

## Two Names in *The Reeve's Tale*

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THE NAME MALYNE occurs only once in *The Reeve's Tale*, at A 4236<sup>1</sup>. The clerk Aleyn addresses the miller's daughter when he is about to leave her bed, having spent the night with her as "esement" for losing his corn to the miller.

And seyde, "Fare weel, Malyne, sweete wight  
The day is come, I may no lenger byde;  
But evermo, wher so I go or ride,  
I is thy awen clerk, swa have I seel!" (A 4236—4239)

The daughter's name has been studied by various scholars, while the name of the clerk has not been given any attention. *Malyne* and *Aleyn*, as a pair, are names which seem to have some relation to each other. It is my contention that Chaucer meant the names to be taken together, and that the meaning of each name has some relation to the poem.

The usual gloss for *Malyne* is "dishcloth." Skeat cites the *Promptorium Parvulorum*, which glosses *malin* as *tersorium*,<sup>2</sup> and this has been taken to be the primary meaning of the name in Chaucer. Baum cites *tersorium* in his list of puns, commenting that it is "not unfitting for this miller's daughter."<sup>3</sup>

The secondary meaning of *Malyne* is also discussed by Skeat, who notes that it is a variant of *Malkin*.<sup>4</sup> He refers to *Piers Plowman*, Cii, 181, and to *Canterbury Tales* B 29—31, for examples of the proverb.

Ye haue no more meryt. in masse ne in houres, (PP C ii, 180—1)  
Than Malkyn of hure maidenhod. wham no man desireth.

It wool nat come agayn, withouten drede,  
Namooore than wole Malkynes maydenhede,  
Whan she hath lost it in her wantownesse. (CT, B 29—31)

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Chaucer are taken from F. N. Robinson, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd edition, Boston, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> W. W. Skeat, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Oxford, 1900, Vol. V, p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> P. F. Baum, "Chaucer's Puns," *PMLA* 71 (1956), p. 240.

<sup>4</sup> Skeat, *op. cit.*, and cf. also Skeat, *Piers the Plowman*, Oxford, 1886, Vol. II, p. 29 (Note on PP C ii, 181).

There are two considerations here, first, that *Malyne*, or *Malin*, means dishcloth, and that Chaucer is making fun of the girl by giving her such a name, and, second, that the name involves a proverb about loss of maidenhead. R. E. Kaske has made the most convincing statement of these theories:

What turns these two lines into parody of course (besides their context) is the name *Malyne* . . . lexically an oven-mop, and in its general significance either the name for a slut or a "typical lower-class female name from the late thirteenth century onwards" . . . . This sudden introduction of *Malyne*, however, seems also to suggest the Miller's daughter as a sort of burlesque-incarnation of the apparently familiar proverb about Malkin's lost maidenhead. . . .<sup>5</sup>

First, as to *tersorium*, one thing is generally overlooked — the joke isn't funny. What is the point of calling the Miller's daughter a dishrag or oven-mop? Although Baum lists it as a pun, and remarks that it is "fitting," he gives no real explanation of why it is fit. There is nothing in *Malyne*'s character that especially suits her for the name "dishcloth" — indeed, *Malyne* has no character at all, either sluttish or otherwise. We know that her figure is well-developed (A 3972–3976), that she has brought the food from town (A 4136), that she sleeps in the same room as her parents (A 4142), and that she snores (A 4167). We also know that Aleyn has spent the night with her. None of this demands or even suggests that the girl should be named "dish cloth."

Nor is it typical of Chaucer to make this sort of joke for joke's sake, having little or no relationship to the context. Calling someone "dishcloth" just because it is a silly name is descending to the lowest level of humor. Although Chaucer obviously liked "low" humor, his *fabliaux* are structurally complex and thoroughly worked out. *Malyne* may gain an extra boost from associations with *tersorium*, but it seems unlikely that Chaucer would stoop so low simply for an additional laugh.

There is some doubt in my mind about the positive identification of *Malyne* with Malkin. For one thing, the proverb is usually found with the name in the form *Malkin*. When Chaucer uses it, he uses this form (B 30). At B 30, *Malkin* is the form given in every manuscript. At A 4236, by far the majority of the manuscripts give

<sup>5</sup> R. E. Kaske, "An Aube in the *Reeve's Tale*," *ELH* 26 (1959), 299–300.

*Malyne* as the form. Thus there is at least some evidence to suggest that Chaucer differentiated between these two forms of the name.

As for the name Malkin in *Piers Plowman*, Professor F. G. Cassidy has pointed out that the passage means just the opposite of the proverb — that Malkin is there pictured as so undesirable that there is no virtue in her retaining her maidenhead, since nobody wants it.<sup>6</sup> This at the least shows that the proverb did not give the name a fixed meaning — it was possible for Langland to use Malkin in a different context.

Thus there is at least some doubt that we should take the meaning *tersorium* as the primary reason for Chaucer's naming the miller's daughter. This is not to say that there was no reason at all for the name. There was no absolute need for Chaucer to assign a name to her — the miller's wife is never named, and one might assume that the two clerks are named simply to tell them apart. *Malyne* was not used for a rhyme with *Aleyn*, either, since it occurs in the middle of the line in its only appearance. It could easily have been replaced by some other locution — “my derling” would scan equally well, for instance. My main objection to “dishcloth” is that it gives Chaucer rather too little credit, making him out a buffoon at this point instead of a complex imaginative writer.

It is my contention that *Malyne* and *Aleyn* are meant to be taken together, and that there is a set of bilingual puns with two old French words.<sup>7</sup> The words are not uncommon, and it is more than likely that both Chaucer and his audience would have been more familiar with them.

Almost all the meanings listed in Godefroy<sup>8</sup> for the two verbs *alignier* and *malignier* fit the situation in the *Reeve's Tale* and inform the immediate context. In Modern French the two words mean just about the same as their English cognates *align* and *malign*, but

<sup>6</sup> F. G. Cassidy, “The Merit of Malkyn,” *MLN* 63 (1948), p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Pure bilingual puns have not been found in Chaucer, but perhaps this is because no one has looked for them. A large number of hitherto unsuspected puns have been turned up in the four years since Baum's article (cited above) appeared. In the list in that first article of Baum's, *argument* and *clause* involve the Latin cognates, *dangerous* the Old French etymological meaning, and *visage sanz peinture* is a pun in Old French without relation to an English meaning. (Baum, pp. 230–231, 233, 235, and 246 respectively.)

<sup>8</sup> F. Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de L'Ancienne Langue Française*, Paris, 1881.

