

## IRONIC DANCING ABSOLON IN THE MILLER'S TALE

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Given recent critical attention to Chaucer's comic mechanics<sup>1</sup> and to the relationship between characterization and syntax,<sup>2</sup> one should beware the poet's devoting three of twenty-five lines of suspended narration to Absolon the Dancer:

In twenty manere coude he trippe and daunce,  
After the scole of Oxenforde tho,  
And with his legges casten to and fro. (3328-30)

The statement seems straightforward until one remembers the ironic underpinnings of all Chaucerian description,<sup>3</sup> and especially that which details Absolon's overall "perfuming," his pleasure in the ritual of hopeless passion rather than the "solas" of the bedchamber, and his self-image of elegant bourgeoisie which places him in theory but not in practice far above the villagers. Explorations of Chaucer's range of irony account in large part for scholarly efforts to understand the significance of Absolon's hair, his profession, his various avocations, and his remarkable attire.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, one would expect such a clearly drawn character to have been studied from head to foot. Yet, as in the case of Peter Riga's *effictio* of his biblical namesake,<sup>5</sup> attempts to explain Absolon's presentation fall off markedly from the knees downward. Although Chaucer's characterizations

are often said to leap out at the reader, the fact that the dancing Absolon literally does so -- casting his legs to and fro -- has occasioned little notice. The counterpoint of expectation and actuality in the criticism of these lines is emblematic of the kind of irony they illustrate because in its most mature form verbal irony demands an understanding or even an intimacy between the poet and the more perceptive of his audience. Ironies exist, therefore, in the gaps between what is expected and what is. Exposing the implications of Absolon's dancing bridges the gaps and allows entrance into the ranks of the more perceptive audience.

Chaucer's portrayal of Absolon as a small town dandy permits the expectation that his dancing be a "genteel accomplishment" -- a social dance -- albeit totally unimpressive to a young lady of Alisoun's spirit.<sup>6</sup> But such an expectation withers under careful scrutiny. There is, indeed, evidence that the Provençal troubadours who escaped the Albigensian purge (ca. 1208) took refuge in various European courts where they were welcomed because of their songs and dances, and nowhere more so than in England whose kings had always been in close touch with Provence.<sup>7</sup> Because of these entertainers, Round Dances or Branles, Farandoles, and Old Almains were well known in Britain by 1350. Their execution seems to have demanded the cooperation of all present and the dividing line for participation was not between peasantry and gentry but between old and young.<sup>8</sup> As a result, dances were learned by the simple folk and could easily be transported from the manor house or castle hall to the village green. The Estampie, a development of the Branle, featuring one gentleman and one or two ladies, would seem admirably suited to the foppish and fastidious Absolon. Yet even if the carole, the roundel, the hay, and variations of each are added to the possible list of dances in Absolon's repertoire, no amount of scholarly chicanery can raise the number of these social dances to twenty.<sup>9</sup>

When a case is made for defining "manere" as "steps" rather than "types" -- and many a Branle, Farandole, and Estampie boasted that number of movements -- there is still no possibility of relating any twenty-step dance to the Oxford environs. It is true that Sir Humphrey Gilbert's scheme for training the aristocracy at Oxford (ca. 1570)<sup>10</sup> included a "dawncing schole" which was in existence for some time. The diary of the notorious Simon Forman, who was an undergraduate at Magdalen College in 1574, also mentions "daunceing scolles" as rather venerable collegiate institutions.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the earliest school that can be identified is the "daunsing

school" on the first floor of a house in Cornmarket, immediately outside the North Gate opposite St. Michael's. This was occupied in 1606 by John Bosseley, "musion," who, on the renewal of his lease by the City of Oxford in 1610, had to promise that "he would not daunce nor suffer any daunsing after tenne of the Clocke in the night nor before fyve of the clocke in the morning"<sup>12</sup> -- sure grounds for lease-breaking even now. So "scole" must mean the "style" or "fashion" of Oxford where the only indigenous dances are those preserved under the title of "Cotswold morris," though they seem to have been in existence long before the term morris (originally "moorish") was adopted in England.<sup>13</sup> The effete-mannered Absolon, then, is proficient not in the stately Estampie but in the jigging, leaping, all-male folk dances common to the Spring-Summer festivals.

Bennett's contention that Absolon's performance would have been "florid" is undoubtedly correct and his further deduction that such dancing must have been the "townish counterpart to the academic schools of Absolon's rival"<sup>14</sup> is what we should expect. Instead, such a conclusion leads to a second irony for, throughout Europe, scholars themselves indulged in dancing. The inception banquet in Paris regularly included dances<sup>15</sup> and, while contemporary Bologna statutes forbade a rector to "dance or make dance with trumpets or without" for a whole month after his inauguration, presumably thereafter this type of recreation was not proscribed.<sup>16</sup> Fifteenth-century agreements between town and gown at Basel and Avignon provide that student dances "qui fuerint in festis de universitate" should not be permitted in public.<sup>17</sup> Rashdall infers that dancing was a favorite amusement with fourteenth-century English students from the fact that even in New College, which was jealously guarded against female intrusion, William of Wykeham found it necessary, for the protection of the sculpture in the Chapel reredos, to make a statute against dancing or jumping in the Chapel or in the adjoining hall. New College also prohibited all struggling, chorusing, dancing, leaping, singing, shouting, tumult, and inordinate noise, the pouring forth of water, beer, and other liquids, and boisterous games in the hall on the grounds that they were likely to disturb the occupants of the Chaplain's chamber below.<sup>18</sup> A moderate indulgence in the more harmless of these pastimes in other places -- and surely dancing can be included here -- seems to have been permitted. So the "town's" Absolon, who seems to rival the "gown's" Nicolas in almost every way, is in his dancing more like than different.

A third irony can be discerned in Chaucer's care to identify Absolon as a parish clerk; one would expect from this that his dancing would at least be not inimical to his ecclesiastical position. Doubtless, the word "dance" had occasioned very contradictory behaviour patterns. Dances were consistently held at court, in the manor houses, at church wakes and saints' festivals at the same time that this amusement was pilloried by both continental and English churchmen: Etienne de Bourbon, Jacques de Vitry, Thomas Cantimpratanus, Berthold de Ratisbon, Johan Geiler, Robert Mannyng of Brunne, and William of Pagula, to name the more conspicuous.<sup>19</sup> A closer look at their proscriptions, however, focuses these condemnations on a special kind of dancing. Robert Mannyng clearly explained the context in which this dancing is intolerable:

Daunces, karols, somour games  
 Of many swych come many shames  
 Whan thou stodyst to make these  
 Thou art sloghe yn Goddys servyse  
 And that synnen yn swych thurght the  
 For hem thou shalt a-coupede be.<sup>20</sup>

The proximity of Mannyng's infamous dances to "karols" -- derived from the primitive linked chain<sup>21</sup> -- and to "somour games" indicates that he does not refer to the social dances of the Troubadours but to another etymologically defensible<sup>22</sup> signification for the word. Although folklore's argument is by analogy and reaches conclusions that are necessarily tentative, such dancing seems to originate in a primitive cult of the army of the dead, moving and raging in ritualistic ecstasy.<sup>23</sup> It is quite possible that costume elements such as bells, ribbons, feathers, along with efforts at disguise like blackened faces and animal masks (many of which characterize the dancers in mediaeval manuscript illuminations and margins<sup>24</sup>) were at first the trappings of dead ancestors and only later were associated with seasonal festivals designed to promote fertility.<sup>25</sup> The evolution from pagan religious ritual to folk custom obviously took centuries; it was not satisfactorily completed by the thirteenth century when Robert Grosseteste and Walter de Chanteloup tried to suppress the May Games and Whitsun Ales whose respectability was doubtful.<sup>26</sup> These summer ceremonies, celebrated by a whole village for the benefit of everybody's crops and herds, included a Young Men's Dance (probably processional in character) whose movements

responded to a musical rhythm while its handkerchiefs, clothing, and other paraphernalia represented the immaterial or spiritual side of man and nature shared alike by the living and the dead.<sup>27</sup> No doubt the original purpose of quickening Nature -- quickened itself by fermented spirits -- found outlet in other activities which merited churchly condemnation.

But folk custom rooted in pre-Christian ritual is difficult to dislodge and the mediaeval church frequently came to terms with the enemy. The Franciscan author of *Dives and Pauper* took the liberal view,<sup>28</sup> and, in organizing processions for its great new feast of Corpus Christi in 1264, the Church resignedly admitted these originally heathen dances to her sacred rites. The *Hours* of Juvenal des Ursines show the procession of the host on Corpus Christi Day surrounded by clerks of the brotherhood wearing wreaths on their heads;<sup>29</sup> similar headgear -- also the trappings of the Young Men's Dance -- seems to have been customary at English celebrations of the Feast, even to being willed from one Corpus Christi Guild member to another.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the marriage of pagan custom and Christian ritual was not always a happy one; there are numerous prohibitions of dancing in churchyards in England, and the Chancellor of the University of Oxford in 1250 or thereabouts, "under pain of the greater excommunication," forbade alike in churches or in the streets "all dancing in masks or with disorderly noises and all processions of men wearing wreaths or garlands made of leaves or trees or flowers or what not."<sup>31</sup>

In 1306, however, there was an obvious breach of the edict, resulting in the demise of Gilbert de Foxlee, when the Oxford Tailor's Guild held a St. John's Eve wake in their shops:

as the use and custom is to do there . . . And after midnight, finding that no man was wandering there in the streets, they went forth from their shops and others with them an held their dances in the High Street in the face of Cloth Hall; and as they thus played, there came the aforesaid Gilbert [who] began to contend with them, purposing . . . to break up that dance.<sup>32</sup>

The inquest into this disastrous behaviour provides us with some important information: the adventure occurs only after midnight when the town was deserted; the time of the year is June; the deposition mentions a group of dances obviously known to all. We can also be reasonably sure that the "tailors of Oxford" were not a dual-sex organization.<sup>33</sup> Given Gilbert

de Foxlee's outrage, it would not seem that these dances were even tolerated in the mediaeval city of Chaucer's fabliau. The tailors would have fared better if they had saved their dancing for the Whitsun and/or Lamb ales which dotted the Oxford countryside on several June Mondays and which were remarkable for their antiquity when Blount described them in 1679.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, one can surmise that Absolon, who disported with his Oseney comrades on a Monday, was well aware of the climate of opinion against such celebrations in the churchly atmosphere of Oxford town. Thus by investigating ecclesial attitude we again watch the dancing Absolon execute an ironic twist.

A last, delightful set of ironies may be connected with variations in the performances permitted in the Young Men's Dances; that they could be solo or group is an option still preserved in the treasured traditions of the Cotswold morris.<sup>35</sup> Solo parts eventually produced two standard characterizations: that of the Fool and that of the Man-Woman. The Fool may originally have been part of an initiation rite, that is, the antics he performs could have symbolized first the death of childhood and the birth of manhood and man, and only later have been confused with the killing and reviving of the spirit of fertility.<sup>36</sup> According to the illuminators of the thirteenth century, the Fool appeared a wretched idiot and even when he was refurbished in fourteenth-century miniatures, the improvements added but little to his respectability or respect.<sup>37</sup> The Man-Woman, that common symbol of fertility, survived splendidly in English morris as the Maid Marian.<sup>38</sup> One would expect, then, that Absolon's participation in these Young Men's Dances would give him an excellent opportunity to display his "lightnesse" and his beautiful shoes, but since Chaucer abstains from detailing the exact nature of his "disporting" one can theorize, first, that the clerk's preceding and subsequent exploits in the tale identify him as a likely candidate for the Fool's part; second, that his lengthy hair and rather questionable masculinity make him a worthy nominee for the Man-Woman role; and third, that whether or not he could be identified as Fool or Man-Woman, his characterization casts doubt on his masculinity and/or sexual adequacy<sup>39</sup> at the same time that it features his participation in dances which rejoiced over and encouraged both the incidence of fertility and the propagation of the species. Obviously, at every turn in these three lines, expectation and actuality underlie a mature and subtle irony. From an informed vantage point, Chaucer's seemingly irrelevant comment yields a rich, ironic harvest.

The ultimate question, however one defines "manere," involves the number twenty. Actually the most active and long-lived morris troupes in the Oxford area (Headington Quarry and Bampton) both have preserved a body of customary dances that number about twenty.<sup>40</sup> Composed of set-dances (stick, reel, handkerchief, or corner) and jigs, the repertoires when collected by Cecil Sharp and Herbert Macilwaine<sup>41</sup> were considered of venerable age, even if individual dances were sometimes put to tunes with modern names. One of the oldest of these dances is called "trunkoles," "trunkles," or "trunkhose" and now identifies a corner dance; its earliest orthographical form, "trunkles," if derived from the later Latin *truncus*,<sup>42</sup> may well have heralded the Fool. In line with its curious name, the melody for this dance has little of what might be called modern tonality; William Kimber, the grand old man of English morris, termed it simply "ancient."<sup>43</sup> Both reputable tradition and contemporary practice indicate that trunkles has 20 steps. Chaucer's notation, then, while it could refer to a whole group of Young Men's Dances, probably specifies a single one -- processional rather than combative in nature -- which celebrated in twenty steps the return of fertility to the earth. A protoform of the morris, this dance may have been a trunkles.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Joseph A. Dané, "The Mechanics of Comedy in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 14 (1980) 215-24.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. Jambeck, "Characterization and Syntax in the *Miller's Tale*," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 5 (1975) 73-85.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Reiss, "Chaucer and Medieval Irony," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1 (1979) 67-82.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the more well-known studies are Paul E. Beichner, "Absolom's

Hair," *Mediaeval Studies* 12 (1950) 222-33; Thomas B. Hanson, "Physiognomy and Characterization in the *Miller's Tale*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971) 477-82; Beryl Rowland, "The Play of the *Miller's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 5 (1970) 140-46; Peter H. Beidler, "Art and Scatology in the *Miller's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 12 (1977) 90-102; Roy P. Clark, "Christmas Games in Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 13 (1976) 277-87; and James Winny's edition of the text (London 1978).

<sup>5</sup>See Paul E. Beichner, "The Old French Verse *Bible* of Macé de la Charité, A Translation of the *Aurora*," *Speculum* 22 (1947) 233-34.

<sup>6</sup>Paul E. Beichner, "Characterization in the *Miller's Tale*," in *Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales*, ed., Richard Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, Ind. 1960) 121.

<sup>7</sup>Melusine Wood, *Some Historical Dances* (London 1952) 13.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. 14.

<sup>9</sup>Sister M. Ernestine Whitmore, *Medieval English Domestic Life and Amusements in the Works of Chaucer* (Washington, D.C. 1937) 22. Cf. Douglas Kennedy, *England's Dances* (London 1949).

<sup>10</sup>Percy Manning, "Sport and Pastime in Stuart Oxford," in *Surveys and Tokens*, ed. H.E. Salter (Oxford 1923) 116.

<sup>11</sup>*Autobiography and Personal Diary of Dr. Simon Forman*, ed. James O. Halliwell-Phillips (London 1849) 12.

<sup>12</sup>Oxford City Council Book B, for September 8th, fol. 109 and fols. 132, 134-35. Cf. Ledger D, 5, 5, fol. 180; cited in Manning (at n. 10).

<sup>13</sup>Rodney Gallop, "The Meaning of Morris," *Nineteenth Century and After* 118 (1935) 92-99; Joseph Needham, "The Geographical Distribution of English Ceremonial Dance Tradition," *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 3 (1936) 26, 39; Violet Alfred, "Morris and Morisca," *JEFDSS* 2 (1935) 42-43. The first citation of the term "morris" in England seems to be the 1458 will of Alice de Wetenhalle which bequeathes to her son "a silver cup, sculpt, de moreys dauns." See Barbara Lowe, "Early Records of the Morris in England," *JEFDSS* 8 (1957) 61: "About the same time the English translator of the Norman-French romance, 'The Knight of the Swanne,' related that the night before the wedding of King Orient and Beatrice 'were made morishes, comedies, daunces, interludes and all maner of joyous sportes'." Theories proposed to explain the English usage of "morris" have abounded, especially since the discrediting of that which attributed its introduction to John of Gaunt. In "The Meaning of Morris," *Nineteenth Century and After*



118 (1935) 92-99, Rodney Gallop surveys both the ancient and modern derivations of the word. The John of Gaunt theory is summarized in William Bayles, "A Canterbury Tales in Plastic," *Germany and You* 5 (1935) 10. Certainly, on both sides of the Pyrenees, mediaeval seasonal festivals included an entertainment called the Mauresque, a contest between Moors and Christians which dramatically represented the annual conflict between life and death; see Kennedy (at n. 9) 44. Such a dance was surely seen by the English army of occupation in Gascony and Aquitaine during the Hundred Years War and perhaps invited comparisons with English varieties in the contest format. But whatever caused the popular misapprehension which extended the term "moorish" to folk dance in England, it is indisputable that the introduction of "morris" there lagged centuries behind its appearance on the European continent; in fact, the dances eventually called "morris" were probably indigenous to the Midlands even before the arrival of the Danes; see Violet Alfred, "Morris and Morisca," *JEFDSS* 2 (1935) 42-43: "The dance is mentioned as performed at the marriage of Queen Petronilla of Aragon in or about 1149 . . . There were solo morescas too. Petrarch once chose to perform a 'vigoreuse moresque' with little bells on his arms and legs." See also Joseph Needham, "The Geographical Distribution of English Ceremonial Dance Traditions," *JEFDSS* 3 (1936) 26, 39.

<sup>14</sup> J.A.W. Bennett, *Chaucer at Oxford and Cambridge* (Toronto 1974) 48.

<sup>15</sup> *Rashdall's The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, ed. F.M. Powicke and A.B. Emden (Oxford 1936) I, 462.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* I, 185.

<sup>17</sup> Avignon: 1441; Basel: 1460 (*ibid.* III, 422).

<sup>18</sup> *Statutes of the Colleges of Oxford with Royal Patents of Foundation Injunction of Visitors* I (London 1853) 100, rubric 63; cf. H. Rashdall and R.S. Rait, *New College* (London 1901) 61, and *Rashdall's Universities* (at n. 15) III, 422.

<sup>19</sup> William of Pagula, *Oculus Sacerdotis*, pars secunda, Ohio State University MS Lat. I, fol. 42va, fulminates against "coreas dissolutas." The other condemnations are cited and surveyed in G.G. Coulton, *Life in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 1967) I, 89 and 129; IV, 359; cf. G.G. Coulton, *Ten Medieval Studies* (Cambridge 1930) 39.

<sup>20</sup> *Robert of Brunne's Handlyng Synne*, ed. Frederick J. Furnival (London 1862) 148, 4684-89.

<sup>21</sup> Kennedy (at n. 9) 33.

- <sup>22</sup> OHG *danson* and MHG *tanzen* indicate a dance which is comprised of leaping, stamping, and hopping (cf. Kennedy, *op. cit.* 26-27).
- <sup>23</sup> Richard Wolfram, "Sword Dances and Secret Societies," *JEFDSS* 1 (1932) 40.
- <sup>24</sup> For example: MS Bodley 264, fols. 21v, 51v, 78r, 84r, 70r, and 129r; MS Auctarium D. 4. 3., fol. 2v; MS Auctarium D. 3. 2., fol. 238r.
- <sup>25</sup> Rodney Gallop, "The Origins of the Morris Dance," *JEFDSS* 1 (1934) 129.
- <sup>26</sup> Grosseteste inveighed against the "Inductio Maii" and Walter's target was the "Ludus de Rege and Regina"; see Elizabeth Swann, "Maid Marian and the Morris," *JEFDSS* 7 (1952) 121.
- <sup>27</sup> Kennedy (at n. 9) 54.
- <sup>28</sup> Henry Parker, *Dives and Pauper* (London 1536) fol. 127, cap. 18 of the "Thyrde Command."
- <sup>29</sup> The manuscript (probably fifteenth-century) was presented to the town of Paris by M. Ambrose Firmin-Didot and was burned in the Hôtel de Ville fire of 1871; see Paul Lacroix, *Military and Religious Life in the Middle Ages* (New York 1874) 238.
- <sup>30</sup> Cited from Christopher Wordsworth, *Notes on Medieval Services in England*, p. 281 in Percy Manning's manuscript notes, MS Top. Ox. D.200.
- <sup>31</sup> Henry Anstey, *Munimenta Academica* I (London 1868) 18; the translation is Manning's (*ibid.*). Coulton, *Life* (at n. 19) I, 204, makes a point of noting the stringent prohibitions against churchyard dancing in the 15th century, but Manning traces a similar pronouncement to the 1287 Synod of Exeter.
- <sup>32</sup> "Aug. 21, 1306: Et post mediam noctem cum intellexissent neminem vagantem ibi in stratis, exierunt de shoppis suis et alii que erant cum eis et ducebant coreas suas in alto vico contra draperiam; et ut sic ludebant supervenit praedictus Gilbertis de Foxle cum quodam gladio . . . et movebat statim contentionem versus eos volens omnimodo penetrasse coream illam" in J.E.T. Rogers, ed., *Oxford City Documents* (Oxford 1891) 165.
- <sup>33</sup> Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Ann Arbor, Mich. 1962) 6 ff.; Joseph H. Dahmus, *A History of Medieval Civilization* (New York 1964) 390.
- <sup>34</sup> Thomas Blount, *Fragmenta Antiquitatis: Ancient Tenures* (London 1679) 149. Mondays are significant throughout the *Miller's Tale*: see John C. Hirsh, "Why Does the Miller's Tale Take Place on Monday?" *ELN* 13 (1975) 86-90.

- <sup>35</sup> Cecil Sharp and Herbert Macilwaine, *The Morris Book I* (London 1912) 5.
- <sup>36</sup> Richard Wolfram, "Sword Dances and Secret Societies," *JEFDSS* 1 (1932) 41.
- <sup>37</sup> Cited from Strutt's *Complete View of the Dress and Habits of the People of England* II, 313 in Horatio Smith, *Festivals, Games, and Amusements Ancient and Modern* (New York 1832) 223.
- <sup>38</sup> Francis Douce, "The Ancient English Morris Dance," *The Mask* II (Florence 1919) 153.
- <sup>39</sup> A commonplace since Earle Birney's "The Inhibited and the Uninhibited: Ironic Structures in the *Miller's Tale*," *Neophilologus* 44 (1960) 337.
- <sup>40</sup> Some of the Bampton Dances have been lost but the Headington Quarry tradition includes a Morris Reel, Stick Dances like "Bean-Setting," "Constant Billy," "Rigs o' Marlow," "Hunting the Squirrel," and "Rodney"; Corner Dances like "Laudnum Bunches," "Trunkles," and "How d'ye Do, Sir?"; Handkerchief Dances like "Country Gardens," "Blue-eyed Stranger," "Getting Upstairs," "Double Set Back," "Haste to the Wedding"; Jigs like "Jockie to the Fair," "Old Mother Oxford," "The Old Woman Tossed Up in a Blanket," "Bacca Pipes," "Shepherd's Hey," and "Figures." See Sharp and Macilwaine (at n. 35) 32 ff.
- <sup>41</sup> The collectors included music and dance patterns along with their discussions of the dance type. Supplementary data of this kind have appeared regularly in *JEFDSS*.
- <sup>42</sup> Charles DuCange, *Glossarium ad Scriptores Mediae et Infimae Latinitatis*, VI (Paris 1736) col. 1324, where a "truncus" is a humble seat; also Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* 1, 30, 84 where "truncus" stands for dunce or dolt.
- <sup>43</sup> From a note by William Kimber on the jacket of his recording of morris tunes in the Oxford City Library.