

**CHAUCER'S *THE MILLER'S TALE* AS MEDIEVAL ESTATES SATIRE****ORTAÇAĞ SINIF HİCVİ OLARAK CHAUCER'IN *DEĞİRMENCI HİKAYESİ*****Pelin AKSU**

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**Abstract**

In his *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer employs the medieval literary tradition of “estates satire” with his exclusive grouping and naming of as many as thirty Canterbury pilgrims according to their social ranks and professional titles. Chaucer portrays his pilgrims as medieval estates stereotypes representing their specific medieval estates with their stereotypical professional malpractices and shortcomings. His pilgrims display stereotypical social and moral failings in conforming to their estate identities and boundaries strictly imposed on them by the feudally-established and deeply-rooted three estate hierarchical divisions of the medieval English society. What makes *The Canterbury Tales* a distinctive example of medieval estates satire is Chaucer’s satirical portrayals of his Canterbury pilgrims as self-fashioning mimic noble medieval estates stereotypes representing their medieval estates with their stereotypical self-fashioning mimic nobility and gentility performances and newly-fashioned mimic-aristocratic and upwardly-mobile identities, as represented and satirized in the “General Prologue” and Chaucer’s satirical refashioning of the medieval knightly romance traditions and courtly love conventions in their tales which are the rhetorical reflections of their mimic gentillesse performances. Chaucer’s self-fashioning mimic-courtly Canterbury pilgrims narrate their mimic-chivalric romances to justify their self-fashioning mimic nobility performances in the “General Prologue”, and hence be welcomed into the courtly, gentlemanly, chivalric and aristocratic sphere of the medieval knightly estate of nobility despite their non-genteel commoner origins, yet through their upward social mobility and mimicry of the knightly and courtly values, lifestyle and courtly love conventions of the nobility. However, their mimic-knightly romances serve as the transparent reflections and satire of the specific medieval estate that they satirically represent as self-fashioning mimic-aristocratic medieval estates stereotypes. Accordingly, this study explores Chaucer’s *The Miller’s Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales* as a distinctive example of medieval estates satire and panorama through Chaucer’s satirical characterization of his Miller in the “General Prologue” as the satirical representative of the self-fashioning, socially-upward and mimic-courtly medieval estate of the peasantry claiming nobility and gentility. Through his satirical characterization of his Miller as a medieval estate stereotype, Chaucer relegendizes and parodies the medieval knightly romance traditions and courtly love conventions in *The Miller’s Tale*.

**Keywords:** Chaucer’s *The Miller’s Tale*, medieval estates satire, self-fashioning, mimic-noble medieval estates stereotypes, Chaucer’s satirical refashioning, medieval knightly romance and courtly love conventions.

**Özet**

Chaucer, *Canterbury Hikayeleri*’nde, otuz adet Canterbury hacısını, sosyal sınıflarına ve meslek ünvanlarına göre gruplayıp adlandırarak ve hacı adaylarını ortaçağ sınıf stereotipi olarak portre ederek ortaçağ sınıf hicvi geleneğini yaşatmaktadır. Canterbury hacılarının her biri, ortaçağın hiyerarşik üç sınıf yapısına karşı gelen, kendilerine empoze edilen sınıf kimliği ve sınırlarını reddeden, yeni edindikleri zenginlikleriyle toplumda yükselen ve soylu sınıfa kabul edilmek için asilleri taklit eden, “ortaçağ “orta sınıf”ına ait bireyleri ve ait oldukları sınıfı temsil etmektedir. *Canterbury Hikayeleri*’ni ortaçağ sınıf hicvi geleneğinde ayırt edici kılan özelliği, Chaucer’ın Canterbury hacılarını, ait oldukları taklitçi ve öz-biçimlendirmeci “orta sınıf”ı “Genel Prolog”ta sergiledikleri soyluluk taklitleri ile asilleri taklit eden, zenginlikleriyle toplumda yükselen taklit-soylular olarak temsil eden ortaçağ sınıf stereotipleri olarak karakterize etmesi ve onların anlattıkları hikayelerde ortaçağ şövalye romansları ve saray usulü aşk geleneklerini hicvisel biçimde yeniden biçimlendirmesidir. Chaucer, asil kökenleri olmadan soyluluk iddia eden ve bu anlamda asilleri taklit eden hacılarına, asillere ait olan ve saray usulü aşk geleneklerini yansıtan şövalye romansları anlatır; ancak bu hikayeler, Chaucer’ın hikayeyi anlatan asil kökene sahip olmadan taklit yoluyla soyluluk iddia eden Canterbury hacılarının soyluluğu taklit eden performanslarının, anlattıkları şövalye romanslarını yeniden biçimlendirme yoluyla, hicvi ve asilleri taklit eden soyluluk performanslarının ve bu performanslarının toplumda neden olduğu asil değerlerin çürümesinin yansımasıdır. Her ne kadar Chaucer’ın

asillerin şövalyelik ve soylu değerlerini taklit eden Canterbury hacıları, şövalye romanslarını, soylu sınıfa kabul edilebilmek adına anlatsalar da, anlattıkları saray usulü romanslar, geleneksel şövalye romanslarının hicivsel biçimde yeniden yazılmış, geleneksel romans kahramanlarının taşıdıkları soylu ve aristokratik özelliklerini yitirdikleri, taklit romanslar olarak karşımıza çıkmakta ve ortaçağ burjuva “orta sınıf”ın taklit soyluluklarının bir parodisi ve hicvi olarak hizmet etmektedir. Bu anlamda, taklit şövalye romansları anlatan ortaçağ “orta sınıf”ı temsil eden hacı adayları, anlattıkları yeniden biçimlendirilmiş hicivsel saray usulü romansları ile asil sınıfa ait olmak bir yana, aslında temsil ettikleri sınıfın bir hicvini sunmaktadırlar. Bu çerçevede, bu makale, Chaucer’ın *Canterbury Hikayeleri*’ndeki *Değirmenci Hikayesi*’ni Chaucer’ın ortaçağ şövalye romanslarını ve saray usulü aşk geleneklerini yeniden biçimlendirmesi ve parodisi yoluyla ortaçağ “orta sınıf” sınıf hicvi olarak incelemektedir. Bu makale, Chaucer’ın *Değirmenci* karakterini, “Genel Prolog”ta asilleri taklit ederek geliştirdiği ve asillere meydan okuyan taklit-aristokratik ve şövalyelik kimliği ile ortaçağın asil kökenleri olmadan, yeni elde ettikleri zenginlik, sosyal saygınlık ve asil sınıfı taklit yoluyla soyluluk iddia eden ortaçağ “orta sınıf”ın temsili karakteri olarak incelemekte ve *Değirmenci*’nin anlattığı *fabliau*’yu, ortaçağ şövalye romans ve saray usulü aşk geleneklerinin parodisini yapan taklit-saray usulü romans olarak ele almaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Chaucer’ın *Değirmenci Hikayesi*, ortaçağ sınıf hicvi, öz-biçimlendirme, asil sınıfı taklit eden ortaçağ sınıf stereotipleri, Chaucer’ın ortaçağ şövalye romans ve saray usulü aşk geleneklerini hicivsel yeniden yapılandırması.

## Introduction

Under the influences of the groundbreaking events like the Hundred Years War, the Black Death and the Peasants’ Revolt, the late fourteenth century was a highly-chaotic period of a profound socio-cultural transformation from feudalism to capitalism, from the courtly-sworn loyalties and the courtly, gentlemanly, chivalric and aristocratic ideals and values of the medieval knightly estate of nobility and the traditional medieval feudal chivalry to the uncourtly and unchivalric mercenary and mercantile values of a money-based economy and from the supremacy of feudalism and the nobility to the golden age of the peasantry and the large-scale upward social mobility, increasing self-consciousness and individuality and the self-fashioning mimic nobility of the newly-rising and newly-wealthy middle class of medieval commoners (the mimic-chivalric medieval mercenaries, the mimic-courtly and newly-landed peasantry and the newly-prosperious and mimic-aristocratic merchants). The fore-mentioned events resulted in the rise of capitalism, the emergence of the non-courtly medieval mercenary chivalry, the emergence of the medieval large-scale upward social mobility and the birth of a new, mimic-aristocratic middle class of social climbers refusing to comply with their strictly-imposed estate identities and divisions, blurring and redefining their estate boundaries and hence, shattering and refashioning the strictly-established three estate hierarchical structure of the medieval society. In the midst of the tragic decline of feudalism, the weakening of the medieval knightly estate of nobility and the traditional medieval feudal knighthood and the self-fashioning mimic nobility of the newly-wealthy and bourgeoisie middle class of medieval social climbers, the deeply-rooted chivalric, Arthurian, aristocratic and courtly ideals, values and culture of the medieval English society were tragically shattered, hand in hand with the tragic deflowering of

the medieval knightly romance traditions and courtly love conventions of the medieval knightly estate of nobility.

The newly-rising, socially-upward and newly-affluent medieval commoners began to reject the restrictions, divisions and boundaries imposed on their estate identities by the Sumptuary Laws and the three estate hierarchical structure of the medieval society. The medieval social climbers started to claim nobility and gentility despite their lack of noble lineage and fashion themselves similar to their noble superiors of gentle birth through their newly-acquired upward social mobility, ever-increasing self-consciousness and selfhood, passionate quest for equality with the majesty of the nobility, newly-gained material prosperity and mimicry of the aristocratic, ostentatious and luxurious apparels, knightly accessories, precious jewels, courtly rhetoric, noble lifestyle and the courtly love conventions of the nobility, as can be clearly seen through Chaucer's satirical depictions of the self-fashioning mimic nobility performances of his Canterbury pilgrims in the "General Prologue" and their rhetorical performances which are Chaucerian satirically refashioned and reromanticized versions of the medieval knightly romances and courtly love conventions. This study argues that Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* presents a transparent and satirical panorama of the decaying, shattering and mimic-noble self-fashioning medieval estates, represented by his self-fashioning mimic-courtly medieval estates stereotypes with their stereotypical mimic gentillesse in the "General Prologue" and with their mimic-knightly romances and mimic-courtly love conventions that delegendize the medieval courtly romance values, asbefitting and as reflective of the tragic deflowering of the chivalric, courtly, gentlemanly and aristocratic values in the post-feudal, decaying, non-courtly yet mimic-aristocratic self-fashioning medieval English society. Within this context, this study aims to analyze *The Miller's Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales* as Chaucer's distinctive example of medieval estates satire and panorama through his satirical characterization of his Miller in the "General Prologue" as the self-fashioning mimic-noble stereotype of the mimic-aristocratic and upwardly-mobile medieval estate of the golden peasantry, and through his satirical deromanticization and refashioning of the medieval courtly love conventions in *The Miller's Tale*, by drawing on Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist approach and his concept of self-fashioning.

New Historicism is a literary practice which flourished in the 1980s as "an attempt to provide a novel lens through which to analyze and comprehend literary works" (Veenstra, 1995, 1) as the mirrors and products of the socio-cultural, political, economic, historical and literary contexts of the period in which they were produced and as the reflections of the influences of the earlier and classical literary works and literary conventions on the writers who borrow from

them, and deliberately refashion them in their works so as to reflect and reshape the changing ideals, values and culture of their societies. In this respect, New Historicism emphasizes a more comprehensive” and deeper examination of a literary work”. It emphasizes the significance of examining a literary work within its socio-cultural, historical and literary context that produces it and is, in return, reshaped by it, with regard to the influences of the earlier and classical literary works and literary conventions on the writer and the writer’s refashioning of these literary works and conventions in his work so as to mirror and reconstruct the changing values and culture of his society. Drawing on the New Historicist key concept, *the historicity of the text*, which views a literary work as the reflection of the socio-cultural and political context of the period in which it was written, this study explores *The Miller’s Tale* as Chaucer’s transparent and satirical reflection of the decaying chivalric and aristocratic ideals and values and the tragic shattering of the knightly romance traditions and courtly love conventions in his post-feudal, capitalistic, upwardly-mobile and mimic-aristocratic self-fashioning medieval English society, through his satirical refashioning and parody of the aristocratic romance traditions and courtly love values. In addition, relying on the other key concept of New Historicism; *the textuality of history*, which refers to the rewriting and refashioning of history in accordance with the changing ideals and values of a society, *The Miller’s Tale* is read in this paper as Chaucer’s satirical refashioning and reromanticization of the medieval chivalric romance traditions and courtly love conventions to mirror and satirize the waning knightly and courtly values and culture of his mimic-noble medieval society witnessing the tragic shattering and chaotic refashioning of its deeply-rooted three estate hierarchical divisions as a consequence of the medieval large-scale upward social mobility and self-fashioning mimic nobility of the newly-prosperous and self-conscious middle class of medieval social climbers challenging the supremacy of their noble superiors with their passionate and rebellious claims to gentility through their new prosperity and mimicry.

In its analysis of *The Miller’s Tale* as Chaucer’s transparent and satirical panorama of the medieval non-courtly, upwardly-mobile and mimic-noble world of social climbers, satirically represented by the mimic-aristocratic and inbetween identity performance of the Miller in the “General Prologue”, this study draws on the Greenblattian concept of self-fashioning which Greenblatt describes as “the achievement of a less tangible shape: a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving” (2005, 2). Greenblatt states that “there are both selves and a sense that they can be fashioned” (2005, 2). This study claims that self-fashioning took place in the Middle Ages as a consequence of the emergence of the medieval large-scale upward social mobility, the birth of the newly-wealthy

and mimic-aristocratic middle class of social climbers imitating their noble superiors and their rejection and reconstruction of their imposed estate identities and boundaries to claim nobility and gentility. Accordingly, this study examines Chaucer's satirical characterization of his Miller in the "General Prologue" as a self-fashioning mimic-noble medieval estate stereotype. In the "General Prologue", the Miller is satirically portrayed as the representative of the medieval newly-wealthy and mimic-courtly peasantry blurring the boundaries between their non-genteel, peasant origins and the aristocratic and courtly identity of the medieval knightly estate of nobility. His uncourtly and non-chivalric tale, which is in accordance with his non-genteel and self-constructed aristocratic identity, is read in this study as Chaucer's parody of the chivalric, aristocratic and courtly ideals and values of the medieval Arthurian knightly romances and the elevated, chivalrous and gentlemanly courtly love values of these aristocratic romances. This study claims that Chaucer parodies and delegitimizes the medieval knightly romance traditions and courtly love conventions in *The Miller's Tale* so as to present a transparent reflection and satire of the self-fashioning mimic gentillesse of the medieval non-courtly social climbers.

### **1. Chaucer's Mimic-Aristocratic Miller as the Representative of the Rebellious and Upwardly-Mobile Medieval Peasantry**

The Miller in the "General Prologue" is satirically portrayed as the representative of the newly-wealthy, increasingly self-conscious, rebellious and mimic-aristocratic medieval middle class of the golden peasantry with his stereotypical claim to nobility through his wealth, upward social mobility and mimicry of the nobility. As the perfect embodiment of the mimic-courtly medieval peasantry transgressing and redefining their imposed inferior peasant estate identities, roles and boundaries by rebelliously asking for equality with the medieval knightly estate of nobility despite their non-genteel origins, yet through their newly-gained prosperity, mimic-aristocratic social significance and esteemability and their imitation of the knightly, courtly and aristocratic ideals, values, lifestyle, manners and attire of the nobility, the Miller shatters and refashions the borders between his estate of commoners and the chivalric estate of aristocracy. Chaucer's prosperous and mimic-aristocratic Miller displays his self-fashioning mimic nobility performance through his mimic-noble apparel, customs and manners. The Miller is depicted as the quintessence of the medieval well-off, rebellious and mimic-courtly millers participating in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and rising on the social ladder with their new affluence, passionate quest for acceptance into the courtly and knightly circle of the aristocracy and self-fashioning mimic gentility, yet attracting much criticism for their blurring and crossing the boundaries between the gentry and peasantry with their upwardly-mobile, mimic-noble and inbetween identities fashioned on the borders between their non-genteel peasant origins and mimicry of

the nobility. As Jones states, the medieval millers “had lots of money to spend and were able to step above the boundaries that had evolved between the classes, but nobody wanted them [since] they were still seen as serfs in the eyes of the gentry” (Lambdin & Lambdin, 1996, 275). As the “non-fit”s in the medieval strictly-hierarchical society (Knapp, 1990, 12), the medieval millers were welcomed neither by the peasantry due to their wealth and upward social mobility, nor by the gentry since they were still regarded as serfs even after they became free. Hence, while belonging to the labouring class, they also belonged to the gentry, so they had “no identifiable stature, being neither upper nor lower class” (Lambdin & Lambdin, 1996, 272). In the “General Prologue”, Chaucer’s Miller is portrayed as the perfect representative of the mimic-noble, in-between and socially-upward medieval millers, the rebels of 1381, claiming freedom and nobility, with his self-fashioning mimic-knightly gentility performance and newly-fashioned in-between and mimic-courtly identity shaped on the blurred boundaries between his non-courtly peasant origins and his mimicry of his noble superiors. Similar to the representation of his historical counterparts, Chaucer’s Miller is depicted with his animal-like appearance, ugliness and red head which is associated with the deception, thievery and treachery of the medieval millers (Mann, 1973, 162). In accordance with the animal-like attributes associated with the medieval millers and peasants in the chronicles of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, the most outstanding trait of Chaucer’s Miller is his physical ugliness, beast-like strong appearance and wild and rebellious nature that overturns the social hierarchy:

His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,  
 And therto brood, as though it were a spade.  
 Upon the cop right of his nose he hade  
 A werthe, and theron stood a toft of herys,  
 Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys;  
 His nosethirles blake were and wyde.

[...]

His mouth as greet was as a greet forneys.

(CT, I, 552-57; 559)

Representing his rebellious identity breaking down the barriers and limitations imposed on his peasant estate identity, the Miller is so strong that he can bring down doors with his head (Pearsall, 1985, 75). With his aggressive and subversive identity, the Miller challenges and transgresses his estate boundaries, and breaks the socially-constructed doors and barriers preventing him from being welcomed into the courtly and aristocratic world of the nobility. As



Pearsall suggests, while aggressively shattering the medieval hierarchical estate divisions, the Miller performs his self-fashioning mimic-noble knighthood performance with his mimic-chivalric tournaments which are his mimic-knightly sword, shield and knives and his uncourtly and non-genteel wrestling tournaments asbefitting his non-courtly peasant origins mimicking the chivalric and courtly values and customs of the medieval knightly estate of nobility. The Miller's chivalric and aristocratic aspirations and his violation of his imposed estate identity and borders are reflected through his mimic-courtly apparel, as well. He wears "[a] whit cote and blew hood" (*CT*, I, 564), which reveals that he is a social climber aspiring to an aristocratic social status since "blue hats and brightly coloured hose were theoretically illegal for the lower classes" (Jones, 1955, 6). The Miller's contrasting combination of his "baggepipe" represents his lower peasant origins, and his mimic-chivalric sword and shield which were restricted to knights and the aristocracy as a symbol of their knightly duties and higher social standing (Erol, 1981, 120), reveals his mimic-aristocratic, upwardly-mobile and inbetween self-fashioning. With his "baggepipe", sword and shield, the Miller transgresses and redefines his inferior estate identity and boundaries, and challenges the majesty of the nobility and claims gentility without his noble lineage, yet through his prosperity, upward social mobility and mimicry. However "despite his wealth and wearing of the blue hood and sword, our miller is still rooted in the peasantry" (Lambdin & Lambdin 1996, 276).

Even though the Miller still has his low peasant identity in spite of his mimic-knightly self-fashioning in the "General Prologue", he is determined to trespass and refashion his imposed estate identity and divisions, and challenge the dominant social hierarchy which is the supremacy of the medieval knightly estate of nobility. In this respect, the mimic-noble Miller deliberately chooses to narrate an uncourtly and unchivalric romance in the fabliau genre that not only mimicks, but also parodies the knightly, courtly and aristocratic conventions and courtly love traditions of the traditional medieval chivalric romances. In fact, the unknightly romance he intentionally tells serves as both the reflection of his material self-fashioning mimic nobility performance in the "General Prologue", and as his powerful medium for claiming nobility through the mimicry and parody of the chivalric, courtly and gentlemanly ideals and values of the medieval knightly estate of nobility which are romanticized and glamourized in their traditional Arthurian knightly romances and courtly love traditions. While the Miller uses his uncourtly romance that both imitates and deromanticizes the courtly and knightly romances as the justification of his mimic-chivalric self-fashioning, it turns into Chaucer's transparent representation and satire of the self-fashioning mimic gentility performances of the newly-wealthy and upwardly-mobile medieval estate of commoners; the passionate social climbers of

whom the Miller is portrayed as the perfect representative of with his stereotypical mimic-noble self-fashioning in the “General Prologue”.

The rebellious and mimic-noble voice of the Miller can be clearly traced in his rebellion against the Host’s attempt to establish social hierarchy and order upon the tale-telling game. After the noble and honourable Knight of gentle birth completes his chivalric tale, the Host asks the Monk to tell his tale asbefitting the three estate hierarchical structure of the medieval English society (*CT*, I, 3116-18-19). However, the “drunken” (*CT*, I, 3120) and disrespectful Miller “displays antagonism towards both the Knight and the Monk when he intrudes upon the game of storytelling to tell his story out of turn, in spite of the Host’s suggestion” (Knoetze, 2015, 37). Although the Host reminds the Miller of his lower social status: “And seyde, “Abyd, Robyn, my leeve brother;/ Som better man shal telle us first another/ Abyd, and lat us werken thriftly.” (*CT*, I, 3129-31), the Miller does not give up his claim, and violates the social hierarchy by telling his mimic-knightly and uncourtly tale after the Knight. Robert Miller argues that the Miller’s rebellion against the social order signals his “antagonism toward the estates of his temporal and spiritual lords” (1970, 157), and represents the willingness of the medieval middle and lower classes to challenge the sovereignty and supremacy of the medieval knightly estate of nobility and the deeply-rooted three estate hierarchical divisions of the medieval English society “during Chaucer’s period – an attitude which had already resulted in the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381” (Knoetze, 2015, 37). In fact, the rebellious and mimic-noble Miller claims equality with the Knight by mockingly saying that he will tell “a noble tale for the nones,/ With which [he] wol now quite the Knyghtes tale” (*CT*, I, 3126-7). In the *Miller’s Prologue*, Chaucer calls the tale which is about to be told by the Miller a “cherles tale” (*CT*, I, 3169), and apologizes for it. In fact, the Miller is seen as a “cherl”; “a freeman of the lowest rank or a rude and surly person” (Knoetze, 2015, 38). With this word, Chaucer suggests that the tale-teller is a non-genteel commoner narrating a “rude and disruptive” tale asbefitting his non-courtly lower class status (38). Accordingly, the Miller’s tale belongs to the fabliau genre which is opposed to the high, chivalric, courtly, gentlemanly and aristocratic spirit of the traditional medieval knightly romances that “ha[d] a tendency to endorse a hierarchical worldview [...] aristocratic power” and “the values of a traditional medieval chivalric and courtly feudal society”, and were “for an elite minority, [...] a vehicle for the construction of a social code – chivalry- - and a mode of sentimental refinement – [...] called “courtly love” – by which noble audiences defined their social identities and justified their privileges, thus reinforcing gender and class distinctions” (Krueger, 2000, 1-5).



To transgress the estate distinctions, challenge the aristocratic and chivalric culture and courtly love conventions of his noble superiors and claim nobility through the mimicry and parody of the hegemonic chivalric values and traditions, the Miller narrates his mimic-knightly and uncourtly romance in the form of fabliau, asbefitting his mimic-chivalric and inbetween self-fashioning. The Miller deliberately prefers the fabliau genre since it is “delightfully subversive—a light-hearted thumbing of the nose at the [...] idealistic pretensions of the aristocracy and its courtly literature, which the fabliaux frequently parody, though just as frequently they parody lower-class attempts to adopt courtly behaviour” (Benson, 1988, 8). According to Furrow,

[...] romances take a deliberately high view of life, and the fabliaux, a determinedly low one. The very things that romance is careful to exclude are the things that are the joy of fabliaux; bodily functions, obscene words, lower-class people, upper-class people who act contrary to romance expectations, unadorned and unceremonialized lust and greed. (1989, 7)

As the representative of the self-fashioning, mimic-noble and bourgeoisie middle class of medieval social climbers asking for gentility through wealth, mimicry and upward social mobility, the Miller tells a subversively humorous fabliau that both mimicks and parodies the courtly love conventions and the chivalric ideals glorified in *The Knight's Tale* telling of the elevated, glorifying, aristocratic and chivalric art of courtly love of two noble knights and their glorious Arthurian quest and chivalric tournament for the sake of the precious love of their worshipped, unattainable, chaste and virtuous courtly lady of gentle birth. Instead of ennobling the idealized aristocratic, courtly and gentlemanly ideals and values of courtly love, the Miller presents a discourteous, non-chivalric and uncourtly romance at the center of which is the mimic-noble self-fashioning world of the medieval social climbers desiring to be accepted into the genteel and aristocratic sphere by imitating the aristocratic apparel, manners and courtly love conventions of the nobility. The Miller's uncourtly romance, parodying the courtly love conventions and the knightly and aristocratic values of the nobility through its self-fashioning, mimic-courtly and socially-upward non-genteel characters; the old “riche gnof” John (CT, I, 3188), his “yong wyf” (CT, I, 3233) Alisoun, their tenant, a “poure scoler” (CT, I, 3312), Nicholas and Absolon, a “parissh clerk” (CT, I, 3312), reflects the “mercantile or commercial” [...] world of the late fourteenth century” (Strohm, 1989, 137-9) witnessing the tragic decay of the courtly and gentlemanly values. In contrast to the chivalric and honourable courtly lover stereotype and the noble, silent, delicate, chaste and virtuous, adorned courtly lady archetype of the traditional medieval knightly romances, in the Miller's Tale, there are neither chivalrous and worthy courtly lovers of gentle birth nor chaste, faithful, unattainable and worshipped

courtly ladies of noble heritage, but instead, obscenity and lechery within the non-gentle love triangle of the unchaste, unfaithful and lascivious Alisoun, mimic-courtly Nicholas whose non-chivalric quest for his uncourtly lady Alisoun is simply sexually-oriented and Absolon whose mimic-courtly love disgraces the refined and gentlemanly art of courtly love with its discourteous pangs of vengeance.

Chaucer's satirical refashioning of the medieval knightly romance and courtly love conventions for his purpose of medieval estates satire and panorama is clear in his satirical portrayal of his uncourtly and non-genteel courtly lady, Alisoun. While chivalric romance ladies are "described very tastefully, with emphasis on their inner virtues, in Alisoun, Chaucer gives us a parodic portrait of a romance heroine in which there is a strong emphasis on her body and sexuality" (Knoetze 42). Cooper states that the portrayal of Alisoun is in contrast with that of the worshipped and precious courtly lady Emelye in *The Knight's Tale* (1996, 106). Emelye's description is typical of a virtuous, delicate and precious romance heroine whose "angel [ic]", "heavenly" beauty is resembled to a "faire" "lilye" blossoming in the "grene" garden, a "Rose", and "flowers, white and red" (*CT*, I, 1041-3) Her untouched innocence, "grene" youth and virginal beauty make her "fressher than the May with floures newe" (*CT*, I, 1037), and "this lovely innocent maiden's" "celestial beauty" is likened to "Venus", the "goddess" of love and the beautiful "garland of many flowers" she was "making herself while singing "as an aungel hevenyshly" (*CT*, I, 1055). In contrast to the romance courtly lady archetype, Emelye, the Miller's uncourtly heroine, Alisoun sings merely like "any swalwe sittyng on a berne" (*CT*, I, 3258), and instead of Emelye's blossoming lilies and roses, she is called a "prymerole [primrose]" and a "piggesnye [pig's eye]" (*CT*, I, 3268). In addition, as Cooper points out, while they glorifying portrayal of Emelye "appeals to the higher senses of sight and sound [...]" Alisoun is perceived as much through the baser physical senses of smell, taste and touch" (106). She is resembled to a pear tree (*CT*, I, 3248), she is "softer than the wolle is of a wether [sheep], and "Hir mouth [is] as sweete as bragot [country drink] or the meeth [mead], / Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth" (*CT*, I, 3261-62). In fact, the satirical portrayal of Alisoun's sexuality, physical desirability and accessibility is in direct contrast to that of Emelye as an angel and the goddess Venus, which serves to highlight Emelye, the ideal romance heroine's purity, virtue, celibacy and unattainability. In fact, the Miller parodies the aristocratic and knightly romances and courtly love conventions of the nobility with "this mock portrait of a romance heroine" (Knoetze, 2015, 43) inspiring mere sexual desire rather than the courtly lovers' chivalric displays of knightly honour, glory, courtliness, gentillesse, prowess and

gallantry in their chivalric tournaments which are their knightly and courtly quests for the precious love of their worshipped, genteel courtly lady.

The scene of Nicholas's wooing of Alisoun serves as Chaucerian parody of the medieval courtly love conventions. When John is away from home for business, Nicholas and Alisoun flirt with each other. As a mimic-courtly lover, Nicholas imitates the elevated, aristocratic and courtly discourse. As a mimic-courtly lover mimicking the lovesickness and pangs of love of the idealized courtly romance heroes, Nicholas tells Alisoun about his "deerne love" (*CT*, I, 3278) for her, and calls her "lemman [lover or paramour]" (*CT*, I, 3278) for whose "love" he "wol dyen" (*CT*, I, 3281). However, meanwhile, "he caughte hire by the queynte [her genitals] / [...] / And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones" (*CT*, I, 3276-9). His mimic-aristocratic display of the noble and gentlemanly art of courtly love contrasts with his uncourtly words: "For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille" (*CT*, I, 3278). As Knoetze argues, "the juxtaposition between the language used and the physical situation mocks the romance genre" (44). With his mimic-courtly rhetoric that is in sharp contrast with his lascivious activities, Nicholas disgraces and delegitimizes the highly-refined, aristocratic and courteous nature of courtly love and the knightly values of gentillesse and courtesy. Similar to the mimic-noble Nicholas, Alisoun, pretending to be an ideal, gentlewomanly, courteous and noble courtly romance heroine of knightly romances, plays the unattainable, virtuous and chaste maiden archetype, and rejects her courtly lover by saying: "I wol nat kisse thee, by my fee! [...] / Or I wol crie out, harrow and 'allas!' / Do wey youre hands, for youre curteisye!" (*CT*, I, 3290-2). Nevertheless, immediately, she accepts the love of Nicholas unlike a capricious and virtuous romance heroine embodying the feudally-idealized cult of true womanhood. Upon reaching his uncourtly aim with "most uncourtly directness and speed" (Stillwell, 1955, 694), Nicholas plays his guitar like a true, gentlemanly, aristocratic, courteous and genteel, courtly lover: "He kiste hire sweete and takethhis sawtrie, / And pleyeth faste, and maketh melodie" (*CT*, I, 3305-6).

The parody and mimicry of the courtly love conventions is more visible in the discourteous and non-courtly relationship between Absolon and Alisoun. Absolon, a parish clerk, a solicitor and barber fashions himself as an ideal, gentlemanly, courteous and aristocratic courtly lover who "hath his herte swich a love-longynge" (*CT*, I, 3349) for Alisoun. Chaucer parodies the courtly love conventions and the knightly romance traditions through his satirical portrayal of his self-fashioning mimic-noble Absolon who displays his mimic nobility and gentility performance through his mimic-aristocratic attire, mimic-courtly manners and mimic-noble talents. As a mimic-noble aspiring to be welcomed into the courtly sphere of the nobility and desiring the precious love of his uncourtly lady through his mimicry of the courtly love conventions of the

nobility, Absolon wears mimic-aristocratic, luxurious and colourful clothes which are restricted to the medieval knightly estate of the nobility, and displays great talent for playing musical instruments and dancing like his noble superiors:

Crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon,  
 And strouted as a fanne large and brode;  
 Ful streight and evene lay his joly shode.  
 His rode was reed, his eyen greye as goos.  
 With Poules wyndow corven on his shoos,  
 In hoses rede he wente fetisly.  
 Yclad he was ful smal and proprely  
 Al in a kirtel of a lyght waget;  
 Ful faire and thikke been the poyntes set.  
 And therupon he hadde a gay surplys  
 As whit as is the blosme upon the rys.  
 [...]

In twenty manere koude he trippe and daunce  
 After the scole of Oxenforde tho,  
 And with his legges casten to and fro,  
 And pleyen songes on a smal rubible;  
 Therto he song som tyme a loud quynnyble;  
 And as wel koude he pleye on a giterne.  
 (CT, I, 3313-24; 3328-33)

Beside his mimic-aristocratic talents and apparel, Absolon mimicks the courtly love conventions of the aristocracy. As a mimic-courtly lover, Absolon “forth [...] gooth, jolif and amorous/ Til he cam to the carpenteres hous” (CT, I, 3355-6), and sang a beautiful serenade to his courtly lady, Alisoun with “his gyterne” (CT, I, 3353) under “The moone, whan it was nyght, ful brighte shoon” (CT, I, 3352). Under his worshipped courtly lady’s window, the mimic-courtly Absolon, suffering from pangs of love, plays his guitar, serenades her “in his voys gentil” (CT, I, 3360) and “Ful wel acordaunt to his gyternynge” (CT, I, 3363), and begs her to pity on his lovesickness: “Now, deere lady, if thy wille be,/ I praye yow that ye wole rewe on me,” (CT, I, 3361-2). As an ideal, lovesick courtly lover, Absolon does not give up wooing his lady. He dresses elegantly, “kembeth his lokkes brode, and made hym gay” (CT, I, 3374). However, “Fro day to day this joly Absolon/ So woweth hire that hym is wo bigon” (CT, I,

3371-2). The woebegone Absolon suffers from insomnia; “He waketh al the nyght and al the day;” (*CT*, I, 3374), and serenades and “[...] woweth hire by meenes and brocage,/ And swoor he wolde been hir owene page;/ He syngeth, brokkynge as a nyghtyngale;” (*CT*, I, 3375-7). So as to win the precious love of his adorned, unattainable courtly lady, Absolon mimicks the knightly and aristocratic ideals of gentillesse, courtliness, and courtesy and the aristocratic display of wealth and courtly generosity “He sente hire pyment, meeth, and spiced ale,/ And wafres, pipyng hoot out of the gleede;” (*CT*, I, 3378-9). However, the mimic-courtly lover Absolon fails as a courtly lover when he “profred meede [money]” (*CT*, I, 3380) to his courtly lady. In fact, Chaucer parodies Absolon’s mimic nobility self-fashioning as an ideal courtly lover through his satirical portrayal of Absolon’s uncourtly and disgraceful objectification of his uncourtly lady. In fact, while Absolon fashions himself as an ideal courtly lover, yet fails in his mimicry of the courtly love conventions as a consequence of his non-genteel origins and claim to nobility without noble birth, yet through his upward social mobility, newly-gained prosperity and mimicry of the nobility, Alisoun plays the part of the unattainable, adorned and capricious romance heroine rejecting her lovesick courtly suitor. Alisoun’s mimicry of the courtly love conventions and the romance heroine stereotype of knightly romances is more obvious in her self-fashioning as a noble lady through her mimic-aristocratic, ostentatious and luxurious costume and fake jewels asbefitting her mimic-courtly, upwardly-mobile, bourgeoisie and inbetween identity fashioned on the blurred borders between her non-genteel inferior origins as the non-courtly wife of a newly-wealthy carpenter and her mimicry of the noble ladies of the aristocracy. As a mimic-noble lady yearning for acceptance into the genteel and courtly sphere of the aristocracy, Alisoun wears fashionable, silk apparel: a “ceynt” “barred al of silk”, (*CT*, I, 3235); “[...] on hir coler aboute,/ Of col-blak silk,” (*CT*, I, 3239-40). As Phillips points out, Alisoun, the bourgeoisie wife of a newly well-off and socially-upward guildsman, dresses like noble ladies (*An Introduction* 56-nazan tez). Her girdle ornamented with silk and pearls which “are imitation [are] parallel to her fake gentility. She wears a brooch but lacking the gentle refinement of taste, she has exceeded the point in size and grace” (Erol, 1981, 148) since the “brooch she baar upon hir lowe coler,/ As brood as is the boos of a bokeler” (*CT*, I, 3265-6).

In fact, Chaucer offers his transparent reflection and satire of the tragic decay of the aristocratic values and courtly love conventions as a consequence of the self-fashioning mimic nobility performances of the newly-rising middle class of medieval social climbers claiming gentility through mimicry, by means of his parody of the courtly love conventions. Alisoun’s mimic nobility performance through her mimic-aristocratic apparel and fake jewels and her

pretensions of the knightly romance heroines through her capricious relationship with her mimic-courtly lover Absolon is in accordance with her two mimic-courtly suitors' unchivalric and discourteous love quest since both of the mimic-courtly suitors disgrace the courtly love conventions. While Nicholas deromanticizes the highly-refined, gentlemanly and aristocratic art of courtly love by dishonouring and devaluing his courtly lady as a worthless object of sexual desire and lust, Absolon turns into a revengeful enemy enkindled by the discourteous fire of grudge, anger and enmity after his disastrous physical interaction with his lady, Alisoun. When Absolon serenades Alisoun from beneath her window for the second time, she is sleeping with her other uncourtly suitor, Nicholas having played a disgraceful trick on John by convincing him to sleep in a tub to protect himself from the overcoming flood. While John is in the tub, Absolon declares his love to Alisoun and begs for her precious "mercy" (CT, I, 3727) and her "kysse" (CT, I, 3716). However, rather than a romantic kiss, he kisses Alisoun's "naked ers" (CT, I, 3734). Upon kissing his lady's "naked ers", Absolon gets outraged, throws off his mimic-courtly refinement, and prays for revenge: "My soule bitake I unto Sathanas,/ But me were levere than al this toun," quod he,/ "Of this despit awroken for to be" (CT, I, 3750-2). Immediately, he goes to "a smyth", borrows a hot iron, and goes back to Alisoun. When Nicholas who has "risen to pisse" (CT, I, 3798) hears Absolon begging Alisoun for another kiss and offering her a golden "ryng" (CT, I, 3794) in return for her golden "kysse", opens the window and sticks out his his bottom, and "[...] anon leet fle a fart/ As greet as it had been a thonder-dent," (CT, I, 3806). Absolon, "with the strook [...] almoost yblent" (CT, I, 3808) is "redy with his iren hoot,/ And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot" (CT, I, 3809-10). Then, Absolon "brende so his toute" (CT, I, 3812), and hence, delegendizes his previous mimic-courtly code with his discourteous and non-genteel vengeance, asbefitting his non-courtly and non-chivalric origins.

### Conclusion

As Chaucer's distinctive example of medieval estates satire and panorama, *The Miller's Tale* humorously turns the deeply-rooted chivalric romance ideals upside down, and mocks the courtly romance genre by parodying the aristocratic and gentlemanly codes of chivalry and courtly love through its satirical portrayals of its discourteous, non-genteel, yet mimic-courtly romance heroes and heroines disgracing the medieval knightly romance traditions and courtly love values with their uncourtly inferior origins, newly-fashioned mimic-aristocratic and inbetween identities and mimicry and failure of the courtly and aristocratic values, manners and courtly love conventions of their noble superiors of gentle lineage. Asbefitting and as reflective of his non-courtly, mimic-noble and upwardly mobile self-fashioning mimic gentility



performance in the “General Prologue”, the Miller turns the idealized and glamourized medieval knightly romances and courtly love conventions into his unknighly and mimic-courtly fabliau that deliberately deromanticizes the courtly, genteel, honourable and worthy romance lady and courtly lover stereotypes of medieval chivalric romances, and delegendizes the chivalric and Arthurian ideals of knightly honour, glory, courtliness, courtesy and gentillesse. In this respect, his uncourtly romance serves as Chaucer’s transparent reflection and satire of the self-fashioning mimic nobility and gentility performances of the specific medieval estate – the newly-wealthy, mimic-noble and bourgeoisie middle class of upwardly-mobile medieval commoners; the social climbers- which he is portrayed as the satirical representative of in the “General Prologue” through his stereotypical material self-fashioning mimic gentillesse and knighthood performance.

In fact, Chaucer offers a distinctive example of medieval estates satire and panorama in *The Miller’s Tale* through his satirical refashioning and parody of the medieval knightly romance traditions and courtly love conventions. By means of his satirical delegendization and refashioning of the medieval knightly romances, Chaucer transparently unveils and satirizes the decaying chivalric, Arthurian, aristocratic, courtly and gentlemanly ideals and values of the medieval knightly estate of nobility and the traditional medieval feudal chivalry and the tragic deflowering of the chivalric romance and courtly love values and traditions in his post-feudal, non-courtly, mimic-noble and upwardly-mobile medieval English society governed by the mimic-courtly self-fashioning of the newly-rich middle grouping of medieval commoners claiming nobility through their mimicry. In this respect, *The Miller’s Tale* functions as his transparent and satirical representation of his decaying, shattering and mimic-noble self-fashioning medieval world of social climbers challenging the supremacy of their noble superiors and asking for acceptance into their chivalric and courtly sphere through their mimicry and refashioning of their romance ideals and courtly love values.

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