

THE REEVE'S TALE.

THE PROLOGUE.

WHEN folk had laughed all at this nice case Of Absolon and Hendy
Nicholas, Diverse folk diversely they said, But for the more part they laugh'd
and play'd;* *were diverted And at this tale I saw no man him grieve,
But it were only Osewold the Reeve. Because he was of carpenteres craft, A
little ire is in his hearte laft*; *left He gan to grudge* and
blamed it a lite.** *murmur **little. "So the* I," quoth he, "full well
could I him quite** *thrive **match With blearing* of a proude miller's eye,
*dimming <1> If that me list to speak of ribaldry. But I am old; me list not
play for age; <2> Grass time is done, my fodder is now forage. This white
top* writeth mine olde years; *head Mine heart is also
moulded* as mine hairs; *grown mouldy And I do fare as doth an
open-erse*; *medlar <3> That ilke* fruit is ever longer werse,
*same Till it be rotten *in mullok or in stre*. *on the ground or in straw*
We olde men, I dread, so fare we; Till we be rotten, can we not be ripe; We
hop* away, while that the world will pipe; *dance For in our will
there sticketh aye a nail, To have an hoary head and a green tail, As hath a
leek; for though our might be gone, Our will desireth folly ever-in-one*:
*continually For when we may not do, then will we speak, Yet in our ashes
cold does fire reek.* *smoke<4> Four gledes* have we, which
I shall devise**, *coals ** describe Vaunting, and lying, anger, covetise*.
*covetousness These foure sparks belongen unto eld. Our olde limbes well
may be unweld*, *unwieldy But will shall never fail us, that
is sooth. And yet have I alway a coltes tooth,<5> As many a year as it is
passed and gone Since that my tap of life began to run; For sickerly*, when I
was born, anon *certainly Death drew the tap of life, and let
it gon: And ever since hath so the tap y-run, Till that almost all empty is the
tun. The stream of life now droppeth on the chimb.<6> The silly tongue well
may ring and chime Of wretchedness, that passed is full yore*:
*long With olde folk, save dotage, is no more. <7>

When that our Host had heard this sermoning, He gan to speak as lordly as
a king, And said; "To what amounteth all this wit? What? shall we speak all
day of holy writ? The devil made a Reeve for to preach, As of a souter* a
shipman, or a leach**.

*cobbler <8> Say forth thy tale, and tarry
not the time: **surgeon <9> Lo here is Deptford, and 'tis half past

prime:<10> Lo Greenwich, where many a shrew is in. It were high time thy tale to begin."

"Now, sirs," quoth then this Osewold the Reeve, I pray you all that none of you do grieve, Though I answer, and somewhat set his hove*,
*hood <11> For lawful is *force off with force to shove.* *to repel force
This drunken miller hath y-told us here by force* How that
beguiled was a carpentere, Paraventure* in scorn, for I am one:
*perhaps And, by your leave, I shall him quite anon. Right in his churlish
termes will I speak, I pray to God his necke might to-break. He can well in
mine eye see a stalk, But in his own he cannot see a balk."<12>

Notes to the Prologue to the Reeves Tale.

1. "With blearing of a proude miller's eye": dimming his eye; playing off a joke on him.
2. "Me list not play for age": age takes away my zest for drollery.
3. The medlar, the fruit of the mespilus tree, is only edible when rotten.
4. Yet in our ashes cold does fire reek: "ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires."
5. A colt's tooth; a wanton humour, a relish for pleasure.
6. Chimb: The rim of a barrel where the staves project beyond the head.
7. With olde folk, save dotage, is no more: Dotage is all that is left them; that is, they can only dwell fondly, dote, on the past.
8. Souter: cobbler; Scottice, "sutor;" from Latin, "suere," to sew.
9. "Ex sutore medicus" (a surgeon from a cobbler) and "ex sutore nauclerus" (a seaman or pilot from a cobbler) were both proverbial expressions in the Middle Ages.
10. Half past prime: half-way between prime and tierce; about half-past seven in the morning.
11. Set his hove; like "set their caps;" as in the description of the Manciple in the Prologue, who "set their aller cap". "Hove" or "houfe," means "hood;" and the phrase signifies to be even with, outwit.

12. The illustration of the mote and the beam, from Matthew.