

Chaucer and the Fabliau

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Like romance, Middle English fabliaux were based on Old French models. The name of the genre comes into English directly from the French: there is no English equivalent of the term 'fabliau' (Cooper 1996: 95). The genre seems to have been far less popular in England (or at least in Middle English) than in France (or Old French): apart from one thirteenth-century narrative, *Dame Sirith*, the only surviving Middle English examples are those found in the *Canterbury Tales*, and there's much dispute among critics over which of Chaucer's tales actually count as fabliaux: the definites are the tales told by the Miller, the Reeve and the Shipman, all of which, as John Burrow points out, are 'clearly modelled on the French type' (Burrow 1982: 79); disputed possibilities include the tales told by the Summoner and the Friar, as well as the unfinished tale by the Cook (Wright, 2005: 478, n.2); *The Merchant's Tale* also has a strong essence of fabliau.

If all the definites and possibles are accepted to be at least strongly related to the genre, it becomes apparent – if surprising – that the fabliau is the most common genre in a collection of stories that includes a wide variety of genres (Burrow 1982: 79). The dispute over which tales can be classified as fabliaux also suggests that Chaucer's narratives differ a good deal from their French predecessors. In the case of the tales told by the Miller and the Reeve, Chaucer's immediate sources are not known, although various analogues of the *Reeve's Tale* survive and one of the plot strands of the *Miller's Tale* is found elsewhere. Although Chaucer is clearly familiar with the traditional Old French fabliaux form, he brings an original approach to the genre; but to be able to appreciate quite what changes he makes, we first need a basic understanding of the Old French fabliau form.

The Fabliau in Old French

The word *fabliau* comes from the Old French *fable* and ultimately from the Latin *fabula*. Between 127 and 150 Old French *fabliaux* have survived; and the lack of determination in the number demonstrates (again) that scholars are unable to agree on the classification of all the narratives: it is not just Chaucer's narratives that are not necessarily easy to categorise conclusively. (This is a common problem with literature of the Middle Ages: medieval genres are not always clearly defined, the self-describing terminology used is fluid and medieval authors sometimes capitalise on whatever genre is popular at time of composition; this can cause confusion for the modern reader when the narrative clearly isn't connected to the genre type in its self-identification.)

An Old French *fabliau* is a kind of *conte*, a short story, often in the form of an anecdote. They are generally quite simple, although some have a complicated or convoluted plot. One important point to remember is that a *fabliau* is always intended to be humorous and often in a cruel and mocking manner. (No political correctness in the Middle Ages!) Glenn Wright points out that the humour of the *fabliaux* ‘normally derives from a bizarre but logical chain of cause and effect, the more elaborate the better, engineered through an act or acts of deception’ (Wright 2005: 483). Tricks, ruses and cleverly-engineered love affairs are all staples of *fabliau*, and the narratives are often heavily ironical, most often because the narrator, the audience and some of the characters share information that is not known to other characters; the dramatic irony thus makes the audience complicit in mocking the misfortunes of the characters, and indeed this laughter at the expense of the unfortunate is a key element of the genre. It’s important to note that there is little or no encouragement to feel any sympathy for the figures in the text, even if they are wronged. Humour is paramount in the *fabliaux* and the intentional and often heavy-handed mockery sometimes seems very cruel to modern eyes.

In the Old French *fabliau*, characters are usually very simply drawn stock figures – a man, a wife, a merchant, a priest – with no names and no history; any characterisation arises only from what happens in the story. The characters are most often drawn from the peasant or bourgeois classes. The stories are set in the urban or domestic everyday world; strange things may occur, but they are treated prosaically: the sense of marvel found in romance has no place here. Charles Muscatine points out that the ‘fabliau world is a thoroughly physical one, with physical pleasure as its central value’ (Wright 2005: 484, citing Muscatine 1986: 83); *fabliaux* plots often revolve around base instincts such as greed, avarice and/or sexual desire, and are driven by the desires of largely stereotyped characters: stupid peasants, randy clerks, avaricious friars, nagging women. Like other medieval genres, many *fabliaux* conclude with a moral, and these, like the tales themselves, are often explicitly misogynous.

The Old French *fabliau* is also defined by its style, which, more often than not, displays an obscenity in keeping with its plot; the title of one Old French *fabliau* will illustrate the point clearly: *Le chevalier qui fist parler les cons* (‘The Knight who Made Cunts Talk’ – he can do it with arseholes too). The casual coarseness of this title highlights another feature of the narratives: they have a tendency to use unambiguous, vulgar terms, what John Hines calls ‘marked’ language, the equivalent of Modern English ‘four-letter words’ – in fact, often ‘three-letter words’ in Old French – rather than formal or euphemistic terms. The *fabliau* calls a *vit a vit* (prick); the texts are liberally garnished with such terms as *coilles* (balls), *con* (cunt), *cul* (arse), *foutre* (to fuck), *corber* (to lay), *merde* (shit), *pet* (fart) (Hines, 1993: 19), and many of the terms offer further possibilities for amusement in their homonymous nature: *vit* (prick) sounds like *vis* (face) (Hines, 1993: 20).

I’ll use one short example to show you the kind of story and characterisation the Old French *fabliau*

offers. *Les quatre souhaits Saint Martin* ('The Four Wishes of St Martin') tells how one day a man meets St Martin, who is pleased with his devotion and gives him four wishes. When he arrives home, however, the man's wife is furious because he is not at work. After explaining what has happened, the husband allows his wife to wish first and she wishes 'that you should be completely covered with pricks' (95: 'Que tot soiez chargiez de viz') and furthermore that 'each prick should have its balls' (99: 'si ait chascuns viz sa coille'). The wish is immediately granted. Somewhat annoyed by this, the husband wishes 'that you should have as many cunts as I have pricks on my body' (144-5: 'Que tu raies autretant cons/ Comme je ai de viz sor moi'); and this happens. Following his wife's instructions, the man then makes matters worse by wishing that all the cocks and cunts should disappear, so the fourth wish is wasted in restoring the man and woman to their natural state, with the customary single set of genitalia each. The author supplies a moral: not, as one might expect, to take care what you wish for, but (pretty standard medieval misogyny) that a man who trusts his wife more than himself will regret it (Hines 1995: 6-7).

This *fabliau* demonstrates various key aspects of the genre. Its characters are caricatures, and it fully exploits the stereotypes of lazy man and nagging wife, their automatically hostile relationship and their utter stupidity. The plot is simple, linear and unashamedly crude. The appearance of the saint is casually treated, and there is no sense of the marvellous in the enactment of the wishes, although read literally they are, of course, miracles.

The audience of the Old French fabliau and Chaucer's audience

Because the *fabliaux* seem to be realistic and their humour is unrefined, some scholars have argued that they started as lower-class stories, although, as Mary Schenck points out, their supposed realism 'is conceivable only if one is comparing these texts to [medieval] epics or romances' (1987: 109). For a long time, it was assumed that the *fabliau* was a low or bourgeois genre, a case famously argued by Joseph Bédier, in 1893. In 1957, Per Nykrog published a reassessment of the genre, and declared that, in fact, the narratives were intended to amuse the aristocracy. Three years later, however, Jean Rychner concluded that variations between the surviving versions actually meant that different versions were aimed at different audiences, from various social classes: so stories for the aristocracy portrayed peasants as stupid, while narratives aimed at the lower classes might show a peasant getting the better of a knight. The lower classes could be amused at the tales themselves, while the upper classes could laugh at the lower classes.

As for the audience of *The Canterbury Tales*, it must be remembered that the internal audience depicted, the pilgrims themselves, is not to be confused with Chaucer's intended readership: the inclusion of *The Knight's Tale* clearly identifies the external audience as aristocratic. As Derek Brewer points out: 'Chaucer's *actual* audience ... clearly consists of lords, ladies, knights, well-to-do gentry-folk

..., and upperclass scholars and lawyers...’ (1968: 295), although the level of education each had might affect exactly what each of these found humorous in the stories.

The layering of audiences and narrators is a key element of Chaucer’s presentation of his fabliaux. Outside the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer crafts the stories to offer maximum amusement to his aristocratic audience, and perhaps particularly fellow poets, other educated men such as Gower and Strode, to whom Chaucer dedicated his *Troilus and Criseyde*. Within the *Canterbury Tales*, the exaggerated innocence and naivety of Chaucer the Pilgrim allows Chaucer the author to distance himself from the bawdiness of the tales. The conclusion of *The Miller’s Prologue* certainly emphasises this, as the Pilgrim-Chaucer, adopting a disingenuous tone, warns his reader that the material to follow might be considered offensive:

And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
For goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere.
And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys. (I [A], 3171-81)

This is a disclaimer: the narrator insists that he has included the Miller’s story only because he must recount all the tales as he heard them and, since Chaucer the Pilgrim has undertaken to report the storytelling competition faithfully, he has no choice but to repeat this tale. Professing to be alert to his audience’s sensibilities, he suggests that the reader might prefer to turn away from such a ‘cherles tale’ (I [A], 3169), and he even includes a wide-eyed insistence that, should the reader be shocked or offended, he has only himself to blame, since a full and detailed warning has been supplied. So runs the argument of Chaucer the Pilgrim. Chaucer the poet, on the other hand, clearly does not expect his reader to turn away from the bawdy story; more likely, he employs the disclaimer deliberately to whet his reader’s appetite for a lewd tale; the dual posture is itself intended to amuse his audience. As Derek Brewer observes, ‘No doubt the lower classes did tell rough and crude jokes, but the implication that the upper classes did not is self-evidently untrue or what is Chaucer himself doing? ... His own fabliaux are the most courtly poems he ever wrote’ (1968: 301). So, in *The Miller’s Tale*, Alison ‘is described in such a way that parodies the formal description of the beautiful court lady, but the parody, though splendid comic poetry, does not mock the formal ideal; it mocks its lower-class subject... This is obviously meant for an audience of lords, not yeomen’ (Brewer 1968: 294). Katherine Zieman recognizes the same point in Nicholas’ wooing of Alison: ‘Nicholas’s seduction is described as erotic music-making that borders on euphemism: “He kiste hire sweete and taketh his sawtrie/ And pleyeth faste, and maketh melodie”

(I [A], 3305-6). When Nicholas and Alison finally consummate their plot, the language descends into downright euphemism' (1997: 79):

Ther was the revel and the melodye;
And thus lith Alison and Nicholas,
In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas,
Til that the belle of laudes gan to ryngge,
And freres in the chauncel gonne synge. (I [A], 3652-6)

The language of the narratives places these tales firmly in the forum of courtly literature, intended for an audience which will appreciate it: the upper classes.

The Framework of Chaucer's Fabliaux

We'll come back to the issue of audience response later, but let's now return to our generic exploration: the comparison of Chaucer's fabliaux and the Old French models. Perhaps the most immediately obvious difference between the Old French *fabliaux* and Chaucer's fabliaux is the slant given to Chaucer's narratives by the framework of the Canterbury pilgrimage. The Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio had included bawdy tales in his *Decameron*, a collection of one hundred tales told by ten lords and ladies to amuse themselves during their escape from the plague in Florence. Chaucer frequently draws on Boccaccio's work: for example, *The Knight's Tale* is a reinterpretation of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, *Troilus and Criseyde* is a reworking of *Il Filostrato*, and the *Shipman's Tale* is thought to be based on two of Boccaccio's *Decameron* stories. Boccaccio's telling of stories-within-stories in *Decameron* may have inspired Chaucer to attempt his framed collection of narratives. However, although *Decameron* was begun around 1349, and revised in 1370-71, Michael Delahoyde observes that the first known reference in English to the work is not until 1404. This does not mean that Chaucer did not know the text; only that there is no supporting evidence. However, Delahoyde (2004) offers as an alternative model another Italian source: the *Novellae* of Giovanni Sercambi, written in 1374. This text also has a frame in which characters meet up while escaping the plague, this time from Lucca: this group, unlike Boccaccio's party, includes clergy. The group travels together, telling tales on the journey; but all the tales are recounted in the text by the author/narrator; there are no individual voices in the text and there is no interaction between the characters over the storytelling. Even in Boccaccio's collection, there is little real characterisation of the storytellers, who share the background of aristocracy; what Chaucer does in assembling a range of pilgrims from a range of classes and professions is very different from either of the Italian collections, and results in a much livelier and more rounded framework.

Chaucer's use of the interaction between the pilgrims as a means of characterisation is clear from the passages which link the Knight's, Miller's and Reeve's tales. *The Knight's Tale* concluded, Harry Baily invites the Monk, as the pilgrim next in social standing, to tell a story; but the Miller, the worse for drink,

insists on telling his story next and proceeds to infuriate the Reeve by announcing his tale to be about a carpenter fooled (cuckolded) by a clerk:

‘... I wol telle a legende and a lyf
Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf,
How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe.’ (I [A], 3141-3)

Chaucer the Pilgrim has already explained in the *General Prologue* (I [A], 614) that the Reeve, Oswald, had trained as a carpenter, so it is clear from the outset that this story is likely to be taken personally by him. Indeed he immediately objects and some lively banter passes between the two, with the Miller’s heavy-handed insistence that he is not suggesting that *Oswald* is a cuckold making it plain that this is exactly what he intended to imply. When the Miller has told his story, the Reeve leaves no room for Harry Baily to reassert his authority, but at once insists on telling his tale in order to ‘quite’ the Miller on his own terms, in a story of ‘ribaudye’ (I [A], 3864-6), and the Host accedes (having little choice). This exchange and these characters are very different from Boccaccio’s courteous storytellers and, as Harry Baily’s hierarchical order dissolves into anarchy, we might already recognize echoes of *fabliau* and its chaotic comedy.

Chaucer’s fabliaux: detail and characterisation

The extensive use of dialogue within the framing structure is echoed in the tales themselves, adding to the impression of rounded character. The Miller’s and the Reeve’s tales are peopled with characters with character: names, professions, more or less clearly defined histories, personalities. The miller who features in *The Reeve’s Tale* echoes the character of the pilgrim Miller, but can also clearly be distinguished from him because Chaucer gives them both names: Harry Baily addresses the pilgrim Miller as Robyn (I [A], 29), while the miller of the *Reeve’s Tale* is one Symkyn. However, the stereotyping of the traditional *fabliau* forms the basis for Chaucer’s more detailed characterisations. The reader who has read the description of the pilgrim Miller in the *General Prologue* – and it is *vital* that all readers read the descriptions of the pilgrims in the *General Prologue*! – discovers pretty quickly that Symkyn and Robyn share some traits, such as their physical size, their dishonesty and violent temper. As for Symkyn, we are told pretty soon what he wears, what his family consists of, the fact that he is a thief, that he carries a variety of weapons, that he prides himself in having gained social status by having married the illegitimate daughter of the local priest – all elements designed to make the aristocratic audience feel most superior. Similarly, the two clerks who pit their wits against Symkyn are given names and Chaucer even represents in their speech the dialect of their homeland in the north of England (again, more humour for the southern/London audience).

To a certain extent, the narratives themselves are just what we expect from *fabliau*: ribald, bawdy stories full of trickery and centred on young men *swyving* (Middle English for ‘fucking’) usually young

women. In simple terms, *The Miller's Tale* involves an old man with a young wife, and a randy clerk who is determined to sleep with her: standard fabliau fare. Yet, in fact, the tale proves to have a convoluted plot, clearly beyond the capacity of a miller's narrative capabilities, never mind one so drunk he can hardly sit on his horse. This adds both a rival lover who is tricked and humiliated, but is given the opportunity for vengeance, and an extremely complicated ruse to allow the clerk and the carpenter's wife to fulfil their lust, which involves the pretence of an astrological prediction of a flood of biblical proportions and the necessity for John, his wife Alison and Nicholas, the clerk, to hang from the rafters in dough-kneading tubs in order to be saved.

The Miller's Tale mingles courtliness with bawdiness. Nicholas sweet-talks Alison in terms reminiscent of courtly love: he declares that he will die if he cannot make love to her. Yet the actions accompanying his speech are expressed in the crude, 'marked' language of the fabliau tradition as

prively he caughte hire by the queynte,
And seyde, 'Ywis, but if ich have my wille,
For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille.'
And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones,
And seyde, 'Lemman, love me al atones,
Or I wol dyen, also God me save!' (I [A], 3276-81)

John Hines observes that here '*queynte* as a noun is used to represent *cunt*' (1993: 76); this usage occurs elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales*, notably when the Wife of Bath describes, in her *Prologue*, how she had berated her husbands for their jealousy: 'Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone?' (III [D], 444; cf. III [D], 332), although elsewhere she refers to her genitalia more coyly as her 'bele chose' (III [D], 447), her 'pretty thing'. In *The Miller's Tale*, the obscene term *queynte* is given greater emphasis by being placed at the end of the line, in rhyming position; reflecting the fabliau tradition of using amusing homonyms, Chaucer pairs it with *queynte* the adjective, meaning 'cunning', as he describes how clerks are 'ful subtile and ful queynte' (I [A], 3275).

The rival lover, Absolon, with his fashionable dress, his music and dancing and his fastidious speech, is also 'somdeel squaymous/ Of fartyng' (I [A], 3337-8); and in true fabliau style, Chaucer returns to this with Absolon's kiss, and makes it clear with Nicholas' production of a prodigious fart that what Absolon has kissed is definitely not a face (I [A], 3806). Absolon's revenge, in which he burns Nicholas 'amydde the ers' (I [A], 3810) with a red-hot 'kultour' (III: 3812) is simple fabliau technique; but Chaucer immediately reasserts his own unique approach by connecting it back to the convoluted plot of the flood and the kneading tubs through Nicholas' screams for water (I [A], 3815ff.).

The Miller's Tale thus introduces Chaucer's audience to his distinctive presentation of a fabliau; and it is worth noting other ways in which his text differs from the traditional form. In the Old French narratives, there is little or no room for sympathy for anyone; but Chaucer's detailed characterisation means that the audience's response to the characters' fates may be complicated and tempered with

humanity. On one level, the audience is drawn to engage more with the characters simply because there is more character to engage with. In *The Miller's Tale*, John is introduced as the stereotypical jealous husband of a young wife, who 'heeld hire narwe in cage,/ For she was wylde and yong, and he was old/ And demed hymself been lik a cokewold' (I [A], 3224-6). Yet this jealousy is not in fact demonstrated by any action we are shown in the text: John is not depicted constraining his wife in any way (Hines 1993: 114). Alison herself refers to John's jealousy (I [A], 3294-7), but the context of her declaration directly contradicts her words (I [A], 3274), since the conversation takes place while her husband has gone out on business, leaving her alone with Nicholas, who is embracing her as they talk. Later, when John asks his wife if she can hear Absolon singing lovesongs to her under their bedroom window, this is all he says: the text nowhere suggests that he blames her for Absolon's behaviour nor even that he plans to approach Absolon about the matter (I [A], 3355-69). Compare this to the description of Symkyn's jealousy of his wife in *The Reeve's Tale*:

There dorste no wight clepen hire but 'dame';
 Was noon so hardy that went by the weye
 That with hire dorste rage or ones pleye,
 But if he wolde be slayn of Symkyn
 With pande, or with knyf, or boidekyn,
 For jalous folk ben perilous everemo –
 Algate they wolde hire wyves wenden so. (I [A], 3956-62)

This violent jealousy is nothing like John's attitude or behaviour in *The Miller's Tale* and, in fact, it is almost impossible not to feel sympathetic towards the old husband who has paved the way to his wife's adultery by the very strength of his love for her. Chaucer's own sympathies are suggested in the frame of the tale, what is in effect the opening of *The Reeve's Prologue*: when the Narrator describes how the pilgrims also 'laughen at this nyce cas' and discuss it at length, he clearly points to 'Absolon and hende Nicholas' as the objects of amusement (I [A], 3855-8). On the one hand, this implies his own sympathy for John the cuckold; on the other, it is notable that Alison too, although she has certainly committed adultery and treated her husband callously, is not condemned, either within the tale or in the frame. This is another departure from the Old French fabliau model, where women are frequently criticised in misogynous morals, such as that of *Les quatre souhaits Saint Martin*. Chaucer's Alison apparently feels no particular emotion for Nicholas – this is lust not love – but neither she is not condemned for this by the poet or the pilgrims: instead the text shows her obeying the basic rules of fabliau, taking exactly what she wants without guilt or censure as a consenting adult.

Rape and *The Reeve's Tale*

Chaucer clearly sets up the Reeve's story within fabliau parameters, introducing key characters in such a way as to avoid any sympathy. Symkyn the miller is an unpleasant and violent man, who cheats his

customers and clearly thinks himself much better than he is, not least because of the good marriage he has made. His wife, despite her airs and graces, is the daughter of a parson and therefore illegitimate, although the parson clearly has delusions of grandeur. These three characters are devoid of any redeeming characteristics and are here set up for a fall. Malyne, the Miller's daughter, however, seems less of a target: we learn more of her from her actions later on and all that is said of her at the outset is that she is a well-built girl, with 'buttokes brode' and her father's pug nose (I [A], 3975, 3974), but she does have nice hair (I [A], 3976).

The story pits the wits of two young clerks against the cunning miller, and climaxes in the clerks' enthusiastic *swyving* of Symkyn's wife and daughter specifically to pay the miller back for cheating them. The idea of 'paying back' is central both to the tale itself and its frame. Oswald tells this tale specifically to 'quite' or repay Robyn for making him look foolish; Aleyn and John *swyve* Symkyn's wife and daughter specifically to 'quite' the miller for cheating them. Unlike Alison, however, the women in *The Reeve's Tale* are never shown clearly consenting to intercourse, and critics frequently point to this as a problematic issue. Some indeed have castigated Chaucer unequivocally for the treatment of the women in the tale. Angela Jane Weisl, for example, examines the normalisation of violence against women in *The Canterbury Tales*, and insists that while the 'quiting' of the Miller by the Reeve is ostensibly a conflict between men, 'beneath ... is another kind of quiting: the quiting of women, of Eve, through a continuous pattern of violent acts against her [*sic*]' (1998: 118). Weisl's view of the sexual activity in *The Reeve's Tale* begins in terms of 'virtual rape' (although she does not explain what she means by the term), but she goes on to describe the sexual intercourse in the tale without the qualifying adjective: as plain 'rape'.

Now, the word 'rape' was not used in the Middle Ages and it's important to realise that the medieval term *raptus* often does not refer to a violent sexual act, against the will of the woman; it can equate to 'abduction'; and abduction, in medieval law, may or may not be carried out against the woman's will. *Raptus* means 'theft'. To modern sensibilities, theft is largely an economic term; and similarly it is also part of the medieval economic forum. A woman's body, and her potential to ensure (particularly amongst the upper classes of society) the continuation of bloodlines, were, in law, in the possession of men: her father, guardian, brother, and later her husband. If a woman consents to elope with a man, the crime of *raptus* has still taken place: the woman, and her economic potential as wife and mother, have been stolen from her guardian. There are further economic implications in terms of the potential dowry a woman might bring to her new husband's family; many marriages, especially amongst the aristocracy, were economic transactions between men intended to strengthen alliances and wealth, and this is echoed in *The Reeve's Tale* when the parson takes it upon himself to determine who Malyne will marry and when he steals from the church to provide dowries for both his daughter and granddaughter. His aping of

aristocratic customs, along with his intention that Malyne will make a good marriage, are laid out for the Reeve's and Chaucer's audiences to mock.

Chaucer will deal with an unambiguous rape in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, an Arthurian romance which opens with a knight forcing himself on a young woman (III [D], 882-92). The young woman is clearly an unwilling participant and is a virgin, making the rape a more heinous offence – and it is an offence: the knight is tried for the rape and sentenced to death. The tone and presentation are completely different from *The Reeve's Tale*, where the intercourse is never treated as an offence; indeed there's no suggestion of any sympathy for the women – perhaps the opposite: the genre used itself suggests that sympathy would not be an appropriate response.

To understand Chaucer's (and the Reeve's) purpose, this tale needs to be read in accordance with fabliau rules. On the one hand, twenty-year old Malyne is unmarried, so apparently still a virgin. On the surface at least, given her father's violent temper, Malyne may have had little chance to 'rage and ... pleye' (I [A], 3958). Her father and her grandfather are waiting to marry her to Mr Right – essentially Mr Rich and Noble. Her grandfather specifically hopes to match his granddaughter with 'some worthy blood of auncetrye...' (I [A], 3982) which is clearly laughable: this is no fairytale, and Malyne is no Cinderella. After Malyne's coupling with Alayn, Symkyn, as Helen Cooper observes, is angry at the loss of the girl's virginity, but this 'comes not from his care for his daughter nor outraged morality, but from the affront to his social standing' (1996: 114): as Symkyn says, 'Who dorste be so boold to disparage/ My doghter, that is come of swich lynage?' (I [A], 4271-2). Sheila Delany also emphasises the economic aspect of the situation: Symkyn has expected 'an advantageous match for his virginal Malkin, until the goods are damaged by Aleyn the clerk' (1994: 74).

On the other hand, Malyne is no shrinking violet. The Reeve describes her as a strapping young woman, 'thikke and wel ygrowen' (I [A], 3973). Before dawn breaks, Aleyn declares that he has 'thries.../ Swyved the miller's doghter' (I [A], 4265-6), so however surprised – or not – Malyne may have been by his initial awakening of her, she has had plenty of opportunity to cry for help between times; but there's no suggestion that she does this. Instead she seems to have made Aleyn work hard in her bed: he 'wax wery in the dawenyng,/ For he had swonken al the longe nyght' (I [A], 4234-5). Add to this Malyne's pleasant words to Aleyn when he leaves her, and what we seem to have here is not a rape, but a young woman making full use of a rare opportunity for enjoyment. If Aleyn has *swyved* her three times, then at least twice she has chosen to allow him to do so. When Aleyn leaves, Malyne weeps: as John Hines puts it, with a pun that suggests he has been imbued with some fabliau-humour himself, 'it is Alayn's going, not his coming, that upsets her' (1993: 127). The situation with Symkyn's wife is less clear cut. We're told that she has had the best *swyving* she's had in years from John (I [A], 4230), and so Helen Cooper's assessment that 'Everybody except Simkin, it would seem, has a good time'

(1996: 114) seems a fair judgement, especially given that the tale is a fabliau.

The modern audience may still find the situation disquieting, but this isn't the right response to fabliau. Evelyn Burge Vitz points out that '[m]any genres, including beast epic and fabliau, were hardly committed to high seriousness. Medieval poets ... often dealt lightly with the entire array of human suffering: war, grievous loss, humiliation, castration and impotence, sickness and death, like rape, all grave, essentially serious ... themes, were frequently treated comically and casually' (1997: 3). 'If people laughed at everything, why should rape have been exempt? Is it reasonable to expect that rape alone, among violent acts and sins, should have been treated in hushed and solemn tones, or indignantly?' (1997: 4).

W. W. Allman and D. Thomas Hanks Jr. point out that *The Reeve's Tale* is 'perhaps the most problematic representation of sex in the *Canterbury Tales* because the consent of neither mother nor daughter is sought, yet the narrative does not stigmatise the acts as rape, as in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*' (2003: 44). These scholars emphasise the narrative's clear statement of the miller's wife's enjoyment of her *swyving*, and point out that Malyne's farewell to Aleyn is given in direct speech; and this is important, since women in medieval texts are frequently allowed no voice; often even their feelings and opinions are not reported. Malyne's speech, in which she gives Aleyn directions for finding a cake made of the stolen meal, makes plain her view of the night's activities: she addresses Aleyn as 'lemman' (lover) not once but twice (I [A], 4240, 4247), and her spontaneous gift is also part of the 'quiting' motif, a payment for services rendered.

Chaucer, whose work displays 'exceptional awareness of the nuances of rape' (Saunders, 2001: 5), and who, perhaps more than any author of the period, presents women with great sympathy and – even – liking, clearly intends the reader to view the sexual activity in *The Reeve's Tale* as both enjoyable and acceptable to all participants. Here, he engages fully with the basic principles of the fabliau: despite its everyday setting, it's not supposed to be read as realism, but it is supposed to be irreverently funny.

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