In Search of the Millers' Tales

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Medieval millers had poor reputations. Chaucer's miller in the *Canterbury Tales* was coarse, vulgar, and habitually dishonest – Robin told 'tavern stories, filthy in the main' and was 'a master-hand at stealing grain'. These stereotypes have cast a long shadow, with these traits reiterated thereafter in texts from jest books, which described the collar of a miller's shirt as 'valiant … Because that everie morning it had a Thief by the neck', to ballads, where lecherous millers were outfoxed by women who refused to marry 'a Thief and a Miller.' Across early modern popular literature millers were stereotyped as sexually promiscuous economic cheats. But how did this portrayal come about?

Diets in early modern England were grain-based, consisting largely of bread, porridge, and beer. Before bakers, brewers, and householders could produce these comestibles, their grain had to be ground. Ground grain was quick to spoil, so grinding services had to be local and accessible, and every community therefore required the services of a mill and miller. Millers were well-known figures in their communities but have been obscured in the historical record: their business was so mundane as to go unrecorded and they left few personal records. However, milling was regulated, and infringements of good practice were tried at local and national courts, particularly the Court of Exchequer - these records offer unique insight into the milling business and the (predominantly) men behind the service.

A common accusation against millers in litigation was that they took excessive toll - a percentage of customers' grain taken for payment - which had a significant impact on household economy and subsistence. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the stereotypical miller was a 'double Knave in grain' who 'out of a bushel a peck he will steal'. Some millers certainly were dishonest, accused at law of taking 'another toll dyshfull' of grain or, more subtly, creating a gap in the mill machinery through which grain could be 'concealed and purloined'.

Whilst millers were not typically well educated, they were highly skilled with extensive technical knowledge gained through informal apprenticeships or from ‘the cradle’ as part of the family trade. Rarely did this skilled work lead to wealth. In ballads millers were as often represented as having ‘three or four Acres of Land,/ And also good Silver and Gold at command’ as they were ‘lowlie’ and ‘rude’. Representations of wealth played with the notion that millers cheated in their trade, and millers who acted ‘Gentleman like’ or above their station were publicly humiliated, such as Dick the miller in ‘Ill-gotten Goods seldome thrive’ who bought a ‘gallant Suit of Clothes’ with the triple toll he took from milling only to have them stolen by a cunning ‘Lasse’ whom he tried to seduce.

In reality a miller’s wealth depended on the area the mill served, whether the mill had land which could be farmed, whether there were competing mills nearby, and whether it was the customary mill which local tenants and inhabitants were obliged to use. Additionally, millers rarely owned mills themselves, but rented mills or were hired by lords of the manor or landowners.

Early modern millers were easy targets for accusations of malpractice. Mills were complex and dangerous machines, which few people could operate, and were situated in remote locations, where it was easy to conceal misconduct. Mills were a vital service industry for inhabitants, who expected efficient and affordable service, but also a profitable business for mill owners, who expected significant profits or demanded a high rent. Millers therefore served two opposing masters. In Bovey Tracey, Devon, in a 1601 dispute between competing mills, John Coles claimed that the millers of the manor mills had ‘taken excessive toll’ because the mills were ‘att a verie high Rent by the yere’ and only through ‘unjust meanes’ could they ‘make up theire Rent’. Some millers had to cheat the customer to meet the demands of their master.

Early modern ballads and jests were often less concerned with a miller’s tradecraft, and more concerned with their ‘Practise and skill’ in sexual congress. The processes and instruments of the trade offered numerous opportunities for sexual innuendoes. In ‘The Lusty Miller’s Recreation’ a woman sent her three daughters to the mill with grist, each of whom fell ‘under the Stones with much pleasure’ and returned with ‘her Belly as full as her Sack’. In ‘Grist Ground at Last’ Molly found the miller forlorn as he

could not make his mill ‘obey’, so took ‘the matter in hand’ and helped his ‘stones go round’ to get her grist ‘ground apace’ – the early modern bump and grind.

Mill operation was dominated by men. Only a few women, mostly widows, worked mill machinery themselves. However, women were important customers at mills. In legal depositions men described sending grain to the mill via their wives or servants rather than taking it themselves. For example, Gilbert Jacson of Grantham, Lincolnshire, claimed in the 1580s that he never dealt directly with the mill ‘but committed the dealing therein whollye to his wyfe’, and in the 1620s John Newton only had knowledge of poor service at Burton on Trent mills because of reports from his ‘wife and maidservant’. Therefore, interactions at mills were often between male workers and female customers. This, along with the isolated location of mills, and metaphorical potential of the processes and instruments of the trade, made mills the perfect setting for tales of illicit assignations.

Whilst mills might have been isolated, millers were involved in local society. The cash-poor early modern economy relied on the extension of credit, which was maintained through interpersonal relationships and obligations. Millers used mutual obligation to attract grist to their mills, usually at the expense of another mill nearby, which often resulted in legal action intended to prevent the rival mill from operating. In 1620s Selby, Yorkshire, a miller was said to have become ‘well acquainted’ with owners of public houses to ‘oblige’ them ‘to bring their corne to his mill to grind’ rather than the manor mill. In Pickering, Yorkshire, in 1710 Anthony Calcot was accused of withdrawing grist from the manor mill by forcing those who were ‘indebted to him or under his power’ to grind at his mill instead. In a similar dispute over competition for grist between a manorial mill and a rival mill in Leominster in the 1600s, a shoemaker’s wife explained that her refusal to use the manorial mill was because the miller did not ‘buy his shooes with my husband’. Millers’ reputations therefore also relied on economic credit.

The stereotypical early modern miller faded with industrialisation and urbanisation. By the 19th century large steam mills were replacing water and windmills, expanding transport networks conveyed finer flour over much greater distances, and millers became merchant-millers, buying grain wholesale and selling the produce directly to shops and bakers. No

longer poked fun at for community infractions, millers provoked new ire as industrial capitalists.