ABSOLON, THE SQUEAMISH PARISH CLERK in Chaucer's Miller's Tale, is, perhaps, a predictable focus for an investigation of gender and genre in medieval literature. He has been the subject of considerable scholarly interest in the past two decades, and a variety of conflicting accounts have been offered of his sexuality, his attitudes towards women, and his literary origins. In part he remains a fruitful source of inspiration precisely because he is so difficult to pin down, both sexually and generically. But, as what follows will suggest, the attempt is worthwhile, both for what it implies about the gendered dynamics of humour in the Tale, and for its wider generic implications.

One of the purposes of this essay, as my subtitle suggests, is to examine just what is troubling for and about Chaucer's squeamish parish clerk. The trouble for Absolon, the apparently disproportionate horror he experiences when he kisses Alisoun's 'nether ye' (or perhaps, more accurately, when he reflects on the implications of that kiss immediately afterwards), is one part of the problem; and takes us into the world of psychoanalysis and gender theory. But the essay will also consider the trouble with Absolon, why it is that he troubles us; why he continues to provoke interest and discussion among scholars and readers of the Tale. Part of his troublesomeness, as I have suggested, lies in the way in which he defies categorisation, how he troubles the boundaries between male and female, masculine and feminine, adult and child, and resists the easy binary oppositions so important to conventional ideas of identity. But he is also troublesome in generic terms, he crosses the boundaries and muddies the waters between fabliau, romance, moral exhortation and biblical narrative. He is, to borrow Mary Douglas's well-known formulation, 'matter out of place' and so an aberration, a problematic, liminal thing, as much between genres as he is between genders. (2) Hence it is fitting that his defining moment should involve a dangerous meeting of opposed categories of being in an archetypally liminal space, the bringing together of his 'pure' lips (wiped dry for the task) and a decidedly impure arse projected disruptively through the frame of a 'shot' window. (3)

Sexuality and the Somewhat Squeamish Male

Most accounts of Absolon have assumed that he is funny -- and in one way or another inadequate -- because of his inappropriate femininity. (4) This seems to me to be a problematic, or at least only partially satisfactory, claim. In what follows I will re-examine Absolon's character, and his role in The Miller's Tale, concluding rather that it is his adoption and internalisation of a fundamentally patriarchal (in a number of senses of the word) ideological stance regarding womanhood that makes him such a laughably inadequate figure in the world of the tale. His relationship -- such as it is -- with Alisoun, the carpenter's wife whom he pursues with gifts and love songs, is not informed by any common 'feminine' traits or shared understanding. Nor is it directed by the conventional bodily urges of the fabliau male. As a result he quite literally does not know how to take her, with, as they say, hilarious consequences (for everyone but him). Yet, nor does the reader know how to take Absolon, hence the laughter that he evokes is at best awkward and at times frankly embarrassed. Is the humour of the kiss implicitly
homophobic, or misogynist, or both? Do we laugh because we know that, in the same situation, we would behave in exactly the same way as Absolon does, or because we hope that we would not? The text does not provide ready answers to such questions. In this, I will argue, Chaucer is both exploring the conventions and implications of his chosen genre, and also tilting, if only obliquely, at a wider and more influential target.

Part of what makes Absolon memorable, as many critics have pointed out, is that he, like his kiss, is so obviously misplaced, grotesquely out of keeping with the prevailing tone and ethos of the tale that he inhabits. It is as if he had wandered into the fabliau from somewhere else, bringing the assumptions and behaviour patterns of that other world with him. In what follows I will explore this idea further, and suggest that this 'somewhere else' is not, as is sometimes argued, the world of romance, the most likely home for young men who court their beloveds with poetry and song, but the realm of popular religion, and in particular of the kind of religiosity that characterises aspects of the medieval drama. In finding Absolon's natural habitat in the religious cycle drama I am following a recent essay by Linda Lomperis that provided an important stimulus to my own thinking on the Tale, but I shall take the argument to rather different conclusions, and so hopefully justify a further examination of some of the same issues. (5)

In Chaucer's Miller's Tale, as in fabliaux generally, sexuality is frankly acknowledged. Desire, satisfaction, and the pleasure to be gained from sexual activity are all taken as given facts of life. Hence the reader is assumed to be - indeed is constructed as - mature enough to understand and accept the nature of the pleasures that sex offers. Chaucer's description of the adulterous 'melodie' (MT, 3652) (6) that Nicholas the scholar and Alisoun enjoy together in John the carpenter's bed is thus not euphemistic but analytical, a reference to the delightful nature of their 'bisynesse of myrthe and solas', rather than a coy refusal to name the deed.(7) It is only with the arrival of Absolon that the notion of taboo is introduced -- manifestly belatedly and inappropriately -- into the narrative. And with him comes a bowdlerisation of human experience and all its attendant baggage (chiefly the infantilisation of masculinity and the neutralisation of female desire that it necessitates) which is drawn from a very different discourse and realm of experience.

Significantly, of course, Absolon arrives in the tale after the crucial, self-sufficient narrative of the Alisoun-Nicholas-John plot has been established and sent on its way to a denouement. And it is distinctive of Absolon's role to bring too little, too late to any situation to have any positive effect on events. If the classic relationship in both chivalric and fabliau competition is the erotic triangle, two men in pursuit of a single woman,(8) then Absolon is already geometrically excessive and surplus to requirements at his first arrival. It is John the carpenter whom Nicholas must defeat in order to enjoy Alisoun, not Absolon. And Alisoun has already responded affirmatively to Nicholas's proposition, signalling the first part of his victory over her husband prior to Absolon's appearance. Moreover, the lodger's shameless groping of Alisoun 'by the queynt' in the orchard (3275-6) has set the tale's linguistic and moral parameters at a level of frankness far beyond the tolerance of Absolon's coy, formal brand of courtship, long before the latter enters the scene with his desire for 'a kiss at least' (see 3680 and 3683). Consequently, Absolon's arrival does not for a moment threaten Nicholas's victory, albeit he does rather take the gloss off it (along with the skin from his arse) when he enacts his final, misdirected, revenge. Rather he presents a comic counter-case, reworking in a parodic key the courtship that Nicholas has already completed successfully in the authentic tones of fabliau comedy.

The iconography of Absolon's portrait has been sensitively analysed by Paul Beichner. Based upon the biblical Absalom, the son of David (II Samuel 14. 25-6), Absolon alludes to a number of exegetical themes. He is effete and luxuriant. His 'crull' golden hair, according to exegetical commentators, connoted excess,(9) and it, along with his skin, eyes, and fastidiously arranged clothes, are described in great detail in the manner of the effectio. The vocabulary deployed here, it is claimed, serves to feminise Absolon; but it also, more radically, infantilises him in images of smallness, prettiness, and inconsequentiality. Absolon's body is that of a child, and it is this that creates the main strand of humour in his portrait. His clothes are those of an infant dressed smartly for school, neat, prim, and in soft, unthreatening pastel colours. He is 'jolyf ... and gay' (3339); with 'joly shode' (3316); is clad 'ful smal and proprely' (3320); his kyrtel is of 'lyght waget'; his surplice as white as blossom (3321 and 24). His movements are either small and precise or extravagant and ungainly (like his awkward, leggy dancing after the 'Oxford
School' (3328-30)). His singing voice is a high soprano (‘a loud quynyble’ (3332)), later referred to as 'gentil and smal' like a warbling nightingale (3360), and it is no accident that his chosen musical instrument is a small rubible (3331) - a little fiddle - the very word for which sounds ungainly and silly. Taken together, these features serve to deny not simply his masculinity but his adulthood per se.(10) The final, seemingly gratuitous detail in his portrait, that 'he was somdeel squaymous/ Of fartyng' (3337-8) - a generally admirable feature in a man, especially a parish clerk, but a grave handicap in the fundamentally visceral world of the fabliaux - 'and of speche dangerous' provides the final, broadest hint of his effete, bowdlerised nature.

That Absolon is feminine in appearance and manners is not necessarily a problem. Despite the claims of a number of critics to the contrary, (11) femininity in a young man is a conventional feature of the successful heterosexual lovers of medieval literature. One need think only of Chaucer's Squire ('A lovyere and a lusty bacheler' (GP, 80), who none the less had 'lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse' and wore clothes 'Embrouded ... as it were a meede / Al ful of fresshe floures, whyte and reede' (81, 89-90)), or of Aurelius in The Franklin's Tale ('That fressher was and jollyer of array, / ... than is the month of May' (FT, 927-8)) to substantiate the claim. (12) Even in fabliaux, the femininity of the hero is part of his lustiness, what marks him our as attractive to the women he pursues. Nicholas himself is 'lyk a mayden for to see' (3202), yet evidently has no difficulties in the role of heterosexual predator.

What is problematic, as we shall see, is not Absolon's femininity, but precisely his lack of access to female experience and his inability to empathise with the woman he pursues. He is narcissistic to the point of autism, incapable of entering even imaginatively into the thoughts, desires, or physical realities of anyone not conceived in his own image. (13) He insists upon abstracting Alisoun imaginatively from her bodily reality, displacing it where necessary into sanitised images of cats and mice, honeycomb, sweet cinnamon, small birds, and suckling lambs (3346-7; 3698-9, 3704). Whereas she is presented to us as a woman firmly grounded in the corporeal (her introduction tells us that she scrubs her face hard to make it shine (3704), and plucks her eyebrows (3310-11) -- discreet signs of the intransigent bodily growth that will become more obviously important later), he insists on denying that corporeality. Hence, when the physical proof of the inadequacy of his conception of femininity is brought home to him in a face full of her 'rough' pubic hair, he is entirely incapable of adjusting, and short-circuits into violence. If Alisoun will not be as he imagined her, then she must be entirely erased: only that will rectify the anomaly that she presents and return his world to order. (14)

Absolon's pleasures, real and imagined, are, as a number of critics have observed, entirely oral and visual. (15) His mouth itches in anticipation of kissing (3682); he dreams that he is at a feast (3684); describes Alisoun, as we have seen, in terms of sweetmeats: honeycomb and sweet cinnamon (3 698-9); and longs for her like the lamb after the teat (3704). He is indeed 'a myrie chylde', a toddler, whose pursuit of women in general and Alisoun in particular is restricted to the voyeuristic pleasures of observation from afar ('Sensyng the wyves of the parisshe faste; / And many a lovely look on hem he caste, / And namely on this carpenteris wyf. / To looke on hire hym thoughte a myrie lyf' (3341-4)) and the kind of indiscriminate gift-giving characteristic of the child in Freud's anal stage, prior to entry into genital sexuality ('He sente hire pyment, meeth, and spiced ale, / And wafres, pipyng hoot out of the gleede; / And, for she was of town, he profred meede; / For som folk wol ben wonnen for richesse, / And somme for strokes, and somme for gentilesse' (3378-82)). (16) The narrator, entering into Absolon's thought processes might speculate that:

I dar wel seyn, if she hadde been a mous, And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon. (3346-7)

But, as Helen Phillips notes, it is only through such displacement that a satisfying consummation can even be imagined. (17) It is not merely 'if' but 'only if' the sexual act could be replaced by the more acceptably infantile satisfaction of eating that it would become thinkable for him. Given that she is not a mouse, nor he a cat, the relationship is doomed to go no further.

The building blocks of a potentially complex, even tragic, dysfunctional figure are all there, but the text keeps its exploration of Absolon resolutely within the comic register. The repeated use of 'joly' to describe his demeanour...
belies the potential seriousness of his 'woe', even before the text gets down to describing what 'courtship' really
involves for Absolon (which, as V. A. Kolve suggests, seems to be merely frequent visits to the mirror and the
dressing-up box): (18)

From day to day this joly Absolon
So woweth hire that hym is wo bigon,
He waketh al the nyght and al the day;
He kembeth his lokkes brode, and made hym gay;
He woweth hire by meenes and brocage,
And swoor he wolde been hir owene page;
He syngeth, brokkyng as a nyghtyngale ...
Sometyme to shewe his lightnesse and maistyre,
He playeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye. (3371-7, 3383-4)

But none of this succeeds since Alisoun's desires are already directed elsewhere. So the parish clerk is reduced
to practising, metaphorically at least, another orally focused form of solitary pleasure,

But what availeth hym as in this cas?
She loveth so this hende Nicholas
That Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn. (3385-7)

Some Boys Do: Nicholas and Absolon

As we have seen, there are similarities between Nicholas and Absolon. Both are effeminate in manner, play
musical instruments, and pursue Alisoun, each in his own way. But attempts to find equivalence between the two
characters miss the point. They do similar things, certainly, and share a number of traits associated with the
conventional roles and attitudes of the lover-seducer, but the similarities, such as they are, are merely superficial.
Lomperis has, for example, noted the associations of each young man with fragrant herbs:

Absolon is not so effeminate as to be unable to wield a phallic coulter, as he does at the tale's end, and Nicholas
is not so masculine as to refrain from perfuming his room 'with herbes swoote' (3205), in the same manner as
Absolon, who perfumes himself by chewing cardamom and licorice (3690). Early on in the narration, Nicholas
himself is compared to licorice (3207). Both he and Absolon, it appears, are equally sweet-smelling. (19)

But the crucial distinction is, of course, that of authenticity. While Nicholas possesses a real penis and seems to
employ it effectively, Absolon can only wield the artificial simulacrum of the phallus, the coulter, in a grotesque
travesty of the procreative act. Here as elsewhere, Absolon's actions, while similar to those of Nicholas, are not
performed 'in the same manner'; they are actions in bad faith. Nicholas smells as sweet as licorice, whereas
Absolon has to chew literal liquorice in a deliberate attempt (we are not told how successful) to achieve the same
effect (3690-3). The same is true of their deployment of music and song. Nicholas strums his psaltery 'privellee'
in his room, singing the Angelus in an attempt to lure Alisouen within, and plays an exuberant riff of triumph once she
has agreed to his proposition. There is a direct and spontaneous relationship between music and desire. Absolon,
conversely, plays his small rubible in the pubs and singles bars of Oxfordshire in an unfocused exhibition of public
courtship: presenting himself to the ladies of the town, en masse, as a would-be amorous troubadour. In each
case, the chewing of liquorice, the playing and singing, the dressing up as a gallant, these are actions that a man
might play, part of a conscious performance, every bit as rehearsed and inauthentic as his (surely absurdly
miscast) role as Herod on the scaffold high.

Absolon's vital role in the denouement of the tale is, like his introduction, carefully set up by the narrator as an
exercise in both misjudgement of character and bathetic mis-timing. He re-enters the narrative in search of his
kiss only after Nicholas and Alisoun have enjoyed their melodious night of sexual revelry, and his anticipation of
the pleasures he might enjoy -- again they are wholly oral in nature ('My mouth hath icched al this longe day; /
That is a signe of kyssyng atte leeste. / Al nyght me mette eek I was at a feeste' (3682-4)) -- seems again woefully
adolescent when set against what has preceded them. There is thus a pleasing appropriateness to the form his humiliation is to take in the moment when the 'misdirected kiss' brings his lips into contact with Alisoun's arse and the world of the Bakhtinian 'lower bodily stratum':

This Absolon down sette hym on his knees
And seyde, 'I am lord at alle degrees;
For after this I hope ther cometh moore.
Lemman, thy grace, and sweete bryd, thyn oore' (3723-6)
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 ne 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! Alas! What have I do?'
'Tehee!', quod she, and clapte the wyndow to,
And Absolon gooth forth a sory pas. (3730-41)

That the clerk who had focused his expectations upon a sweet kiss should be paid for his trouble with one less saccharin is indeed apt. And the irony is not lost on the recipient. Nicholas's mocking 'A berd! A berd!' (3742) echoes Absolon's cry that the narrative does not provide at first hand:

This sely Absolon herde every deel,
And on his lippe he gan for anger byte,
And to himself he seyde, 'I shal thee quyte.' (3744-6)

But just why -- and indeed how -- is Absolon so effectively humiliated? As Linda Lomperis has observed, despite the text's apparent openness and abundance of anatomical detail ('hir hole' (3732), 'hir naked ers' (3734), 'a thyng al rough and long yherd' (3731)), there remains considerable scholarly disagreement about exactly where and upon what Absolon plants his lips. To Valerie Allen and Paul Strohm the description suggests Alisoun's anus, to Wolfgang Rudat her vagina. H. Marshall Leicester is engagingly disingenuous in weighing up the possibilities; 'it does not in fact sound like he has kissed an ass, but a cunt'. (20) The consensus seems to be that it must be either one thing or the other (only Lomperis bucks the trend and goes for the long-odds possibility that it is Alisoun's penis). (21) But, given that the night is as black as coal, and Absolon has sunk to his knees and is thrusting himself upwards with his eyes shut towards a body that is being squeezed out of a cramped shot-window, it is surely likely that he gets a face full of both at once. Thus the ritual indignity of the osculum fundamentum or baise-cul is combined with the parodic meeting of upper and nether lips in a camivalesque act of uncrowning. (22) Additionally, given the (at best basic) lavatorial hygiene of the period, there may also be in play here at least a hint of that fascination with kissing or eating shit evident in both the colloquial insult 'a turd in your teeth' and fabliaux such as La Coille Noire and Le Debat du Con et du Cul. (23)

Whether it is single, double, or triple, however, the insult to Absolon and the humiliation that it imparts are apparently devastating. His complete horror at the physicality of the encounter is reflected in the frenzied lengths to which he goes to remove any trace of Alisoun's savour from his all too sullied flesh:

Who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes,
With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes,
But Absolon, that seith ful ofte, 'Alas!' (3747-9)
This is no temporary embarrassment, but the end of his sexual ambitions for life:

'Allas', quod he, 'allas, I ne hadde ybleynt!'  
His hoote love was coold and al yqueynt;  
For fro that tyme that he dadde kist hir ers,  
Of paramours he sette nat a kers,  
For he was heeled of his maladie.  
Ful ofte paramours he gan deffie,  
And weep as dooth a child that is ybete. (3753-9)

Despite the text's having set us up -- through reference to Absolon's particular brand of squeamishness -- to expect his final quietus to be flatulent, his real humiliation is thus delivered here in the kiss. The fart that Nicholas ultimately bestows upon him is, however impressive in its dimensions and results ('As greet as it had been a thonder-dent, / That with the strook he was almoost yblent' -- although it is not finally clear whether it is Nicholas that is nearly blinded by the effort, or Absolon by the blast), no more than an afterthought. Absolon has already discovered in the kiss a fundamental truth far more unsettling than the bodily function of which he had hitherto been so 'squaymous'.

What, then, are we to make of Absolon's frenzied reaction to what Rudat has memorably described as his 'involuntary act of (almost) cunnilingus'? (24) As Leicester has suggested, there seem to be clear echoes here of the primal scene imagined in Freud's late essay 'The Medusa's Head':

The terror of the Medusa is... a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this; it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe in the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother. (25)

So it is tempting to see Absolon's kiss as re-enacting the moment when all toddlers discover 'the truth' about sexual difference at first hand, and hence to see Alisoun's thrusting of her arse out of the window as a defiant rejection of both Absolon's inept courtship and his sexual naivete. For, as Freud goes on to say, the exposure of one's own genitals (especially if one is female) is an archetypal act of defiance:

displaying the genitals is familiar in other connections as an apotropaic act. What arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy ... We read in Rabelais of how the Devil took to flight when the woman showed him her vulva. (26)

Still more powerfully, the kiss evokes Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, with Absolon's horror echoing the reaction against the fluid signs of sexual difference, the 'substances that cross bodily boundaries, that traverse physical thresholds' central to notions of abjection. (27)

But, if in psychoanalytic terms the kiss re-enacts yet another version of the primal encounter with female sexuality and its attendant castration anxieties (and in this respect it is interesting that at the moment that he initiates his revenge, his thoughts turn to his mother and her generosity ('Of gold', quod he, 'I have thee broght a ryng. / My mooder yaf it me, so God me save,' (3794-5)), in the public sphere it seems also to evoke the Bakhtinian notion of the clash between the grotesque and classical bodies. Again, to point this out is to say nothing new; but it is important to remember that these two readings are not alternatives -- still less are they mutually exclusive. Freud and Bakhtin are telling essentially the same story, and Absolon's response to his encounter with Alisoun's arse neatly embodies the fact.

It has been objected against Bakhtin that his account of the classical and grotesque bodies neglects the crucial issue of gender; (28) but on closer inspection gender proves to be central (albeit tacit) to the opposition between the two bodies he describes (representing respectively the values of the clerical elite and the popular marketplace). The grotesque body, it will be remembered, is characteristically 'unfinished, [it] outgrows itself,
transgresses its own limits’, revealing ‘an openness to the world’. (29) This seems a particularly apt delineation of Alisoun's 'rough and long yherd' 'hole', which is presumably also distended and fluid (both 'open' and 'transgressive') after her long night of merriment. It may be that Absolon's hair suggested excess to exegetically-inclined readers, but his hair is carefully combed and crimped. It is rather Alisoun's unkempt pubic hair that represents the uninhibited indulgence in the bodily life of the world.

Such features as Bakhtin describes were, in terms of the classical medical theory that lies at the heart of medieval notions of physiognomy, characteristic of the female body. As Mary Harlow has recently demonstrated, the Hippocratic texts of the fifth and fourth centuries BC drew crucial distinctions between the male and female bodies in terms of their porousness and 'openness to the world'. According to this model, male bodies are dry and closed, while female bodies are spongier and more open, because of the nature of female flesh and the functions of the female body . . . indeed the open body, opened by menstruation, sexual penetration, and childbirth, is an inherently healthy female body, according to the Hippocratic corpus. (30)

Hence, as Harlow points out, the process by which women might find approval within the ascetic religious ideology of the clerical elite, involved explicitly 'becoming male' in both intellectual and bodily terms:

The physical hardships and strict fasting that were practised by certain female ascetics might even produce a body that approached near to the masculine model of dry and closed. Lack of food could dry out the porous flesh of the female: it could even result in the suppression of menstruation, a defining female trait. (31)

It goes without saying that such a process also marked a movement in Bakhtinian terms from the grotesque body of the marketplace to the classical body of the church. What it might involve is graphically described in a letter of Basil of Caesarea (although here, as the final sentence quoted makes clear, the recipient is male):

Piercing your body with rough sackcloth, and binding your loins with a stiff belt, you resolutely put pressure on your bones. Through your abstinence, your sides become hollow ... You collapsed your flanks from within like a gourd, forcing them to adhere to the area of your kidneys. Then, emptying your flesh of fat, you nobly dried out the channels of the hypogastric region, and by fasting compressed your stomach itself, so that you made your ribs, like the eaves of a house, cast a shadow over the place of your navel. So with your whole body shrunken, you confessed God's glory in the night hours, and with streams of your tears you soaked and smoothed your beard. (32)

The grotesque body, as described by Bakhtin, is, then, also the female body as imagined by medieval medical theory -- and more generally the body that medieval thinking posited as 'feminine'. For it is only at those moments of openness, the 'shameful' moments of overindulgent eating, defecating, pissing, ejaculating, or being penetrated as a passive sexual partner, that the male body abandons its classical integrity and enters into the carnivalesque sphere of the grotesque. (33) In celebrating the openness, fluidity, and incompleteness of the grotesque body, as against the closed, dry body of the classical ideal, Bakhtin is reversing the traditional hierarchy of gender under patriarchy every bit as much as he is reversing the traditional social and cultural hierarchies of elite and plebeian, church and marketplace. (34)

To return to the primal scene of The Miller's Tale, what are we to make of poor Absolon and his horror? In almost all cases the critical assumption has been, curiously, that the text aligns itself with Absolon's repulsion at the corporeal, 'rough yherd' materiality of Alisoun's body. His realisation that such things are not really what he was looking for in life is taken to provide the moral of the tale - or at least of his part in it. It is the salutary experience that restores him to a more 'normal' perspective on life. As Anne Laskaya put it, 'Absolon's kiss forces his recognition of truth, his recognition of his own ridiculous delusions.' (35) But this seems an overly generous interpretation of Absolon's response. It is hard to see any evidence in his subsequent near-hysterical behaviour of a recognition of any new truth about himself, or of an abandonment of his delusions. It is his view of Alisoun that changes as a result of the kiss, not his degree of self-awareness, and he simply shifts from one inherently

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/printdoc.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=RELEVANCE&prod=LRCEA...
misogynistic delusion (woman as incorporeal ideal) to another more overtly misogynistic one (woman as grotesque carnality). (36)

Even those consciously perverse readings that have tried to reverse the dynamic and celebrate, as it were, the cunt and not the kisser have seen themselves as reading against the grain to reveal a carnivalesque unconscious at work in the text that the narrator does not openly acknowledge. The assumption seems to be that the tale, being a work of elite culture, could not really be so openly subversive as to side with the grotesque body against its clerical critic and 'gloser'. But this implies too rigid a distinction between the elite and the carnivalesque. The kind of culture that Chaucer inhabited, poised between the city of London and the court, was itself porous and accommodating enough to embrace the grotesque body and all its implications. What we know of the royal court, its texts and ceremonies suggests very clearly that it too was not squeamish, but was happy to include the grotesque among its holiday entertainments (the most obvious example of which being the game of 'fart-prick-in-cul' included in Henry Medwall's Fulgens and Lucres for the entertainment of Archbishop Morton's household). In such an environment Absolon's fastidiousness would appear as ridiculous as it would in any other forum. (37)

That the reader's response to Absolon's 'cure' is supposed to be as derisory as that toward his original malady is implied in the narrative itself, for in neither state is he aligned to the world-view of the tale. His self-mortification and abjuration of all 'paramours' are as absurd as was his earlier inept pursuit of the Oxford women with small rubible in hand. Significantly Absolon, like Malvolio in the finale of Twelfth Night, is entirely excluded from the cruel, cleansing communal laughter at John's expense that closes the tale, and which the narrator invites his audience to share. Unlike Malvolio, however, Absolon does not threaten through his exclusion to upset the other characters and disrupt the sense of closure that the scene achieves. The world of The Miller's Tale closes ranks to mark his alienation as mockable, and consequently, as he frets at his lips and threatens vengeance, his case has none of the moral power that Malvolio achieves as he staggers from the dark house to declare that he has been done 'notorious wrong'. (38) Were the reader being encouraged to see Absolon's newfound asceticism as an admirable recovery of a true spiritual perspective after a period of worldly blindness (as some readings have suggested), his resolution would surely have been cast in a more plausibly moral or spiritual framework. As it is, it appears to be manifested simply in gratuitous self-mutilation and murderous, misogynist violence. All in all, the idea that Absolon is converted to a clearer sense of his spiritual duties by his experience seems unlikely. God might speak directly to sinners in a voice of thunder from the pages of the Bible, from clouds, even (we might note) on one occasion from within a bush, but there is no tradition of his doing so from an arse and in the form of a blinding fart.

Boys' Own Stories? Absolon, Squeamishness, and Romance

But, if Absolon is, and remains, laughable, what is it exactly that we are being invited to laugh at? Does the comedy have a wider reference than merely evoking a comic stereotype of certain kinds of male behaviour? One conventional answer to this question points towards the rival literary genre of romance, claiming that the characterisation of Absolon is a deliberate mocking of the chivalric hero, part of the Miller's attempt to 'quite' The Knight's Tale and parody its values. (39) In this respect Absolon is read as a parodic version of Palamon and Arcite, and of the heroes of romance in general, and his inclusion in The Miller's Tale seen as a further gambit in Chaucer's ongoing fascination with the blurring and reworking of conventional literary genres.

Yet, is it true to say that Absolon brings the mood and ethos of courtly romance with him into the fabliau? He reproduces a number of the tropes of romance courtship, certainly; but he does so in a manner that falsifies the integrity of the genuine romance every bit as much as it fails to find the authentic note of the fabliau. His courtship of Alisoun has about as much in common with authentic courtly behaviour as the lies spun by Nicholas to deceive John have with the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. Absolon is a creature of nurture rather than nature, self-fashioned (and that badly) in the image of the courtly lover; but crucially he is a failure, an amatory equivalent of the miles gloriosus. His behaviour would be as out of place and risible in a romance as it is in a fabliau.
The true romance sensibility is not infantilised—inhhibited from growth and development as Absolon is—but more properly child-like in its approach to sexuality and sexual relations. Its innocence is not enforced but organic, a stage through which the central hero will pass in the quest for experience and self-knowledge. The chivalric hero is thus frequently a 'childe' only in the sense that he is a young man, inexperienced and questing, he is neither too young nor too ill equipped to deal with the challenges of adulthood when they arise. As Derek Brewer shrewdly observes, the typical romance 'is a story about being young, and growing up'. (40)

The sexual experiences of heroes such as Palamon and Arcite in Chaucer's Knight's Tale, or Gawain and the Green Knight, are presented as awkward and fraught with difficulty, but they are not ridiculous, whereas Absolon's behaviour is ridiculous in its own terms, regardless of the fabliau setting that renders it doubly risible. The world of romance, while it celebrates the courtliness and finer sensibilities of its ideal protagonists, is not squeamish about the body or its functions. As Patricia Ingham notes, the reader is not shielded from the gruesome physicality of Arcite's death in The Knight's Tale. (41) The knights of romance are not distanced or alienated from their own bodies, or from those of their allies and adversaries. They bleed copiously, they slice off giants' testicles, and clutch at their own intestines as they threaten to spill upon the ground. The romance world is thus a fundamentally visceral one, posited upon the fact of the common corporeality of humanity, even as it seeks to find distinctions among its inhabitants between the refined and the coarse, the noble and the base. (42)

If we look at some specific examples, beginning with Chaucer's own Knight's Tale, the point becomes clearer. In Chaucer's Tale Palamon and Arcite's desire for Emily is childlike, even childish in its competitive aspect, and immature in every sense, but it is manifestly genuine, prompted by and expressed through powerful and compelling emotional energies. The knights' desire for Emelye at first sight is represented as comic (hence the images used to describe it -- buckets in a well, two dogs fighting over a bone -- and the generally petulant tone in which it is discussed) but it is desire nonetheless. Both the powerful, urgent nature of Palamon's attraction to her and the possibility of its reciprocation (despite Emelye's long ignorance of his feelings and her initial unwillingness to wed) are hinted at in the mirrored responses of the two young aristocrats to the procreative stimulus of that first May morning. Both Emelye and Palamon occupy symbolic spaces suggestive of detachment from the natural and the bodily spheres. She, protected from the wilds beyond the city in her walled sanctuary of tamed vegetation (itself a tiny sanctuary within the walls of the wider city), and he, elevated above the base multitude in the lofty tower with its panoramic view of 'al the nobel citee', ought to be well placed, symbolically as well as geographically, to withstand the lures of base nature. But, as the text reveals, each is responding instinctively to the calls of May, the conventional metaphor for the urges of burgeoning sexual desire.

V. A. Kolve has drawn attention to the way in which these passages are structured around variations on the word 'roam', drawing tacit analogies between the two characters whose experience seems on the surface so different. (43) Palamon

Was risen and romed in a chambre an heigh,
In which he al the noble citee seigh,
And eek the gardyn, ful of braunches grene,
There as this fresshe Emelye the shene
Was in hire walk, and romed up and doun. (1065-9)

And it is important to appreciate the sexual charge that this 'roaming' has here, and its implications for the narrative. On a conscious level Emelye may be ignorant of Palamon and his feelings, but subconsciously she is responding to the same drives and urges, sublimating them into the private rituals of 'Maying' which also serve to display her availability as a sexual partner—a possibility reinforced by reference to the physical proximity of their respective enclosures:

The greere tour, that was so thikke and strong
Which of the castel was the chief dongeoun,
(Ther as the knyghtes weren in prisoun
Of which I tolde yow and tellen shal
Was evene joynant to the gardyn wal
Ther as this Emelye hadde hit pleuyenge (1056-61)

Each of them paces frustratedly back and forth within the confines of their own enclosed spaces in a movement that tacitly bespeaks powerful unrequited and unacknowledged desires. The walled garden might be a conventional symbol of all kinds of abstractions and retreats from bodily nature (of prelapsarian perfection, the enclosed purity of female virginity, of private reflection, and the wildness of nature tamed to civility and order), but Emelye's actions within this particular garden suggest that the unruly impulses of human sexuality reach even here. Palamon paces impatiently in his high cell, placed in the head of the hard, phallic tower, while Emelye traces a similar course, roaming up and down in the fertile glade of the moist vegetative garden that adjoins it:

Er it were day, as was hit wone to do,
She was arisen and al redy dight;
For May wole have no slogardlie a-nyght.
The sesoun priketh every gentil herre,
And maketh hym out of his slep to sterte. (1040-4)

... in the gardyn, at the sonne upriste,
She walketh up and doun, and as hire liste
She gadereth floures . . . (1051-3)

Nor does the poem disguise the painful realities of mature sexuality. Diana (the goddess of childbirth as well as chastity, whose unwillingness to aid the woman at her feet crying out in the travails of labour provides one of the most unsettling images of the highly disturbing third part of the poem) offers Emelye a brutally honest appraisal of her future prospects. The delayed extinguishing of one of the fires on the altar and the subsequent oozing of blood from the rushes symbolise both the death of Arcite that will be one result of his contested passion, and her own eventual loss of virginity and labour as a trophy wife for Palamon. Even chastity itself is a visceral, painful, fluid-soaked affair in this world, as many of the images in the Temple of Diana suggest. Despite the conventionality of the narrative and its ordered, balanced, representation of events, the poem thus takes an ultimately serious, unsentimentalised view of the role of sexual desire in human affairs, and the painful consequences of its pursuit in a rebarbative universe.

Chaucer mocks the absurdities of Palamon and Arcite's behaviour; but his is a tolerant mockery. Like Theseus, coming across the two fighting furiously in the grove, the narrator is able to combine a sense of detached amusement at the young men's antics ('now looketh, is nat that an heigh folye? / Who may been a fool, but if he love' (1798-9)) with a sense of compassion at the depths of abjection to which love can bring its victims." Although the accidents of their behaviour are mocked, the substance at its core is recognised and endorsed by an authoritative voice who has himself known what it is like to be young and in love ('I woot it myself ful yore agon' (1813)). Again, the contrast with Absolon (whose foolishness lies in the adoption of the accidents of love while remaining entirely ignorant of its substance) is telling.

A second, apparently even closer case will further clarify the crucial differences between the 'romantic' notions of Absolon and those of the true romance hero. In Sir Gawain and die Green Knight the attitude to sexuality is also ultimately mature and serious. On one level Gawain's trajectory through the poem mirrors that of Absolon in The Miller's Tale. He is a supremely courteous young man, well-versed in the protocols of refined, 'courtly' speech, who encounters a woman seemingly more sexually experienced and uninhibited than himself who outwits him, prompting in him a sudden and violent loathing of the flesh and of his own previously acknowledged sexual identity. But the resemblance is, again, only superficial. While Gawain may be placed in the role of the innocent abroad, and is the butt of some delicate (and some fairly broad) sexual comedy in the bedroom scenes of Fitt Three, and is frequently feminised in his relationship with his active, indeed predatory adversary, he is nonetheless authentic in his emotional responses, a figure of 'earnest' beneath the obvious game-play. It has
been suggested that part at least of Gawain's difficulty on the first day of trial may be created by the fact that he is naked beneath the bedcovers and so prevented by modesty from getting up and must endure the symbolic emasculation of being pinned down and trapped by a woman. (45) Yet it is not the embarrassment of being seen naked by a woman per se that Gawain fears. His discomfort is social rather than personal, as the repeated references (in a poem playfully willing to acknowledge the knight's pre-existence in other texts) to his sexual experience elsewhere suggest. Rather the awkwardness here is entirely constructed by the obligations inherent upon Gawain's status as a guest, and his need to conform to the protocols of loyalty to his host.

The revulsion that Gawain expresses in the fourth fitt at the promptings of the 'flesh crabbed' are thus directed against his own cowardice and covetousness, the urges that ostensibly prompted him to seek the comfort of the green girdle and the promise of protection that it offered (as he tells Bercilak, 'For care of py knokke, cowardyse me ta3t / To acorde me with covetyse, my kynde to forsake' (2378-9)) rather than at the stirrings of lust that he felt (see 11. 945ff.) for the woman who is fairer than Guinevere. Similarly the misogynistic outburst against the whole female sex is prompted not by the lady's capacity for sexual betrayal but by her subtlety in tricking him into the ill-advised promise to secrete the girdle. Indeed the former possibility, that Gawain, like Absolon, has resolved hereafter to wash his hands of 'paramours' on account of their treachery, is denied by his wry declaration that the best way with women is 'to luf hom wel and [be]lieve hem not' (2421).

Romance, then, retains in both its child-like quality and its capacity for growth, characteristics that distinguish it from Absolon's infantile, essentially inflexible sexual identity. Gawain or Palamon, transposed into The Miller's Tale, would not behave in the way that Absolon does. The ability of a romance hero to negotiate the unexpected situations that adventure throws up, his capacity for expressing his sexual desires explicitly, and not least his potential for the kind of devastating physical violence that lies at the heart of chivalric adventuring (the kind of death-dealing that sees Gawain dispose of giants, bandits and wild animals in a single stanza (720-5), and Palamon froth at the mouth like a wild boar while wading ankle-deep in his own blood (KT, 1635ff.)): all of these qualities would make him even more mad, bad, and dangerous to know in the unprepared world of bourgeois comedy than he is in his natural romance habitat (where at least everyone is used to sudden death as a regular fact of life ). Absolon's own inept attempt to deploy violence in his own cause through the use of the coulter, unchivalrously aimed at a 'defenceless' woman, and even then mistaking the target, only serves to highlight the contrast. The only 'romance' equivalent to Absolon is Chaucer's other parodic creation, Sir Thopas, another travesty of real romance encoding, who shares the same levels of inadequacy and squeamishness we see in Absolon. (46)

Nor is it the case that Absolon's sexual drives are euphemised or displaced into other symbolic acts or into the imagery that the text deploys around him. Such is the case, for example, in The Knight's Tale, where the phallic tower and luxuriant May garden speak eloquently of the protagonists' desires, the extinguished flame and trickle of blood in Diana's temple suggests Emelye's visceral fears concerning the demands of sexual maturity, and the sheer profusion of images of bodily disfigurement in all three temples seems, like Dorian Gray's portrait, to absorb the protagonists' painful knowledge of the likely consequences of being a mortal body in the grip of powerful desire, leaving them to pursue their quests freed of anxiety. Rather Absolon is, as I have suggested, bowdlerised, his squeamishness a sign that his sexuality has been entirely written out of the picture.

Kolve usefully draws attention to the passage in Chaucer's translation of the Romance of the Rose, in which the God of Love provides a detailed description of the lot of those who have fallen into his snare. Every true lover, he declares, suffers willingly a solitary confinement of both heart and body in hope of the release that only his beloved can offer. Each is

... as man in prisoun sett,  
And may not geten for to et  
But barly breed, and watir pure,  
And lyeth in vermyn and ordure:  
With all this yitt can he lyve,
Good hope such comfort hath hym yive,
Which maketh wene that he shall be
Delyvered, and come to liberte.
In fortune is [his] fulle trust;
Though he lye in strawe or dust,
In hoope is all his susteynyng.
And so for lovers, in her wenyng,
Which Love hath shat in his prisoun. (2755-67)

It is precisely the vermin and ordure, the genuine physical suffering, the sheer, corporeal discomfort of being a human being, subject to all the embarrassing functions that flesh is heir to, that Absolon is unwilling to subscribe to--indeed, is incapable of recognising. And it is this that marks out his 'luf-longyng' as inauthentic. Hence it is telling that it is this very corporeality that rears up to refute his pretensions, even as the straw and the dust that are the true lover's metaphorical lot return in material form as the means whereby he seeks to mortify and purify his lips of all trace of Alisoun's likerous 'nether ye'.

Like a Virgin: The Squeamish Body Personified

If Absolon fails in his attempts to play the amatory role that he chooses for himself, however, what about the role that society has chosen for him, that of parish clerk? The general critical consensus has been, unsurprisingly, that he is singularly unsuited for this vocation too. But, in one respect at least, he may not be. His fantasy of Alisoun that is so rudely shattered by the encounter with her nether eye, while sadly out of sync with the reality of fabliau womanhood, does reflect very closely contemporary devotion to another female role model, the Virgin Mary. And, given that one of Absolon's favoured pastimes is playing 'Herodes' on a scaffold high (presumably in pageants of the Magi and the Slaughter of the Innocents) it is intriguing to note that he would have seen played Out around him in the Nativity sequence of whatever putative 'Oxford cycle' he took part in, the story of something very like the woman of his dreams.

In surviving dramatic presentations of the Nativity (based upon apocryphal sources such as the Protoevangelium of St James, and texts such as the Revelations of St Bridget of Sweden), Mary's body and its functions are represented in terms unlikely to offend even the most squeamish of men. The plays present a Virgin who both miraculously defies the normal rules of conception and childbirth and delights the senses in so doing. In the York Nativity pageant, for example, the emphasis is on the 'sweetness' and 'comfort' of Christ's birth amid the discomforts of the Bethlehem stable. In its counterpart from the Chester cycle (the second half of Play 6) the birth is described as not merely painless ('withouten teen or travailing' (506)), but acutely pleasurable ('clean maiden this woman is, / for she hath born a child with bliss' (509-10)). And in the York Purification pageant St Symeon declares that a degree of that sensual delight extended to all those who either witnessed the event or encountered the Virgin afterwards. Mary's womb, he confirms, 'yeldyd fresh and fayr / And she a clean vyrgen and unfyld' (356-7), and he praises her, in terms reminiscent of some of Absolon's pastoral flights of fancy, as a virginal meadow flower the odour of whose 'goodness reflars [i.e. rises up] to us all' (366-7). (47)

The N-Town Nativity pageant provides the most anatomically detailed version of this phenomenon, when it brings midwives onstage to testify to the purity and cleanliness of Mary's post-partum integrity.

Come nere, gode systyr Salome.
Beholde pe brestys of pis clene mayd.
Ful of fayr mylke how pat pei be;
And hyre chylde clene, as I fyrst sayd.
As other ben nowth fowle arayd,
But clene and pure bothe modyr and chylde (234-41)
The world in which children are born from pure, sweet-smelling women by painless process of osmosis, without blood, sweat, or amniotic fluids—without, that is, any of the gore, smell, and mess that real physical childbirth entails—and in which young tender virgins dispense wholesome, sweet-tasting milk from their full, rounded breasts as they smile serenely at the viewer, is very much Absolon's fantasy world of amorous lambs at the teat made flesh. As Salome, the first of the N-Town midwives attests, Mary remains, even after childbirth, every inch the perfect woman that she always was, and every bit the sweet-tasting treat that Absolon hoped Alisoun would be,

a mayde as sche was befor
Natt fowle polutyd as other women be,
But fayr and fresch as rose on thorn,
Lely-whyte, clene with pure virginyte. (302-5)

Sadly for Absolon, however, Alisoun proves merely 'fowle polutyd, as other women be'.

That Absolon is not just a jobbing barber and legal scrivener but a parish clerk, is, then, far from incidental to his portrait. Amorous clerks litter the fabliaux, and frequently their failure to achieve their sexual ambitions forms the climax of the comic narrative. Chaucer's neat twist on the tradition is to make his parish clerk not the conventional lecherous hypocrite, using his status as 'gloser' of Holy Writ to seduce his victims, but someone who actually believes what he reads about the ideal woman in the books of the Fathers and what he sees of her in the religious drama. Absolon is not only an inadequate lover whose sexual identity seems to have been constructed from a grotesque misreading of the drama and the spiritual and courtly love lyrics, but a man who expects the woman he pursues to be the same. Having internalised the image of the blessed Virgin as his model of womanhood, he has fashioned his identity in the form best suited to court her. Kara Virginia Donaldson usefully observes that 'Aliso un is both the product and object of a male discourse that has maintained power over women by separating women from both their bodies and language.' But it is important to note that, in Absolon, Chaucer offers a male character created in the same way. As Donaldson further suggests, one of the most effective rhetorical strategies of medieval courtly love poetry lies in the way it addresses the female object of desire as though she were the Virgin. The only difference here is that with Absolon there is no pretence, no cynical seductive agenda behind the surface courtesies. (49)

In this respect, Absolon's portrayal fits the wider agenda of the narrative he inhabits. The Miller's Tale itself, as a number of critics have pointed out, plays irreverently with the Virgin's vita, offering in the triangle of Alisoun, John the carpenter, and Nicholas a comic variant of the trio of Mary, Joseph, and the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation. (50) The echoes are, of course, pointed up by the fact that it is the Angelus ad virginem that Nicholas sings lustily in his room at nights. In treating the Virgin's story comically in this way, Chaucer was, it seems, following the lead of the dramatists (although the precise chronology of composition is not clear), who had in the pageant of Joseph's Troubles about Mary already imagined a grotesque realist reading of the Annunciation in Joseph's suspicion that 'som man in aungellis liknesse / With somkyn gawde has hir begiled' (Joseph's Troubles, York, 136 -7), leaving her pregnant and her impotent husband facing humiliation. Rather than dissolve such doubts wi th the arrival of a manifestly authentic angel as the pageant-makers did, however, Chaucer allows the counter-narrative to play itself out, with Nicholas in the role of the beguiling young man. What The Miller's Tale adds to the scenario is the figure of Absolon, who provides the fulcrum around which the Annunciation story is swung into parody. While Joseph is transformed into an avaricious cuckold, Gabriel into a lecherous student, and Mary herself into a wild and 'likersous' young wife, the parish clerk remains the repository of the values of the 'orthodox' story, maladroitly retaining its sense of the numinous potential within the mundane, begging for a kiss 'For Jhesus love, and for the love of me' (3717), and voicing his courtship in terminology borrowed from the Song of Songs and contemporary lyrics. While both Nicholas and Alisoun have adopted the carapace of cynicism necessary for survival in the fabliau world, only Absolon (and to a degree John, the other dupe of the story) continues to see the world with a child's eyes, as do the characters in the Nativity sequence of the cycle plays.

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/printdoc.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=RELEVANCE&pro...
What The Miller's Tale seems to be mocking is thus not the use of inappropriate language to couch sexual ambition, as is assumed by those readings that place Absolon's humiliation in the context of the Miller's 'quiting' of The Knight's Tale, but the inappropriate erasing of sexuality—and corporeality per se—that is an explicit part of the religious drama and of Mariolatry generally. In this respect Absolon is the fabliau world's response to the suggestion that the only possible reaction to the Mother of God was a reversion to childhood, and a denial of sexuality (if God Himself could become a child for this woman, the argument seems to run, how much more compelling is the need for her mortal admirers to infantilise themselves before her?). The issue clearly interested Chaucer, as his other problematic excursion into Mariolatry, The Prioress's Prologue and Tale, involves a similar process of infantilisation, this time of both the protagonist, the little 'clergeon', and the narrator herself, reduced to the status of 'a child of twelth month oold, or lesse' (484) in the face of the Virgin's majestic 'worthynesse'.

What lay behind this interest in the powerful nexus of ideas of adoration, infantilisation, squeamishness and denied sexuality is, of course, another question entirely. That Chaucer should fashion so contemptible a vehicle as Absolon for such notions raises more problems than it solves. One could, of course, attribute that contempt to Chaucer himself. It would not be unreasonable to posit a poet who reacted violently against the kind of mawkish sentimentality that often characterised popular Mariolatry and frequently tumbled over into a kind of pious pornography obsessed with the details of the Virgin's intact hymen, her fragrant womb, or the sweet perfection of her breasts. (51) Alternatively, one could, following Beryl Rowland, see this as just another aspect of Chaucerian ventriloquism, the crafting of a suitably churlish persona to characterise the Miller, the teller of the first of his churlish tales. (52) Or is it, perhaps, best to see the portrayal of Absolon as one more product of the poet's interest in genres? One might profitably site the contempt for Mariolatry and the squeamish, infantilised males who practise it, squarely within the fabliau spirit itself. For fabliau is a genre in which all relations can be ultimately traced back to sexuality and sexual desire, and from its perspective such attitudes as the Nativity plays express were an explicit denial of reality that needed ridiculing Out of court. Either way, Absolon, far from being an afterthought, a comic digression in the narrative of The Miller's Tale, represents a fundamental element in both the tale and Chaucer's conception of the fabliau world, and asking why we laugh at him in the way(s) that we do, presents a provocative challenge to our understanding of both gender and genre in medieval culture.

In a sense, then, asking questions about Absolon's own gender position or sexuality is to miss the point. He is not constructed in the way that he is in order to mock a particular kind of man, whether gay or straight, sexually inexperienced or lecherous, but as a repository for certain ideas about women and sexuality drawn from a particular genre of literature. If the text deploys homophobic or misogynist motifs, if it seems to laugh laddishly at small instruments and squeamish aversions to farting (and I would argue that it clearly does all of these things) it does not do so in order to mock effeminacy, sexual naivety, or squeamishness per se. Rather it constructs Absolon from a mass of assumptions about sexuality and gender, masculinity and bodily functions, gleaned from popular religious culture, in a way that invites reflection on the demands of that genre itself. Just as the varieties of masculinity displayed by Nicholas and John the Carpenter, Palamon and Arcite, and the other heroes and protagonists discussed in this essay are the product of the needs of fabliau and romance respectively, so Absolon is constructed to display the kind of masculinity called forth by Mariolatry and popular dramatic representations of the Annunciation and the Nativity. He is placed in the jarringly inappropriate genre of the fabliau in order to show up his idiosyncrasies all the more clearly. In doing so Chaucer deploys the fabliau form for a purpose well beyond the normal range of its resonances and implications. If, The Miller's Tale seems to argue, one accepts that all women can, and indeed should be like the Virgin, then one must also accept that all men could, indeed should be like Absolon: a prospect the tale treats as so absurd as to demand our laughter.

(1.) In the early part of this essay, I revisit material taken from an earlier essay, 'Laughable Men: Comic Stereotypes from Chaucer to Shakespeare', published in Roberta Mullini, ed., Theta VI (2002), pp. 1-16. I am grateful for the opportunity to reproduce some of that material here, and to the Leverhulme Trust, whose grant of a Major Research Fellowship gave me the time in which to work on this essay. I am also very grateful to my colleagues Drs Emma Parker, Anne Marie D'Arcy, and David Salter (now of the University of Edinburgh), and to Dr...
Claire Jowitt of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, each of whom read earlier drafts of this essay and asked critical questions that helped me to rethink the implications of what I was trying to say.


(3.) I am grateful to Dr Emma Parker for suggesting to me the significance of the window as a frame for the famously 'misdirected' kiss.

(4.) Anne Laskaya, Chaucer's Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), p. 87 ('Absolon is the only man in the tale who is described as feminine, and he is the man most maligned by the crude events of the tale'); Paul E. Beichner, 'Characterisation in The Miller's Tale', in Chaucer Criticism, Volume One: The Canterbury Tales, ed. by Richard Shoek and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), PP. 117-29 (at p. 119) ('Absolon... is too ladylike, and therein lies much of the humour when his fall occurs'); H. Marshal Leicester Jnr, 'Newer Currents in Psychoanalytical Criticism and the Difference "IT" Makes: Gender and Desire in The Miller's Tale', English Literary History 61(1994), 473-99 (at p. 488) ('It has long been recognised that much of the satire in the portrayal of Absolon is constructed by feminizing him; here the man who acts too much like a woman is punished for both his gender and class treachery by having his feminization shoved in his face by a woman who acts like a man').

(5.) Linda Lomperis, 'Bodies that Matter in the Court of Late Medieval England and in Chaucer's Miller's Tale', Romanic Review 86 (1995), 243-64.


(7.) See, for example, the comments in Angela Carter, 'Alison's Giggle', originally published in The Left and the Erotic, ed. Eileen Phillips (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), repr. in Angela Carter, Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings, ed. J. Uglow (London: Charro and Windus, 1997), pp. 542-53. I am grateful to Emma Parker for bringing this essay to my attention, and to Nick Everett for tracking down a copy for me.

(8.) This is, of course, the scenario that drives the Tales of the Knight, the Franklin, the Merchant, the Shipman, and the Squire, as well the Miller's offering, and it lies behind that of the Reeve. It is also the ostensible motor for the second half of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and provides the core of the tragic movement in the Arthurian cycle in the relationship between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. For the notion of the erotic triangle, see Rene Girard, Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), expanded and modified by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); and Martin Blum, 'Negotiating Masculinities: Erotic Triangles in the Miller's Tale', in Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in The Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde, ed. by Peter G. Beidler, Chaucer Studies 25 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), pp. 37-52.

(9.) For Hugo of St Victor and Adam Scotus, Absalom's hair signified the excessive tendencies of human flesh and desire. See Paul E. Beichner CSC, 'Absolon's Hair', Mediaeval Studies 12 (1950), 222-33.

(10.) Blum, 'Negotiating Masculinities', pp. 45-61.

(11.) See footnote 3, above.

(12.) John Gower, in the Vox Clamantis (5, 225-40), complains that knights in love adopt womanish ways ('femineos mores'), but, again, this is presented as a heterosexual seduction device rather than a retreat from heterosexuality.
(13.) See Laskaya, Chaucer's Approach to Gender, p. 86: 'His subjectivity blinds him to the possibility that Alisoun could have her own desires and wishes beyond, or in contradiction to, his own. He absolutely refuses to grant her autonomy; she is merely an extension of his own fantasy.' Kara Virginia Donaldson ('Alisoun's Language: Body, Text, and Glossing in Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale"', Philological Quarterly 71 (1992), 139-153), helpfully cites Helene Cixous's essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (in E. Marks and I. de Courtivron, eds, New French Feminisms (Brighton: Harvester, 1985), pp. 245-64, at p. 251) to explain Absolon's deafness to Alisoun's voice. Cixous observes that, when a woman speaks, 'her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine'. But it is important to note that Absolon's 'deafness' goes beyond questions of gender. He is oblivious to debate -- to speech of any kind -- that is peripheral to his own immediate desires, hence his obliviousness to the jests of Gervays the smith as he awaits the coulter that will provide the instrument of his revenge. ('This Absolon ne roghte nat a bene / Of al his pley; no word agayn he yaf; / He hadde moore tow on his distaf' (3772-4)).

(14.) Donaldson, 'Alisoun's Language', pp. 149-50.


(16.) Leicester, 'Newer Currents', p. 489, squares the circle between infantilisation and feminisation, suggesting that this kind of infantilism is itself encoded as feminine: 'This disgusting, unmanly, and unrealistic condition is ordinarily described as infantile, immature, pre-oedipal, and pre-genital, narcissistic, masturbatory. Feminist psychoanalytic theory, however, has noted that this kind of pleasure, after it grows up and goes through the Oedipus complex, is also designated feminine, insofar as it is the pleasure of the castrated, what women are stuck with.'


(18.) V. A. Kolve, Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), p. 187: 'For Absolon the process is its own reward, an excuse for dressing up, combing our his beautiful long hair, and waking while others sleep'; and p. 188, 'Whatever he may be up to, sexual desire seems at most tangential to it.' For similar views on Absolon's 'real' motivation, see Blum, 'Negotiating Masculinities', p. 44 ('Absolon makes his means his end ... Instead of being a lover, he derives his satisfaction from impersonating one. There is even some doubt whether it is really a sexual union he is after, since it seems that a kiss is enough for him'), and pp. 45-6; Leicester, 'Newer Currents', p. 489: 'his pleasure ... is derived from the skipping, "wynsing" activity of "paramours" itself; the acting and strutting and singing, and role-playing for their own self-consuming sakes, concealed and protected by the pretence of working to get the girl'. For the contrary view that Absolon is genuinely lecherous, see Laskaya, Chaucer's Approach to Gender, p. 91; D. Brewer, A New Introduction to Chaucer, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1988), p. 283; Wolfgang E. H. Rudat, 'The Misdirected Kisses in the Miller's Tale', Journal of Evolutionary Psychology 3 (1982), 103-8 (at p. 105); Peggy Knapp, Chaucer and the Social Contest (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 38.


(20.) Valerie Allen, 'Blanche on Top and Alisoun on Bottom', in A Wyf Ther Was: Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens-Fonck, ed. by Juliette Dor (Liege, 1992), pp. 23-9 (at p. 28); Strohm, Social Chaucer, p. 136; Rudat, 'Misdirected Kisses', pp. 103-8; Leicester, 'Newer Currents', p. 487.

(21.) See Lomperis, 'Bodies that Matter', pp. 250-2 for the reasoning behind the striking claim.
For the baise-cul, see M. Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 373-7. It is interesting to note the terms employed in Bakhtin's description of 'uncrowning comedy' in The Dialogic imagination: 'Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides ... lay it bare and expose it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object ... This is the zone of maximally familiar and crude contact ... Basically this is uncrowning, that is, the removal of an object from the distanced plane ... In this plane (the plane of laughter) ... the back and rear portion of an object (and also its innards not normally accessible for viewing) assume a special importance' (M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 23-4.) In his encounter with Alisoun's arse, Absolon is granted the opportunity to enter this world of uncrowning laughter, to replace his sterile, squeamish idealisation of both 'woman' as object and himself as subject with a liberating exposure to the realities of 'the lower bodily stratum'. However, rather than embracing the 'crude contact' and joining in the laughter, he recoils from it back to the safety of the 'distanced plane' from which he came -- leaving himself the butt (so to speak) of Alisoun and Nicholas's laughter.


Rudat, 'Misdirected Kisses', p. 105.


Leicester, 'Newer Currents', p. 474.

Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), especially pp. 4 and 93–100. Kristeva's suggestion that a subject's existence in the symbolic order depends on 'a clean and proper body', that is one that rejects any of the 'improper, unclean and disorderly elements of corporeality', would seem very pertinent to Absolon's reaction to his kiss. The aptness of Kristeva's work for an understanding of Absolon's role in the Tale was brought to my attention by Dr Emma Parker. I am very grateful for the chance to discuss the idea of abjection with her, and to benefit from the succinct account of Kristeva's ideas in her essay, 'From House to Home: A Kristevan reading of Michele Roberts's Daughters of the House', Critique 41 (2000), 153-73, from which I quote in the summary, above.


(34.) See, for example, Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, pp. 240-4: 'In this tradition woman is essentially related to the material bodily lower stratum; she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously.'

(35.) Laskaya, Chaucer's Approach to Gender, p. 87 ('He is rudely awakened to the "naked" truth about Alisoun, for no lady would bare her bottom to her lover in such a mariner'), and p. 88 ('To be healed of his effeminacy, Absolon must be aggressive. If he was love-sick before, he is "cured" at the end'). For similar approaches to the issue, see Kolve, Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative, p. 193 (the kiss is 'the lesson this young parish clerk most needs to learn'), and p. 197 ('The hairy kiss restores him to his proper person, ending the make-believe and role-playing, breaking the game'); Allen, 'Blanche on Top', p. 28 ('when she exposes her naked bottom she reveals the ugly essential nature beneath her skirt and completes the descriptio with its absent notatio') Strohm, Social Chaucer, p. 136 ('The idealistic Absolon learns fast after his confrontation with Alisoun's hairy ass'). The most overtly 'normative' reading is probably Alan Renoir's, 'Absolon's reaction . . . is a piece of superb psychological realism, and any man who thinks he would react differently ought to make an emergency appointment with his analyst.' Alain Renoir, 'The Inept Lover and the Reluctant Mistress: Remarks on Sexual Inefficiency in Medieval Literature', in Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives; Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner, ed. by Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 180-206 (at p. 201).

(36.) See Donaldson, 'Alisoun's Language', p. 149.


(39.) See, for example, Lomperis, 'Bodies that Matter', p. 249; Leicester, 'Newer Currents', p. 482; Elisabeth Brewer, Geoffrey Chaucer: The Miller's Tale (Harlow: Longman, 1982), p. 38 ('Absolon is...a parody of the noble lover of romance'); Lee Patterson, "No Man His Reson Herde": Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the Canterbury Tales', in Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530, ed. by L. Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 113-55, pp. 131-2. But, as Derek Pearsall has argued, Absolon's 'love-talkyng' is so 'intrinsicly ridiculous' 'that the joke is surely on him, and not on the courtly idealism of love that [he] get[s] so idiotically wrong'. Derek Pearsall, The Canterbury Tales (London: Everyman, 1985), p. 176.


(42.) There are, of course, sub-genres of romance that do not focus openly on the visceral nature of human existence, and the corporeal consequences of martial endeavour. Such texts focus on the courtly and emotional aspects of the knighthly experience, on deeds of love rather than of arms. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight dispenses with the whole business of combat in a single stanza (albeit the impending violence at the heart of...
Gawain's quest is displaced throughout the narrative in a powerful undercurrent of violence, most obvious in the hunting segments of Fitt Three), while the Breton Lay is generically inclined to focus away from the field of combat, as Chaucer's forays into the genre suggest. What Arveragus does to win honour in England in The Franklin's Tale is not investigated, and the knight of The Wife of Bath's Tale's only act of violence is his violation of the young maiden at the start of the tale. But such tales are simply not interested in the visceral nature of bodily desire and its satisfacti on. The Miller's Tale is different. It is very interested in that visceral quality, but has a central figure, in Absolon, who is incapable of recognising and responding to it. A helpful contrast is provided by Aurelius in The Franklin's Tale. Like Absolon, he expresses his courtly identity through singing and dancing in the company of women and a good deal of his description is taken up with accounts of his music-making. His sphere of operation is the private, household realm of love and dalliance rather than the public world of chivalric competition and deeds of arms. But, like Chaucer's Squire in the General Prologue, and unlike Absolon, his character is founded upon a secure knowledge of the bodily realities of the world he inhabits.

(43.) Kolve, Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative, pp. 86-9.
(44.) Kolve, Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative, pp. 91-3.
(48.) In Bridget of Sweden's account of the Virgin birth, the process was so perfectly arranged that she professed herself unable to determine even from which orifice the baby emerged. ('And that maner off the byrth was so sothenly and so wysely doone that I myght not dyscerne nor perceyve how or what membyr off her body she had borne her chylde withall', Bridget of Sweden, The Revelations, Chapter XII, excerpted in Women's Writing in Middle English, ed. by Alexandra Barratt (London: Longman, 1992), P. 87.) Squeamish male theologians had, of course, already hit upon the ideal means of bowdlerising Mary's sexuality in the notion of the conceptio per aurem: the idea that Christ was conceived by the Virgin through reception of the Holy Spirit through her ear. Thereby the Marian genitals could be absolved of all sense of through traffic in either direction, and the question of just how, precisely, the Word was made flesh could be tactfully avoided.
(49.) Donaldson, 'Alisoun's Language', pp. 141 and 145.
(51.) See, for example, a number of the lyrics examined in Douglas Gray, Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric (London: Routledge, 1972), especially pp. 84-106. Quite how securely The Prioress's Prologue and Tale fit with this idea is, however, difficult to gauge. The Tale, with its attendant prayer to the Virgin, seems on one level to be an authentic exercise in Marian devotion, yet it deploys a similarly erotised vocabulary to describe how the Virgin, at the Conception, 'ravyshest doun from the Deitee .../... the goost that in th[ee] alight' (1659-60). I am very grateful to David Salter for sharing with me his astute comments about The Prioress's Tale in this context.
(52.) Rowland, 'Chaucer's Blasphemous Churl', p. 44.
Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA97995767&v=2.1&u=holl83564&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=f9a5958bf69bfb7f0034243c284850d2

Gale Document Number: GALE|A97995767