

Chaucer's Fabliaux: *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*

AMANDA HOPKINS

[Citation details: HOPKINS, Amanda, 'Chaucer's Fabliaux: *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*.' Version of a lecture given on the Medieval to Renaissance English Literature course, University of Warwick, 12 November, 2013.]¹

CONTENTS

[Frames](#)

[Quiting](#)

[The Fabliau](#)

[Quiting in Chaucer's fabliau](#)

[Quiting within the plots](#)

[Quiting and sexual economy](#)

[Bibliography](#)

FRAMES

The Canterbury Tales [CT] is a frame narrative: Chaucer the Poet speaks through the character of Chaucer the Pilgrim.² Within the stories, each tale echoes this framing strategy, so that the *Knight's Tale* is told by the pilgrim Knight, and so on (although sometimes internal comments seem to be made in the voice of Chaucer the Poet). Many of the tales in the manuscripts are linked: some of these linking passages are called 'prologues', but they often contain material that provides an epilogue to the previous tale and include other material, such as discussions between the pilgrims, that give a sense of doubling the main frame. For instance, in the group of the first three tales, the Pilgrim Chaucer describes the discussions taking place between the storytelling, and sometimes offers comments on the tales themselves. When the Knight finishes his story, Harry Baily, the Host of the Tabard, asks the Monk, who is next in the social hierarchy of the

¹ To reference notes taken during the lecture, rather than this version:

HOPKINS, Amanda, 'Chaucer's Fabliaux: *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*.' Lecture, Medieval to Renaissance English Literature, University of Warwick (17 November, 2015).

² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al. 3rd edn (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

pilgrims, to tell his tale; but the Miller interrupts, leading to an argument with the Reeve, and thus Chaucer the Poet explicitly interconnects the first three tales.

The Knight has told a rather lengthy tale, set in classical Greece, concerning two knights – Palamon and Arcite – who are cousins and best friends; but their close bond is broken when they in love with the same woman, Emelye. This seems to be an archetypal love triangle, but – true to form – Chaucer varies this archetype, and thus provides space for social commentary and critique, by making the love interest completely disinterested in love: Emelye does not want to marry at all. *The Miller's Tale* [*MilT*] and *The Reeve's Tale* [*RT*] also focus on the geometry of love, and thus use *The Knight's Tale* [*KnT*] as a kind of springboard for their own narratives. One motif that strongly links the three tales, and sets up an interaction used elsewhere in *CT*, is the idea of *quiting*.

QUITTING

Middle English *quiten* can mean one of several things: to repay, recompense, make good a promise, atone, get even with, punish, take revenge, etc.³ *Quiten* does not exist in Modern English, but a word related to it has survived: *requite*.⁴ This term is now probably most familiar from the term *unrequited*, usually connected with unreciprocated love (*OED* 3a), although the *OED* entry at 2a also shows a meaning familiar from Middle English *quiten*: ‘to retaliate for, avenge (a wrong, injury, etc.).’

Quiten, in the sense of ‘repaying’ or ‘getting even with’, links the first three tales and is also a key motif in *MilT* and *RT* (of which more later), and the term arises in the passage that connects the first two tales. When the Knight has finished his tale, the Host invites the Monk, the next highest in social status, to tell a story: “‘Now telleth on, sir Monk, if that ye konne | Somwhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale’” (I [A] 3, 118–19). However, the Miller is clearly struck by the idea of *quiting* – here meaning ‘matching’ or ‘repaying’ – and interrupts, saying: “‘I kan a noble tale for the nones, | With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale’” (I [A], 3126–27). The idea of *quiting* will be used explicitly to connect *MilT* to *RT*, and the term will recur several times. In the linking passage, the Miller says he “‘wol telle a legende and a lyf | Bothe of a carpenter and of

³ *Middle English Dictionary* [*MED*], ed. Frances McSparran et al. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2001), *quit**, v. <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED35686>> [accessed 20 September, 2013].

⁴ See *Oxford English Dictionary* [*OED*], *requite*, v., *OED Online* <<http://0-www.oed.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/Entry/163287?rskey=6smVI0&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 20 September, 2013].

his wyf, | How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe” (I [A], 3141–43). *Setting the wrightes cappe* refers to deceiving or making a fool of someone; medieval listeners or readers would be well aware of the appalling reputation students (*clerks*) had for sexual debauchery, and would immediately suppose that adultery would feature in the Miller’s story.

The Reeve takes this personally, as the Miller intends. A Reeve was responsible for the overall general management of a village, under a steward; his job was to make sure the serfs in the village completed their labour service on the lord’s land, but, as the *General Prologue* [GP] makes clear, the pilgrim Reeve had trained as a carpenter (I [A], 614). As soon as he hears that the Miller’s story is about a carpenter, he at once realizes that the Miller is intending to mock him: he takes the Miller’s words personally – as they are clearly intended – and in his angry response, he alludes to adultery: “It is a synne and eek a greet folye | To apeyren any man or hym defame, | And eek to bryngen wyves in swich fame” (I [A], 3146–48). His response also reiterates the idea of *quiting*: “So theek,” quod he, “ful wel koude I thee quite, | With bleryng of a proud milleres eye, | If that me liste speke of ribaudye” (I [A], 3864–66). However, the Reeve’s suggestion that he might not wish to tell a ribald story does not prevent him from doing so, as the lead-in to his tale makes plain: “This dronke Millere hath ytoold us heer, | How that bigyled was a Carpenter, | Peraventure in scorn, for I am oon. | And by youre leve I shal hym quite anon; | Right in his cherles termes wol I speke” (I [A], 3913–17).

These – *cherles termes*, *ribaudrye* and *quiting* – are key features of the stories told by the Miller and the Reeve, and of the broader genre of which these tales are examples: the fabliau.

THE FABLIAU

In Old French, a *fabliau* is simply a *conte*, a short story, often anecdotal. (There is no English word for the genre: the French term has been borrowed and simply loses its italics.) These stories are usually simple, although some have a complicated or convoluted plot. They are always intended to be humorous, and frequently cruel and mocking. Glenn Wright explains 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’.⁵ Tricks, ruses and cleverly-engineered love affairs are staple fare of the fabliau, and the tales often deploy dramatic

⁵ ‘The Fabliau Ethos in the French and English *Octavian* Romances’, *Modern Philology*, 102 (2005), 478–500 (p. 483).

irony: the narrator, the audience and some characters may share information unknown to other characters and the audience thus becomes complicit in mocking characters' misfortunes. Laughter at the expense of the unfortunate is a common feature of the fabliau and the texts give the audience little or no encouragement to feel any sympathy, even for wronged characters.

In the Old French fabliau, characters are usually simply drawn stock figures: – a man, a wife, a merchant, a priest – with no names and no history; characterization arises only from events in the story and the characters' reactions to them. The characters are most often drawn from the lower classes – peasants or bourgeoisie – and the setting is the urban or domestic everyday world; strange things may occur, but they are treated prosaically, not as marvels. Wright observes that 'the fabliau world is a thoroughly physical one, with physical pleasure as its central value' (p. 484). The plots often revolve around base instincts, such as greed, avarice and/or sexual lust, and are driven by the desires of largely stereotyped characters: stupid peasants, randy clerks, avaricious friars, nagging women. Like some other medieval genres, many fabliaux conclude by offering a moral; and both tales and morals are often explicitly misogynous. French and English fabliaux frequently adopt what Chaucer calls *cherles termes*: coarse or uneuphemistic language, which John Hines refers to as 'marked' language, the equivalent of Modern English 'four-letter words'.⁶

The origins and audience of the fabliau have been much debated, notably in terms of class. For many years it was thought that the tales were peasant or bourgeois stories, a case argued by Joseph Bédier in 1893. In 1957, Per Nykrog reassessed the genre, and decided that the fabliau was, in fact, intended to amuse the aristocracy; but a study published by Jean Rychner in 1960 concluded that variations between surviving versions meant that there were different versions for different audiences/classes: stories for the aristocracy thus showed peasants and bourgeoisie to be stupid, while peasants might make fools of knights in the stories for lower-class audiences.⁷ The lower classes would simply be amused at the content of the tales, while the upper classes could laugh at the lower classes. In Chaucer's case, it must be remembered that the internal audience – the pilgrims – is not same as the intended readership of *CT*: the inclusion of *KnT* 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 upper-

⁶ *The Fabliau in English*. Longman Medieval and Renaissance Library. (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p. 19.

⁷ Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*. Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, fasc. 98 (Paris: Emile Bouillon, 1893); Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux: étude d'histoire littéraire et de stylistique médiévale*. New edn. (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1973); Rychner, *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux: variantes, remaniements, dégradations*. 2 vols. (Genève: Droz, 1960).

class scholars and lawyers'.⁸ Variations in the level or type of their education might define exactly what each kind of audience found humorous. Chaucer the Poet crafts stories to offer maximum amusement to an aristocratic audience and, perhaps particularly, to fellow poets – and thus educated men – such as John Gower and Ralph Strode, to whom Chaucer explicitly dedicated his tragic poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Within *CT*, conversely, the Pilgrim Chaucer's exaggerated innocence and naivety allow Chaucer the Poet to distance himself from the tales' bawdiness. This is particularly emphasized by the conclusion of the *Prologue to MilT*, in which the fictionalized Chaucer disingenuously warns his reader about the content of *MilT*:

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)

Ostensibly, this is a disclaimer: the narrator says he has to include the Miller's story because he has promised to recount all the tales just as he heard them; he has no choice and editing for taste is not an option. Professing to be alert to his audience's sensibilities, he suggests the reader might prefer to turn away from such a *cherles tale*. Chaucer the Pilgrim states, with a wide-eyed insistence, that any the reader who is shocked or offended has no-one else to blame: a full and detailed warning has been supplied. Chaucer the Poet, of course, does not expect his reader to turn away from the bawdy stories at all; in fact, the disclaimer whets the reader's appetite for a lewd tale – a dual posture intended, of course, to amuse the audience further.

CT contains a variety of genres, including romance, hagiography, satire moral tale, beast-fable, and sermon. This suggests that medieval genres are obviously distinct from each other, but often this is not the case. In the Middle Ages generic terms were not strictly applied, so that it is not always clear which tales can accurately be described as fabliaux. The tales told by the Miller, the Reeve, and the Shipman are definitely fabliaux; while those told by the Summoner, the Friar, the Merchant, and the Cook (an unfinished tale) have strong enough elements of fabliau to be viable contenders. What this means is that the fabliau is actually the most common genre in *CT*.

⁸ D. S. Brewer, 'Class Distinction in Chaucer', *Speculum* 43 (1968), 290–305 (p. 295).

Brewer notes that ‘[n]o 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’ (p. 301). In *MilT*, 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’ (p. 294). Katherine Zieman recognizes the same point in Nicholas’ wooing of Alison: ‘Nicholas’ 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’.⁹ She quotes I [A], 3652–56, by way of example:

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 ryng,
 And freres in the chauncel gonne synge.

The vocabulary used here places the tales firmly in the forum of courtly literature, for an audience that will appreciate it: the upper classes.

The lexis in Chaucer’s fabliaux is not usually as coarse as the action; on the other hand, Chaucer does not avoid ‘marked’ language. *MilT* blends bawdiness into its courtliness. 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)

Hines explains that ‘*queynte* as a noun is used to represent *cunt*’ (1993: 76), and here it is given even greater emphasis by being placed at the end of a line, in the rhyming position. Reflecting the fabliau tradition of using homonyms and puns, Chaucer pairs the noun with the adjective *queynte*, meaning ‘cunning’, describing the clerks as ‘ful subtile and ful queynte’ (I [A], 3275).¹⁰

⁹ ‘Chaucer’s *Voys*’, *Representations*, 60 (1997), 70–91 (p. 79).

¹⁰ The word occurs elsewhere in *CT*, 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). She also refers to her genitalia more coyly as her ‘bele chose’ (III [D], 447: pretty thing). Note also that her prologue and tale also address *quiting*, again in the framework of sexual economy.

QUITTING IN CHAUCER'S FABLIAU

As previously suggested, there are parallels between the plots of *MilT* and *KnT*. *KnT* describes a love triangle: Palamon and Arcite vying for the hand of Emelye. *MilT* also presents a triangle, involving Alison, John and Nicholas; but it is complicated by a second and then a third triangle: first Alison, Nicholas and Absolon, and then Alison, John and Absolon. The triangular structure invites direct comparison with *KnT*, partly through Nicholas's courtly language and Absolon's posturing as lover; and most especially through the description of Alison, which contains echoes of the Knight's description of Emelye. Both women are described largely in relation to the natural world. Emelye

fairer was to sene
Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,
And fressher than the may with floures newe –
For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe, [...]
Yclothed was she fressh, for to devyse:
Hir yelow heer was broyded in a tresse
Bihynde hir bak, a yerde long, I gesse.
And in the gardyn, at the sonne upriste,
She walketh up and doun, and as hire liste
She gadereth floures, party white and rede,
To make a subtil gerland for hire hede;
And as an aungel hevenysshly she soong.

(I [A], 1034–55)

Emelye is linked to the natural world specifically in terms of purity (lily white, spring flowers), and her innocence is emphasized by the angel parallel.

Alison, on the other hand, is related to or paralleled with animals (wild or agricultural), giving her a more earthy quality, and country plants, but her description contains elements that define a stronger physical/sexual presence and others that suggest her awareness and deployment of her attractions, in the adornments she wears. This is a less subtle, less 'ladylike', and perhaps less controllable woman:

Fair was this yonge wyf, and therewithal
As any wezele hir body gent and smal.
A ceynt she werede, barred al of silk,
A barmcloth eek as whit as morne milk
Upon hir lendes, ful of many a goore.
Whit was hir smok, and broyden al bifoore
And eek bihynde, on hir coler aboute,
Of col-blak silk, withinne and eek withoute.
The tapes of hir white voluper
Were of the same suyte of hir coler;
Hir filet brood of silk, and set ful hye.
And sikerly she hadde a likerous ye;
Ful smale ypulled were hire browes two,
And tho were bent and blake as any sloo.

She was ful moore blisful on to see
 Than is the newe pere-jonette tree,
 And softer than the wolle is of a wether.
 And by hir girdel heeng a purs of lether,
 Tasseled with silk, and perled with latoun.
 In al this world, to seken up and down,
 There nys no man so wys that koude thenche
 So gay a popelote or swich a wenche.
 Ful brighter was the shynyng of hir hewe
 Than in the tour the noble yforged newe.
 But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne
 As any swalwe sittynge on a berne.
 Therto she koude skippe and make game,
 As any kyde or calf folwyng his dame.
 Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth,
 Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth.
 Wynsynge she was, as is a joly colt,
 Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt.
 A brooch she baar upon hir lowe coler,
 As brood as is the boos of a bokeler.
 Hir shoes were laced on hir legges hye.
 She was a prymerole, a piggesnye,
 For any lord to leggen in his bedde,
 Or yet for any good yeman to wedde.

(I [A], 3233–70)

These passages also connect with *RT*, since Malyne – the closest *RT* offers to a heroine – is also described, although to vastly different effect. In the frame of the Reeve’s *quiting* of the Miller, the daughter of the brawny miller is brawny herself (another contrast to ‘ladylike’ Emelye):

This wenche thikke and wel ygrowen was,
 With kamus nose, and eyen greye as glas,
 With buttokes brode, and brestes rounde and hye;
 But right fair was hire heer, I wol nat lye.

(I [A], 3973–76)

All three tales present young women: one (Emelye) unmarried, but available for the kind of politically beneficial union so frequent in the aristocracy; a second (Alison) who is married to a much older man, another topus of the Middle Ages; and a third (Malyne), who is unmarried, and, for several reasons, likely to remain so. At twenty, Malyne is old to still be single, and the chief reason for spinsterhood involves another insult from the Reeve to the Miller: an accusation of snobbery and social climbing. Malyne’s mother, Symkyn’s wife, had

ycomen of noble kyn;
 The person of the toun hir fader was.
 With hire he yaf ful many a panne of bras,
 For that Symkyn sholde in his blood allye.
 She was yfostred in a nonnerye;
 For Symkyn wolde no wyf, as he sayde,
 But she were wel ynorissed and a mayde,
 To saven his estaat of yomanrye.
 And she was proud, and peert as is a pye.

(I [A] 3942–50)

How is this an insult? First, a parson is a parish priest, and medieval priests were, of course, sup-

posed to be celibate. They were, indeed, barred from the sacrament of marriage. Symkyn's wife was conceived through a sinful union; and she herself is illegitimate. Symkyn's belief that he is improving his social position in marrying her is plainly risible; and his wife, too, is a snob: her father had her well brought up in a convent, which makes her think she is better than her peers. The parson, too, has delusions of grandeur:

This person of the toun, for she [Malyne] was feir,
In purpos was to maken hire his heir,
Bothe of his catel and his mesuage,
And straunge he made it of hir mariage.
His purpos was for to bistowe hire hie
Into som worthy blood of auncetrye;
For hooly chirches good moot been despended
On hooly chirches blood, that is descended.
Therefore he wolde his hooly blood honoure,
Though that he hooly chirche sholde devoure. (I [A], 3977–86)

The chattels in question belong to the Church, not to the parson – and in any case, Malyne may not be a pure maiden at all; Chaucer casts a certain doubt over the parentage of her only sibling, supposedly her baby brother: ‘a child [...] of half yeer age; | In cradel it lay and was a propre page’ (I [A], 3971–72). Symkyn, his wife and his father-in-law are thus all shown to be snobs, aiming to marry Malyne far above her station – all retaliatory insults in Reeve's *quiting* of Miller.

The three tales thus interconnect, first in the link between *KnT* and *MilT*, in their presentations of love triangles and the descriptions of the young women at the apex of the triangles; and then in terms of *quiting*, as the Miller *quites* (repays, matches) *KnT* and the Reeve *quites* (pays back) the Miller for his insult with the unflattering description of Malyne and her family's snobbery. The idea of *quiting* is not, however, confined to the frame of the tales; *quiting* is also a key feature of the plots of *MilT* and *RT*.

QUITTING WITHIN THE PLOTS

MilT and *RT* offer the elements expected of fabliau: bawdiness, trickery, young men *swyving* (usually young) women. The plot of *MilT* focuses on an old man with a young wife, and a randy clerk determined to sleep with her – standard fabliau fare. Yet the situation is, in fact, much more convoluted, and develops into a narrative that is clearly well beyond the storytelling capacity of a miller, never mind one so drunk he can hardly sit on his horse (I [A], 3120–21). The plot adds both a rival lover, who is tricked and humiliated, but given the opportunity for vengeance, and an extremely complicated ruse to let the clerk and the carpenter's wife spend the night together.

This requires Nicholas to convince John that he has both foreknowledge of a biblical-type flood, and divine guidance so that John, Alison and Nicholas will be saved if they hang from the rafters in kneading tubs.

The rival lover, Absolon, with his fashionable dress, his music and dancing and his fastidious speech, is also ‘somdeel squaymous/ Of fartyng’ (I [A], 3337–38); and having set up this motif, Chaucer returns to it, in true fabliau style, in the subplot of Absolon’s kiss, when Nicholas’s fart makes it clear (finally!) to Absolon that what he has kissed is definitely not a face (I [A], 3806). Absolon’s revenge, his *quiting*, in which he burns not Alison – which would make it a more sinister kind of tale – but Nicholas ‘amydde the ers’ (I [A], 3810) with a red-hot ‘kultour’ (I [A], 3812) is a simple fabliau device; but Chaucer reasserts his unique approach by linking it back to the convoluted plot of the flood and the kneading tubs through Nicholas’s screams for water (I [A], 3815–3823).

Quiting is also echoed in the presentation of John and Alison, whose relationship ultimately offers a complex commentary on marriage, a theme with which many of the tales are concerned. In *KnT*, Emelye is required, against her own preferences, to marry; as the king’s sister-in-law, her marriage is a matter of political and dynastic concern, not personal desire. The narrative thus sets up marriage as a subject to be examined within the tales, and a topic for debate by both the pilgrims and the audience. If *KnT* offers a view of the priorities of aristocratic marriage, *MilT* engages with another topos of the Middle Ages, to which Chaucer will return more than once in *CT*: the unevenly-matched married couple. John is first presented in stereotypical terms as a young wife’s aging, jealous husband, 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], 3224–26). In sleeping with Nicholas, therefore, Alison seems to be *quiting* her husband for suspecting her. Yet John’s actions in the text are not those of a jealous man: he is not shown to control or curb Alison in any way (cf. Hines, p. 114) and, as the description of her clothing (quoted above) suggests, he seems to indulge, even spoil, her. He seems, if anything, too indulgent and trusting, and certainly loving; when Nicholas pretends that everyone is going to die in the flood, John’s first thoughts are for Alison: “‘Allas, my wyf! | And shal she drenche? Allas, myn Alisoun!’” (I [A], 5522–23). Alison certainly makes a reference to John’s jealousy (I [A], 3294–97), but the immediate context offers a direct contradiction to her words (I [A], 3274): Alison’s husband is out on business and, as she speaks, Nicholas is embracing her with very little restraint. Later, when John asks Alison if she can hear Absolon singing love-songs to her under their bedroom window, there is no implication that John is rebuking Alison, or that he thinks she has encouraged Absolon, or that he plans to

take the matter further with his wife or the lovesick singer (I [A], 3355–69). This is not a jealous man's behaviour, which Chaucer depicts through *RT*'s Symkyn:

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 *MilT*'s John, who paves the way to his wife's adultery by the very strength of his love for her. Although this is a fabliau, it is difficult not to respond sympathetically to the cuckolded husband; and the poet's own sympathies are suggested in the frame of the tale: when Chaucer the Pilgrim describes how the internal auditors also 'laughen at this nyce cas' and discuss it at length, he points to 'Absolon and hende Nicholas' as the objects of amusement (I [A], 3855–58), not to John. It is notable, however, that Alison, who has certainly committed adultery and treated her husband callously, is not condemned, either within the tale or in its frame. This is another departure from the Old French fabliau model, in which women are frequently and explicitly criticized in misogynous morals. Alison apparently feels no particular emotion for Nicholas – this is lust not love; but she is not condemned 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.

QUITTING AND SEXUAL ECONOMY

The situation in *RT* is more complex, since here Symkyn's theft of the corn is *quited* through coitus. The plot pits the wits of two young clerks (students) against the miller, and climaxes (as it were) in the clerks' enthusiastic *swyving* of Symkyn's wife and daughter, specifically to pay back (*quite*) the miller for cheating and making fools of them. Chaucer clearly sets up the Reeve's story within fabliau parameters, introducing key characters in such a way as to avoid any sympathy. Symkyn is unpleasant and violent, cheating his customers and thinking himself much better than he is, as do his wife and her father; all have pretensions to social importance. These three characters are devoid of any redeeming characteristics and are here set up for a fall; but Malyne seems not to be similarly targeted.

Unlike *MilT*, where Alison clearly consents to her coitus with Nicholas, the women in *RT* are never overtly shown consenting to intercourse: a problematic issue, certainly for modern audi-

ences. Feminist critics especially have criticized Chaucer for this. Angela Jane Weisl, for example, considers violence against women to be normalized in *CT*, insisting that while the *quiting* of the Miller by the Reeve is ostensibly a conflict between men, ‘beneath [...] is another kind of *quiting* [*sic*]: the *quiting* of women, of Eve, through a continuous pattern of violent acts against her [*sic*]’.¹¹ In Weisl’s view and terminology, the sexual activity in *RT* begins with ‘virtual rape’ (a term she fails to explain); but she goes on to describe the sexual intercourse in the tale without the qualifying adjective, as plain ‘rape’.

There are, however, more complex issues here than Weisl suggests; for one matter, the terminology itself. In the Middle Ages, sexual violation was undoubtedly a problem (which, like enforced marriage, has not gone away), but the word ‘rape’ was not used to describe the act, and thus can be ambiguous when imprecisely applied to a medieval context. The legal term used in the Middle Ages was the Latin word *raptus*; and it often refers not to sexual violation, but to ‘abduction’. This is another word with a Latin root: *abducere* means literally ‘to lead away’. However, this term too has altered over time; in Modern English it is synonymous with kidnapping; but, when applied to a woman in medieval law, the term may or may not suggest an act carried out against the woman’s will. *Raptus* means ‘theft’, but in the modern Western world, theft is largely an economic term. It is similarly part of the medieval economic currency; but so were people. A woman’s body and her potential – particularly amongst the aristocracy – to generate offspring and to ensure the continuation of bloodlines were, in law, in the possession of men: her father, her brother, her husband, even sometimes her son or her nephew. If a woman ran away with a man of her own volition, the crime of *raptus* had still taken place since the woman, and her economic potential as wife and mother, had been stolen from her legal guardian.¹² In some cases, therefore, *raptus* and *abductio* equate to the Modern English sense of *elopement*.¹³

Chaucer will address sexual violation in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* [*WoBT*], an Arthurian

¹¹ “‘Quiting’ Eve: Violence against Women in *The Canterbury Tales*”, in *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts*, ed. by Anna Roberts (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), pp. 115–36 (p. 118).

¹² There are further economic implications, for instance the loss of the dowry the woman would have brought to the alliance.

¹³ See Middle English *rapt(e, n.; MED* <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=byte&byte=155110323&egdisplay=compact&egs=155111433>> [accessed 22 September, 2013]. The *OED* entry for *abduct*, v., offers the following translations of Latin *abducere*: ‘to lead away, carry off, remove, to withdraw, to entice away, to captivate, charm, to appropriate, take away, to pull away or aside, to turn aside, divert’. Some definitions here also offer parallels with *raptus*: see 2a, ‘To take (a person) away by force or deception, or without the consent of his or her legal guardian; to kidnap’; 2b, ‘to take without permission; to steal’ <<http://0-www.oed.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/Entry/212?redirectedFrom=abduct#eid>> [accessed 22 September, 2013]. Corinne Saunders offers some useful guidance on the distinction in medieval thought between sexual violation, consensual and non-consensual abduction, and *raptus* in *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2001), notably in the section on law (Chapter 1) and in the discussion (in Chapter 4) of whether the Middle Ages viewed Helen of Troy as having been forcibly abducted or whether she chose to leave her husband and go with Paris.

romance which opens with a knight forcing himself on a young virgin who is clearly an unwilling participant (III [D], 882–92). This is a legal offence: the knight is tried for the rape and sentenced to death. The tone and presentation are completely different from *RT*, in which the intercourse is treated with humour; there’s no suggestion of any sympathy for the women – perhaps the opposite: the fabliau genre itself suggests that sympathy would not be an appropriate response. The audience is given no opportunity to feel sympathetic towards Symkyn’s wife, who is as violent, drunken, and coarse as her husband; and Chaucer sidesteps the issue of consent in suggesting her enjoyment of the coitus – John has given Symkyn’s wife the best *swyving* she has had in years (I [A], 4230) – although the audience is not made privy to her own thoughts on the matter.

The situation with Malyne, however, is very different. Malyne is unmarried, and may – or may not – still be a virgin; but the description of her father’s violent temper and marital jealousy suggest that his daughter may have had little chance to ‘rage and [...] pleye’ (I [A], 3958). As mentioned above, her father and grandfather are waiting to marry her off to ‘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 Aleyn, Symkyn is angry at the loss of the girl’s virginity, but this, as Helen Cooper observes, ‘comes not from his care for his daughter nor outraged morality, but from the affront to his social standing’.¹⁴ Sheila Delany also underlines the economic aspect of Symkyn’s response: he has expected ‘an advantageous match for his virginal Malkin, until the goods are damaged by Aleyn the clerk’.¹⁵ As Symkyn says, ““Who dorste be so boold to disparage | My doghter, that is come of swich lynage?”” (I [A], 4271–72).

Yet, Malyne, as her description suggests, is no shrinking violet. She is shown as a strapping young woman, ‘thikke and wel ygrowen’ (I [A], 3973), a miller’s daughter used to working round the mill and hefting sacks of corn. Conversely, Aleyn is an impoverished scholar (I [A], 4002), unlikely to be well-fed or brawny; Chaucer’s depiction of the stereotypical Clerk in *GP* offers a parallel: ‘he nas nat right fat, I undertake, | But looked holwe’ (I [A], 288–89). Even if Aleyn does surprise Malyne in her sleep, she would be well able to fight him off should she choose to; and, since everyone is sleeping in the same room, she only need cry out to raise the alarm; but she does neither. Instead she seems to have made Aleyn work hard in her bed: he tells John that he has ““thries in this shorte nyght | Swyved the miller’s doghter”” (I [A], 4265–66), and he ‘wax

¹⁴ *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 114.

¹⁵ ‘Sexual Economics, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale and *The Book of Margery Kemp*’, in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All her Sect*, ed. by Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 72–87 (p. 74).

wery in the dawenyng, | For he had swonken al the longe nyght' (I [A], 4234–35). If Aleyn has *swyved* Malyne three times, then at least twice – and arguably on all three occasions – she has let him do so. When Aleyn takes his leave, Malyne tells him, apparently in repayment (*quiting*) for his hard work, where to find the cake her father has made with the stolen meal, thus allowing Aleyn to *quite* the miller for his theft. When Aleyn leaves, Malyne weeps: as John Hines puts it, 'it is Aleyn's going, not his coming, that upsets her' (p. 127). The issue of Symkyn's wife's consent may remain ambiguous, but Malyne's case is demonstrably not a sexual violation rape: this is a young woman making full use of a rare chance for fun. Helen Cooper's conclusion that 'Everybody except Simkin [*sic*], it would seem, has a good time' (p. 114) seems a fair judgement, especially given that the tale is a fabliau.

W. W. Allman and D. Thomas Hanks, Jr, point out that *RT* 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*'.¹⁶ These scholars emphasize the tale's clear statement that the miller's wife enjoys her *swyving*, and point out that Malyne's farewell to Aleyn is given in direct speech – this is crucial, since women in medieval texts are frequently allowed no voice; often their feelings and opinions are not even reported (cf. the victim in *WoBT*). 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' or 'darling') not once but twice (I [A], 4240, 4247), and her spontaneous gift is explicitly framed as part of the *quiting* motif, a payment for services rendered.

Modern audiences may still find the tale disquieting, and this is certainly useful for generating scholarly enquiry. Just as relevant a question, however, is whether such discomfort is an appropriate response to a 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. [...] 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?'¹⁷

One problem is that many of the feminists who damn these tales are not specialists in the

¹⁶ 'Rough Love: Towards an Erotics of the *Canterbury Tales*', *The Chaucer Review*, 38 (2003), 36–65 (p. 44).

¹⁷ 'Rereading Rape in Medieval Literature: Literary, Historical, and Theoretical Reflections', *The Romanic Review* 88 (1997), 1–26 (pp. 3–4).

medieval period, but more generally scholars of women's studies; often, an examination of their work shows that they have not attempted to research medieval law or theological commentaries on their topic, choosing instead to apply modern sensibilities broadly, or to condemn storytellers outright, without examining the historical period or literary context, or to ignore the texts' direct invitations to debate the issues presented – an approach that is inherently biased. To castigate medieval writers and their world for not sharing modern-day ethical values and mores is anachronistic and lacks objectivity; such criticism is also hypocritical, since twenty-first century human beings have demonstrably failed to solve a range of serious social problems– rape, enforced marriage, torture, violence and a host of other unpleasant vices – whilst inventing new techniques to accomplish them. This approach is also self-defeating, since it denies Malyné any right to take ownership of her sexual enjoyment and its *quiting*.

The medievalist Corinne Saunders offers a sounder perspective, observing that Chaucer's work displays 'exceptional awareness of the nuances of rape' (p. 5). Perhaps more than any other author of the period (female writers included), Chaucer's presentation of women is framed with sympathy and liking. He addresses social problems elsewhere, including in several of *CT* narratives; but in *MilT* and *RT*, however, he engages with the basic principles of the fabliau genre: the tales are not supposed to be read as realistic, but they are supposed to be irreverently funny.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary sources

CHAUCER, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al. 3rd edn (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1988)

Secondary sources

ALLMAN, W. W. and D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., 'Rough Love: Towards an Erotics of the *Canterbury Tales*', *The Chaucer Review*, 38 (2003), 36–65

BREWER, D. S., 'Class Distinction in Chaucer', *Speculum* 43 (1968), 290–305

BURROW, J. A., *Medieval Writers and Their Work: Middle English Literature and its Background, 1100-1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982)

BÉDIER, Joseph, *Les Fabliaux*. Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, fasc. 98 (Paris: Emile Bouillon, 1893)

COOPER, Helen, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)

DELAHOYDE, Michael, 'The Plan of *The Canterbury Tales*.' *Online Chaucer* (Washington State University, 2004, <<http://www.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/chaucer/>>), <<http://www.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/chaucer/CTplan.html>> [accessed 22 September, 2013]

- DELANY, Sheila, 'Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale and *The Book of Margery Kemp*', in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All her Sect*, ed. by Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 72–87
- HINES, John, *The Fabliau in English*. Longman Medieval and Renaissance Library (Harlow: Longman, 1993)
- Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Frances McSparran et al. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2001) <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>
- MUSCATINE, Charles, *The Old French Fabliaux* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986)
- NYKROG, Per, *Les Fabliaux: étude d'histoire littéraire et de stylistique médiévale* New edn. (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1973)
- Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by John Simpson et al. *OED Online*, 2013 <<http://0-www.oed.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/>>
- RYCHNER, Jean, *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux: variantes, remaniements, dégradations*. 2 vols. (Genève: Droz, 1960)
- SAUNDERS, Corinne, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2001)
- SCHENCK, Mary Jane Stearns, *The Fabliaux: Tales of Wit and Deception*. Purdue University Monographs in Romance Languages, 24 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1987)
- VITZ, Evelyn Burge, 'Rereading Rape in Medieval Literature: Literary, Historical, and Theoretical Reflections', *The Romanic Review* 88 (1997), 1–26
- WEISL, Angela Jane, "'Quiting" Eve: Violence against Women in *The Canterbury Tales*', in *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts*, ed. by Anna Roberts (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), pp. 115–36
- WRIGHT, Glenn, 'The Fabliau Ethos in the French and English *Octavian* Romances', *Modern Philology*, 102 (2005), 478–500
- ZIEMAN, Katherine, 'Chaucer's *Voys*', *Representations*, 60 (1997), 70–91

Illuminations included in the lecture slideshow are taken from the 'Ellesmere Chaucer': Huntington Library, MS EL 26 C 9, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, CA, <<http://sunsite3.berkeley.edu/hehweb/EL26C9.html>> [accessed 24 September, 2013], except for the joust scene, which comes from Jean Froissart, 'Jousts of Betanzos', *Chronicles*, Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, FR 2645, from Luminarium.org, <<http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/betanzos.jpg>> [accessed 24 September, 2013].