

# Chaucer's Fabliaux: The Miller's and Reeve's Tales

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## FRAMES

*The Canterbury Tales* (CT) is a frame narrative: Chaucer the Poet speaks through the character of Chaucer the Pilgrim. 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 are linked in the manuscripts: some of these linking passages are called 'prologues', but often contain material that provides an epilogue to the previous tale and other connecting matter, such as discussions between the pilgrims, resulting in a doubling of 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 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 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.

There are many ways to examine *The Miller's Tale* (MilT) and *The Reeve's Tale* (RT), and their relationship with *The Knight's Tale* (KnT): this lecture will examine some themes, linked by the motif 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. *Quiten* has not survived into Modern English, but a word related to it has come down to the modern language: *requite*. This term is now probably most familiar from the term *unrequited*, usually connected with love (OED 3a), but the OED also shows a meaning familiar from Middle English *quite*: 'requite 2a = to retaliate for, avenge (a wrong, injury, etc.)'.

*Quiten* and its meaning, in the sense of 'repaying' or 'getting even with', link the first three tales and is also a key motif in *MilT* and *RT* (of which more later). When the Knight has finished his tale, the Host invites the Monk to tell a story: "Now telleth on, sir Monk, if that ye konne/ Somwhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale" (I [A] 3118-19). 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] 3126-7). The idea of *quiting* will be used explicitly to connect *MilT* to *RT*, and the term recurs several times. In the linking passage, the Miller says he "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). *Setting the wrightes cappe* means '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's response is to take this personally. 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 thus 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] 3146-8). 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] 3864-6). 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 Carpenteer,/ Peraventure in scorn, for I am oon./ And by youre leve I shal hym quite anoon;/ 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 also of the genre they are part of: the *fabliau*.

#### 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’ (2005: 483). Tricks, ruses and cleverly-engineered love affairs are staple fare of the *fabliau*, and the tales often deploy dramatic 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 element of *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 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 (contrast romance). Wright observes that ‘the *fabliau* world is a thoroughly physical one, with physical pleasure as its central value’ (2005: 484, citing Muscatine

1986: 83). 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 conclude with 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’ (Hines 1993: 19).

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 further study, by Jean Rychner (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. 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 upperclass scholars and lawyers’ (1968: 295). 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, other educated men such as Gower and Strode (dedicatees of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*).

Within *CT*, conversely, the Pilgrim Chaucer’s exaggerated innocence and naivety allows the Chaucer the Poet to distance himself from the tales’ bawdiness. This is particularly emphasized by the conclusion of the *Prologue to MilT*, in which Chaucer the Pilgrim 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 must recount *all* the tales just as he heard them; he has no choice. 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 wide-eyed insistence that, should the reader be shocked or offended, he has only himself to blame, since a full 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, moral tale, beast-fable, fabliau – but there may be overlaps and confusion: in the Middle Ages generic terms were not strictly applied, so that it is not entirely clear which of Chaucer's stories are to be considered fabliaux. The tales told by the Miller, the Reeve, the Shipman are definitely fabliaux; those told by the Summoner, the Friar, and the Cook (an unfinished tale) may be fabliaux; *The Merchant's Tale* also contains strong elements of fabliau. If all these tales are accepted as at least strongly related to the genre, it becomes apparent that the fabliau is the most common genre in *CT*. 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' (1968: 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' (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, quoting I [A], 3652-6:

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 syng.)

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

Chaucer's fabliaux may be coarse in content, but not always in lexis; on the other hand, he does not avoid 'marked' language. *MilT* 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)

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 amusing homonyms, Chaucer pairs the word with *queynte* the adjective, meaning ‘cunning’, describing the clerks as ‘ful subtile and ful queynte’ (I [A], 3275). (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), her ‘pretty thing’; and it is worth noting that she and her tale also deal in the economy of *quiting*.)

### **QUITING IN CHAUCER’S FABLIAU**

There are parallels in 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 a third triangle: Alison, Nicholas and Absolon, and 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 therwithal  
 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 **piggessnye**,  
**For any lord to leggen in his bedde,**  
**Or yet for any good yeman to wedde.** (I [A] 3233-70)

These descriptions also offer a forward link to *RT*, since Malyne is also described, although to vastly different effect. In the Reeve's *quiting* of the Miller, the daughter of the brawny miller is brawny herself (and again offers a 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] 3973-6)

All three tales present three young women, then: one unmarried, but available for a political union (Emelye); a second young woman, married to a much older man (Alison); and a third, unmarried, and likely to remain so (Malyne). At twenty, Malyne is old to be single, and this 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)

A parson is a parish priest and medieval priests were supposed to be celibate. Symkyn's wife was conceived in sin and 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: having been well-brought up in a convent 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; there is some doubt about the maternity of her so-called baby brother: 'a child [...] of half yeer age;/ In cradel it lay and was a propre page' (I [A] 3971-2). 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 expected fabliau elements: bawdiness, trickery, young men *swyving* (Middle English for 'shagging' or 'fucking') usually young women. *MilT* basically introduces an old man with a young wife, and a randy clerk determined to sleep with her: standard fabliau fare. Yet the plot is, in fact, much more convoluted, and well beyond the capacity of a miller, never mind one so drunk he can hardly sit on his horse. The plot adds to the basic mixture 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 ruse involves a pretended astrological prediction of a biblical-type flood, and the necessity for John, Alison and Nicholas to hang from the rafters in tubs in order to be saved.

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 the subplot of Absolon’s kiss: 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 at once reasserts his own unique approach by connecting it back to the convoluted plot of the flood and the kneading tubs through Nicholas’s screams for water (I [A], 3815ff.).

*Quiting* is also echoed in the presentation of John and Alison, which seems ultimately to offer a complex commentary on medieval marriage, a theme with which many of the tales are concerned. Initially, the marriage in *MilT* seems to be the familiar old man/young wife situation, reflecting a social issue of the period, in which aristocratic families – and perhaps families of the lower classes, aping courtly habits – often married their young daughters to much older men in order to make politically or economically beneficial alliances. (In the dynastic economy, sons too had little choice about their marriages.) In the high Middle Ages, the Church took greater control of marriage by making it a sacrament, and demanded that both parties must consent to any marriage, a point of no little contention with the aristocracy (see also Hopkins, 2005).

In *MilT*, John is introduced in stereotypical terms, as a young wife’s 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], 3224-6). In sleeping with Nicholas, therefore, Alison seems to be *quiting* her husband for his jealous treatment of her. Yet this jealousy is not demonstrated by actions in the text: John is not depicted constraining Alison in any way (cf. Hines 1993: 114), and in fact seems to indulge, even spoil, her (see the description of her clothing, quoted above). Indeed, given the way the other characters in the tale behave, John seems, if anything, too trusting, and when Nicholas pretends that everyone is going to die in the flood, John’s immediate thought is for his wife: “‘Allas, my wyf!/ And shal she drenche? Allas, myn Alisoun!’” (I [A] 5522-3). Alison herself certainly refers to John’s jealousy (I [A], 3294-7), but the immediate context directly contradicts what she says (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 fairly explicitly as they talk. When John later asks Alison if she can hear Absolon singing love-songs to her under their bedroom window, the text nowhere implies that John is suggesting she encouraged Absolon’s behaviour nor even that he plans to approach Absolon about the matter (I [A], 3355-69). This is not the behaviour of a jealous man, which Chaucer details in the description of Symkyn’s jealousy of his wife in *RT*:

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 jealous 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 *MilT*. In fact, it is almost impossible, even in a fabliau, 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: 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, 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 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.

#### **QUITTING AND SEXUAL ECONOMY**

The situation in *RT* is more complex, since here the *quitting* of Symkyn's theft of the corn is taken in 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, with their pretensions to social importance. These three characters are devoid of any redeeming characteristics and are here set up for a fall; but Malyne seems less of a target.

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 audiences. 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 *quitting* of the Miller by the Reeve is ostensibly a conflict between men, 'beneath [...] is another kind of quitting [*sic*]: the quitting of women, of Eve, through a continuous pattern of violent acts against her [*sic*]' (1998: 118). Weisl's view of the sexual activity in *RT* begins in terms of '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'.

Yet, there are more complex issues here than Weisl suggests. The word 'rape' was not used in the Middle Ages, and the medieval, Latin, legal term *raptus* often does not refer to a violent sexual act, against the will of the woman, but to 'abduction'; and abduction, in medieval law, may or may not be carried out against the woman's will. *Raptus* itself means 'theft'. In the modern world, theft is largely

an economic term; similarly it is also part of the medieval economic forum. A woman's body, and her potential to ensure (particularly amongst the upper classes) the continuation of bloodlines, were, in law, in the possession of men: her father, her brother, her husband. If a woman consented to elope with a man, the crime of *raptus* had still taken place since the woman, and her economic potential as wife and mother, would have been stolen from her legal guardian. There are further economic implications in terms of the dowry such a woman might have brought to the alliance.

Chaucer will deal with an unambiguous rape in *The Wife of Bath's Tale (WoBT)*, an Arthurian romance which opens with a knight forcing himself on a young virgin (III [D], 882-92), who is clearly an unwilling participant. 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 her father's violent temper and marital jealousy suggest that Malyne may have had little chance to 'rage and [...] pleye' (I [A], 3958). Her father and grandfather (see above) 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' (1996: 114). Sheila Delany also underlines the economic aspect of Symkyn's response: he has expected 'an advantageous match for his virginial Malkin, until the goods are damaged by Aleyn the clerk' (1994: 74). As Symkyn says, "'Who dorste be so boold to disparage/ My doghter, that is come of swich lynage?'" (I [A], 4271-2).

Yet, Malyne, as her description suggests, is no shrinking violet. She is described as 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, as Chaucer's stereotypical depiction of the Clerk in *GP* implies: 'he nas nat right fat, I undertake,/ But looked holwe' (I [A] 288-9). Even if Aleyn does surprise Malyne in her sleep, she is likely 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], 4265-6), and he 'wax wery in the dawenyng,/ For he had swonken al the longe nyght' (I [A], 4234-

5). If Aleyn has *swyved* Malyne three times, then at least twice she has chosen to allow him to 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 Alayn’s going, not his coming, that upsets her’ (1993: 127). The issue of Symkyn’s wife’s consent may remain open, but Malyne’s case is not rape, but that of a young woman making full use of a rare chance for fun. Helen Cooper’s assessment that ‘Everybody except Simkin [*sic*], it would seem, has a good time’ (1996: 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*’ (2003: 44). These scholars emphasize 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 – important, since women in medieval texts are frequently allowed no voice; often their feelings and opinions are not even reported (cf. *WoBT* rape victim). 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 situation disquieting, but is this an appropriate 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. [...] 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: 3-4). (Comedies such as *South Park* and *Burke and Hare* offer modern parallels to such dark humour; and there are many other examples.)

Many of the feminist critics who find these tales so problematic are not specialists in the medieval period, but scholars of women’s studies, and an examination of their work frequently shows that they have not attempted to research medieval law or theological commentaries on their topic, choosing instead to condemn storytellers outright, to ignore the texts’ invitations to debate issues, and thus to approach medieval literature with a biased mindset and from a strictly modern perspective. To criticize the literature of the Middle Ages for not displaying modern ethical values is anachronistic, subjective, and hypocritical, given that twenty-first century human beings have singularly failed to solve a range of serious social problems: rape, enforced marriage, torture, violence and a host of other unpleasant

vices. It also denies Malyné any right to sexual enjoyment and its *quiting*.

Conversely, the medievalist Corinne Saunders, in her book *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, observes that Chaucer's work displays 'exceptional awareness of the nuances of rape' (2001: 5). Perhaps more than any author of the period, Chaucer presents women with great sympathy and liking, and clearly intends the reader to view the sexual activity in *RT* as both enjoyable and acceptable to all participants. Here, he engages fully, as he intends to, not with social problems – which he addresses elsewhere – but with the basic principles of the fabliau, which is not supposed to be read as realism, but is supposed to be irreverently funny.

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