The last line of the Miller's "Prologue" has been variously interpreted as indicative of Chaucer's aesthetic intentions both in the tale itself and in his works as a whole. In it, the narrator, after warning his readers of the kind of tale to follow and disclaiming responsibility should any of them subsequently "chese amys," adds a final rider: "and eek men shal nat maken ernest of game." The phrase itself is sufficiently commonplace to be classified as proverbial, and variations of it occur four times elsewhere in the Tales: January finally settles on one delectable young girl as his bride "bitwixe ernest and game"; Griselda, bereft of her daughter, never mentions her name either "in ernest nor in game," and Walter, despite the murmurs of his subjects, continues to try his wife "for ernest ne for game"; the Host is relieved that wine can resolve the differences between the Cook and the Manciple and "turnen ernest into game." But in these instances the implied polarities are unequivocal. Only in the Miller's "Prologue" does the phrase seem to contain tantalizing ambiguities and to mean more than a prefunctory tag. Some critics differ on whether the narrator is advising the more squeamish of his readers to skip the tale for the immorality of its action, the vulgarity of its speech, or for both reasons. Others, inasmuch as they consider that Chaucer's "game" always has serious intent, appear to regard the statement as ironic.

It is clearly revealed in the typology of the protagonists, and, as in the Mystery plays, the link between one Fall and another is neatly and palpably established.

The assumption in every case is that "game" has the meaning of gaiety or mirth for which numerous instances are cited in the Middle English Dictionary. The possibility arises, however, that Chaucer, in adumbrating a particular kind of tale to warn off those of his audience who preferred "storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse, / And eek moralitee and hoolynesse", was using "game" in a specific sense directly pertinent to the action which follows. Some critics differ on whether the narrator is advising the more squeamish of his readers to skip the tale for the immorality of its action, the vulgarity of its speech, or for both reasons. Others, inasmuch as they consider that Chaucer's "game" always has serious intent, appear to regard the statement as ironic.

For game in this sense, the Middle English Dictionary cites only two examples, and the New English Dictionary alludes only to games in antiquity. Nevertheless "game" was a common term for the Mystery Drama, and appears in the Promptorium Parvulorum as the equivalent of "play" (ludus) as well as iocus. The matter has been well documented since Rossell Hope Robbins contended that "game" was an equivalent for dramatic performance to support his claim that a proclamation admonishing an audience to keep quiet and not interrupt the "game" was a fragment of a Mystery Play. As evidence, he cited references to "oure game" and "oure play" contained in another fragment, clearly an epilogue to a Mystery Play, and to the proclamation in the Ludus Coventriae--"Of holy wrytte pis game xal bene." He also showed similar usage in the earliest extant morality play, The Pride of Life, and in a sermon quoted by Owst. Its use in the two fragments, one ascribed to the thirteenth and the other to the sixteenth...
century, suggests currency over a long period, and apart from various town records concerning "game gear," "game-book," "game players gowns and coats," the "Lopham game," the "Garblesham game," and the "Kenningale game," further evidence has accrued to show conclusively that "game" and "play" were used interchangeably.

If "game" has this specialized meaning in the Miller's *Prologue,* "ernest" has a particular relevance. In its general combination with "game" or "play," "ernest" was simply an antonym meaning serious; used with reference to drama, it was reality in contrast to counterfeit. This distinction was made by the Wycliffite preacher to support the argument that the play marked an abstention from the true concerns of life. The meaning was even more strongly defined by Skelton, who took the view that the polarities were reconcilable and that truth could be presented under the guise of play:

Take hede of this caytyfe that lyeth here on grounde;  
Beholde, howe Fortune of hym hath frounde!  
For though we shewe you this in game and play,  
Yet it proueth eyrnest, ye may se, euery day.

This kind of usage suggests that Chaucer, in juxtaposing "ernest" and "game," may have been making an antithesis meaningful within the terms of the contemporary Mystery play.

That the *Miller's Tale* contains a number of allusions to the Mystery plays has often been noted, and Harder suggested that the tale might be a parody of a particular cycle. Certain references enable us to be more specific and to find in the tale one of the principal themes of the Mystery plays. The carpenter about whom the Miller promises a "legende and a lyf" directly points to St. Joseph of the Holy Family. Probably because of the late development in the West of his cult as a saint, he was one of the most extensively and independently treated characters in medieval drama, often in a comic mode. Like "selig" John, he too was aged, married to a young wife, and fearful of being cuckolded. The momentous event with which he is associated becomes the pivot of the burlesque.

To confirm the various elements of the "game" Chaucer uses the structural pattern found in the Mystery plays themselves. The creators of these dramas passed over many Biblical stories which seem equal or even superior to those dramatized. The reason was that the form of the pageants was determined by traditional exegesis. The writers sought to impose order and meaning upon their material by stressing correspondences and prefigurings cited in the Biblical text and further developed by hermeneutical writers from Tertullian onwards. As Kolve has observed:

The dramatist simply took over certain significant patterns that had been long observed and studied in Biblical narrative, and by simplifying, abridging or neglecting entirely the mass of incident and detail that surrounds them, they produced a cycle sequence charged with theological meaning--strong, simple, and formally coherent.

Hence they included the story of Cain and Abel because it prefigured the death of Christ, and the play of Noah and the Flood because it prefigured Baptism, the Crucifixion and the end of the world. Similarly the story of Abraham and Isaac was important because it prefigured God's sacrifice of his own Son.

It is this kind of prefiguring, fundamental to the shaping and the interpretation of the Mystery Drama, that Chaucer observes in comic fashion. With audacious artistry he points up a comparable series of correspondences which are inherent in the central action. The initial event in his tale is a young man's salutation of a young woman. In appearance Nicholas resembles the somewhat effeminate-looking angel of the Annunciation--"lyk a mayden meke for to see"; he also has the attribute for which Gabriel was especially renowned in the Mystery plays: he sings divinely--"ful often blessed was his myrie throte." But his role is confirmed by what he sings: *Angelus ad virginem,* the hymn of the Annunciation, and the *Kynges Noote,* whereby he reveals God's purpose. The young woman, likened to the weasel, an animal traditionally compared to the Virgin because of the unnatural method of
its conception, appears to play the complementary role. The travesty was probably not new to Chaucer's audience. Mary was supposed to have been abashed at the Annunciation because a young man had "made hym lyk an angyll" with the Devil's help and seduced maidens on pretext of a similar errand, and Boccaccio, in the second story of the fourth day, tells of a clerk who pretended to be Gabriel in order to seduce a young married woman. Here, the logos which is whispered in Alison's ear is an immediate reminder of the contrasting prefiguration to which exegetists of the Annunciation almost invariably referred. Instantly superimposed on the scene of the Annunciation is that of the first Temptation. Eve replaces Ave, and the "sleigh and ful privee" young man is the Serpent himself.

The role of the rival lover, Absolon, is also clearly defined in the "game." Although his namesake never appears to have been included in the cycles, the parish priest is too important to the tale not to be drawn into the sphere of the Mystery play, albeit obliquely. Prefiguring his own climactic attempt at cauterization or curettage, he is assigned the part of the bombastic villain whose most spectacular appearance concerned the Slaughter of the Innocents. Like Herod, "wel koude he laten blood and clippe and shave," and there is little difference in their instruments: Herod is usually depicted with his curved falchion; Absolon has his coulter. Both of them finally betake themselves to Satan. In displaying his "maistreye," Absolon is, one suspects, showing not only his skill but his profession, his "mystery," which is to be responsible for the dénouement.

As the plot develops, more correspondences become apparent. Essential to the central action is the story of Noah and the Flood, which dramatists treated as one of the most important prefigurations in the cycle. The aged Noah, a carpenter, singled out by God to be His servant and fulfill His purpose for humanity, was considered to prefigure Christ. But he was also the type of Joseph, similarly a carpenter, and chosen as the divine instrument. John who, Nicholas implies, is also chosen by God, becomes the appropriate third correspondence. He, too, is an aged carpenter, mal marié if self-deceived, and like Noah he is subsequently to be mocked by his companions. Nicholas plays a similarly appropriate role: in some versions of the tale, God sends Gabriel or another angel to reveal His purpose to Noah. Moreover, inasmuch as the Flood was traditionally held to prefigure salvation through baptism, it is particularly apposite that Nicholas should regard the event as effecting his Salvation. Of even greater importance, however, is the role of the uxor in the episode. A popular development of the Noah episode in the Mystery cycles was the comic quarrel between Noah and his shrewish wife, which turned upon her reluctance to cooperate with him and enter the ark. Such domestic discord prefigures that of Joseph, often depicted in the plays as another aged mal marié. Nicholas is forced to draw John's attention to "the sorwe of Noe with his felaweshipe, / Ere that he myghte gete his wyf to shipe" in order to provide a reason for the separate tubs. But the reference sets off yet another correspondence. In the widely diffused folktale, Noah's wife succumbed to the blandishments of the Devil, and in the Newcastle-on-Tyne "Noah's Ark," the Wife's recalcitrance is due to her collusion with the Evil One. In the "Miller's Tale," Alison behaves towards John as the meek wife of the Noah plays in the Ludus Coventriae and the French mystère, the wife who was said to prefigure the Virgin, but her involvement again looks back to that of the First Temptation which traditionally prefigured this episode.

The reception of the tale by the pilgrims shows that many interpretations are possible: "Diverse folk diversely they seyde, But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde." This interpretation emphasizes one strand of the humor: the comic travesty of the St. Joseph legend, with Nicholas as the Evil One and Alison as Eve. The ambiguities inherent in the narrator's warning remain unresolved but among the various components of this complex tale, this aspect of "game" appears to be undeniably present. It is clearly revealed in the typology of the protagonists, and, as in the Mystery plays, the link between one Fall and another is neatly and palpably established.

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)