggested, Muscatine and Kolve in particular have been helpful in suggesting that the way these commitments inform the tale's entire mode of representation makes it a case, as Muscatine puts it, of "fabliau . . . virtually made philosophical." I agree with Muscatine and Kolve that, however funny the tale is, Chaucer means it as more than an occasion for laughs, and as more than the expression of a churlish man who simply fails to see what the Knight's concerns are: the *Miller's Tale* engages the normative problems raised in the *Knight's Tale* with complexity and precision, rather than merely evading them with a joke. The further question I now want to pose is how to understand Chaucer's philosophical interest in that complex engagement. Muscatine, in unpacking his notion that Chaucer makes fabliau nearly philosophical, outlines what he takes to be the tale's "assertions" of "the binding, practical sequentiality of all events," of the "ethical imperative" of "physical action," and of "the purest fabliau doctrine, the sovereignty of animal nature."[15] Kolve gives explicit formulation to a view that is, I think, implicit in the critical procedures of Muscatine and many other critics when he says that the tale "presents a contrary view of human experience" to that of the Knight, and so "required of Chaucer the invention of a counter-art: nonhierarchic, nonhieratic, addressing no truth beyond itself."[16] What links Muscatine's and Kolve's claims is the idea that the tale expresses an essentially subjective worldview, a set of self-contained and self-consistent assertions, a pure doctrine that points only to its own truth. If that idea is right, then the way to locate Chaucer's philosophical interest in the tale is by laying out the theory the tale, and through it the Miller, assert; and in specifying the relations of the first two *Canterbury Tales*, we will say what most critics have said, that the Miller's theory opposes the Knight's, and, depending on how one understands those theories, that the Miller subverts the Knight's ideology, or lacks his greater wisdom, or simply sees things differently.

While I agree that the Miller's *theory* opposes the Knight's, I think there is more to be said about what it means to have such a theory, and what interests Chaucer in the Miller's having it, than emerges from attention to that theory considered as a set of propositions about the world given expression in literary form. As I will now argue, what makes Chaucer's project in the tale philosophical is his interest in naturalism as a site of misrecognition. In pursuing this interest, Chaucer stands squarely within the Socratic or Platonic philosophical tradition, with its central concern of tracking the dialectical relationship between what people are prepared to assert about themselves and the world and the competing beliefs they cannot articulate and would even disavow, but which nevertheless the pressure of philosophical reflection shows them to have. This concern is the basis both of Socratic method and Platonic dialogue, and as I will argue in chapter three, it is the basis as well of Boethius's use of dialogue form in the philosophical text with which Chaucer had the most frequent and deepest engagement, the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Let us turn, then, to the question of how the Miller inhabits the naturalistic views his tale expresses, the range of claims those views make on him, and the multiple ways he disposes himself towards those claims.

The character of the Miller's investment in his naturalistic theory begins to look a bit more complex than one of simple belief when we notice a peculiar paradox that attends a project of the kind he pursues. The various features of the tale that support a normative naturalism are targeted against what the Miller takes to be the enemy, a perverse refusal to live in the world like the happy animals he thinks we are. His polemical strategy is to hold the enemy up to a withering public laughter, first at the sheer folly of such a refusal, and second at the satisfying justice of the enemy's appropriate punishment, brought about by a series of narrative coincidences that seem to be less the effects of chance than signs of the natural order of things asserting themselves. What is peculiar about this, however, is that if anything like the Miller's naturalism were right, then there could not be such an enemy in the first place. If desire and its objects were determined by a set of naturally given facts in such a way that instinct alone picked out our ends and made them transparent to us, then there would be no room for the perverse displacements of desire that the Miller is so interested in exposing. Anything anyone did would be neither more

nor less than the sign of instinct's operative power; the possibilities for action represented by the Knight, his characters, and their surrogates in the *Miller's Tale* would either simply be impossible, and no one would do anything like them, or they would not be perverse, since if they did exist they would just be another set of ways for naturally determined desire to operate. This, then, is the problem: the point of the Miller's naturalism seems to be its recommendation of an ethos, a way of life suited to the human animal; but a naturalistic view of human action – at least one as thoroughgoing as that expressed in this tale – cannot have the normative force the Miller wants of it. It cannot recommend one way of life over another, since on such a view there can be no such thing as going wrong.[17]

The point is abstract, and it will take some time to suggest its upshot for an understanding of the tale; but it is, I think, the crucial step for understanding the sense in which the tale might best be understood as philosophical, as well as the way Chaucer's interest in the misrecognitions naturalism requires opens out into his interest in the discontents to which my title refers, including those discontents for which gender and sexuality serve as central *topoi*. The initial force of the paradox can perhaps best be seen if we notice a related problem about the motivation for telling a tale such as this. Paradox notwithstanding, the Miller is clearly committed to a naturalistic repudiation of what he takes to be folly; that, on nearly everyone's account of the tale, is his main reason for telling it. His point seems to be that if there is such a thing as perversion, at least it can have no claim on him or those who think like him. But if we grant the thought, strictly unformulable in the Miller's terms, that the errors and perversions he parodies and punishes somehow do exist; and if we accept the supposed normative transparency of the natural, the plain fact as the Miller would have it that desires and their objects are just there to be seen, perspicuous and inherently compelling; then those who suffer from such errors would hardly be enemies to be argued with. They would be more like pathetic madmen, inexplicably blocked from the world that is before their eyes, worthy perhaps of pity or of a quick mocking dismissal, but not of the sustained effort of a polemic. If the Miller's victory can be so easily won, and if what counts about us and the world we inhabit is the joy we can take in our naturally blessed condition, then large portions of his narrative

project look like a waste of time. He ought just to have left behind the aspects of his tale that mock the misguided and punish them for their foolishness, and have concentrated instead on straight appreciation of the world's bounty of the kind expressed in Alisoun's portrait. In this respect, then, the Miller's polemical project in the tale, with its dovetailing plot that functions like an intricate narrative machine to bring his point home, looks disturbingly like Nicholas's plan to cuckold John, an excessively clever construction designed to crush an enemy that needs no defeating, a deferral of animal pleasure by a creature whose rational capacities have interposed themselves where they do not belong. In telling a tale that means to make normative claims of a naturalistic kind, the Miller locates himself both as the kind of creature for whom his own ethos cannot be right, and as the kind of creature who, in the terms of that ethos, is perverse.

The depth of the problem of perversity here begins to emerge if we imagine an alternative version of the tale that, unlike the Miller's, would concentrate on straight naturalistic appreciation.[18] Such a tale could still in a rather restricted sense have normative force: in its pure expression of glad animal spirits it could be taken to recommend itself as a model for human life. But it would not be able to give any expression to the normative problems to which it would be a response, the questions of what to do and how to live to which it would purport to give an answer: any such expression would be strictly ruled out from the beginning, since it would fall like a shadow across the tale's celebratory spirit, giving the lie to the views of action and motivation to which it must everywhere give voice. Such a tale would then be something more like a case of pure ideological posturing than the expression of an ethos, since its possibility would require a wholesale denial of the very problems that bring it into being. The *Miller's Tale* shares with this imagined case something of the quality of ideological posturing, since it too cannot squarely face the questions it purports to answer. But far from engaging in a wholesale denial of normative problems, the tale gives them loud expression in its polemical purpose. The Miller wants to recommend a way of life that the Knight and Absolon and their like are missing, and he wants to do so by exploring and exposing the error that leads them astray from their proper path. That motivation contaminates the Miller's naturalistic project from the ground up, as though in order to bring our

condition as happy animals into view the Miller needed to cast it against an unaccountable perversion, an impossible possibility that, despite his apparent self-assurance, still does have a claim on him. What in the imagined case of pure naturalistic appreciation appeared only as a shadow slanting in from outside the narrative's scope appears here already on the inside, at the base of what sets the narrative in motion, at the heart of its deepest concerns. This shadow in the Miller's heart makes the relationship between the official naturalistic story and the inadmissible normative questions that motivate it more complex and unsettled than in the imagined case, and so makes of the *Miller's Tale* something considerably more interesting than a case of pure ideological bad faith.

The relation between the Miller's naturalism and the problems that motivate it might then be put as follows. It is the most evident thing in the world to the Miller that we can go wrong: he thinks that the Knight is wrong, that his whole romantic aristocratic ethos is wrong, that the social order that supports him and would silence the Miller's voice in favor of a more suitable one is wrong. The Miller cares about this; it is what motivates his speech from the beginning. The problem of ethical normativity, then – the problem we face of trying to find a right way, and of wanting to say what such a way might be, what makes it right, and how we can follow it – is the problem he wants to address, just as the Knight does. But the Miller's way of addressing this problem is to wish that it would go away, or more precisely to wish that it could never have arisen, that we were the kind of creatures for whom it could not arise, like animals who really are just moved by instinct's operative power, or perhaps like small children who do not yet have the responsibility of owning up to a course of action and having reasons for it. What the Miller imagines, then, is an "animal" or "childlike" condition in which normative problems would never have arisen, but in which the supposed fact of this condition plays the part precisely of providing an answer to as yet unasked, and indeed unaskable, normative questions. Normative naturalism thus gives voice to a nostalgic longing for a condition that, even from the Miller's own point of view, never was and never could have been.[19]

Chaucer's project in the *Miller's Tale*, as I see it, is one of exploring this paradoxical response to the problem of normativity, of representing

its expression in a way that opens up spaces for thought both about what makes such a response compelling and about some potential consequences of the attempt to think this way. And this is essentially a philosophical project, although one for which the explicit representation of philosophical themes matters very little, and one for which issues of literary form and a concern for the conceptual and psychological dynamics of cases are essential. In fact, as I suggested earlier, we can say more precisely that Chaucer's project in the tale – and, I would argue, in the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole – is not only philosophical but, like the projects of Jean de Meun, Langland, and the *Pearl*-poet, dialectical. Philosophical dialectic frequently takes the literalized form of dialogue: in the aforementioned poets, as in Plato's dialogues and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, a figure given philosophical authority engages with interlocutors who often resist the arguments he or she makes, and in so doing give voice to their resistance to philosophical reflection. But, as I will argue with respect to Boethius in chapter three, philosophical authority itself has its source in beliefs, desires, and other attitudes which the interlocutors already have; the point of Socrates or Lady Philosophy making an argument is to unpack the inner logic of their interlocutors' views, revealing their incoherences and opacities, and thus exerting pressure on them to acknowledge the claim of views they disavow. As I have been arguing, in the *Miller's Tale* Chaucer reveals such incoherences and incapacities, and the dialectical relationship between the views the Miller avows and those he will not acknowledge, in the absence of dialogue form. Here there is no Lady Philosophy to lead the Miller through the tangle of his intuitions towards philosophical clarity; for what interests Chaucer centrally, both here and throughout his poetry, is less the production of clarity than an understanding and exploration of the tangle itself, of the necessarily opaque and incoherent situatedness from which people engage the problems philosophy tries to articulate.

THE PERVERSE REMAINDER

I began this chapter by claiming that the *Miller's Tale* links an ideology of gender and erotic desire, and specifically an ideology of normative masculinity, to a broader theory of practical normativity as such.

Having offered a sketch of that broader theory and the misrecognitions it entails, for the rest of this chapter I will focus on the question of how Chaucer's philosophical interests can help us read his interests in ideology and the psychology of erotic life, and how problems in the representation of gender and desire can help us better understand what is at stake philosophically for Chaucer in the tale.

The moment that perhaps links these concerns most explicitly is that of the Miller's confrontation with the Reeve in the tale's prologue. The Reeve has been angered by the Miller's announcement of a tale about the cuckolding of a carpenter, as though fears of his own wife's infidelity inclined him to take the coming story as a personal attack. The Miller replies by recommending to the Reeve his own attitude about such fears:

> I have a wyf, pardee, as wel as thow;
> Yet nolde I, for the oxen in my plogh,
> Take upon me moore than ynogh,
> As demen of myself that I were oon;
> I wol bileve wel that I am noon.
> An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
> Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.
> So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
> Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere.
> (I.3158–66)

The Miller wants this little piece of advice to communicate his sense of himself as a practical-minded purveyor of sound common sense, and up to a point this is just what the passage does. To judge yourself to be a cuckold, especially in the absence of compelling evidence, would reflect a pointless and excessive anxiety; the Reeve, like anyone else, would be much better off just believing that he is not one. This is advice straight from the heart of the naturalism that informs the tale, as becomes clear in the Miller's elaboration of it into the general principle of divine plenitude: as long as we can taste of God's plenty we should be happy, and there should be no need to worry about "the remenant." As in the tale, the world's plenitude is supposed to exempt us from the need to look beyond present satisfaction. Whatever is left over when a husband is satisfied is God's concern, or his wife's, but not his, and any inquiry into it is supposed to be as excessive as a Reevish marital suspiciousness.

To inquire into this "remenant," then, is just another way of erecting a barrier between ourselves and the objects of our desires, which in the absence of such artificial barriers are there for the taking.

As I have meant to suggest in eliding the "us" to whom the Miller means his general ethos to apply with the "husband" whose situation this passage more specifically describes, this advice also shares with the tale as a whole a tendency to universalize the perspective of an antifeminist heteromasculinity. While antifeminism has more virulent strains – the Miller's attitude towards his wife, as towards Alisoun, is after all a species of appreciation – "woman" as an object of appreciation here is fundamentally a means to an egocentric end, little more than a place for a man to find his own pleasure, as is suggested most starkly in the thought that the "there" in which "a husband" finds God's plenty is his wife's "pryvetee," that is her genitals, rather than *her*.[20] That egocentric pleasure-seeking, in turn, is what constitutes his desire for her, as indeed it constitutes desire more broadly speaking throughout the tale. While a respect for his wife's "pryvetee," in the sense of her privacy, may seem to provide a generous-minded alternative to this identification of the masculine with the free activity of pleasure-seeking and the feminine with passive objectification, it is really part of the same attitude, a way of seeming to grant his wife her freedom while allowing himself to ignore *her*. The recommended husbandly attitude towards the sexual availability of a wife here is roughly equivalent to the attitude one might take towards the food in a magic refrigerator that replenished itself whenever anyone ate from it: in such a case, it *would* be selfish, not to mention somewhat crazy, to care whether someone else ate from it, since you could always eat your fill. But in its application to another person, we could only call such an attitude generosity if we thought there were something generous about imagining our relations to erotic others as fundamentally like our relation to food, that is as a relation of consumption.[21] Indeed, as the Miller's comparisons of Alisoun to fruit and Muscatine's reference to her as "delectable" suggest, fantasies of consumption are an important feature of the way the Miller imagines the masculine relation to an erotic object.[22] To bring us back to the terms more directly in play in the passage under discussion, what licenses the recommended carelessness there is the equally ungenerous thought that what this husband cares about in the sexual relation is just "getting his." That is what constitutes

his wife's value for him, and that is why what she does in her spare time is supposed to be of no consequence to him.

The attitude this passage expresses is, at least in some respects, a familiar one, and it finds frequent expression in the tale that follows. I think it matters to Chaucer both because it can so easily be recognized as the voice of a brand of patriarchal common sense and because there is a duplicity in the Miller's rejoinder to the Reeve that calls into question just what we think we recognize here. The Miller says that he does not care about his wife beyond her role as a source of his pleasure, and more than that, that husbands need not care about their wives in any other way. This is what licenses his decision to believe that he is not a cuckold: his belief, even if false, is supposed to give nothing away, and adopting it saves him from the perverse self-frustrations of those who, like the Reeve, do not simply follow nature's course. If that is the case, however, why does the Miller need to believe that he is not a cuckold, especially since such belief amounts, as he says it does, to an act of will? According to the logic of his own announced position, as long as his potential cuckoldry does not interfere with his wife's erotic availability to him, and so with her function as the ready-to-hand locus of his satisfactions, it just should not concern him, and he should need no particular beliefs about the matter at all. The Miller should, in effect, be even more careless than he manages to be, and his decision to adopt a belief in this regard suggests that the thought of his potential cuckoldry matters to him in a way he refuses to acknowledge. This is so even if we think of the danger of cuckoldry as being primarily its threat to a purely egocentric sense of manly mastery and pride rather than to the character of his marital relations. That his wife's "pryvetee," in the absence of any diminished erotic availability of her, could pose such a threat at all already suggests that she is more than just a locus of present satisfactions. And that suggests that no matter how unconcerned he claims to be with his wife's private affairs, he is not content simply to take God's plenty where he finds it and leave the rest for someone else. Even if he were receiving all the "foyson" he could handle, his wife's private activities are something more than a superabundance of plenty that does not concern him.

My point is not that the Miller is "really" afraid he is a cuckold. To locate the causal source of this passage's duplicities in some imagined

antecedent psychological fact like a fear of cuckoldry would be to miss the scope of the problem the Miller faces: it is not merely "personal," the sign of a bad marriage or a nervous character, and it is not restricted to the erotic context that provides its occasion. That is partly because these duplicities are ideological, part of larger structurings of gender and desire that do not depend on anyone's particular sexual experiences. But even within the Miller's own engagement with these issues, the ambivalence of his posture of carelessness towards his wife is part of a broader ambivalence in his posture of carelessness towards "the remenant," towards whatever remains of the world's pleasures when he is done with them; and here as well the Miller does not manage to be as careless as his own views require. For it is one thing to say that we *need* not inquire into an innocent remainder, quite another to say, as the Miller also does, that we *should* not be inquisitive. If we ought simply not to care about "the remenant" as long as the world's plenitude is available to us, then a prohibition of inquiry seems as oddly excessive as a decision to believe in the fidelity of one's wife. The "remenant" should just be the sum of pleasures we do not find the occasion to enjoy, something that could never make a claim on us, something we would never need to confront or deny. But apparently God has his secrets too, secrets that, like a wife's, one might not want to know: the entire constitution of the world, or some coming fate, may make of the Miller's recommended carelessness nothing more than a willful blindness, and he knows it. Under the pressure of the Miller's prohibition, then, another "remenant" comes into existence behind or beneath the "remenant" that is just the innocent remainder of untasted pleasures: a shadow remainder that functions as a receptacle for things best kept out of sight.

This shadow remainder haunts the Miller's picture of a world of plenty perfectly fitted to desire in much the same way that the category of the perverse does. In each case, the Miller declares himself to be unimplicated in whatever possibilities shimmer into existence there: they are simply external to him, occupants of the empty spaces beyond the proper life of the human animal. And in each case, the declaration of nonimplication is partly motivated by a claim that these empty spaces continue to exert. Further, in the face of this ongoing claim, the Miller's commitment to drawing a firm line between the natural

and the perverse, between the all-encompassing space of God's plenty and the remainder where secrets go to hide, seems to leave him on both sides of the line at once, as a happy creature of nature and a secret pervert. God and his wife may be harboring damaging secrets, but the most damaging secrets seem to be the ones the Miller is harboring from himself, the inner companions to the metaphysical and erotic secrets that may be out in the world waiting for him.

A moment ago I said that my point is not that the Miller is really afraid he is a cuckold, and I want to be clear here that my point is not that he is really, secretly, a pervert. I do not mean to suggest that there just is some secret there, waiting to be exposed, but rather that a worry about secrecy, however muted by the Miller's loud avowals of carelessness, is a structural product of the way he responds to the problem of normativity. According to the Miller's naturalistic theory of action, questions of what to do or how to live are settled by two fundamental relationships we have to the contents of our inner lives. The first is one of observation. Those contents, paradigmatically our desires, are introspectively available; all we need to do to determine what they are is look and see the plain facts of nature in us. The second is one of passivity. Once we have seen what our desires are there is nothing further for us to do to make them effective at moving us; it is just of their essence that they reach through us, commanding us the way a desire for Alisoun or for one of those succulent ripe fruits on the "pere-jonette tree" is supposed to do. These two features together are what yield the motivational transparency of the natural on such a view. One of the problems with this, as I suggested earlier, is that in a sense it leaves no room for being wrong. Anything anyone does becomes the sign of a naturally determined desire's operative power, and if "being natural" is the reason an action counts as right, then any action will be right. But we might also say here that if the Miller wants to hold on to the notion of error and the category of perversity, as he clearly does, then if someone acts in a way the Miller deems to be perverse, then this too must be the sign of a naturally determined desire in operation: on this view it would just be a natural fact that some desires are perverse and the people who have them are perverts.[23] And this thought helps to specify the character of the problem the Miller faces in being the kind of creature who, in terms of his own ethos, is perverse. For if his way of conducting himself in the

tale or elsewhere shows signs of motives that his naturalism does not endorse – signs, that is, of the ongoing claim of the perverse and of whatever constitutes that "remenant" no one is supposed to care about – then such motives on the Miller's own account can only be present in him as features of his nature, characteristics of a secret perverse self he never knew he was.

The Miller's posture of carefree animality is supposed to insure that such secrets cannot exist. But the naturalism by means of which he seeks to justify this posture has the effect not of dispelling the possibility of such secrets but of reifying them into mysterious presences that then become the objects of a prohibition, an imperative not to look: what he means to be a way of dispelling any worries about metaphysical and erotic secrecy, the kinds of worries that seem to him to drive the Knight and the Reeve, only reinforces those worries by closeting them. One powerful form that the Miller's longing for a state of carefree animality takes, then, is something like a phenomenology of the closet, a relationship to a territory of secrecy which he is committed to saying does not exist and cannot matter, and which has the hold it does on him precisely by virtue of the way he seeks to deny it.[24] This is not to say that there are some naturally given facts in the Miller's closet, waiting to be known. The whole conception of a person's inner life as having a space of secrecy in it, composed of determinate inner objects potentially available to introspection even if clouded by self-deception, and compelling merely by virtue of their interior presence, is part of the self-deception involved in the Miller's naturalism. The phenomenology of the closet at issue here is thus one in which a restless, unlocalizable worry appears not as the opposite of a careless self-gratification but as its hidden other face, the same thought in different form.

AGENCY, GENDER, AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PERVERSE

I have argued that the Miller responds to the problem of normativity in part by dispersing its claims into the various perversions represented in the tale, and that in doing so he constructs them as sites of an interior secrecy he does not want to examine. To understand the specific contours of those sites – to understand, that is, Chaucer's project of

exploring the psychology of secrecy and disavowal attending normative naturalism and the ideology of gender and desire with which it intersects – we need to look more closely at the perversions and the various fates they meet. The place to start, however, is not with the perversions themselves, but with what very nearly amounts to their opposite, the figure of Alisoun. For while she provides the cornerstone of the normative views by which perversion is judged in the tale and gender and eros are brought within the orbit of the Miller's preferred version of "the natural," this very function produces perverse effects that will help us understand what happens to Nicholas, Absolon, and John.

As the description of Alisoun as synecdoche for nature's plenitude and her function in the tale as the unmoved mover of male desire suggests, the narrative proceeds as though to be human just is to be a man desiring a woman, and to be a woman is little more than to be the thing men desire – that is, as though the contrast between male and female straightforwardly tracked a contrast between activity and passivity, or more precisely between being an agent and being a place, object, or locus of activity; and further, as though a possessive heteromasculine desire were the only form desire could take.[25] What makes each of the male characters perverse from this perspective is the particular way each fails to respond properly to Alisoun, and so fails to participate adequately in the surrounding ideology of gender and desire. But there is an aspect of Alisoun's representation that is fundamental to her function in the tale, but that cannot be accommodated to the set of oppositions on which these views of gender and desire are based. For the Miller means his picture of the human to have quite a general scope, to describe not just how it is for him, or even how it is for men, but how it is for everyone; and if any of his characters manages to exemplify this picture in its ideal form rather than a perversion or deformation of it, it is Alisoun.[26] She alone never acts in such a way as to erect an artificial barrier between herself and her own pleasure; she alone consistently lets instinct settle questions of what to do, or rather lets it prevent those questions from even arising; and as a result she alone remains unpunished by the crushing inevitability of cause and effect at the tale's end. The Miller, then, identifies with Alisoun as the perfect exemplar of the human on his own account, the embodiment of the ethos he lays claim to and recommends, even as she also serves as a purely passive object

of desire, the thing outside the all-male world of action that sets that world in motion.

Here as elsewhere, then, an analysis of the ambivalences of gender and desire in the *Miller's Tale* depends on an analysis of the tale's engagements with ethics and the theory of action. For if it is puzzling that Alisoun seems to serve mutually exclusive functions in the tale, as passive object and as perfect exemplar of action, there is a sense in which this is just what we should expect from a figure of fully realized normative naturalism. On a naturalistic account action is, oddly, at its base a species of passivity, a way of being moved by forces to which we make no contribution: the only thing we do with respect to those forces is observe them, like objects in a kind of inner theater. Or alternatively, insofar as this view is supposed to tell us how to act rather than just describing what it is we do when we act, then when we act rightly, we do not make a contribution to these forces; if we make a contribution, it seems, the only kind it could be is the perverse one of turning our desires from their proper path. To say that the Miller identifies with Alisoun, then, is in part to say that she serves as the best figure for these two basic features of his view of action, an underlying passivity on the one hand, and a spectatorial relationship to desires on the other. That is why she never violates the tale's ethos, and is never violated by the operations of its plot. The fact that this also means that she is excluded from the territory of action into the status of an object, then, can help us bring into further focus the sense in which the Miller suffers from a kind of nostalgic longing. For Alisoun's double function amounts to the recognition, however dim, that his view of action is in fact a wish for escape from the conditions of agency, a wish to be passive with respect to his own motivations, and so to become a pure and perfect object – a wish that is already foregone by the time it finds expression, since it arises, as I have said, precisely in response to the need to find a right way of acting.

This suggests that the problem with Alisoun's representation has an inwardly directed version as well: we might say that, as manly a man as the Miller is, his own preferred version of himself looks like a woman, or at least like what he takes a woman to be. One occupant of the Miller's "remenant," then, is a wish to be, or be like, a woman, and while such a wish must be an embarrassment to the Miller's most

prevalent attitudes, a secret shame that can never be acknowledged, it is also quite directly the product of those attitudes. And more: if to be the perfect human is to be, or be like, a woman, we might just as well say what the narrative trajectory of the tale also suggests, that to be a man is to be perverse, and to deserve punishment. And here too we find support from the Miller's naturalistic views, for according to them to be a man – to be the active one, the doer, rather than the site or locus or object of the action – is to make a contribution to the forces that move you, to interpose yourself between desire and its issuance in action: this is what the Miller and all his male characters do in failing to remain transparent to the motive force of natural desire. What emerges from the intersection of the Miller's naturalistic ethos with the gender views that seem so tightly bound to it, then, is a wish for a kind of effeminacy, which takes the form of a desire to castigate whatever in him is masculine. This, in effect, is the gender-inflected form that his broader wish to escape his condition as an agent takes.

While the punishments visited on Nicholas, Absolon, and John are nominally directed towards external enemies, then, they are first of all directed towards the Miller himself, as ways of imagining a self-castigation that need never reveal itself as such. I will begin with Nicholas, for his case is most fully accommodated to the terms generated by the Miller's ethos. As I have already suggested, this "handy" man nearly remains faithful to the vision of a world provided for his own practical use, and his reward is a night "in bisynesse of myrthe and of solas" (I.3654) with Alisoun; and while his plan for cuckolding John exceeds the pure goal of appreciative immersion in the world's plenitude, it does so in much the same way as the Miller's tale does, and the Miller seems to regard it with gleeful enjoyment as much as suspicion. The punishment for Nicholas's tendency to defer animal satisfaction – the punishment the Miller brings on his own masculinity – is the humiliation and pain of being struck "amydde the ers" (I.3810) by Absolon's hot borrowed blade. The initial thought here seems to be that Nicholas, having displaced his erotic impulse into the more intellectual pleasure of a carefully orchestrated trickery, needs to be brought back to the material fact of his body by way of pain. Pain, then, is supposed to do what eros was initially supposed to do but could not, for the Miller any more than for Nicholas: provide a territory of sheer animal sensation incapable

of being gotten wrong, incapable of being rerouted or reinterpreted, a sensation that can just be seen for what it is, and that, being seen, presents an agent with a transparent motive, in this case a motive to cry out and seek relief. Part of what counts about Nicholas's pain, then, is that it is overwhelming; it makes him passive with respect to its motive force; in the face of it, we might say, the body takes over. But part of what counts about it is also that it is humiliating, and humiliating precisely because of the way it makes him passive. The clever man who thought he could become a little prime mover in the world is reduced to his animality; his rationality is humiliated, and so is *he* – there is, in this moment, nothing of him that he *could* interpose between affect and action.

But if pain is supposed to provide a site of subjective determinacy and transparency, and so to rescue the key elements of a naturalist theory of action and identity from the trouble gender and eros create for it, that trouble reemerges when we ask exactly what happens to Nicholas. Given the shape of a colter – the thin blade at the front of a plow that makes an initial cut in the soil to prepare the way for the larger plowshare – and given Absolon's intention of taking vengeance on Alisoun and her "hole," one possibility the scene suggests is that of Nicholas receiving Absolon's blade in *his* hole "amydde the ers."[27] The function of anal penetration as the mechanism of humiliation and pain would then be that of extending Nicholas's newly restored passivity to the territories of eros and gender. For what needs humiliating is not just Nicholas's rationality but also his manliness, his existence as the doer of erotic life: he must be broken down, made forcibly into the feminized man that alone can be in possession of an agency with a passivity at its base, and so can live according to naturalistic norms. Since the Miller wants to live according to those norms – since he wants to be the passive agent, and wants this punishment visited on himself as much as he wants it visited on Nicholas – another occupant of the Miller's "remenant" is a desire for the scourging humiliation of anal penetration. This is one paradigmatic form of what he imagines the desire to be passive, to be acted upon rather than to act, to involve. But it is not the only form at issue here. For however powerfully the scene alludes to anal penetration, it stops short of actually depicting it; and the hand's-breadth of skin burned off Nicholas is broad enough to open other possibilities.

In a highly suggestive reading of the tale, Glenn Burger has argued that we are invited to see the moment as a cauterizing rather than a penetrative thrust.[28] If the Miller thinks of Nicholas's imaginative excess as a wound in need of cauterizing, then he figures that excess as a site of leakiness that should be sealed off, and associates it with the feminine through the "wound" of that other leaky "hole" in whose place Nicholas has put his own. Nicholas's anus is thus still in the picture, and still a threat to masculine propriety. On this account, however, the most readily apparent aim of the Miller's self-punishment is that of mortifying the shamefully feminized man, sealing him back up into the hard, self-enclosed body that ought to be his, rather than, as in the anal penetration reading, that of forcibly producing the feminized man the Miller's ideology requires. I do not think we need to choose between these readings, however incompatible they may be; the passage suggests both without giving any definitive depiction of just what Absolon has done, and if Chaucer had wanted to give such a depiction he certainly could have done so. The passage's suggestive openness, its way of simultaneously expressing shame at and desire for feminization in performing its basic function of a humiliating return to passivity, is one of many places in the tale in which Chaucer indicates how indeterminate the contents of the Miller's "remenant" must be, and how tortured the logic by which naturalism gets instantiated.

In the interpenetration of a shameful and desirable effeminacy with a wish for mortification, we begin to touch on the territory opened by the figure of Absolon, in whom the Miller explores effeminacy and its ideologically appropriate punishment with a thoroughness that borders on delectation. Absolon, more than any other character in the tale, suffers from an inability to live the life of a happy animal. He is deeply taken with the postures of love-longing – lyrical and dramatic expressions of passion, vows of servitude, wakeful nights – all of which take such ridiculous forms that they seem designed to keep the possibility of an erotic payoff at bay, and so to prolong the time of a theatrical self-regard as much as possible. Absolon's displacement of the erotic impulse suggests a certain aversion towards what, on the Miller's account, ought to be its proper object; and in the context of his squeamishness about farting, his fastidious speech, and his obsession with fresh breath, this aversion begins to look like it has its source in a more general

aversion towards the human body and its orifices, the places where inside and outside meet. As far as the Miller is concerned this is all quite unmanly, as he makes clear through repeated suggestions that Absolon is infantile and effeminate, most notably in the moment when Absolon tries to woo Alisoun through self-infantilization and self-effeminization: "I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete" (I.3704); "I may nat ete na moore than a mayde" (I.3707). We can unpack Kolve's notion that the hole-kissing brings Absolon into contact with "the real nature of what he sought," then, as follows. Being a man, Absolon wants *this*: a creature with holes and hair, with a body, just like him, a piece of the natural world, a solid chunk of physical reality; and the disgust and humiliation he shows afterwards, as he rubs his lips with sand and straw and chips and weeps like a beaten child, while it shows him cured of the extravagances of love *paramours*, confirms him in the foolish aversion to reality and bodiliness that led to those extravagances in the first place, and so underlines the justice of the moment that exposes and punishes him.

The thought that the Miller's punishment of Absolon is also a self-punishment may seem more counterintuitive than the same thought in the case of Nicholas, for while the fondness in the Miller's representation of Nicholas makes an identification between the two relatively straightforward, the representation of Absolon is all mockery and disdain. But it should not be surprising that an unacknowledged wish for what looks to the Miller like effeminacy should involve disdain for a figure that embodies that wish directly. Further, there is a deeper sense in which Absolon embodies the Miller's ideal, or rather a peculiar kind of literalization of it that reveals its consequences more thoroughly even than Alisoun does. For Absolon seems to have nothing but a spectatorial relationship to desire; he seems to want to do nothing with respect to his desires but observe their display; in Absolon, the reduction of action to observation and passivity has become complete. The figure of Absolon, then, gives expression to the thought that the very views by which the Miller supports his sense of carefree manliness have as their upshot something he finds disgustingly unmanly, an aversion to the body and to the female, which he otherwise wishes to represent as the ultimate object of male desire. This aversion is yet another occupant of the Miller's closet, as is its companion here, the desire to punish himself

for it by way of a humiliating confrontation with the body that simultaneously arouses and disgusts him.

We can further understand this mingling of arousal and disgust by turning to another feature of the scene that links it to that of Nicholas's punishment. Just as Chaucer suggests that Nicholas is both sodomized and cauterized and that the Miller's investment in the scene depends on both possibilities, so here he conflates Alisoun's vagina and anus into one "hole" to suggest that the Miller's joke on Absolon depends on incompatible pictures of what Absolon kisses and how that matters.[29] On the one hand, the Miller states that Absolon "kiste hir naked ers," and he must be thought to do so for the moment to produce the monumental disgust in him that makes his punishment so fitting. On the other hand, for the scene to achieve its purpose of exposing the "real object" of masculine desire, Alisoun's genitals must be thought to be at issue when she puts her hole out the window, as indeed they must when Absolon confronts that long-haired thing that seems in the dark to be a bearded face, unless Alisoun has an extraordinarily hairy ass. But doing both jobs at once with Alisoun's "hole" requires the Miller to gloss over the distinction between what, on his view, is desirable and what is disgusting – as again he must, and even more directly, in the punning punch-line that follows the scene, "his hoote love was coold and al yqueynte" (I.3754) – as though at this central moment in the Miller's gesture of comic exposure he could no longer tell the difference between what arouses desire and what quenches it, or could not make the difference stick. The effect of this conflation is to keep the self-humiliation the Miller figures in the scene squarely in the territory of erotic desire, in the form of an erotics of disgust and self-degradation that inflects both the Miller's imaginative identification with the feminine and his picture of intimate contact with the female body. But the Miller hardly has a settled, univalent relationship to such an erotics. The most readily apparent aim of self-punishment here, as in the cauterizing of Nicholas's anal "wound," is that of mortifying the passive agent or feminized man. But the desire to mortify the passive agent is at the same time a desire for the Miller's core normative ideal to be broken down, and so for the collapse of a major support for the naturalized masculinity that authorizes his disdain of a figure like Absolon.

The unsettledness evident in the Miller's diagnostic and punitive impulses becomes even more evident when we turn to John; for John's perversity and punishment, unlike those of Nicholas and Absolon, never even provisionally comes into focus in the terms provided by a normative naturalism. In the Miller's initial portrait of John we hear that "Jalous he was, and heeld [Alisoun] narwe in cage, / For she was wylde and yong, and he was old / And demed hymself been lik a cokewold" (I.3224–26). This description makes John look like a figure for a self-defeating Reevish worry that provokes the very situation it fears: it would seem that John's problem is a refusal of the carelessness the Miller avows, a refusal to be happy with what he can get from Alisoun without asking too many questions. But we never see John as the jealously restrictive husband, despite the opportunities the Miller has to cast him in such a light.[30] Instead John seems completely unpossessive of Alisoun, leaving her unguarded on his many business trips and remaining sublimely unconcerned on an obvious occasion for jealousy, when Absolon awakens him in the night singing love songs to Alisoun at his window. The Miller wants, of course, to cast this as folly in itself, since it leaves John vulnerable to Nicholas's machinations and Alisoun's betrayal. But charging John with an incompatible jealousy and unguardedness hardly helps in diagnosing his error; and worse, the only apparent space afforded in the Miller's view to an unpossessive desire for another of the kind John seems to have for Alisoun is that of the very carelessness the Miller says John violates. In fact, John becomes very nearly a mouthpiece for another feature of the Miller's avowed carelessness, a general commitment not to know secrets, when he echoes the Miller's comment from the tale's prologue: "Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee" (I.3454). In this sense John begins, as Nicholas and Absolon do, to become a figure for an aspect of the Miller's naturalism, and the Miller seems to be setting up his own self-deception for punishment. But on closer inspection John cannot even be described in these terms. The first thing we learn about him is that "he lovede [Alisoun] moore than his lyf" (I.3222), and the strength of his love for her is borne out by his immediate reaction to Nicholas's news of the impending flood: " 'Allas, my wyf! / And shal she drenche? Allas, myn Alisoun!' / For sorwe of this he fil almoost adoun, / And seyde, 'Is ther no remedie in this cas?' " (I.3522–25). The fact that John loves Alisoun more than he

does his own life, that the end of the world for him means first of all her death, provides the wedge in his psyche that opens him to Nicholas's plot. It also provides the clearest case for his perversity on the Miller's account; for the Miller's carelessness, and his entire view of motivation, is predicated on nothing mattering more than one's own life. More pointedly, no *one* can matter that much. Other people are at most the objects or instruments of self-gratification: in the genesis of motivation, self-interest always comes first.[31] This is something even Nicholas and Absolon, perverse as they are, seem to realize. Their problem is that in seeking self-gratification they transfer their attention from their ends to the means of achieving them, and so displace the properly gratifying object from view; but for all that they are still after self-gratification, and with a little chastising their knowledge that Alisoun is the properly gratifying object can be brought back into focus for them. But this saving knowledge is not available to John; he is too far gone, outside the realm of a fundamental self-interest altogether, into a territory of motivation the Miller has no easy way of imagining, even as its alienness from a naturalistic view is palpable to him.

The extent of that alienness will become clearer if we notice another feature of John's character, a general willingness to be moved by altruistic motives, as shown by his fears for Nicholas's health and life when Nicholas has locked himself in his room as the first step in his trick. John is the only character in the poem for whom altruism is even raised as a possibility. The closest anyone else comes is Gerveys the blacksmith's indifferent willingness to lend Absolon his blade, but unlike Gerveys, John is actively concerned to attend to others' needs, even when doing so serves no apparent self-interest. This is a big mistake according to the Miller's theory, a point he underlines by making John's altruistic inquiry the step by which he enters into Nicholas's plot. Still, John's altruism is easier to accommodate to naturalistic intuitions than is his love for Alisoun; for altruism can be sorted with a thought that motivates and underlies the Miller's view of motive, namely that there is a clean split to be made between a concern for oneself and a concern for others.[32] This split is what allows for the thought that a concern for oneself always comes first, preceding any concern for another; and it can be preserved even when the possibility of altruism is admitted. The thought would then be that there is a clean

distinction to be made between altruism and egoism: in a given instance, one is moved by one or the other, and the Miller's point would be that being moved by anything but egoistic concerns is foolish. Love, however, is a harder case, for it cannot be sorted so easily. John's reaction to the thought of a flood is clearly not motivated by a fundamental self-interest of the kind the Miller's other characters display. What moves him is the thought that Alisoun will die, not the thought that he will lose a major source of self-gratification; and further, we would expect an egoistic concern to express itself here in something notably lacking in John's reaction, a fear of his own death. But if love is not the expression of a fundamental egoism, neither is it a form of pure other-directedness. John is not moved by sheer impersonal concern for another, as though, for instance, he recognized an impartial duty to save Alisoun. It never occurs to him to worry about the rest of mankind perishing; and it is hardly the expression of a sense of duty when the sorrowful thought of Alisoun's death almost brings him to the ground, or when, imagining the flood drowning her, he quakes with fear and breaks into uncontrollable weeping and wailing. The disaster he faces is deeply personal; it goes to the heart of him, to what matters most to the particular person he is; only his heart cannot be figured in egoistic terms, or in any other terms that derive their significance from the underlying thought that a concern for oneself can be neatly distinguished from a concern for others.

In a sense, then, it is clear enough what makes John perverse on the Miller's account, and so what the Miller means to castigate in himself by way of John's punishment: John wants to be a lover, and to be loved; he wants intimacy of a kind that makes a concern for the desired other a constitutive feature of his concern for himself, and that makes her something without which he has no life he can recognize as his own. But since the Miller's naturalism offers no way of understanding such desires, all of the terms it provides misdescribe John, and in doing so create the need for further descriptions, even if they are incompatible with the ones that came before. So even as the Miller wants to say that John is a fool for love, he tries to cast this folly as jealousy and possessiveness, as though caring for someone as much as John does could only be a kind of hyper-possessiveness, an instance of the impulse to possession which has lost touch with the carelessness that is supposed

to go along with it. But the Miller knows this cannot be right; he knows that John and the Reeve are worlds apart. This is the reason, I think, for the odd formulation by which the Miller tries to cast John's attitude as a version of Reevish suspiciousness, saying that he "demed hymself been lik a cokewold" (I.3226). Nothing John does suggests he thinks himself *likely* to be a cuckold. But from a naturalistic perspective, he is in a certain sense *like* a cuckold, for he has already been "betrayed" in the integrity of his narrow self-interest by the claim on him of another, who is free to return his love or not. Since John obviously does consider himself to be subject to that claim, he can in this sense be said to judge himself to be like what the Miller takes a cuckold to be, someone who lacks a relation of perfect possession to the object of his desire. The fact that he lacks this relation for a reason practically the opposite of the Reeve's – because the trope of perfect possession does not apply to his attitude rather than because it does apply but he fears it has been violated – only serves to underline the Miller's problem in bringing John into clear view. Nicholas and Absolon can at least be provisionally identified from a naturalistic point of view, and thus can be punished with a precision designed to set them back on the right path; but there is no setting John right, for from the point of view from which he appears to be perverse there is no way to say even what he is.[33] Instead the Miller does the only thing he can, bringing John in for as heavy a punishment as possible, having him suffer a broken arm, betrayal by his wife, and a resounding public humiliation in which his folly is made into a huge joke, he is held by everyone to be mad, and any explanation he tries to offer is drowned in the ensuing laughter. If John cannot be set right because he cannot be identified, he will simply be broken, and broken in such a way that everyone sees there is no identifying him: he is outside the space of intelligible discourse altogether, simply insane.

The problem posed by the figure of John, then – the problem the Miller poses for himself through the figure of John – is that of the lover, the one who desires intimacy. This problem is so deep because the Miller knows that intimacy cannot be what his picture says it must be, simply a matter of coming close to some desired object by possessing it. If that is so, then the problem of intimacy cannot be figured in terms of a contrast between masculine and feminine that tracks contrasts between activity and passivity, agent and place; and someone who

desires intimacy cannot be figured as having the kind of relations to herself that naturalism imagines, namely, relations of observation and passivity between her and the objects that make up her inner life. I will explore each of these features of the problem at greater length; they are perhaps only implicit in what I have said so far. But first I want to be clear about what I think the bare fact of the Miller's interest in intimacy suggests. With an acknowledgment of the problem of intimacy the Miller's entire naturalistic posture is made more deeply problematic than it is by any of the perverse phenomena we have examined so far, for those phenomena have each in their own way participated in the commanding tropes by which the Miller's picture finds expression. In fact we should expect that something would exceed the representational capacity of these tropes, since, as I have been arguing, naturalistic convictions cannot provide the terms for their own understanding. In the problem of intimacy, then, we find the specification within the Miller's preferred arena of erotic life of the more general problem posed by his views as a whole: just as the only way to understand the Miller's denial of the normative problem is to see that denial as a response to the normative problem, so here the only way to understand the denial of the problem of intimacy is to see that denial as a response to the problem of intimacy.

The problem of intimacy – or, a bit more specifically, the problem of love conceived as a species of intimacy – was one of Chaucer's central interests throughout his poetic career, and it will remain a central interest throughout this book, especially in the final two chapters. Another reason I begin this book with the *Miller's Tale*, then, is that the tangle of naturalistic commitments in the tale and the discontents those commitments produce – a tangle that at first takes root in the ground of an objectifying, possessive erotic desire – leads to an engagement with intimacy that can neither be collapsed into such desire nor cleanly distinguished from it, however clear and distinct our definitions of the two may be. That is to say that Chaucer's interest in love is itself dialectical; or so at least I will argue as this book progresses. For now, let us remain with the version of that interest Chaucer pursues here.

In the Miller's case, an engagement with the problem of intimacy is most immediately evident with John, but pressures similar to those that appear in his representation appear as well in the figures of Alisoun,

Nicholas, and Absolon. The attempt to imagine these characters in the Miller's preferred terms, after all, produces the paradoxical figures of the passive agent and the feminized man, figures that the narrative simultaneously valorizes and repudiates: the conflict of intuitions and impulses here suggests the restlessness that becomes most insistent with John. To explore fully the form taken in the narrative by a desire for intimacy and its denial, then, we need to return to the figures in whom the Miller manages that denial more successfully, to suggest how, in spite of this, the problem of intimacy does arise, as the very motivation for its denial.

IMAGINING INTIMACY

Again it will be helpful to begin with Alisoun; for if intimacy is at issue in the tale, she is the embodiment of what the Miller imagines the presumptively masculine agent wanting to be near, and a desire for that nearness is the Miller's paradigm for what moves an agent to act. As I have argued, the Miller thinks of this nearness as a kind of touching, the kind expressed so gleefully by Nicholas when he teases John with a joke John is in no position to understand: "And after wol I speke in pryvetee / Of certeyn thyng that toucheth me and thee" (I.3493–94). The laugh here comes from the thought that the matter which pertains to Nicholas and John is actually a *thing* that *touches* them, or rather, that they touch; and the Miller allows Nicholas this joke because while John is supposed to think that this thing is just his, in touching John's thing – that is, in touching Alisoun's – Nicholas gets possession of the object of John's desire.[34] I have already suggested that Alisoun's status as an exemplar of action presents a problem for such a reifying account of what she essentially is; but it also presents a problem for such an account of what it would mean to want to be near her. For the Miller knows that in wanting to touch her, one wants to touch not just a thing, but an agent; not just an object, but a subject of desire. Here we should remember the Miller's warnings about inquisitiveness in the tale's prologue: "an housbonde shal nat been inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf." "Wyf" here is commonly read as an abbreviated possessive parallel to "Goddes," rendering the sense of the warning as "husbands should not be inquisitive of their wives' secrets," or, following the *double entendre*,

"husbands should not be inquisitive of their wives' genitals." But the lines also just say that husbands should not be inquisitive about their wives, period. According to the Miller's ideology, this is all supposed to amount to the same thing: wives just *are* their genitals, and it is better not to be inquisitive about any secrets concerning those things, since they may have been busy with someone else. But in the context of the Miller's problems in keeping the notion of "woman" or "wife" clearly determined by that of "thing to be possessed or enjoyed," another thought expressed in this warning against inquiring into wifely "pryvetee" is that in order to keep thinking of your wife as defined by her genitals, and in order to keep thinking of her genitals as just a "thing," you have to try not to know too much about them or her, which requires not knowing too much about what you want in wanting them or her.

The hole-kissing scene provides an example of this problem of knowing too much, for under the pressure of exhibiting the ultimate object of desire the Miller's whole notion of coming near to a desirable object, particularly a gendered object, falls apart. But the problem is not local to any particular moment in the plot. From the very start, Alisoun is represented as having her own life of desire, a "likerous ye" (I.3244) that is essential to her sexiness both in the portrait and afterwards.[35] Her desiring eye, to be sure, is presented as one more object of consumption for the masculine gaze that wanders over her soft woolliness, sweet mouth, and supple, thin body; it is part of what makes her the perfect object of desire, and we are not invited to imagine it as much more than that. But that is already enough to disturb her ideological function; for it means that for her to be the satisfying object of an eroticized masculine look she must be able to look back, to have a desiring gaze of her own. The scopophilic thrill her portrait is supposed to provide could not exist if she were seen simply as an object, or again simply as an animal: there is no such thrill in looking at the pear tree or the sheep to which she is compared.[36] Nor could it exist if she were the kind of human the Miller imagines us to be, or imagines that we ought to be. For the thrill of looking at her would again be dampened if she were merely passive with respect to a desire that, as it were, looked out through her eye; the masculine looker does not want to imagine that her desire is, in effect, helpless, but that it is hers to bestow where she

will, and that it might be pointed *here*. The thrill the portrait offers is not even that of a male observer imagining having his way with a woman, reducing her as a practical rather than a theoretical matter to a state of passivity, for then too the desire in her eye would be extinguished, or at least forcefully set to the side. The thrill is more like that of imagining a seamless return of desire, a perfect interaction between two agents who want exactly the same thing in exactly the same way. It is a thrill that depends on the desire for intimacy.

It must be said right away that the passage averts the possibility of intimacy on which it depends. If this scopophilic portrait of a woman with desire in her eye imagines an erotic interaction in which two agents want exactly the same thing in exactly the same way, the most immediate way they can be said to want it is with the desire of the man; Alisoun is, after all, the Miller's creation, and the thrills she provides are the ones he wants her to. In this sense the portrait provides the Miller with a way of imagining a desiring eye, like that of Pygmalion's statue come to life, that cannot help but be trained on him, since that is the way he made it. It is the erotic charge, that is, of a narcissistic wish for the other's desire to be an echo or reflection of one's own, even as it somehow, impossibly, maintains its status as other. In linking Narcissus and Pygmalion in this way, as figures who express a masculine desire for a love object that is simultaneously a perfect object and an agent, I am following Jean de Meun, and suggesting that the *Miller's Tale* is one of many places in which Chaucer takes up and pursues further what he finds interesting and expressive in the *Roman de la Rose*.[37] I will expand on the notion of a scopophilic narcissism in the *Rose* in chapter four. For now I want to note that a return to the dominant gender ideology in the *Miller's Tale* can help us unpack the structure of such narcissism: it involves the desire for a woman, the erotic locus or place, to be like a man, the erotic agent, and not just any man, but the very man who desires her. The narcissism of the Miller's desire thus opens onto a narcissized homoeroticism that is very nearly adjacent to it, and that is part of what it means for the Miller to want to be a "feminized man" and to imagine the self-castigations of anal penetration and of a humiliating confrontation with the disgustingly desirable female body.[38] This narcissized homoeroticism is another occupant of the Miller's "remenant," and suggests a further sense in which his tale pictures a perfect match

between desire and the world; in effect, the tale's dominant trope of a desire perfectly matched to its object is here figured as the desire of a man who reaches out to possess his own image.

It is worth pausing for a moment over the topic of the Miller's homoeroticism; for while I have meant it to be implied for some time now, and while it is taken by many to be the first and most obvious consequence of attending to the problems of gender and desire in the tale, the bare fact of a homoerotic desire here tells us very little, and it is easy to make the wrong thing of it. We can take our cue from a line I have already cited from the Miller's description of Alisoun's animal sexiness, that she is "softer than the wolle is of a wether." Leicester reminds us that "a wether is a male sheep that has been castrated before it reaches maturity," and remarks that as a consequence "the thought of touching Alisoun has its scary side."[39] The comment is suggestive but needs unpacking. What exactly would be scary about touching an Alisoun figured in this way? An appeal to "castration anxiety" will tell us little: the question concerns the tropological value of castration rather than the explanatory value of an anatomically anchored anxiety related to some supposedly universal psychic event.[40] The first thing to notice is that Alisoun – not, as Leicester's comment implies, her masculine desirer – is the one being imagined as a castrated male, and a sexy one at that: remember that we are supposed to find the thought of touching her wether-like softness arousing. If Alisoun-as-sexy-male is being figured here as castrated – as lacking power, cut off from mature development, perhaps as passive – then the desire for such a one is what a desire for her is imagined as being. This is what I mean by calling the homoeroticism at issue here narcissized: it imagines the object of a homoerotic desire as figuratively "castrated," and so imagines that the desiring, uncastrated male is the sole locus of power and activity in the erotic scene. But the point needs putting more broadly, since the Miller clearly wants us to think of Alisoun's sexy softness as womanly, and since the narcissistic figuring of the object of desire as passive is hardly restricted to homoeroticism in this text. The trope of Alisoun-as-wether is a kind of gloss on the general impulse in the poem to figure erotic life in terms of a clean split between activity and passivity: it imagines that to be an object of desire is to be castrated, powerless, passive; that one cannot be both desired and active; that to be an object of desire is to be

no more than an object, to be objectified. The scary side of the thought of touching Alisoun would then be the thought that she might be aroused by the touching, that she might desire you, so make of you an object, a castrate. This is a way of putting a fairly familiar thought, that part of what is involved in narcissism is an aversion to being desired.[41] But it is crucial to remember that even the thought of being the object of a castrating masculine desire, fearful as it is, is not merely aversive. Like the fantasies expressed in Nicholas's anal penetration and Absolon's kiss, what is being imagined here is an erotics, and one not fundamentally powered by narcissism. For what is being imagined in each of these cases is the *desirability* of the other's agency, the fact that what makes the other appear in the Miller's gender ideology as "masculine" is essential to what constitutes the possibility of their sexiness.

Given the Miller's obvious investment in a heteronormative self-conception, the desirability of what that very self-conception persistently figures as the masculinity of the love object is a high price to pay for keeping the desire for intimacy out of sight. And, as I have suggested, it cannot even do that, since the impossibility of a purely objectifying desire is central to the emergence of a homoerotic desire here; and, to return to Alisoun, the erotics of her portrait is itself already predicated on the centrality of her desiring look. This means that part of what one wants in desiring her is to be desired by her, and so to be close not just to her body or her "thing" or anything else that can be imagined as simply a touchable or possessable object, but to be close to *her*. But to want this is to recognize that she might look back at you, not with desire, but with aversion; or she might not look back at all. This is knowledge that scopophilia, in its imagining of a seamless interaction between agents, wishes to avoid. The scopophilic eroticism of Alisoun's portrait, together with her representation as a touchable thing, means then to guarantee a kind of intimacy, a condition in which a desired nearness could never be lost because the ultimate object of desire is always close by, ready to hand like the rest of God's plenty, and always looking back at you with desire, never averting her gaze. But in representing the object of desire as necessarily close by, the Miller also distances himself from it, banishing the desired other from the scene of intimacy; or at least he tries to do so, substituting a simulacrum of the other, perhaps her body, in any case a projection of her into the erotic

scene as an object that can never really satisfy the desire for intimacy whose satisfaction it is supposed to guarantee. This structure of desire is one that first of all sends its object away, so that it then can be brought back in another form: a form consistent with the Miller's naturalistic picture, in which a concern for oneself precedes and underlies any concern for others, and other people are just one kind of thing whose possession is what it means to bask in nature's plenitude; and a form consistent also with the nostalgia of his naturalism, in which he freezes himself in longing for a condition that is necessarily already lost, and lost precisely because of the way he imagines that it has been guaranteed.

A structure of desire in which one pushes the desired object away in order to bring it back in another form: here the Miller is beginning to sound again like Nicholas, who bypasses the opportunity for immediate sex with Alisoun in order to have her in another form, as the sign that his will can fill the scene of an action in which others become little more than his instruments. Even in the figure of Nicholas, however, the Miller cannot imagine this sort of desire through to a moment of completion. There is a moment of completion, of course, to which the Miller refers with a rather vague description of Nicholas's activity with Alisoun in bed: "Ther was the revel and the melodye; / And thus lith Alison and Nicholas, / In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas" (I.3652–54). But after all the queynte-grabbing and talk of touching people's things that has come before, this quadruple euphemism for the tale's sole moment of erotic satisfaction is a bit surprising, and more so since erotic satisfaction is the tale's prime example of the gratification of human desire. It would not take much to say, as the Merchant for one is quite willing to say, just what is involved in this "solas" in a way that would drive home the Miller's point about desire. If, however, the Miller were more specific in just the way he has been specific all along, one thing he would certainly lose would be the thought that Alisoun and Nicholas were doing something *together* there in bed. If Nicholas were not just doing something to Alisoun, the most the Miller could show while remaining consistent with his picture would be them doing something to each other, or more properly to the objects each took the other to be. This could be sexy in its own way, but it is evidently not the kind of sexiness the Miller wants of the moment: it would come too

close to what he elsewhere imagines either as mere build-up, a reach and a grab that might produce a startled jerk back as much as a return of desire, or as punishment or victimization, the reception of a violating thrust. The result of this is that the central moment of satisfaction in the tale, what ought to provide the best case for a picture of the world as a place of plenitude, must be left blank, pointed to with multiple euphemisms but not represented. This silence is the sign of another version of what happens there in bed, a version essential to the Miller's sense of the moment as one of the ultimate happiness, the moment towards which all of the more tangible arousals he does represent are aimed, but a moment for which, it seems, he has no words.

If in Nicholas's case the problem that a desire for intimacy poses for the Miller is expressed in a moment in which something is not shown, in the case of Absolon it gets expressed in a far more spectacular moment in which something is shown. I am of course referring to the moment in which Absolon finally does draw near enough to Alisoun to touch her, the moment of that ill-fated kiss, which the Miller imagines with a sensual precision and slow-motion relish unmatched by anything in the tale outside of Alisoun's portrait. Here we are taken inside the phenomenal scene of the perceiving and desiring agent, the scene whose supposed specular passivity plays such a crucial role in the view of action that the Miller offers. Absolon wipes his mouth "ful drie" with anticipation; he kisses Alisoun's "naked ers" "with his mouth," "ful savourly." During the moment of anticipation what is waiting for Absolon is the face of his beloved, in particular her beautiful, succulent lips crying out to be kissed. What impales Absolon on the Miller's joke is that those lips are still phenomenally there for him in his savoring the kiss of her ass, and their residual image and the savoring associated with it even lingers after Absolon starts to realize that something has gone wrong. What he does first is just to register error and jump back. What is there for him is still a face, only not any longer a woman's, for he knows that a woman does not have a beard. But the face is not exactly a man's either, since the sensation of beardedness only registers strongly enough to call into question the image of a woman. There is even a moment in which the object as it is for Absolon – the object, that is, of his perceptions and affects – loses its facedness entirely, becoming a bare unrecognizable thing with unreadable features. When Absolon feels "a thyng al rough

and long yherd," that thing is no longer a bearded face of indeterminate gender, and not yet an ass; and when he cries out "what have I done?" he does so because he does not yet know what he has done, he only knows it was awful.

What makes the phenomenally rich features of this scene problematic for the Miller is that, while he must make them accessible to impale Absolon on the joke, neither the perversity they represent nor the punishment they provide can finally be cast in naturalistic terms. Absolon's problem as he is humiliated by kissing Alisoun's ass is not that he has the wrong object of desire present to his consciousness, leading him astray, as Nicholas might be said to have when he too cleverly presents Absolon with a target for his borrowed blade. Nor does the scene serve to reveal some normatively transparent object of perception and desire, something that, like Nicholas's pain, cannot be gotten wrong. What the scene does instead is to explore how what is phenomenally present can suddenly change faces, and change us with it. The humiliation in the moment for Absolon, and what makes the joke on him so biting, is that by the end of it he has become an ass-kisser: that may not have been his intention, but it is a fact about him, at the moment the only fact that counts. And if the shifting character of the object's identity is humiliating, the course of its transformation is even worse. The change, both in Absolon and in what he encounters, is not a matter of a switch from one determinate identity to another. When the object of his perception and desire becomes a mere "thyng al rough and long yherd," Absolon not only does not know what he has done, he does not know what he has become; the sheer attractiveness of a world of plenty perfectly matched to human desire, and the definitive human identity that goes with it, has been replaced by the sheer aversiveness of a world with nothing in particular in it, a world of disgusting thinginess that leaves him with nothing to want and no one to be.

Compared to this, being an ass-kisser – or being any of the various kinds of creature constructed in the Miller's relationship to his closeted "remenant" – would be a positive relief. Consider one such possibility produced in this scene. The appearance of that bearded face is partly meant as a reprimand to Absolon: it suggests that the passive lover or female man deserves to be confronted with the disgusting manliness of the love object he has in effect been wishing for. This is what the Miller

has Nicholas understand to be the force of the joke on Absolon when, in a remarkable act of something like telepathy, he exclaims "A berd! A berd!" (I.3742); so the Miller clearly has a lot invested in enforcing this sense of what is so humiliating here. If we follow through on the thought that in punishing these representatives of a perversion internal to him the Miller is expressing a wish for self-punishment, we can take this as further confirmation of a homoeroticism that the normative masculinity the Miller exemplifies simultaneously disavows and depends on. In the joke on Absolon, that is, we have one more expression of the Miller's disgust towards his own ideal of the female man, where his disgust serves to keep the scene's identification of a homoerotic desire internal to that ideal out of sight, and helps to define some of the contours of that desire's sexiness. This does not mean, however, that a homoerotic desire is what's "really" in there, a secret in the depths of the Miller's soul that drives or at least inflects all of his other desires and identifications. That way of locating such a desire and describing its explanatory force would derive from thoughts that the tale's naturalism is meant to support: that desires are inner objects that define us simply by their presence, and that our relationship to them is fundamentally one of observation, of seeing them for what they are or of covering them up and denying their existence. As I have been arguing all along, this is the crucial step in the Miller's self-deception; if a closeted homoeroticism structures his psychology in this way, or indeed if any of the various occupants of the shadow-remenant do so, they do so to the extent that this self-deception is successful, *not* as some secret fact about him that only we are in a position to see. It would be better, then, to describe this moment as expressive of a longing for the homoerotic, produced by the Miller's more obvious longing for the heteronormative, and in exactly the same naturalizing terms. For what the Miller gains in bringing Nicholas in on this version of the joke – and what would be perpetuated in any critical account that stopped here – is the preservation of a naturalistic account of subjectivity and action, the preservation of the thought that inner life consists of a set of facts that just are what they are, and that, if known, would tell us what to do.

But the scene of Absolon's kiss does not stop here, and in fact it never really started here at all. As I have suggested, the joke on Absolon works

because his perceptions and attitudes help to constitute the object that is phenomenally there for him, and that object, in turn, helps to constitute him, in the particular way that we are constituted in and by our relations with objects that are also subjects and agents – that is, other people. The kind of humiliation Absolon suffers, then, is one of a family of reciprocal relations between agents, of which intimacy is another. Part of what binds this family together is that such reciprocal relations are not grounded in some primary relation each agent has to himself; on the contrary, the relations any agent has with himself are in part determined by the reciprocal relations he has with others. This is one reason why there is no set of inner objects in a person that just are what they are first, and that tell him what to do; and therefore why there is not the kind of basis the Miller imagines for generating motive out of an antecedent self-interest. More to the point, *within* the conduct of reciprocal relations who and what each person is, what each person wants, and who and what each takes the other to be depend on any number of things, including what each person does, what they do together, and even just what happens between them and to them. However well Absolon's punishment fits his perversity, he is humiliated by that kiss not because he is a pervert or a fool, but because he is in the condition the Miller knows we all are in: the condition of creatures for whom the normative problem cannot be answered by recourse to some set of determinate interior facts, creatures whose identities outrun anything internal to them but who are bound by those identities nonetheless, partly because they are essentially determined by the fact that they live in a world with others who matter to them not just as objects but as agents.

One powerful motivation for holding to the Miller's picture of the human, then – and a motive that is neither peculiar to him nor dependent on the force of a suspect ideology – is that we are vulnerable, just as Absolon is, to being made and unmade in relation to others who may have nothing more than our humiliation in mind. They may have something much better in mind, of course; but even in the best case of mutual goodwill, there is no way to say beforehand what the endpoint of reciprocal self-constitution will be, or even if there will be an identifiable end. This in itself can be a fearful thing. To the extent that we want to be able just to look and see who we are and what we

want, and to look at another and see a determinate thing whose normative claim on us is transparent, it can seem that reciprocal relations require us to act blindly – or worse, to live in a world in which nothing is definitively identifiable at all, including ourselves. A particularly heightened version of this fear – heightened in a way determined by the Miller's conceptual commitments – finds expression in the progression of Absolon's kiss to a point at which his relationship to the world is one of sheer aversion to its thinginess. For given the way Alisoun's desiring eye is essential to her sexiness from the start, given the way she always looks back at her male observer, making a claim of reciprocity on him even from her "nether eye," the closest she comes to being the purely animal, purely bodily object that makes no agentlike claim is in the moment when she becomes that bare unrecognizable "thyng al rough and long yherd," terrifying in its failure to take part in any sense of what Absolon has done to or with it. Here the Miller's picture of the normative power of the erotic object – his picture of the other's body as what is tangibly real, and of this reality as the source of motive – becomes a picture of the other as utterly alien, something you can have no identifiable relation to, something disgusting. This is yet another of the discontents naturalism brings in its wake, in which the fantasy of a seamless connection to the world opens on to an abyss of disgust and the sadness of a radical isolation from everything that is supposed to fill that world with value.

The character whom the Miller has the most trouble imagining as alone in this way, and who therefore figures most directly both the Miller's knowledge that he is not alone in this way and his sense of what this entails, is John. For John's entire way of thinking and acting is predicated on an acknowledgment of the others in his world. More than that, he has one particular other who *is* his world; for him, the loss of her and the end of the world amount to the same thing, which is why Nicholas's gag about a second flood has the power it does over him. And now it should be somewhat clearer what it means for the Miller to punish John in the way he does. Breaking John's arm is the least appropriate of the punishments, for nothing that is at issue in the possibility John represents has to do centrally with the body. A broken arm hurts, but it does not hurt John where he lives; at most it is a kind of rearguard action on the Miller's part, an attempt to pull John's case

back within a naturalistic orbit after the fact. The public and mocking denial of John's rationality is more interesting, in part because it just misses its mark. For it is not so much John's rationality that gets denied, despite the crowd's solidarity in declaring his madness; his fate is not that of having no reasons, but that of having no one listen to the reasons he so evidently has: "no man his reson herde" (I.3844). John's punishment, then, is less a denial of the rationality of intimacy than an attempt to destroy the possibility that the desire for intimacy might have reasons for it, born of the fearful fact that the reasons you have might be ones that no one else is willing or able to hear. This is also the reason for John's other, and worst, punishment, his betrayal by Alisoun: as it turns out, even the person he wants intimacy with does not care to hear him, and does not share his reasons. The fact that this fearful isolation is behind both of the latter two punishments suggests that the Miller partly means the tale's final moment to take something of intimate concern and make it the occasion for a public scene, as though to deny its intimate scale, and by sidestepping intimacy to make of John's isolation an instance of the radical isolation the Miller fears, one that can presumably be avoided by participation in the solidarity of the crowd.

But John's isolation, fearful as it is, is quite unlike that entailed by the Miller's picture, for nothing says that John is in principle alone or unhearable; it just turns out that way. This suggests that here as elsewhere the Miller's nightmares are part and parcel of the wishes his naturalism embraces; for both his fantasy of seamless connection to the world and his nightmare of radical isolation participate in the wishful attempt to deny that it can just turn out that way, that who you are and the happiness you seek can rest on such contingencies. And here as elsewhere the Miller reveals his further sense that he cannot fully identify himself with the wishes that power his narrative, in either their idyllic or demonic form. For just as John is an object of greater hostility than either Nicholas or Absolon and so receives the heaviest punishment, there is a pathos in John's situation that goes deeper than that attending the other male characters, and that brings with it a sympathy lacking in their cases.[42] And this pathos is just what the Miller has said it is all along, the intimate pathos of staking your heart on someone only to find somewhere along the way that they

have no such stake in you. The Miller depends on this pathos in making John out to be a fool; but once it is admitted, mere carelessness is no longer a viable option, for nothing in the world of God's plenty could replace what has been taken away.