In the fabliau world of Chaucer's Miller's Tale, private parts, furtive sexual encounters, and a so-called "misdirected kiss" constitute the order of the day. Indeed, critical discussions of the tale generally take for granted its elaborate concern for body parts and bodily activities, these being understood, if nothing else, as evidence of the tale's generic tethering.(1) Equally striking, however, though rarely commented upon, is the way in which the Miller's Tale elides the specificity of those very bodies that it sets quite prominently on display. A good example of this can be seen in the tale's representation of the Miller himself. The prologue to the Miller's Tale locates the Miller initially in terms of physical positioning, introducing him as someone who drunkenly cuts in front of the Monk, the figure whom Harry Bailly invites to tell the next tale (3120f.)(2) Speaking, moreover, in the mode of declamation and oration -- in "Pilates voys" (3124) to be exact -- the Miller assumes the identity of an actor, calling further attention to his physical, dramatic placement as a body on stage. The expression "Pilates voys" however, also points to the fact that voice, not body, ultimately constitutes the mainstay of the Miller's performance;(3) indeed, much of what the prologue reveals is the way in which the Miller himself -- his bodily presence, that is -- finally drops out of the picture. "... [I]f that I myspeke or seye, / Wyte it the ale of Southwark, I yow preye" (3139-40). By shuffling the responsibility for his words onto the ale of Southwark, the Miller effectively locates his speech outside his own body. His theatrical delivery thereby turns into a situation of disembodied voice, a narrative instance that detracts from rather than calls attention to the Miller's own bodily location. Interestingly, this double act of self-inscription and self-erasure on the part of the Miller undergoes a repeat performance in the subsequent prologue representation of Chaucer the pilgrim. For just as the Miller pre-empts the speech of the Monk, so Chaucer the pilgrim cuts in on the Miller-Reeve exchange, thereby inserting himself into the narrative in a pre-emptory manner. His speech, moreover, like that of the Miller, provides the occasion for an act of self-effacement: what the pilgrim says pilgrim himself. The apologetic tone of his remarks ("Blameth nat me ..." 3181f.), his self presentation as a mere repeater of someone else's words (3172-75), and his effort (however sincere or ironic) to direct readers' attention away from the tale he is about to tell (3176-77) all work together to absent the pilgrimnarrator's body in the very midst of its textual inscription.

Equally elusive in this respect is the representation of the body of Alisoun, the tale's central character.(4) Of the three character portraits given in the tale-Nicholas's, Absolon's, and Alisoun's -- hers is by far the longest and most artistically accomplished, giving the impression of a vividly delineated character. Much like "hende Nicholas," moreover, Alisoun herself also seems to be defined by basic and seemingly unequivocal bodily attributes. Early on in the narrative Nicholas, we are told, grabs her "by the queynt" (3276), a gesture which for most critics could not be more tellingly graphic or more bodily definitive.(5) And yet, Alisoun is also the figure within the taleabout whom much bodily information is noticeably withheld. In the space of her description, for example, elaborate emphasis is given to her clothes, but not at all the specific body underneath. Indeed, every time the specificity of Alisoun's body potentially comes into focus, the language of the description stops short of explicit reference and veers instead in the direction of metaphor: "She was ful moore blissful on to see / Than is the newe pere-jonette
tree" (3246-47); "She was a prymerole, a piggesnye ..." (3268); "Ful brighter was the shynyng of hir hewe / Than in the Tour the noble yforged newe" (3255-56). Alisoun's body, it seems, never escapes conventional or euphemistic terminology and this right up to the very end of the tale where we are reminded rather cryptically of the fact that Absolon has kissed her "nether ye" (3852). Even the expressions applied to Alisoun's body in the infamous misdirected kiss scene -- "hir hole" (3732); "hir naked ers" (3734); "thyng al rough and long yherd" (3738)-seem to defy literal reference. Despite the wealth of critical commentary that this scene has elicited, readers have found little common ground in their assessments of the specific bodily vision that Chaucer's language provides at this point.

How, then, are we to understand the body of Alisoun, and what also are we to think about the bodies of the Miller and the Chaucerian pilgrim narrator? What sorts of bodies are these, and why should the Miller's Tale be so actively involved in producing them as absences? Why, moreover, should these three figures be allied by virtue of their common absence? What might they have in common? Or to turn this question in a slightly different direction, what collectively do they serve to hide? If the Miller's Tale is a narrative in which bodies do indeed matter -- and so it certainly seems to be -- why are these very important bodies precisely those that remain hidden, those that are produced as secrets or " pryvetee" of the narrative as a whole? This article investigates the parallel obfuscation of authorial and female bodies in the Miller's Tale, attempting thereby to shed new light on the political positioning of this narrative both within late medieval England and within modern critical reception.

As a way of addressing the question of bodies in this tale, let us begin by exploring more generally the tale's investment in particular notions and constructions of identity. Many readers of late have focused on the representation of gender categories in the Miller's Tale; their concern has been with questions having to do with "men" and "women" and with the various intrigues and animosities in the tale that pit the sexes both for and against each other. And yet, such preoccupations with matters of sexual difference, it seems to me, are at best, limited and at worst, simply inappropriate largely because no one in the Miller's Tale can be said to inhabit his/her gender identity in any sort of simple or straightforward way. John's putative status as a jealous husband who keeps his wife "narwe in cage" (3224; 3294) simply is not borne out by the events of the narrative. Within the space of this tale Alisoun is never caged; on the contrary, she seems to have plenty of freedom of movement -- enough, at least, so that she is able to join forces rather comfortably with Nicholas in orchestrating the Flood plot. Jealousy, moreover, does not appear to be John's dominant character trait. More often than not, the narrative depicts his relationship to Alisoun as one of loving -- not to say maternal -- concern. When Nicholas describes to John the events of the impending Flood, John thinks first of Alisoun's well-being: "'Allas, my wyf! / And shal she drenche? Allas, myn Alisoun!'" (3522-23). Alisoun, for her part, cannot be regarded simply as a passive woman -sex object, the pawn of male homosocial designs, as some readers have maintained, for when it comes to her relationship with Nicholas the tale presents her first and foremost as an equal and a partner. Alisoun, after all, agrees to be Nicholas's lover completely on her own terms, only "[w]han that she may hir leyser wel espie" (3293), and the tale emphasizes the fact that spending the night with Nicholas was "his desir and hire also" (3407). Moreover, unlike the Miller's Tale source narratives in which the buttocks, out-the-window joke is performed exclusively by men, Chaucer's tale not only makes this joke equally the province of male and female performance, but also makes Alisoun herself into the joke's author: she, not Nicholas, performs the joke first, vaunting her own trickster capacities to Nicholas along the way: "'Now hust, and thou shalt laughen al thy fille'" (3722). Alisoun's gender identity, thus, cannot be understood simply in terms of conventional (i.e., binary and hierarchical) gender attributes, and neither can the identities of Nicholas and Absolon. Ostensibly the tale pits Nicholas's aggressive masculinity in clear opposition to Absolon's passive effeminacy, and yet here once again the narrative as a whole does not uphold such rigid and binary categorization: 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 cardamon and licorice (3690). Early on in the narrative Nicholas himself is compared to licorice (3207). Both he and Absolon, it appears, are equally sweet-smelling.
Class categories set forth in the tale also do not seem to provide secure foundations of identity. Alisoun, one presumes, is a commoner, and yet she, like Absolon, is wearing fashionable clothes made of expensive fabric: "A ceynt she werede, barred al of silk" (3235); "... hir smok ... broyden al bifro / And eek bihynde, on hir color aboute, / Of col blak silk, withinne and eek withoute" (3238-40); "Hir filet brood of silk" (3242); "... a purs of lether, / Tasseled with silk . . ." (3250-51). Alisoun is also good enough, we are told, "for any lord to leggen in his bed," (3269) and one wonders if this is so because she herself is upper class, and not at all the country wench she first appears to be. Nicholas, we learn, is a "poure scoler" (3190), and yet he is able to afford a private room in town, something students in late fourteenth-century England as a rule could not do.(10) Nicholas's wealth, in fact, appears to be considerable, for not only does he possess "bookes grete and smale" (3208) and a "gay sautrie" (3213) unlike the impoverished Clerk of the General Prologue who has to make a choice between buying books or buying musical instruments (cf. 293 -96), but he also possesses for his very own high-price, luxury items: a copy of Ptolemy's Almageste and an "astrolabie" (3208-9).(11) John the carpenter, for his part, describes himself to Nicholas at one point as a card-carrying member of the medieval proletariat: "... 'Thynk on God, as we doon, men that swyne" (3491). And yet not only do we never actually see John hard at work (all we know is that he is periodically away at Oseneye, which also where Absolon goes "to dispers and pleye," 3660), we also recognize him more often not as the boss of his two servants, Robyn and Gille, figures whom he routinely orders around (cf. 3431-33 and 3631-32). Indeed, contrary to what some readers have identified as "peasant consciousness" in the Miller's Tale, I read questions of class affiliation in this tale in much more complicated terms.(12) To do so is also to reckon with the fact that the Miller narrator is not simply a drunken miller, any more than his tale is simply a piece of churlish "harlotrie."(13) Not only were fabliau narratives products of aristocratic literary spheres,(14) but the Miller's own narratorial performance is also clearly connected to other explicitly upper class acts. Nicholas's snobby, clerical admonition to the lewd john not to look into "Goddess pryvetee" (3558) echoes the Miller's own earlier condescending recommendation to the Reeve. Likewise, Nicholas's comments to John about supplying the kneading tubs with food for a day "fy on the remenant!" (3552) recall the Miller's own equally highhanded renunciation of remnants ("Of the remenant nedeth nat enqueure," (3166). Moreover, the Chaucerian pilgrim narrator, whose performance, as we have already seen, resembles the Miller's own, also explicitly locates his own remarks in terms of an aristocratic vantage point: he addresses himself to "every gentil wight" (3171), apologizing condescendingly for the "cherles tale" (3169) he is about to tell.

Rather than casting identity, then, in terms of clearly delineated and fixed categories of gender and class, the Miller's Taleseems to locate questions of identity specifically in the mode of performance: people achieve recognition in this tale, establish their identities, that is, largely through their acting abilities, through their abilities, that is, to deliver convincing performances of conventional social roles.(15) Such an understanding of identity indeed makes much sense in the context a narrative such as this in which characters spend most, if not all of their time engaging in theatrical activities -- dressing up, repeating scripted roles, getting up acts, keeping up appearances.(16) Within this overall scenario of acting and theatricality, moreover, different characters in the tale deliver different kinds of performances. Alisoun and Nicholas, for example, both seem to be elaborately skilled and, more importantly, highly self-conscious performers. So much is suggested by the scene of their amorous encounter at the very beginning of the tale. Nicholas here clearly plays the part of courtly lover, but he does so, it seems, in a comically exaggerated manner: the incongruous combination of his extremely direct body language ("... he caughte hire by the queynte," 3276; "... heeld hire harde by the haunchebones," 3279) and his conventionally indirect, courtly mode of address ("For deere love of thee, lemman, I spielle,' 3278) effectively turns courtly love into camp, highlighting at the same time the thoroughly stylized subject position that Nicholas occupies as male courtly lover. Alisoun herself delivers an equally stagey, camped up performance in her part as the female object of these courtly affections. Her refusal of Nicholas's handy sexual advances takes place not in the mode of spontaneity or immediacy, but rather in the mode of tongue-in-cheek theatrical awareness. "'Why lat be! ... Lat be, Nicholas, / Or I wol crie 'out, harrow, and 'alas'" (3285-86, my underlining). Instead of putting up resistance by simply crying out "out! harrow! alas!," Alisoun offers an awareness of the role she needs to play: she tells Nicholas what she will cry; she alludes to the lines of a script that she will pronounce next in playing the part of the recalcitrant female beloved. Alisoun and Nicholas's theatrical prowess, of course, does not stop here. For almost the entire rest of the narrative their time is sent in jointly producing, directing, and acting in the deceptive
drama of the Flood, a theatrical project which, among other things, serves to highlight further similarities in their performance styles. Nicholas's dosing remark to John, "'Go, save oure lyf, and that I the biseche'" (3600) is repeated nearly verbatim only ten lines later when Alisoun tells John to do the same, "'Go, deere spouse, and help to save oure lyf'" (3610).

In contrast to Alisoun and Nicholas, John and Absolon both seem to possess an utter lack of theatrical self-consciousness. As players of various parts within the tale, John and Absolon take on their roles with a great deal of earnest and with no sense of irony or critical distance in relation to the situation itself of acting. Not surprising in this regard is the fact that Biblical rhetoric, the language, that is, of true belief, provides the script that guides both of their performances: Absolon plays the part of courtly lover by repeating the language of the Song of Songs (3698-3707), and John best performs the business of carpentry only in the context of acting out the story of Noah's ark (3620-35). These similarities notwithstanding, John's and Absolon's performances are also finally quite different. John, it seems, plays several different roles: at any given point in the tale we can observe him acting as either a man who "swynkes," a boss to his servants, a husband who loves his wife, or a lewd man who knows only his "bileve." Absolon, in contrast, plays only one part throughout the entire narrative, that of the aristocratically fashionable courtly lover. He seems, in fact, to have no ability to play anything else: even in church in his role as parish clerk he is "[s]ensynge the wyves of the parisshe faste" and casting "many a lovely look on hem" (3341-42), engaging, in short, in the same sort of girl-chasing activities that he accomplishes in the tavern or beneath the bedroom window of John and Alisoun. Absolon spends all his time, moreover, cultivating this one role, as opposed to cultivating the other parts that he apparently also play: his role, that is, as a barber or as a draper of deeds and quitances (cf. 3326-27). Thus we see him lying awake at night planning his next amorous move, and then rising early the next morning so as to dress himself meticulously for the occasion: "... hym arraieth gay, at poynt-devys" (3689). And in this regard, it is also important to note that even when Absolon does explicitly take on another kind of theatrical project -- "He pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye" (3384) -- he does so only as a means of winning Alisoun's favor, only, in other words, as part of his overall performance as a courtly lover. Absolon, in short, does not deviate in the slightest from a single-minded performance of one particular role. The act is the man, the man the act. Indeed, throughout the better part of the tale he appears to be nothing more than a kind of courtly lover wind-up toy.

Recognizing the elaborate investment of the Miller's Tale in notions of theatricality and performance leads to further reflection on the ways in which the actual conditions of dramatic performance in late medieval England might have exerted a shaping influence on Chaucer's writing, in particular on the representation in this tale of the figure of Alisoun. For as Meg Twycross has argued, the late medieval English stage was indeed cross-dressed: men routinely played female parts, or so at least it appears from the available documentary evidence.(17) Conceivably, then, Alisoun's situation as a character in Chaucer's tale -- her performance, that is, as the female object of male heterosexual attention -- might have nothing to do with the matter of anatomical sex and everything to do instead with an elaborate and thoroughly convincing situation of dramatic masquerade.(18) Alisoun, in other words, might not be a woman at all, but rather a cross-dressed theatrical performer or female impersonator: a man, that is, in woman's clothing. Improbable as this interpretation may at first appear, it certainly is not without other kinds of textual justification. Readers have often noted the ways in Chaucer's writing invites comparisons between Alisoun and Absolon, reminding us thereby of the ways in which the Miller's Tale both invokes and highlights conventional understandings of Absolon's femininity.(19) But these same comparisons, I would argue, can also be said to operate in the reverse direction: they work to undo the specificity of Alisoun's female identity at the same time that they provide a basis for recognizing something of the tale's display of Alisoun's somatic masculinity.

Such display, it seems to me, lies at the heart of the misdirected kiss scene. Drawing attention simultaneously to masculine anatomical specificity -- "wel he wiste a womman hath no berd" (3737) -- and to anatomical ambiguity - - "thyng al rough and long yherd" (3738), Chaucer's writing about Alisoun's "naked ers" seems at once to reveal and re-veil, both to Absolon and to readers of the tale, something of the masculine physical basis of this ostensibly female performance.(20) The gesture of re-veiling this recognition, however, does not last for long.
Nicholas's punning response to Absolon's kiss, "'A berd! A berd!'" (3742) swiftly returns our attention to the question of masculine anatomical specificity. In this scene, in other words, not only does Absolon kiss what he does not expect to kiss, he also perceives something of the limitations of the courtly love performance he has earnestly espoused up until now: more precisely put, Absolon's experience of kissing Alisoun's "naked ers" leads to the fleeting recognition that Alisoun "herself" is a boy, not at all the "gay gerl" (3769) Absolon thought she was. It is this recognition, I would argue, which elicits from Absolon a reaction of disgust, a reaction, moreover, very much akin to the one displayed in Neil Jordan's film The Crying Game by the amorous and consummately heterosexist Fergus when he learns that the beautiful girl he has been pursuing is in fact no girl at all.(22) For Absolon as for Fergus, I am suggesting, it is devastating to recognize that your girl is a boy.(23) Indeed, this devastating recognition seems to be given yet another shape in Absolon's subsequent visit to the workshop of Gervais the smith. Commenting to Absolon that "[s]om gay gerl, God it woot, / Hath broght you thus upon the vir(i)-toot" (3769-70), Gervais engages in a bit of friendly and patently heterosexist ribbing, remarking on the fact that some woman must have left Absolon, here in the wee hours of the morning, reeling about like a top.(24) Neither affirming nor denying Gervais's assessment of things, Absolon's silence in this instance also invites us to look further into what the smith says. For Gervais's words can also be said to detail something of the transition that Absolon has lately undergone: from his initial endeavor to woo Alisoun as a "gay gerl," Absolon has finally been brought into contact with a "vir(i)-toot," with the "toute" or bum, that is, of a man, a vir.

This sort of reading of the misdirected kiss scene becomes all the more convincing, it seems to me, when measured against representations of sexuality that occur in the rest of the narrative, for surprisingly and despite appearances, the Miller's Tale seems neither to revel in heterosexual activity nor to feature it explicitly as the central concern of the story. Absolon, for example, seems for the most part much less interested in actually having sex with Alisoun than he is in preparing for and performing his role as a courtly lover. At any rate, Absolon does not appear to be serious in his pursuit of Alisoun's sexual favors. As Kolve puts it, "What earnest trespasser upon a marriage would go sing to the wife at an hour when the husband lies beside her in their bed?" (187). John and Alisoun, though shown together in bed, are never shown engaging in any kind of amorous physical activity. Even Alisoun and Nicholas, who ostensibly have sex and only sex on their minds, seem to be much more interested in (excited about?) elaborate theatrical posturing and game-playing than in actually having sex. When indeed their sexual union does take place, Chaucer's writing places it notably within the background, according it only three short lines of metaphorical description (3652-54). Furthermore, Nicholas's playful recasting of the Biblical Flood story, a narrative which stands, after all, as the consummate exemplar of a theologically-based normative heterosexuality, actually upsets the terms of such normativity by calling attention to situations of gender reversal. Consider in this regard Nicholas's description to John of the blissful aftermath of the Flood:

"Whan that the grete shour is goon away,
Thanne shaltou swymme as myrie, I undertake,
As dooth the white doke after hire drake."

(3574-76)

Johns' subject position, imaged here as that of a female white duck, is matched with that of Alisoun, who is herself figured as the female duck's male partner, "hire drake." Moreover, Nicholas's subsequent promise to John that "thanne shul we be lordes al oure lyf / Of al the world, as Noe and his wyf" (3581-82) not only locates the "we" -- John, himself, and Alisoun -- as masculine world rulers ("lords"), but also casts both Noah and "his wyf" in that same masculine subject position. Heterosexuality, it seems, is a troubled category in the Miller's Tale. Expectations of heterosexual activity seem to loom larger than actual instances of it, leaving us to wonder about the precise erotic basis of this ostensibly heterosexual, theologically-based narrative about a carpenter and his wife.
On this note, let us stop and contemplate further John's part in all of this. If, as I am suggesting, Alisoun is indeed actively cast in the tale as an impersonated woman, a man in woman's clothing, are we as readers meant to recognize or assume John's awareness of this fact? Did John know all along of Alisoun's "true" identity? (25) How indeed, we might ask, could he have not known about the "pryvetee" of his own wife? In any event, what are we to make of the tale's representation of John and Alisoun's marriage? We can best address these questions, it seems to me, by recognizing first of all the way in which the tale consistently casts John as a believer in fictions, fantasies, and trumped up appearances. Belief, after all, is one of the very terms that John uses to characterize himself, "a lewed man / That nought but only his bileve kan" (3455-56), and what the tale conveys to us quite clearly, it seems to me, is John's belief in the reality of "ymaginacioun" (3612). Witness John's ability to conjure up, in his mind's eye, a very truthful, life-like representation of the upcoming Flood:

This sely carpenter bigynneth quake
Hym thynketh verraily that he may see
Noees flood come walwynge as the see
To drenchen Alisoun, his hony deere.

(3614-17 emphasis mine)

So powerful, moreover, is this mental image of the Flood that it makes John "wepeth, weyleth, maketh sory cheere / ... [and] siketh with ful many a sory swogh" (3618-19). Indeed, in his susceptibility to the power of fantastic images -- in particular, those that Nicholas crafts pertaining to the second Flood -- John very much resembles Boccaccio's Calandrino, a figure from the Decameron who is constantly being tricked by his friends Bruno and Buffalmacco largely because of his unquestioning belief in the various fictions they concoct -- even the fiction of his own pregnancy. (26) However, unlike Calandrino who is frequently shown to be in conflict with his wife, John in the Miller's Tale is never shown to be in conflict with Alisoun. On the contrary, his attitude towards her throughout the tale is one of amorous idealization. Just as Absolon conceives of Alisoun as the ideal object of his courtly love performances, calling her at one point "hony-comb" (3698), so John regards her in very much the same terms: for him Alisoun is "his hony deere" (3617), his "trewe, verray wedded wyf" (3609), this last designation in particular being the fiction that Alisoun herself perpetrates and that John is eminently willing to believe. And of course, in casting Alisoun as "wylde and yong" (3225) and sexy ("And sikerly she hadde a likerous ye," 3244), Chaucer's writing necessarily ups the ante for her status as a heterosexual male's dream come true, especially for a senex amans like John who has actively ignored the prevailing wisdom that "man sholde wedde his simylitude" (3228). (27) Indeed, the Alisoun-John relationship in the Miller's Tale can be understood as a kind of medieval version, if you will, of the Song Liling-Rene Gallimard relationship in David Henry Hwang's play M. Butterfly. Song Liling, the Chinese cross-dressed male opera singer, is cast in the play both as a purely fantastic woman and as the beguiling object of desire of the French diplomat Rene Gallimard, himself an individual who is utterly incapable of recognizing anything other than the reality of his own fantasies. Alisoun in Chaucer's narrative, I would suggest, could easily be said to be John's biggest fantasy, just as Song Liling was for Rene Gallimard. All John can think about in relation to the Flood is what will happen to Alisoun; she more than anything else is consistently at the forefront of his "ymaginacioun."

But what still are we to make of the physical aspects of John and Alisoun's relationship? Although it is certainly not inconceivable that John and Alisoun may have had a sexual relationship of some sort all the while that Alisoun's male identity continued to remain hidden from John, just as Song's did from Gallimard, more likely is the situation that John and Alisoun do not have sex at all. Chaucer's narrative, in any event, certainly does not represent any sort of physical contact between them, and thereby leaves open the possibility that theirs may very well have been a chaste or spiritual marriage, a marriage, that is to say, in which both partners agree to abstain from having sexual relations with each other for reasons of piety. (28) As a phenomenon that cut across social classes (though located mostly within bourgeois and aristocratic contexts), spiritual marriages occurred throughout late medieval
Europe, apparently providing to the spouses in question both religious and nonreligious benefits: for women in particular, spiritual marriages may have afforded greater freedom from conventional gender roles as well as greater freedom from normative concepts like female submission.(29) In this connection let us note the vested interests that both John and Alisoun may have had in maintaining their marriage -- spiritual or otherwise. John presumably would want marriage so that he might have for his very own the woman of his dreams. The tale does indeed make clear John's willingness to endure cuckoldry for the sake of remaining married to Alisoun (cf. 3231-32). Alisoun, for her part, could very well have desired the marriage with John largely as a means of achieving social legitimacy for the socially illegitimate same sex relationship she maintains with Nicholas and perhaps, has already maintained with other young scholars in the past who have lodged in John's house. In this connection, I note the fact that John's jealousy, to which the narrative occasionally alludes, may indeed derive largely from past experience, that is to say, from situations involving scholars whom Alisoun has known and loved in the past, and not at all from her present situation with Nicholas.

But how are we to understand Nicholas's position in all this? Having engaged with Alisoun physically at the beginning of the tale, Nicholas presumably knows from the very start who exactly "she" is. Readers typically regard him as a conventional figure whose boundless heterosexual energies and "handy" performances are very much akin to the appetites and actions of the randy, roving scholars of the Reeve's Tale.(30) This interpretation, however, may well require some modification. Nicholas's upper class attributes, which are emphasized, as we have seen, by the tale, allow us to contextualize Nicholas within the fashion-conscious, performative world of the mid- to late fourteenth-century English court, an historical setting in which configurations of sexual desire and indeed normative heterosexuality itself, I would argue, were undergoing significant changes. In order to substantiate this assertion, let us turn our attention for a moment to the question of men's fashion during this period.

As costume historians point out, fashionable attire for men at court in England and France from about 1340 onwards was characterized on the whole by two specific features: tight fit and extremely short hemlines. The slim fitting outer cote (or cotte hardie), a standard masculine garment of the time, had a hemline that ended anywhere from mid-thigh to top of the thigh, easily revealing or simply drawing attention to men's legs, genitalia, and buttocks, much to the dismay of contemporary moralists who condemned this mode of dress as nothing more than a pretext for sinful acts of bodily display. But bodily display, or more precisely, the unabashed celebration of the male physique, was indeed, as one scholar puts it, "the principal theme of late medieval menswear."(31) More than ever before, fashion exposed to public view the lines and shapes of men's bodies and private parts, and in so doing, I argue that it established a situation in which men's bodies were routinely constituted as objects of erotic fascination not only for women, but also, and perhaps more often than not, for other men as well. The comments of Chaucer's Parson are telling in this regard. Railing against mens' short jackets and tunics as a cause of sinful bodily display, the Parson in his speech also shows his very own careful scrutiny of the exposed parts of the male anatomy. Frequently repeating the names of the private parts and adding rhetorical embellishments to boot, the Parson demonstrates his own nascent prurient interest in the male body that the fashionable clothing reveals:

Allas, somme of hem shewen the boce of hir shap, and the horrible
swollen membres, that semeth lik the maladie of hirnia, in the
wrappynge of hir hoses; / and eek the buttokes of hem faren as it
were the hyndre part of a she-ape in the fulle of the moone. / And
mooreover, the wrenched swollen membres that they shewe throught
disgisynge, in departynge of hire hoses in whit and reed, semeth
that half hir shameful privee membres weren flayne. / And if it so
be that they departen hire hoses in othere colours, as is whit and
blak, or whit and blew, or blak and reed, and so forth, / thanne
semeth it, as by variaunce of colour, that the half partie of hire
privee membres were corrupt by the fir of Seint Antony, or by
cancro, or by oother swich meschaunce. (422-27)
The rhetoric of courtly romance also provides ample evidence of men gazing desirously (or quasi-desirously) on
other mens' bodies. Chaucer's Knight, for example, eagerly seizes the opportunity to describe in loving detail the
manly, physical attributes of Lycurgus, King of Thrace, one of the knights participating in Theseus's tournament:
Blak was his berd, and manly was his face;
The cercles of the eyen in his heed,
They gloweden bitwixen yelow and reed,
And like a grifphon looked he aboute,
With kempe hearis on his browes stoute;
His lymes grete, his brawnes harde and stronge,
His shuldres brode, his armes rounde and longe
(2130-36)
Contemplating the tourneying knights as a group, moreover, the Knight registers his enthusiastic approval in
terms of a pleasurable act of gazing "To fighte for a lady, benedicitee! / It were a lusty sighte for to see" (2115-16).
In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the chamberlains who dress Gawain in "ryche robes" (862) also admire the
beauty of his newly clothed body, as the following lines suggest:
Sone as he [Gawain] on hent and haped perinne,
Pat sete on hym semly, with saylande skyrtez,
pe ver by his uisage verayly hit semed
Welne3 to vche hapel, alle on hwes,
Lowande and luufly alle his lymmez vnder;
pat a comloker kniy3t neuer Kryst made,
Hem po3t.
(864-70)(32)
Returning now to my earlier assertion about configurations of desire in late medieval English court contexts, we
can see that associating Nicholas with this environment -- in particular, with the court of Richard II --means
associating him with a world in which heterosexuality may not at all have been the dominant or exclusive form of
sexual practice. Let us remember in this regard that Richard II and Anne of Bohemia had a twelve-year-long,
childless marriage, a fact which leads one to wonder whether theirs might not have been a sexless, spiritual
marriage, actively designed as such in order to accommodate Richard's own sexual preference for men. (33)

Though such speculation may at first appear unfounded, records do in fact bear witness to Richard's very close relationships with other men, notably with his band of Cheshire archers. (34) Evidence also exists of Richard's having commissioned a hagiography of his great-grandfather Edward II, a figure whose same sex sexual interests were as well-known in Richard's day as they are in our own. (35) My aim in presenting this kind of interpretation of historical material is hardly to establish once and for all the fact of Richard II's sexual preference for men, but rather to suggest the plausibility, if not the likelihood of such sexual preference both for Richard himself as well as for other men in his court. Although it may be very difficult to make definitive claims about the forms and currencies of sexual desire within premodern contexts, it is nonetheless possible to imagine the co-existence of same sex and heterosexual sexualities both within the English courtly community as a whole and potentially at least, within the practices of any individual member of that community. (36) In any case, the historical scenario I construct here suggests a way of understanding Nicholas in the Miller's Tale as someone who may not have been exclusively or even predominantly interested in heterosexuality. Thus, Nicholas's promiscuous heterosexuality cannot be regarded as the unshakably secure foundation upon which the rest of the narrative builds. Indeed, what Nicholas desires from Alisoun could very well have been the same-sex sexual relations which, according to my argument, he does in fact receive.

Recognizing, thus, the ways in which questions of same-sex sexuality bear upon our understanding of characterization in the Miller's Tale points as well to new ways of interpreting the tale's concluding events. Typically readers have viewed the final portion of the tale in terms of a scenario of just desserts. The concern has been to understand how each of the characters in the tale does or does not, as the case may be, get what is coming to him/her, based on his/her behavior in the preceding moments of the narrative. Eschewing all such considerations, my own assessment of the ending of the Miller's Tale emphasizes instead the tale's concluding representation of what we might call, following Michel Foucault's discussion of sodomy, an utter confusion of categories. (37) In the aftermath of the misdirected kiss scene a number of structural confusions occur.

Boundaries of class heretofore maintained now get broken down, as hot coulters get beaten into knightly swords, and narrative worlds previously held separate now intersect swiftly one with the other: in the space of Nicholas's desperate cry for water, the story of Noah and the Flood blends seamlessly with Absolon's intrigue of courtly wooing. Through these kinds of confusions the narrative actively conjugates playful, amorous activity -- Alisoun and Nicholas in the bedroom -- with seriously vengeful, violent activity -- Absolon's attack with the coulter -- and in so doing, eroticizes the violence of the coulter scene itself, a scene in which a phallic object graphically engages with a male character's "toute." In this way the Miller's Tale can also be said to extend -- indeed "quyte" -- the logic of the Knight's Tale, a narrative that has already hinted at the conjoining of aristocratic heterosexuality and martial world of male homosociality. References in the Knight's Tale to the love-related piercing of Palemon's and Arcite's hearts (cf. 1079; 1115-16; 1220: 1564-65; 1574-75) tend to cast their heterosexual courtly foreplay as just another version of their male homosocial knightly spearplay. The latter, conversely, is itself described as a kind of labor of love, an activity which elicits from the young knights friendly, brotherly affection (cf. 1652) as well as persistency: "they foyyen ech at oother wonder longe" (1654). The manifestly heterosexual story line of the Knight's Tale, moreover, is interrupted routinely by events and concerns pertaining to male homosociality. Arcite's pursuit of Emiyle, for example, is interrupted by the story of Perotheus and Theseus, a story of male friendship which is not only a love story in its own right (in 11. 1196-1202 The Knight repeatedly mentions the love Perotheus and Theseus have for each other), but also a story with the power to distract the Knight from the narratorial matter at hand, namely, telling the story of Arcite's pursuit of Emiyle (cf. esp. 1199-1201). Even the climactic marriage of Palemon and Emiyle, the consummate moment of heterosexuality in the tale, is interrupted by one small, but very telling detail: Palemon arrives on the scene at this point dressed in mourning clothes (cf. 2978). Apparently on this the occasion of his presumably much longed-for marriage to Emiyle, Palemon is still longing for his dear friend and cousin Arcite, and this after "certeyn yeres" (2967) have gone by and "al stynted is the moornynge and the teres / Of Grekes, by oon general assent" (2968-69). With its regular insistence, thus, on relations of male homosociality, the Knight's Tale actively troubles the explicitly heterosexual ideology of aristocratic courtly romance. And in this respect, it establishes a significant precedent of the narrative trajectory of the Miller's Tale. For as the structural confusions at the end of the talesuggest, the Miller's Tale functions explicitly as a
sodometrical piece of writing, revealing what the Knight's Tale has kept in the closet, so to speak: the blatant existence of male homoeroticism within the world of heterosexual romance.

Questions of revelation are indeed very much to the point in the Miller's Tale. All throughout the tale, in fact, we are constantly being reminded that secrets will, in the end, be revealed. When Nicholas swears John to secrecy about the impending second Flood, John protests vehemently that he will tell no one, not "child ne wyf" (3512): "I am no labbe," he says, "ne, though I seye, I nam nat lief to gabbe" (3509-10). Upon taking leave of Nicholas, however, John goes straight to Alisoun and tells her "his pryvetee" (3603). The Miller-narrator tells the Reeve in the prologue not to look into "Goddes pryvetee" (3164) and then proceeds to tell a tale which turns on a situation of just that, of looking into "Goddes pryvetee" (in more ways than one, in fact). Secrets, it seems, cannot be kept in the Miller's Tale and that is what I would argue the last part of the narrative urges us to recognize once again. For Absolon now knows the secret of Alisoun's identity and he apparently has no qualms about telling it. So much is implied by Absolon's response to Gervais's inquiry as to what Absolon plans to do with the hot coulter: "'Thereof,' quod Absolon, 'be as be may. / I shal wel telle it thee to-morwe day" (3783-84). By the end of the tale, moreover, Absolon has become a very dangerous figure. He is mad, he is violent, and he can indeed do real harm to others, as the description of Nicholas's burned "toute" makes clear: "of gooth the skyn an hande-brede aboute" (3811). But not only has Absolon become more vengeful, he also has become more strategically savvy. Whereas before he played the part of courtly lover with no sense of irony whatsoever, after the misdirected kiss he plays the same role with a masterful sense of performative self-consciousness.(39) His courtly professions of love now become nothing more than a part played with the intent to deceive:

"... God woot, my sweete leef,
I am thyng Absolon, my deereelystyng.

Of gold," quod he, "I have thee broght a ryang.
My moother yaf it me, so God me save;
Ful fyn it is, and therto wel ygrave.
This wol I yeye thee, if thou me kisse."

(3792-97)

Absolon, in short, has become a performer very much in the mode of Alisoun and Nicholas, and his performance at the very end of the talesuggests his ability not only to triumph deceptively over them, but also to use theatricality as a ploy, a strategy, just as they have already done. The last part of the narrative, in other words, shows Absolon fully capable of beating Alisoun and Nicholas at their own game, and also, presumably, of revealing to others just exactly what Alisoun and Nicholas's "game" really is.

And it is precisely for this reason, I would argue, that Absolon is also the figure in the tale who finally disappears. He, not Alisoun, is absent in the end -- noticeably so, in fact, in the closing scene involving all the clerks of the town, of which Absolon is indeed one. Contrary to what readers typically affirm, I find Alisoun to be quite clearly present at the end of the tale. In the aftermath of John's fall from the ceiling Alisoun takes her place beside Nicholas (cf. 3832), and the two are presumably both part of the clerical community that bands together and prevails over John in the end. It is in fact important, I would argue, to recognize the complicity of Alisoun and Nicholas in the end, for what they seem to be doing here is what they have already done before, namely, setting up an extravagant theatrical act. One can hardly help but read the final emphasis on John's craziness in any other way, for the force of this clerical put-down seems excessive and the scene as a whole does not follow logically from the events that precede it. Why indeed is so much concerted clerical effort ("every clerk anonright heeld with oother" 3847) expended on destroying the reputation of a single, lewd, town carpenter, one who has already been defeated, intellectually speaking, at the hands of a single clerk? Although this scene of character assassination

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seems to be little more than a gratuitous instance of overkill, it is also of a piece with the pervasive insistence in
the Miller's Tale on strategic acts of theatricality, role-playing, and performance. The point here seems to be to
shift the narrative ground away from Absolon, and to that end Alisoun, Nicholas, and all the town clerks engage in
one more gesture of theatricalized deception, reshaping the drama of the Flood into yet another fabliau play this
time involving, as one might expect, the conventional performance of clerical intellectual superiority over lewd,
lower class ignorance.

The Miller himself actively joins in this performance, restaging the entire tale at the end as a straightforward
fabliau narrative, one in which the characters' fates are practically and summarily accounted for. So much is
suggested by the Miller's catalogue conclusion:

Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
For al kepyng and his jalousye,
And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,
And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.

This tale is doon, and God save all the rowte!

(3850-54)

But the Miller's account here leaves out as much as it tells: it is too swift, too vague, and too generically restrictive
to be believable. It tries to force the action back into the style and strictures of fabliau narration, a literary mold that
the tale never fully inhabited in the first place.(40) Interestingly, moreover, rather than fostering the disappearance
of Absolon, the Miller's remarks actually return Absolon to center stage, highlighting in particular his problematic
encounter with Alisoun's body: "And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye." The image of the "nether ye" presents us
with one more instance of category confusion (upper blends with lower, the facial with the genital), and hence,
with one more way of gauging the homoerotic climate of the tale as a whole. Ultimately, then, this literary
performance on the part of the Miller, like all other acts of theatricality in the Miller's Tale, is one that we are
encouraged finally to see through.

How, though, might we understand this double gesture at the end of the tale, both a return to Alisoun's body in the
form of the "nether ye" and also an effort to leave this body (and its spokesman, Absolon) behind? As this essay
has tried to suggest, the Miller's Tale constitutes the secret of male homoeroticism as an open secret, as one that
"every gentil wight" in Chaucer's late-medieval audience could potentially read. The political significance of such
legibility, moreover, was no doubt neither single nor simple. On the one hand, the secret of Alisoun's body, and of
her same-sex relationships with both John and Nicholas may have reminded the late fourteenth-century English
court community of a situation that potentially threatened its own well-being: homoeroticism as a mode of non-
reproductivity meant that the aristocracy could no longer simply reproduce itself. Aristocratic homosexual
practices, thus, threatened the collapse of a power-base from within. On the other hand, the various negotiations
of identities and sexualities that the Miller's Tale engages, and above all, the importance the tale accords to
situations of theatricality and performance as a powerful means of orchestrating such negotiations might be
understood as alluding in positive terms to the fashionable and self-fashioning modes of Richard II's court, a social
milieu which placed a high premium not only on theatrical display, but also on the political importance of
magnificence and personal pleasures.(41) Chaucer's writing in the Miller's Tale could thus be seen as a eulogy of
a particular political style, bearing witness at the same time to one way in which heterosexuality in late medieval
England was subject to contestation. But no matter how we finally resolve the political valence of the Miller's Tale,
our efforts to do so will be guided by the elusive bodies that the tale simultaneously hides and incites us to pursue,
those of the Miller, Chaucer the pilgrim and Alisoun. Their bodies matter, the tale suggests, precisely because they
are implicated within, rather than set above, the theatrical power plays and contingent identity configurations that
the tale itself sets forth.
Bedier, Pearcy, and Nykrog all discuss formal aspects of the Old French fabliaux, noting, among other things, the importance of themes of sexuality. Recent discussion of the Miller's Tale as a fabliau are given by Farrell, Kolve, and Kendrick.

All citations are from The Riverside Chaucer.

Hanna also insists, for purposes different than my own, on the importance of voice in the expression "Pilates voys." As will become clear in the rest of this essay, I take the body of Alisoun to be the central concern of the tale. In general, feminist scholars and those interested in questions of sexuality (e.g., Kara Virginia Donaldson, Lochrie, and Leicester) analyze the Miller's Tale by focussing on the figure of Alisoun, albeit at times only for the purpose of discussing her marginalization.

The Middle English word "queynt," as the Riverside editor notes, means "elegant" or "pleasing," and as well as "pudendum" or "vagina." "Queynt" in 1. 3275, moreover, is part of an identical rhyme, the preceding occurrence being glossed by the Riverside editor as "ingenious, clever." The use of this word in the context of an identical rhyme tends to emphasize something of the breadth, rather than the narrowness of the word's semantic range. Thus, Chaucer's language in this instance is perhaps more euphemistic than readers have usually supposed, and Alisoun's "queynt" could be glossed as a metaphorical reference -- Alisoun's "elegant" or "(sexually) pleasing" body part -- and hence would be understood as an expression very much akin to the Wife of Bath's "bele chose."

A survey of some recent discussions of this scene will serve to exemplify my point. Focusing in Absolon's recognition that "a woman hath no berd" (3737), Lochrie points to Absolon's having kissed Alisoun's "female genitals [conceived] as equivalent to the male mouth," although she also discusses the kiss in terms of Absolon's conversion of Alisoun from "lemman" to "thyng al rough and long yherd," thereby leaving Chaucer's language in this second instance to speak silently for itself. Beidler, like Lochrie, insists on Absolon's sense of women not having beards, though unlike Lochrie, he regards Absolon's understanding here as an unerring indication of female anatomical specificity: "A man in the same position would not present what might so readily be mistaken, in the darkness of the night, as a beard" (95-6). Leicester's analysis of the Absolon's kiss mixes conviction with uncertainty: "It does not in fact sound like he has kissed an ass, but a cunt" (487). Rudat's assessment does so to an even greater extent: "Absolon has performed an involuntary act of (almost-)cunnilingus" (104). Rudat also notes the difficulty involved in determining how closely Absolon has come in contact with Alisoun's beard, "whether it is with his hands, his face, or his mouth" (103). Interestingly, despite their many differences, readers all seem to concur in their understanding that Absolon has indeed kissed some part of the female anatomy.

John also displays concern for Nicholas when the latter does not emerge from his room for several days (cf. 3462-63).

Leicester also argues for Alisoun's agency in the tale, interpreting her action at the window in terms of her using her female body "in a masculine, aggressive, indeed, phallic way" (488).

Both Hanna and Patterson are concerned with peasant consciousness in the Miller's Tale. For both these critics, the main representative of this consciousness is the Miller himself.
(13.) Kolve's remarks about the refinements that the Miller's Tale works upon fabliau conventions are relevant here: "The Miller's Tale represents the fabliau largely denatured of its indecency, brusqueness, and cynicism, although it recounts an action as outrageous as any in the entire corpus of such tales" (161).

(14.) Nykrog was the first scholar to have presented a convincing case for the aristocratic provenance and circulation of fabliau narratives in the Middle Ages.

(15.) My argument here is indebted not only to Judith Butler's overall insistence on questions of performance in relation to identity categories, but also to her more specific understanding of gender identity as a public "reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (140). For further discussion of these issues see Butler, 134-49.

(16.) Wilson, Prior, and Kolve all discuss various connections between the Miller's Tale and the themes, images, and ideology of medieval mystery plays. None of these critics, however, focuses as consistently as I do on the tale's representation of situations of acting and performance.

(17.) Twycross's claims that the late medieval stage was exclusively cross-dressed have been countered by Stokes who points to the many ways in which women participated, sometimes as actresses, in late medieval English drama. Convincing as they are, Stoke's arguments do not seem to me to vitiate Twycross's claims; the former are based wholly on evidence that derives from a single location, namely Somerset, whereas the latter are based on evidence drawn from several different dramatic cycles. Twycross also argues for recognizing the cross-dressed medieval stage as a phenomenon separated from the cross-dressed stage of early modern drama.

(18.) Riviere's classic discussion of the notion of "womanliness as masquerade" is relevant here, although unlike Riviere who locates her analysis in the tradition of psychoanalytic critical thinking, I locate my analysis primarily in relation to historical evidence about the drama in late medieval England and also in relation to textual evidence from the tale.

(19.) Beichner discusses in detail elements of female gender specificity conventionally associated in the Middle Ages with the Biblical figure Absalom, which is the basis for the Chaucerian character Absolon.

(20.) According to the MED "thyng" can be glossed as "a genital part." Attendant upon this definition, moreover, is a lack of anatomical specificity: "thyng" in the sense of "genital part" can refer to either male or female genitalia. The MED cites in this regard the comments of the Wife of Bath: "Membres . . Of generacioun . . were maad for purgacioun Of vryne, and oure bothe thynges smale Was eek to knowe a femele from a male" (121, my underlining).

(21.) Nicholas's remarks here register a significant structural confusion. Nicholas's perspective becomes confused with Absolon's own unexpressed thoughts at the time of the misdirected kiss: "... wel he wiste a womman hath no berd" (3737). Later on in this article I address in greater detail the significance of these sorts of structural confusions in terms of the tale's delineation of questions of sodomy.

(22.) In the film Fergus vomits, whereas Absolon in Chaucer's tale rubs his lips "[w]ith dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes" and commends his soul to Satan (3747-50).

(23.) My reading here is designed, in part, to take issue with all those that have portrayed Absolon's response to the kiss at the window in terms of psychological devastation or shame that derives from Absolon's encounter with Alisoun's vagina. Kolve, for example, suggests that Absolon recognizes Alisoun's "pudendum" and then characterizes this recognition as "the most devastating of all" (196). Leicester writes of a similar recognition on the part of Absolon, and characterizes Absolon's kiss, thus, "not only as a shameful kiss, but a shameful kiss of a woman" (487), implying, I presume, that Absolon's act of kissing Alisoun's vagina is in and of itself shameful. There seems to be no reason to believe that in premodern culture, any more than in our own, the act of kissing female genitalia was implicitly shameful or devastating. Old French fabliaux which prominently display female
genitalia (Le Chevalier qui fit les cons parler, or Le Jugement des cons, for example) do not appear to convey as well an implicit sense of devastation or shame surrounding this imagery. Kendrick, however, mentions the social humiliation that redounds to the knight who kisses the "long cul" of his cross-dressed wife in the fabliau Berenger au long cul: ". . . a kiss bestowed on the lower orifice, instead of the mouth, puts woman `on top' in a grotesque parody of the ceremony of vasselage" (188 n. 10).

(24.) Offering a number of possible definitions for the apparently nonce expression "viriotot," Singman glosses it finally as "whirligig" or "top." Needless to say, Singman's interpretation here is based on an unquestioned assumption of heterosexuality in the Absolon-Alisoun encounter.

(25.) I place "true" in scare quotes here so as to make apparent the fact that Alisoun's body is no more a source of truthfulness or an essential foundation for her identity than is any one of the socially visible roles that she plays within the space of the tale. See in this regard Butler's refutation of the notion that the body of a drag performer constitutes a locus of true or original gender identity, 137-39.

(26.) Calandrino's pregnancy is recounted in the Decameron in the third story of the ninth day.

(27.) For further consideration of the ways in which women in Chaucer's narratives serve as objects of fantasy for heterosexual male readers, see E. T. Donaldson's famous essay "The Masculine Narrator and Four Women of Style," 46-64.

(28.) Elliott's recent and very interesting study of this phenomenon in the late antiquity and the Middle Ages is my main source of information here. Chaucer has depicted a marriage of this kind, of course, in the Second Nun's Tale, albeit there in an historical setting very different from that of the Miller's Tale.

(29.) Elliott argues that women were, more often than not, the initiators of as well as the beneficiaries in a spiritual marriage, achieving through this arrangement a measure of personal power and autonomy that conventional marriages simply did not provide for them. As John Bowers has argued, however, there is no reason not to suspect that men also benefitted from spiritual marriages just as often as women did.

(30.) In view of D. W. Robertson's infamous label for the Wife of Bath and in view of prevailing critical opinion, it is tempting to label Nicholas something like "masculinity, or rampant heterosexuality." Kolve modifies somewhat the prevailing interpretation of Nicholas by suggesting that Nicholas is more interested in game-playing and theatrical orchestration than he is in having sex with Alisoun.

(31.) de Marly, 24. Overall my discussion here is indebted to the very fine work on this subject by de Marly and Newton.

(32.) I quote here from the edition of the text translated and edited by Casey Finch.

(33.) John Bowers advances this hypothesis about the implications of Richard and Anne's childless marriage (20).

(34.) Gillespie discusses the ways in which Richard's close association with his Cheshire yeoman retainers caused the king political difficulties. Gillespie also cites the Kenilworth chronicle, which mentions the fact that Richard's Cheshire bodyguards addressed the king in familiar terms and in the intimate language of English, the mother tongue.

(35.) Bennett, 13. In Christianity Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, 298-300, Boswell reviews both fourteenth-century chronicle discussions and modern historical discussions of Edward II's homosexual relationships, focusing in particular on prejudices and blindspots that have informed both sides.

(36.) In Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe, Boswell comments on the anachronistic or inappropriate nature of historical scholarship that bases its reasoning on the notion that premodern culture contained two clear-cut and rigidly divided sexualities, namely, heterosexuality and homosexuality: ". . . even where the difference [between
these two sexualities] was noticed and commented upon, it was much less important to premodern Europeans than many other moral and practical distinctions regarding human couplings. It was adultery that troubled most medieval Christians (particularly in the Mediterranean), not the gender of the party with whom it was committed" (xxv).

(37.) Foucault calls sodomy "that utterly confused category" (101).

(38.) Kendrick's analysis of the Miller's Tale focuses in part on the way in which the kneading tubs hung from the ceiling in John's house create a large phallic formation suggestive of God's own private parts (5-6).

(39.) Kolve makes this very same point about the transformation Absolon undergoes as a courtly lover (197), although Kolve does not associate Absolon's new style of performance, as I do, with the theatricality of both Alisoun and Nicholas.

(40.) Many readers of the Miller's Tale -- Muscatine, Kolve, and Farrell in particular -- identify ways in which Chaucer's writing quite obviously exceeds the conventional boundaries of fabliau narratives. Discussions of this matter vary, however, according to how individual critics define fabliau conventions.

(41.) For further discussion of these aspects of Richard II's court, see Eberle and Green.

Abstract:
Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale' appears to be preoccupied with body parts and bodily activities. However, the tale does not give a detailed account of the very bodies that it focuses on. It is also notable for the bodily absence of the Miller, the female character Alisoun and the pilgrim narrator. The parallel ambiguity of authorial and female bodies in Chaucer's work is analyzed in terms of its political positioning within both medieval and modern times.

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The Canterbury Tales is one of the best loved works in the history of English literature. Written in Middle English, the story follows a group of pilgrims who are travelling the long journey from London to Canterbury Cathedral. Chaucer introduces us to a vivid cast of characters, including a carpenter, a cook, a knight, a monk, a prioress, a haberdasher, a dyer, a clerk, a merchant and a very bawdy miller. These characters come from all corners of 14th century society, and give Chaucer the chance to speak in many different voices. This suggests the tales were enormously popular in medieval England. This early and handsomely ornamented manuscript copy, from c.1450, was made within a generation of Chaucer’s death. Shelfmark: Harley MS 1758, f.1. Chaucer’s use of time-reckoning as the device for the trick the clerk plays on the carpenter in the Miller’s Tale reveals an increasing commodification of time in late medieval England. It also indicates a new understanding of how that commodity could then be translated into social power, specifically in regards to rank and status. In “Merchant’s Time and Church’s Time in the Middle Ages,” Jacques Le Goff explains that “Among the principal criticisms leveled against the merchants was the charge that their profit implied a mortgage on time, which was supposed to belong to God alone.” Sylvia Th