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Chaucer Essay: Music as an Instrument of Desire in "The Miller's Tale"

In "The Miller's Tale," the sexual appetites and actions of the characters are expressed in terms of music in order connect them with the beauty of Nature and emphasize the worldly pleasure of physical love. When he describes Alison, Absolon and Nicholas, the three characters whose sexual desires drive the plot of the tale, the Miller also describes the vivacity of their musical talents. Alison sings "loude and yerne (lively) as any swalwe sittinge on a berne" ("The Miller's Tale," 154-5). Absolon plays the fiddle and the guitar, and there is not a pretty barmaid in town that he has not "visited with his solas" ("The Miller's Tale," 232). Here, stressing the connection between music and lovemaking is the use of "solas." It refers to Absolon's entertaining music, but in the description of Nicholas, it refers to his sexual experience. Earlier, the Miller calls Nicholas one who "of derne love he coude and of solas" to depict Nicholas' knowledge of secret love and pleasure ("The Miller's Tale," 92). Nicholas' musical talents extend as far as his having a "gay sautyre, on which he made a-nightes melodye so sweetly, that al the chamber rong" ("The Miller's Tale," 105-7). What on the surface sounds like Nicholas practicing the instrument into the night also sounds like a euphemism for his nocturnal sexual activities. In addition, both Nicholas and Absolon woo Alison with their instruments, and when Alison agrees to love Nicholas, he "pleyeth faste and maketh melodye" ("The Miller's Tale," 203). That last phrase is taken from the description of his nighttime activities. "Melodye" appears again when the pair is having sex; they are described as making love with "revel and melodye" and music is further invoked with ringing bells ("The Miller's Tale," 549). "Melodye" is also what connects music and lovemaking with the natural realm. In the general prologue, Nature inspires small birds to "maken melodye" in the spring ("General Prologue," 9). Even here, the music is associated with sexual drives. Spring is traditionally considered the season of love and coupling, and these birds that "maken melodye" also "slepen al the night with open ye" and are "priketh [by Nature] in hir corages" ("General Prologue," 9-11). The language ties the birds to Nicholas (who makes melody) and Alison (who sings like a bird). And that the birds are awake all night and inspired to love by Nature implies that the birds singing in the spring are courting like the couple. The music analogy is used by Chaucer to redeem sexual love in "The Miller's Tale." Throughout the tale, sex is identified as something that is messy and bodily, that does little else but make people foolish (Adelman, lecture 9/14/05). Instead, the identification of desire with music and music with nature is a reminder that the messiness, physicality and even the stupidity of it are exactly what make sex perfectly natural, beautiful and pleasurable.