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Oral Presentation 1.4

"WEL KOUDE HE BLOWE AND SOWNE"
MUSICAL SYMBOLISM IN CHAUCER'S "THE MILLER'S TALE"

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Little is known about the life of Geoffrey Chaucer, but there is no evidence that he was a trained musician. In *The Canterbury Tales*, however, Chaucer uses music as a tool for social stratification. The way Chaucer's audience thinks about and responds to the music in the *Tales* lays a foundation for judgments of the pilgrims, the characters in their stories, and Chaucer himself. Chaucer was familiar with the writings of Boethius, and this may provide the link between the use of music in the *Tales* and social classification. In *De Musica*, Boethius writes that different types of music and musical instruments display different social strata. Through musical markers, Chaucer makes distinct comments on the social positions of his characters.

Chaucer's use of musical symbolism to suggest rank in *The Canterbury Tales* is perhaps most apparent in the character of the Miller. The Miller's description in the General Prologue includes references to his bagpipe, an instrument notoriously recognized as a symbol for lechery. The instruments and music associated with Absolon and Nicholas in "The Miller's Tale" reflect the morality (or lack thereof) of the two men. In addition, these musical symbols provide links between the characters in "The Miller's Tale" and other pilgrims on the way to Canterbury, adding another level of satire to the text. A better understanding of the ways Chaucer used the audience's preconceived expectations of music and musical instruments to manipulate their response to text adds meaning not only to his "The Miller's Tale," but to *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole.