University of Alberta

"'Lat us Werken Thriftily'": Rethinking Identity and Social Organization in Chaucer's Fabliaux

by

Lisa Jeanette Ward Mather 

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall, 2002

University of Alberta

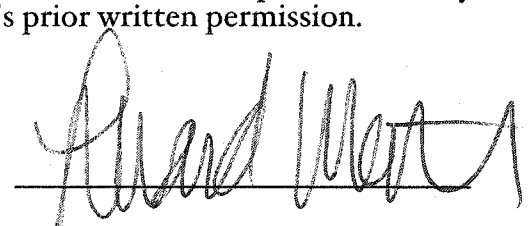
Library Release Form

Name of Author: Lisa Jeanette Ward Mather

Title of Thesis: "'Lat us Werken Thriftily'": Rethinking Identity and Social Organization in Chaucer's Fabliaux

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Year this Degree Granted: 2002



8812-90 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
T6C 3L6

August 27, 2002

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "'Lat us Werken Thriftily': Rethinking Identity and Social Organization in Chaucer's Fabliaux" submitted by Lisa Jeanette Ward Mather in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

for *Prof. Glenn Burger*

Prof. Garrett P. J. Epp

Prof. E. D. Blodgett

Prof. Stephen R. Reimer

August 23, 2002

Prof. Christine McWebb

for *Prof. Susan Crane*

For Paul and Katie

Abstract

This thesis argues that in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer engages with the medieval genre of fabliau in order to develop a new theory of identity and social order. For Chaucer, identity is socially negotiated and social position is a process achieved through the investigation of social difference. Fabliau is central to Chaucer's project because, as the first chapter argues, these stories represent social organization as a complex problem that is only imperfectly addressed by class and gender hierarchies. Fabliaux question the explanatory power of these hierarchies when they suggest that their characters' desire is possibly worthwhile.

The second chapter considers the first Fragment of *The Canterbury Tales* and argues that fabliau is introduced in "The Miller's Prologue," which shares one of fabliau's central techniques; it exposes a character as a "churl." The prologue suggests that the dismissal of the lower classes as obviously low can cause social conflict. "The Miller's Tale" works to diminish this possibility by expanding the dangerously reductive social binaries producing conflict.

The third chapter studies "The Shipman's Tale" to reveal gender's role in naturalizing class distinctions. When the merchant's household is described in two contradictory ways—as "worthy" and "thrifty"—it becomes clear that the tale's principal problem is not the wife's immoral liaison with the monk, but merchant wealth, which allows merchants to adopt expensive forms of social display and thus makes it impossible for a nobleman's appearance to naturalize his rank.

The fourth chapter discusses "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" to further investigate gender's role in producing a public identity. The Wife seems to prove the legitimacy of gender stereotypes when she represents herself as combative, lustful, and greedy. However, the episode of her relationship with Jankyn reveals that her

self-representation has been merely a reiteration of the conventions of gender ideology, not a demonstration of her "true" errant nature.

The fifth chapter traces the ways in which "The Summoner's Tale" manifests and attempts to conceal the troubling indeterminacy that characterizes late medieval society. Specifically, the frame narrative places "The Summoner's Tale" in the context of an institutional struggle within the late medieval church.

"'Lat us Werken Thriftily'": Rethinking Identity and Social Organization in Chaucer's Fabliaux

Lisa Ward Mather

Introduction

When this project was still new to me, genre seemed a tedious subject. Although Chaucerians have done worthwhile work on Chaucer's use of genre,[1] many fabliau scholars seemed distracted by their discussions of genre. Fabliau scholarship seemed stuck in debates about the genre's defining characteristics and class origins. Many of these scholars discussed the tales' content only briefly. Excited by the prospect of doing detailed readings of the Old French fabliaux, I was frustrated by this neglect. I found these "horrible little stories," as a colleague once described them, to be stimulating subject matter. The Old French fabliaux's reductive and often disturbing representations of gender and class were particularly interesting, for they conveniently distinguished, it seemed to me, the French fabliaux from Chaucer's fabliaux. Whereas the Old French stories reproduced ideological representations of identity, Chaucer complicated such representations in his fabliaux.

Eventually, realizing that genre was central to Chaucer's project of complicating simplistic representations of identity, I was drawn to ask not only "why these fabliaux?," but also, "why fabliau?" I wanted to know how and why Chaucer uses genre to talk about identity in *The Canterbury Tales*. I read materialist critics, from Althusser to Dollimore, to help me theorize Chaucer's engagement with inherited knowledges of gender and class. However, in the process, I became aware of the power of inherited knowledges on my own work. In fact, this power was evident in my assumption that the Old French fabliaux are simple texts, uncritical of their ideological environment, and that Chaucer is heroically resistant to late medieval social hierarchies. Like those scholars who debated fabliau's defining

[1] Susan Crane's *Gender and Romance in* The Canterbury Tales provides a valuable analysis of gender's centrality to romance and places Chaucer's romances in a literary context. Henry Ansgar Kelly's *Chaucerian Tragedy* is another recent discussion of

characteristics, I had stayed within the boundaries established by previous scholars and, as a result, mechanically reproduced their values and reiterated their arguments.

I no longer theorize this project as a record of the differences between Chaucerian and Old French fabliaux and the superiority of Chaucer's texts. Contrary to much scholarly thought, I assume that the Old French fabliaux are complex, sophisticated texts in their own right and that this complexity accounts for Chaucer's interest in this genre. Clearly, this theoretical shift expands possibilities for scholars of fabliau. However, recognizing fabliau's complexity is also a crucial task for Chaucerians, for continuing to characterize the genre of fabliau as a low, predictable form skews our analysis of Chaucer's fabliaux. Chaucer's stories become distanced from their Old French antecedents and instructive correlations between them are missed. It is important for Chaucer scholars to study the genre of fabliau not because he improves upon or transforms it, but because he appreciates (this) genre's ability to shape both its narrative, and readers' responses to the hierarchies that work to structure their social lives. Explaining how genre can mold readers' responses to social hierarchies is another theoretical goal of this thesis.

Chaucer, in his fabliaux, demonstrates genre's influence over the explanatory power of class and gender hierarchies. A text's generic characteristics can support these hierarchies by representing characters as fully identified by their classification within class and gender hierarchies. In this thesis, I argue that these hierarchies can function mutually. They can work jointly in medieval texts to characterize identity as obvious and singular. However, Chaucer is not only interested in genre's ideological function. He also explores its ability to suggest that inherited class and gender distinctions represent identity in dangerously reductive ways. He uses fabliau to

---

Chaucer's exploration of a genre.

challenge such reductive representations and suggest that identity is, in fact, complex and not simply decided by birth.

In and around his fabliaux, Chaucer identifies the simplistic representation of identity as problematic. He does so by alluding to various conflicts over social authority that were taking place in the late Middle Ages. For Chaucer, social order is threatened by reductive social binaries that represent all "churls" as permanently low. He implies that such binaries are dangerous because in late medieval England, many "churls" were gaining economic influence and, as a result, their desires were becoming socially intelligible. Such newly intelligible individuals rebelled against their characterization as permanently low in, for instance, the Revolt of 1381.

In developing this argument, I have found particularly instructive those scholars, including, for instance, David Wallace and Sarah Beckwith, who theorize medieval ideologies of gender and class while providing a historicist account of those ideologies. Although my argument is quite different from theirs, I use a similar methodology to explain how Chaucer's use of fabliau is specific to his historical moment. I demonstrate the historical contingency of gender and class identity in the Old French and Chaucerian fabliaux by both analyzing the textual representation of medieval ideologies and explaining the social conditions that made possible the production of those ideologies.

Apart from my theoretical inclination to provide a historicist account of the ideologies that appear in Chaucer's fabliaux, I am drawn to contextualize these tales because of Chaucer's own project, which is to develop a new theory of identity and social order. The fabliaux are a crucial part of this project, because he accomplishes it by exploring Old French fabliau's ambivalent response to simplistic representations of identity. The French fabliaux represent social organization as a complex problem that is only imperfectly addressed by class and gender hierarchies. Fabliaux question the explanatory power of these hierarchies when they suggest that

their characters' desire is possibly worthwhile. However, the Old French stories often limit their transformative potential by simplifying their plots and characters. In fact, the fabliaux reinforce inherited hierarchies in producing such simplified plots and characters. Chaucer both acknowledges the power of such reductions and works further towards a transformative representation of identity and social theory by creating characters that are surprising and not reducible to their class or gender category. These characters imply a different understanding of social organization. In this thesis, I will address only a few of the many techniques that Chaucer uses to reimagine medieval society in *The Canterbury Tales*. Specifically, I will argue that Chaucer transforms the inherited understanding of public identity and rigid social organization by revealing gender's role in bolstering class distinctions, by historicizing his fabliaux, by complicating his stories' plots and by particularizing their characters.

Chaucer's fabliaux insist that social position must be reimagined as a process achieved through the investigation of social difference rather than the assertion of rigid social categories. Identity is not public and obvious, but overdetermined and socially negotiated. While a text's generic characteristics can suggest that class and gender hierarchies accurately describe medieval society, they can never prove this accuracy when considered in that text's broader context. This context reveals that society is more complex than these hierarchies suggest and that this complexity can never be completely erased.

The first chapter will introduce the genre of fabliau, as defined by the Old French fabliaux, outlining some of the major debates in fabliau scholarship in order to suggest that these debates demonstrate how fabliau has suffered from a lack of serious critical consideration. Many fabliau scholars, assuming that the fabliaux are simple and unsophisticated, discuss the requirements for fabliau as a genre rather than perform a serious analysis of the stories themselves. In this chapter, I will

suggest a new definition of fabliau that acknowledges the genre's complexity. As indicated above, I will argue that Chaucer takes up fabliau in *The Canterbury Tales* because it represents social organization as a complex problem. This complexity is evident in fabliau's contradiction: many fabliaux both defend rigid ideologies of gender and class and appreciate individual initiative. Such fabliaux imply that these social hierarchies can never guarantee social order because they can never totally manage individual desires. Accordingly, Chaucer uses this genre to develop a new, more flexible way of thinking about identity and social order.

Reading the first Fragment of *The Canterbury Tales*, the second chapter will offer further evidence that Chaucer engages with fabliau's ambivalent treatment of rigid social models. I will argue that fabliau is introduced first in "The Miller's Prologue," not "The Miller's Tale." The prologue shares one of fabliau's central, and conservative, techniques; like many Old French fabliaux, it exposes a character as a "churl." Employing fabliau's direct, uncomplicated narrative movement, the prologue suggests the obviousness of the Miller's churlishness by directly following his interruption, his inappropriate transgression of social boundaries, with his exposure as a churl. The plot's directness characterizes its causation as unidirectional and undeviating. Importantly, the prologue suggests that the dismissal of the lower and middle classes as obviously low carries with it the possibility of social conflict—a miller is, after all, the central character in texts written by the rebels of 1381. Chaucer works to diminish this possibility in "The Miller's Tale." The tale demonstrates how textual complexity, by avoiding a simplistic representation of identity and social roles, can expand the dangerously reductive social binaries producing conflict.

In his tale, the Miller challenges the assumption that social identities are obvious and immutable. He foregrounds his characters' differences and choices. Thus, Absolon and Nicholas, Alison's two suitors, are readily distinguishable and Alison clearly chooses between them. Further, the tale's characters are surprising.

For instance, the tricky clerk Nicholas does not absolutely dominate the action, nor does he escape Absolon's reprisal. Because these characters do not quite fit into traditional social categories, they belie those categories and their attempts to describe identity as a simple reflection of a rigid hierarchy. The tale suggests that traditional social models can generate social violence. The possibility of social violence is first introduced in "The Miller's Prologue" with the Miller's rowdy interruption. The tale also alludes to this possibility and works to defuse it. The tale is set in Oxford, a city beset by conflict between the town and university communities and in which essentialized class distinctions were increasingly unworkable. "The Miller's Tale" works against this possible conflict with the addition of Absolon to the conflict between John, a wealthy townsman, and Nicholas, a student. The tale also develops a new subjectivity that has no stable basis in essentialized class distinctions and that can better account for those who live in an increasingly flexible and permeable urban setting.

Chaucer's complex representation of social roles and the subjects who inhabit those roles is distinctly different from other medieval texts that refer to a historical context. Some medieval authors, including, for instance, the chroniclers, use literary techniques to suggest that any challenge to the inherited social order is obviously wrong and will inevitably result in punishment and condemnation. In order to characterize social roles delineated by class and gender stereotypes as permanent, such authors often define identity as public, as an inherited status that is always visible. This chapter will study the chronicles as examples of such texts. Unlike Chaucer, the chroniclers use historicization to confirm the authority of inherited social hierarchies. These texts deny the possibility of unexpected change in order to assert that identity is determined by lineage and that social relationships are predictable.

The chapter will conclude with a discussion of "The Reeve's Tale," which, despite the Reeve's attempt to reassert fabliau's connection to established literary traditions and social hierarchies, destabilizes long-held assumptions about the legitimacy of these traditions. That the Reeve fails in his attempt to counter the Miller's challenge is evident in fabliaux that follow, particularly "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," "The Summoner's Tale" and the tale examined in the next chapter, "The Shipman's Tale."

The third chapter will study "The Shipman's Tale" to reveal gender's role in naturalizing the class distinctions that are under scrutiny in Fragment I. The principal problem explored in this tale initially seems to be the wife's immoral liaison with the monk. However, the wife's behavior is eventually explained by an apparent contradiction in her household. She is expected to maintain a household that is simultaneously "worthy" and "thrifty." The household must be "thrifty" because this designation justifies the merchant's profession by characterizing it as uncertain. The house must be also configured as "worthy" because the merchant's wealth is only socially recognizable when displayed in the context of a feudal household. Thus, the problem investigated in the tale is merchant wealth. Their wealth allows merchants to adopt forms of social display previously available only to the nobility and thus makes it impossible for a nobleman's appearance to naturalize his rank.

Wealthy merchants who resemble noblemen challenge the medieval conception of identity—a conception that gender works to stabilize. Gender identifications can suggest that identity is natural and obvious. In other words, a nobleman's masculine qualities can help characterize his nobility as a singular, inherited status. While many medieval texts, including *Havelok the Dane* and *Vox Clamantis*, use masculinity to naturalize nobility, Chaucer's texts, such as "The Knight's Tale" and "The Merchant's Tale," undermine this naturalization in various ways. Examining the partial resemblance between a wealthy merchant's household

and that of a nobleman, "The Shipman's Tale" effectively demonstrates that noble identity is not permanent and that it must be continually reasserted through public display. This tale thus illustrates that identity is not public or certain. The merchant's identity is determined by numerous influences, not only by birth. The merchant's "private" life, including his domestic relationships, also influences his reputation. His identity is not absolute and pre-determined, but is socially negotiated.

In "The Shipman's Tale," the merchant's wife manages the problem of merchant wealth. The merchant's wife is not just "naturally" inclined to immoral behavior. She deliberately misrepresents herself and her husband according to gender ideology in order to explain her debt, which is inexplicable in the context of her "worthy" household. She is attempting to conceal the fact that they do not fit within the dominant class hierarchy; it fails to account for them. Although the wife does not deliberately subvert gender ideology, her actions in context reveal that gender is discursive and performative and not part of a permanent identity. "The Shipman's Tale" seems to be about a moral dilemma that is denounced through gender stereotypes. In fact, this tale is about a threat to social signification that the naturalizing influence of gender ideology works to obscure.

The fourth chapter will discuss "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" to further investigate gender's role in producing a public identity. The Wife seems to prove the legitimacy of gender stereotypes and the theory that identity is public and obvious when she represents herself as having the characteristics of a stereotypical woman: combativeness, lust, and greed. Consequently, she resembles many women in Old French fabliaux, including the title character of "La Veuve" ("The Widow"). Although the title character of this Old French story is characterized as powerful because uncontrollable, her excessiveness above all serves to characterize her as the essentialized lustful, deceptive "Woman." Unlike the Widow, the Wife of Bath

becomes an individual rather than just a type. The episode of her relationship with Jankyn reveals that the Wife's self-representation has been merely a reiteration of the conventions of gender ideology, not a demonstration of her "true" errant nature. When the Wife is shown to have emotional complexity, she can no longer be thought of as an essentialized woman. Although she has internalized gender stereotypes, that internalization is a complex process in which her experience has a part.

When the Wife's negotiation of authority becomes apparent in her "Prologue," she dispels the misogynist connotations surrounding feminine mobility. The worth of the Wife, the mobile woman, becomes visible in the "Prologue" because, in late medieval England, it was beginning to be possible to imagine the worth of social mobility. Members of the middle social strata were gaining economic influence and their desires and abilities were becoming socially intelligible. One consequence of this class shift was that the inherited class hierarchy was decreasingly able to describe social differences. Also, as the "Prologue" demonstrates, the binary model of gender difference was decreasingly able to account adequately for women like the Wife.

"The Wife of Bath's Prologue" makes visible the negotiation of medieval gender ideology to demonstrate a new reading model, unlike the binary model, that can account for multiple categories of social intelligibility and the possible mobility between those categories. This model proposes that meaning and power do not originate from a single point, but that they emerge through circulation between various social groups. The visibility of the Wife's emotional complexity and her negotiation of authority suggest that meaning is determined through a process of exchange between inherited knowledges and historically located subjects.

Like previous chapters, the fifth chapter is interested in historicization and its potential for ideological destabilization. This chapter will consider "The

Summoner's Tale" and trace the ways in which the Summoner's text manifests and attempts to conceal the troubling indeterminacy that characterizes late medieval society. Specifically, the frame narrative places "The Summoner's Tale" in the context of an institutional struggle within the late medieval church. The Summoner has no desire, like the Miller or the Wife, to emphasize the contingency of the hierarchy that imperfectly structures his institutional life. He attempts to suppress institutional discord and, like the Reeve, erase social uncertainty. Interestingly, despite his resistance, the Summoner draws attention to the institutional discord that he hopes to obscure. His failure demonstrates that social ambiguity is not easily dispelled, even with the help of generic strategies. On the contrary, social indeterminacy is more tenacious than the structures that attempt to hide it.

The Summoner uses the organizing power of genre to make his case against the Friar and stabilize the church's authority. Eager to conceal the division within the church, he shifts from an exemplum to a fabliau while telling his story. In the first part of the tale, exemplum allows him to absolutely condemn Friar John's immorality while asserting church authority. However, the tale's scatological climax, when Thomas repays the Friar's greed with a fart, is clearly a fabliau moment. Fabliau allows the Summoner to attribute Friar John's condemnation to the laity, the group that was primarily responsible for the friars' success. However, in shifting genres, the Summoner generates a contradiction: he represents self-interested behavior in two different ways. While exemplum understands self-interest as wrong, fabliau recognizes its possible worth. This contradiction, considered in the context of the frame narrative, ultimately reveals the Summoner's agenda—to condemn friars and yet assert the unity of the church—and makes the realization of this agenda impossible. Although he wants to establish that the church is an absolute, stable authority, the Summoner ultimately suggests that social authority is multiple and

conditional. Clerical authority is finally undermined when the tale's fabliau section extends a different definition of social "productivity."

Another significant effect of the Summoner's use of fabliau is that he creates characters who are not reducible to their social classes. The tale's appreciation of self-interested behavior, which implies an appreciation of the thoughts and desires of the two lowborn characters, contradicts an assumption central to the dominant social model: that the thoughts and desires of members of the lower classes are predictable and unimportant. This is, as previously mentioned, a quality common to many Old French fabliaux.

Finally, the Summoner's use of fabliau also undermines his own attempt to constitute a universal reader, a goal common to exempla. Because the Summoner includes the reader on the side both of destabilized church authority and of the socially disruptive laity, he constitutes a reader that can occupy multiple positions in relation to his text. The Summoner's multiple failures to fix his characters and his readers within a hierarchy demonstrate the persistence of social ambiguity; it is not easily dispelled even when assaulted by the powerful tools of representation. The Summoner's failure further demonstrates that it is impossible to eliminate all conflict and difference to construct a stable authority. In fact, it seems that social order does not require an absolute authority. Unwittingly, the Summoner portrays a social structure that is strong because it is flexible. In this tale, as in others of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer crosses generic boundaries to demonstrate that a flexible, mobile social authority does not threaten social order.

Chapter 1

The Old French Fabliaux: Critical and Chaucerian Engagement

Introduction

Scholars who describe some of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as fabliaux and fail to investigate what that means with any rigor demonstrate a dangerous presumption that has characterized much fabliau scholarship: that fabliau is a simple and easily understood genre. Because of this presumption, analyses of the Old French fabliaux[2] have often been dismissive and unnuanced. Some scholars have openly denounced these stories as obscene or crude while others have failed to take them seriously. The critical tendency to describe the fabliaux as uncomplicated[3] and fun-loving is just one product of this lack of serious critical consideration.

Fabliau scholars have rarely engaged in discussions more substantive than how to define this genre. The definition of fabliau is, in fact, one of the most common topics for discussion among fabliau scholars. Fabliau criticism, as Simon Gaunt points out, "has always had an overt preoccupation with the idea of genre. Critics have had an interest verging on obsession in defining both the morphology of their object of study and the corpus of texts they wish to ascribe to the genre" (234). Fabliau scholars generally agree that the fabliaux emerged at the end of the twelfth

---

[2] In this thesis, I will focus on the Old French fabliaux because these are the stories with which Chaucer would most likely have been familiar. The Old French fabliaux are also an appropriate choice to represent the genre since the majority of fabliaux are French and because the French stories "have unquestionable priority in characterizing this genre. Medieval fabliau was most clearly conceptually recognized as a genre in France" (Hines x).

[3] Throughout this thesis, I argue that critics often characterize the Old French fabliaux as simple and uncomplicated. Although this attitude is common in discussions of fabliau stories and characters, it does not characterize all fabliau scholarship. For instance, scholars often acknowledge the sophistication of fabliau meter and versification, which I do not address in this thesis.

century and continued to be composed in Northern France[4] until the fourteenth century[5]. However, there are two significant areas of definition that have generated much discussion. Some critics have attempted to define the genre by cataloging its formal characteristics. Others have debated fabliau's class origins. Because these stories can be characterized by their interest in the middle and lower classes—most fabliau characters are members of one of these classes—some critics have argued that fabliau's audience was also from the middle or lower classes and that the genre must have originated from them.

Fabliau scholars' arguments about definition reveals that this genre has a crucial ideological role in current medieval scholarship. For many contemporary scholars, fabliau represents a category of simple medieval texts that are readily contrasted with more complex medieval texts, like *The Canterbury Tales*. This chapter will consider this critical history, including competing definitions of fabliau both in terms of form and in terms of the presumed class of its audience. Like Susan Crane, I am not "concerned . . . to find the edges and subdivisions" of my subject genre (*Gender and Romance* 4). However, I will develop my own working definition of fabliau that acknowledges the genre's complexity and opens up a space to think about Chaucerian fabliaux differently. Of course, scholarly disregard for the fabliaux has dramatically influenced, and limited, criticism of Chaucer's fabliaux. Brewer relates the history of Chaucerian fabliau criticism, noting the distaste that characterized early twentieth-century responses to these tales.

> Those giants of Chaucerian scholarship and criticism who preferred to avert their eyes include Manly, Root, Kittridge, Lowes, and Patch. Manly omitted the fabliaux from his edition of the *Canterbury Tales*.

---

[4] Hellman and O'Gorman note that fabliaux spread with particular vitality "in the region of Paris and in the provinces of Picardy, Flanders, and Normandy" (183).
[5] Some scholars date the end of Old French fabliau composition as 1346, when the

> Root was not much interested in them; he refers a little disdainfully to "those who wish to go farther with this not very profitable theme" (p. 175). He points out the extreme indecency of the Miller's and Reeve's tales. Root is eminently calm and sensible about the morality or lack of morality of these poems, but he is divided in his judgement. On the one hand, they provide "merely a diverting interlude," and thus appear to him to be low in artistic value; on the other hand he comments on how in, for example, the *Miller's Tale*, attention is diverted from the lustful and nasty features of the story to the brilliant characterization and consummate narrative skill. Later criticism has followed this second judgement, showing how Chaucer has enriched the spare, direct, impersonal fabliau—in itself a process somewhat contradictory to the essential nature of the French fabliau. (299-300)

Chaucer does not use this genre because it represents an opportunity for him to improve upon an unsophisticated form, or because it constitutes the low end of the medieval literary spectrum and can confirm the "lowness" of his "churlish" characters. Rather, fabliau has a prominent place in *The Canterbury Tales* because it represents social organization as a complex problem that is only imperfectly addressed by class and gender hierarchies. This complexity is evident in fabliau's contradiction: many fabliaux both defend rigid hierarchies and appreciate the individual initiative that can inspire a deviation from such hierarchies. Such fabliaux imply that social hierarchies can never guarantee social order because they can never totally manage individual desires. Accordingly, Chaucer uses this genre to develop a new, more flexible way of thinking about identity and social order.

---

last major fabliau author, Jean de Condé, died (Hellman and O'Gorman 13).

Definitions by Class

The class origin of fabliau has been the subject of many critical discussions. Joseph Bédier's 1925 book on the fabliaux, *Les Fabliaux: Études de Littérature Populaire et d'Histoire Littéraire du Moyen Âge*, is at the center of this debate. For Bédier, the fabliaux represent a change in medieval literary style and he asks, "Pourquoi cette verve amusée ou grossière envahit-elle le genre élevé, grave, hautain par excellence?" (373). He answers his question, saying, "La classe bourgeoise est née" (373). In his 1956 thesis, *Les Fabliaux: Etude D'Histoire Littéraire et de Stylistique Médiévale*, Danish scholar Per Nykrog challenges Bédier's premise that the fabliaux must have come from the middle class because they appeared when the middle class emerged. He points out, for instance, that fabliaux developed at the same time as "toute la littérature courtoise" (xl). Further,

> les prologues de certains fabliaux . . . qui s'adressent manifestement à un public noble—les manuscrits qui renferment, intimement mélangés, des poèmes des deux inspirations que Bédier veut séparer—certains genres aristocratiques, comme la Pastourelle, qui montrent qu'un "esprit bourgeois" n'était pas étranger aux nobles. (xxxix)

Nykrog's manuscript evidence is convincing. He notes that manuscript collections include fabliaux along with other more "aristocratic" genres like romance and epic. This contradicts Bédier,

> Car si la thèse de Bédier avait été fondée, il faudrait que les manuscrits fissent une distinction entre "genres bourgeois" et "genres aristocratique," chaque recueil accusant les goûts de celui qui l'a composé et, partant, son rang social. (25)[6]

[6] Barbara Nolan also studies medieval manuscripts and comes to the same conclusion. She uses this evidence to claim that "readers of fabliau-anthologies would have expected to experience bawdy fictions *in relation* to many kinds of different

Another argument supporting Nykrog's conclusion is that fabliau, when addressing class hierarchies, tend "Time and time again . . . [to] pass up golden opportunities to satirize or inveigh against vicious seneschals and lecherous monks and arbitrary lords" (Harrison 9). Further, many fabliaux are critical of the middle and lower classes. As Harrison says, "No lover ever cuckolds a man of a higher social class with impunity, and when an aristocratic husband is cuckolded, the noble rank of the lover is invariably stated, although the social class of a lover of a burgher's or a peasant's wife may remain unspecified" (9). The fabliaux's reproduction of this social hierarchy seems to suggest that they are not necessarily critical of the status quo.

Since the appearance of Nykrog's influential book, Charles Muscatine has challenged his conclusions, analyzing the fabliaux's vocabulary to argue that no single class is responsible for them. He convincingly argues that both Bédier's and Nykrog's conclusions "now appear too simple and too extreme; we cannot attribute either the origin or the fundamental attitudes of the fabliaux to a single social class" (*The Old French Fabliaux* 24). He points out that the fabliaux are not universally concerned with either aristocratic or middle-class characters and settings, although "the greatest number of fabliaux . . . [take place] in smaller rural communities" (30). Despite this rural quality, Muscatine does not conclude that the fabliaux are rural in origin. Rather, he argues that in thirteenth-century France, there was much social mobility and interaction between town and country.[7]

---

texts and images, several of them diametrically opposed to fabliaux" (95). She goes on to claim that Chaucer was inspired by "one or several fabliau-manuscripts" in organizing *The Canterbury Tales* according to a principle of "montage" (98).

[7] There have been other theories concerning the origins of the fabliaux, most of which have either been disproved or have failed to receive widespread agreement. Before Bédier, the Count of Caylus thought the fabliaux to have descended from classical narrative. Gaston Paris maintained that they were of Arab and Indian origin. Early compiler Legrand d'Aussy believed them to be shortened medieval romances. Edmond Faral, in 1924, argued that the medieval authors transformed the ancient Latin comedies by Palutus and Terence into narrative fiction. Johnston and Owen, Nykrog, and Robert Guiette have all suggested that the fabliaux developed out of

Definitions by Form

Other scholars tackle the problem of fabliau definition by focusing on this genre's formal characteristics. Such definitions have widely varying degrees of specificity. One strategy that scholars use when attempting to characterize this body of diverse stories is to develop a broad definition. It is difficult to argue with Bédier's definition of fabliau as "des contes à rire en vers" (30). The fabliaux are, certainly, comic tales written in verse.[8] While the generality of this definition makes it impervious to challenge, it also limits its usefulness.[9] Other scholars have dealt with fabliau diversity by developing a narrow definition. Some definitions, like Clem Williams', are so narrow as to exclude many stories that are widely considered fabliaux. Williams finds in many fabliaux much farcical action and argues that the fabliaux can be characterized by their fragmented conclusions: "this rather simple trait, of unresolved or only speciously resolved disorder, is a characteristic of all the tales in the main body of the fabliaux, giving the world of each a final and unmistakably farcical stamp" (30). However, as Cooke argues, this conclusion leads Williams "to reject from the 'main body' many [stories] which everyone else would accept" as fabliaux (147). There are, in fact, *many* fabliaux that resolve cleanly and decisively.

Other definitions deal with fabliau's heterogeneity by adopting a more tentative approach. Thomas Cooke, for example, narrows Bédier's definition by pointing to "the most important single feature of [fabliau] comedy": their comic climax (13). He finds that, in fabliaux,

> the climax consists of two elements: it comes as a surprise, and yet it has been carefully prepared for in such a way that when it comes, it is

---

fables.

[8] All but one of the extant Old French fabliaux is written in octosyllabic verse.

[9] Knud Togeby provides a different, but similarly broad definition: the fabliau is a

> seen as artistically fitting and appropriate. The tension experienced between the surprise and preparation generates the humor of these tales, and an audience's appreciation of the climax is the deep satisfaction that it feels in seeing the appropriateness of that climax. (13)

However, because this characteristic is not unique to the fabliaux, Cooke does not claim it as a defining characteristic.

Still other definitions address fabliau uncertainty not by limiting their conclusions, but by making them highly detailed. One such definition, which Eichmann calls the "safest" attempt at definition (*Cuckolds, Clerics* 2), is developed by Mary Jane Schenck. Following Vladimir Propp's method for classifying fairy tales, Schenck defines the fabliaux according to nine functions, including arrival, departure, interrogation, communication, deception, misdeed, recognition, retaliation, and resolution. Accordingly, she ends up with the following definition:

> A fabliau is an independent, brief, verse narrative with a tripartite macrostructure whose narrative is a humorous, even ribald, story with a cautionary moral. In the narrative, dupers and victims engage in repeated acts of deception and misdeed, such as adultery, theft, or cheating. The cyclical pattern of aggression and retaliation may be brought to an end in a pseudo-judicial scene or it may remain unresolved, but in no case does a heroic figure emerge to establish harmony or a just conclusion to the conflict. (*The Fabliaux* xi)

Although Schenck includes in her definition the important characteristic of "deception and misdeed," she rejects an equally important characteristic: the fabliau

---

"nouvelle de niveau bas du XIIIe siècle" (8).

obsession with women and priests (and other male religious).[10] She assumes that this interest would be characterized as anti-feminism or anti-clericalism and rejects these as characteristics of fabliau because "for every text that proves such a bias, another one may prove just the opposite" (xii).[11]

Problems with Fabliau Definition

These and other scholars have contributed to our understanding of fabliau in their discussions of how to delineate this genre. However, their definitions also have many weaknesses. In the case of those scholars who attempt to understand the genre by considering its class origin, Bédier and Nykrog, their differences can be explained as "deep-rooted diverging opinions on the ideology of the genre" (Gaunt 234). Both Bédier and Nykrog make assumptions about medieval classes and decide fabliau origin based on those assumptions. Even though Nykrog comes to a very different conclusion than does Bédier, many of the biases apparent in Bédier's argument are also apparent in Nykrog's. Their arguments have the same condescending attitude toward the bourgeoisie, and they both presume that the bourgeoisie and aristocracy are pure entities that define themselves in opposition to each other. Whereas Bédier argues that the fabliaux are without artistic merit and therefore bourgeois, Nykrog argues that they have artistic merit and are therefore aristocratic in origin. Their conclusions are based "on the assumption of a neat correspondence between social class and literary taste" (Muscatine *The Old French Fabliaux* 24). Although convenient,

---

[10] Although I do not discuss the fabliaux interest in religious men, I do discuss the fabliau interest in women both later in this chapter and in my chapter on "The Wife of Bath's Prologue."

[11] As the above examples illustrate, many scholars attempt a definition of fabliau by focusing on the genre's structural and stylistic characteristics. However, in "Les Fabliaux: Genre, Styles, Publics," Jean Rychner offers a different kind of definition. He suggests that fabliaux should not be defined by their (inconstant) formal characteristics, but by their function. They could be called, for instance, "bonnes histoires à servir après le repas" (51).

this correlation is simplistic and unconvincing, especially considering that both Bédier and Nykrog stay "aloof . . . from the particular details of thirteenth-century economic and social life" (27).

The other method of definition, which focuses on fabliau's structural and stylistic qualities, can also have dubious results. It is difficult to strictly delineate the boundaries of a genre that is notoriously flexible and with few strict defining characteristics. The fabliaux do not consistently follow the same pattern. For instance, sometimes the deceiver is punished, other times, she or he is never even discovered. Importantly, such differences do not necessarily change how we read fabliau characters or determine our sympathies. It seems, then, that the desire to come up with a rule that definitively fixes where fabliau narrative goes and how it gets there is inherently problematic and not particularly useful.[12]

Another reason for the difficulty scholars have had setting a fixed definition of fabliau is that both the signification of "fabliau" and the specificity assumed by the category "genre" change throughout time. For instance, "In the Romantic era[,] it was the fashion to use the word [fabliau] to characterize any short composition from the medieval period. Today, however, its application is more precise and closer to its original use, which was to designate a distinct genre" (Hellman and O'Gorman 182). Although the medieval use of the word was somewhat more precise than the Romantic use, generic distinctions were not as fixed and unchanging in the Middle Ages as they are now:

> The Middle Ages had no precise sense of *genre*, and the fableors themselves gave their creations a variety of names: *dit*, *ditié*, *fable*, *lai*, *example*, *proverbe*, *roman*, *risée*. Omer Jodogne notes that by the early

[12] Simon Gaunt agrees. He refuses to "attempt to define the limits of the *fabliaux*: the absurdity of this activity is clear when scholars invent definitions and then exclude texts which do not conform" (234).

> fourteenth century, when the fabliaux were on the wane, the last known author, Jean de Condé, called them *truffes* (jokes) (1975, p. 24). Of the 160 surviving fabliaux, [only] 56 are expressly called fabliaux. (DuVal and Eichmann xiii)

Some scholars have responded to this uncertainty about medieval genres by "promiscuously us[ing] original characterizations, classical genre concepts, and later classifications" (Jauss 129). Such studies, according to Jauss, have "failed to advance any contribution to a historical systematics or to the general development of a theory of literary genres" (129). Developing such a theory has proved difficult in part because of the weakness of genre as an analytic category. One reason for this weakness is that genre studies can propose similarities between texts across time periods with too little attention to the ways in which a text's contexts pervade it. Further, genre studies tend to de-emphasize a text's idiosyncrasies in the process of defining a category. Henry Ansgar Kelly discusses such problems in two "genres of [medieval] genre theory" (3). In "subjective" genre theory, practitioners "have their own idea of [the genre] . . . and they attempt to see whether or to what extent it is verified in the works of Chaucer and his contemporaries" (3). Practitioners of "objective" genre theory "derive an idea of [the genre] from an examination of Chaucer's (and sometimes others') uses of the term, and then interpret medieval works in its light" (3-4). While the first approach can misread a medieval text by comparing it to an external, and possibly not directly related, set of criteria, the second approach can privilege one author's definition of a genre and thereby erase the ways in which different texts take up their genre.

A Working Definition

Despite these difficulties, genre is still an important analytic category. Susan Crane, for instance, recognizes genre's "taxonomic impulse" (*Gender and Romance* 8), but

insists that genre studies can resist its "coercive classifying function" (7). Resisting this impulse can enable an instructive reading of the Old French fabliaux as challenging and complex texts. This complexity is particularly apparent in their representations of gender and class. Many fabliaux both reproduce traditional assumptions about the stability of a hierarchized social order and challenge those assumptions in their representation of the pleasure of individual initiative.

A definition of fabliau that hopes to acknowledge its complexity must attend to some of the genre's thematic and structural characteristics discussed by previous fabliau scholars while attempting not to erase the genre's diversity. In this chapter, fabliau complexity is discovered through an analysis of several significant characteristics, including direct narrative, uncomplicated characters, the lack of a specific context, an interest in class and gender hierarchies, and an appreciation of individual desire and initiative. This list of characteristics makes use of established fabliau scholarship; other scholars have noted that many fabliaux share these attributes. However, this scholarship has overlooked one compelling conclusion that can come from an investigation of these characteristics. Fabliaux, in their engagement with class and gender hierarchies, generate a contradiction: although fabliaux often confirm these hierarchies, they also challenge them by suggesting the possible worth of transgressive pleasure. By undermining these hierarchies, these stories suggest that the identities defined by class and gender stereotypes are disputable; identity is not entirely determined by birth. The Old French fabliaux recognize the power of class and gender hierarchies, but they also qualify it. The fabliaux represent this power in the directness of their plots, the simplicity of their characters, and the indefiniteness of their contexts.

Although the Old French fabliaux vary in length,[13] they are typically brief, with a direct, uncomplicated narrative movement. In other words, the fabliaux usually focus on a single conflict between a limited number of characters. Robert Guiette characterizes the directness of fabliau narrative:

> Ces contes sont menés à la française, tambour battant, droit devant eux. La composition en est toute linéare, et en pleine clarté. Pas de détours, pas d'ombres troubles, pas de mystères. L'atomsphère est pure et nette. On respire librement. Les couleurs sont fraîches, comme chez les anciens peintres que l'on dit primitifs. (qtd in DuVal and Eichmann xxii)
>
> [These tales march along, French style, with the drum beating ahead of them. The composition is entirely linear and clear. No detours, no disturbing ambiguities, no mysteries. The atmosphere is pure and neat. We can breathe freely. The colors are fresh as with the old, so-called primitive painters. (xxiii)]

Despite Guiette's overstatement (indeed, there are many "d'ombres troubles" throughout the fabliaux), he rightly describes fabliau narrative as direct and linear. In part because these stories are so brief and focused on a direct narrative, fabliau characters are not developed or complicated.

Hellman and O'Gorman characterize fabliau characters as "stock figures or conventional types, most often barely individualized and without development" (188). Harrison agrees, saying, "their personages are not so much individuals as caricatures of social and psychological types" (11). Fabliau plots generally pit one such caricature against another: "c'est le vilain qui s'oppose au prêtre, l'amant qui s'oppose au mari, le

[13] They range from 18 to 1356 lines (Harrison 1).

jeune qui s'oppose au vieux" (Nykrog 109). The directness of fabliau plots reinforces the ideological effect of character reduction. By simplifying their narrative and reducing character complexity, fabliaux suggest that their outcomes are inevitable and that their characters are incapable of change. In so doing, they serve to confirm the obviousness and indisputability of character stereotypes.[14] This is certainly true, for example, of those fabliaux that directly address class hierarchies. The narrative movement of these stories demonstrates that marriage across classes leads to a (usually sexual) transgression, which then leads to the transgressive character's exposure as a churl and, perhaps, his or her punishment.[15] The narrative represents this causation as direct and linear. A common kind of class disruption in these fabliaux is a noble woman's marriage to a rich but lower class man.[16] As Eichmann says, "The unforgivable sin for a peasant is to try to elevate himself out of his social class" (*Cuckolds, Clerics* 59). These stories characterize sexual transgression as the inevitable result of a churl's advancement. In so doing, they represent nobles and churls as absolutely different.

The fabliau affirmation of social hierarchies is also strengthened by the lack of a specific context. It can seem at first that these stories take place in a particularized context. Hellman and O'Gorman, for instance, note that they "move against a vivid background of the daily life of court, town, and country," mentioning places like markets, mills, churches, taverns and domestic spaces (190). This seeming specificity has led many fabliau scholars to conclude that these stories offer a glimpse into the lives of "real people" in medieval France. As R. Howard Bloch notes,

---

[14] Often, characters are identified by their gender or their class.
[15] I will be discussing these stories in more detail in my chapter on "The Miller's Tale."
[16] For instance, "De Berangier au long cul," "Le Vilain Mire," "Du Prestre ki abevete," "De Jouglet" and "D'Aloul." There are variations on this pattern. In "Des Trois Boçus," for instance, the contrast is not between a noble woman and lowborn man, but between a beautiful burgher's daughter and an ugly hunchback.

> Because these tales seem to contain a more rounded spectrum of social types than the epic, the lyric or the romance . . . and because the vision of human nature they portray appears on the surface closer to a kind of grasping materialism than to the idealism of courtly forms, scholars traditionally have concluded that the fabliaux offer a privileged view of the way things really were in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. (*The Scandal* 4)[17]

Such scholars claim that the fabliaux somehow offer a window into medieval life despite the fact that fabliau settings and characters are given little specific detail. For instance,

> the fabliards do not dwell on the details of their settings; all the poet allows himself is a quick epithet, a very brief description or an apology for the lack of one. In the best of the tales this cursory treatment is enough to provide a sense of place. (Hellman and O'Gorman 190)

Readers who assume that such briefly described settings and characters represent something "real" about medieval France fail to recognize that such descriptions have a function that can only be discerned when these stories are read as complex, rather than transparent, literary texts. In fact, by relating events that are only located in a superficial way, many fabliaux confirm the baseness of their characters. Like its reduction of plot and character complexity, fabliau's reduction of its setting's distinctiveness can validate traditional gender and class hierarchies. In a nonspecific context, these hierarchies seem absolute and not relative to the interest of any social group. The ideological effects of fabliau's various reductions and its treatment of gender and class are evident in three stories about marriage across classes, "D'Aloul,"

---

[17] Bloch points to Etienne Barbazan, LeGrand d'Aussy, J. B. B. de Roquefort-Flaméricourt, Charles Langlois, Edmond Faral (*La Vie*), Marie-Thérèse Lorcin and Philippe Ménard.

"De Jouglet," and "Du Vilein Mire." Three other stories, "Du Vilain de Bailluel," "Du Prestre ki abevete," and "Del vilein e de sa femme cuntrariuse" demonstrate that fabliau's relation of gender and class both enforces and undermines ideological ideas about a hierarchized social order.

Reducing Complexity in Some Old French Fabliaux

Some fabliaux limit character complexity and condense their plots by identifying characters according to their social class and describing their conflict in terms of class difference. Many fabliau characters are churls who are foolish and "obviously low." Although peasants are not always treated cruelly in the fabliaux,[18] those peasants who attempt to deceive a person of higher rank, or marry into a higher rank, are always punished or mocked in some way. The plot usually moves directly towards this punishment, suggesting that it is the inevitable result of a violation of social norms. For instance, when a churl marries a noble woman, he is characterized as obviously ill suited for the match. Robert, the husband in "De Jouglet," is the "fols et entombis" ("foolish and simple") son of an old woman (6). Robert's stupidity is central to this story's plot, which focuses on Robert's marriage to a gentleman's daughter. Both Jouglet, a minstrel charged with getting Robert to the church, and the new bride demonstrate their cleverness by manipulating the hapless Robert. Jouglet convinces Robert to eat too many pears and to restrain his bowel movement, and thus makes Robert's wedding night miserable. Then, Robert's bride convinces him to retaliate. Robert's stupidity is not the ultimate cause of the chaos depicted in the story; it is linked to his social class. The wife is angry that her husband is such a foolish churl:

[18] One such fabliau is "De Brunain, la vache au prestre." The cobbler in "Baillet" successfully torments a priest who's been sleeping with his wife, after his young daughter tells him about the affair.

Por la char Dieu, com sui honie
Quant cis vilains gist delez mi!
. . . . .
Honi soient tuit li parent
et trestuit li mien enaement
qui m'ont doné a ceste beste! (142-3, 149-51)

[By God's flesh, how disgraced I am
With this clod lying beside me!
. . . . .
May all his relatives be shamed
And all mine as well,
Who gave me to this beast!]

The wife is shamed because she is married to a "vilain." The word "vilain," which means "commoner" or, according to Eichmann and DuVal's translation, "clod," suggests both Robert's lowly class and his stupidity. His stupidity thus represents in an extreme way his inappropriateness as the husband of a noble wife.

Another story, "D'Aloul" also demonstrates the inadequacy of a lower-class husband. In this fabliau, the title character is a

. . . vilains riches,
mes molt estoit avers et ciches,
ne ja son vueil n'eüst jor bien.
Deniers amoit seur tote rien,
en ce metoit toute s'entente. (5-9)

[. . . rich commoner,
But he was very miserly and stingy;

There wasn't a day that he didn't have his way.

He loved money more than anything

And dedicated himself entirely to it.]

When he marries the daughter of a nobleman, who gives her in exchange for Aloul's money, Aloul becomes an extremely jealous husband. Aloul's jealousy is represented as inappropriate and proof that he, a mere commoner, is unfit to marry a well-bred woman. Aloul is not as stupid as the husband in "De Jouglet," but his jealousy is a symptom of his inability to be certain of his environment or confident in his control of that environment:

Male chose a en jalousie!

Trop a Alous mauvese vie,

quar ne puet estre asseürez. (17-9)

[This jealousy he had was bad!

Aloul had an extremely tough life,

Because he could not be sure of anything.]

The tale's reduced character complexity and direct narrative suggest that although Aloul attempts to maintain strict control of his wife and household, his wife's challenge to his authority is inevitable. He is not a capable enough husband to inspire her dedication.

The rich peasant in "Du Vilein Mire" or "The Peasant Doctor" is a similarly incompetent husband. He even seems to recognize his inadequacy. When he marries the daughter of a widowed chevalier, he is overcome with fear that his wife will cuckold him:

Quant je serai a ma charue,

le chapelein iert en la rue,

a qui toz les jours sunt feriez,

et quant me serai esloigniez
de ma meson, li sougrestein
ira tant et hui et demein
que ma fame me fortrera
si que jamés ne m'amera
ne ne me prisera un pein. (64)

[When I am out behind my plough,
the chaplain's on the road; . . .
And every time I go away
The sacristan will come around,
Today, tomorrow, till he's bound
To bring her to adultery,
And then she'll have no love for me,
Nor think I'm worth a loaf of bread. (65)]

The peasant's solution to this problem is pathetic and inappropriate: "'Dieus!' fet il, 'se je la batoie'" ("'By God, I'll beat her up!'") (66-7). His doubt is explicitly linked to his sense that he should not marry a noblewoman. Immediately before he expresses his fear that his wife will cuckold him, he thinks that he has done something wrong by marrying her:

Quant trespassé fu son afere
et des noces et autre chose,
ne demora mie grant pose
que le vilein se porpensa
et dist que mal esploitié a:
n'aferist pas a son mestier
avoir fille de chevalier. (64)

[The business done, and in the wake
of honeymoon and everything,
it didn't take much time to bring
the peasant to the dismal thought
that he hadn't acted as he ought;
for the likes of him it wasn't right
to have the daughter of a knight. (65)]

His marital uncertainty occurs because, as he is aware, his marriage inappropriately crosses class boundaries. After her first beating, the wife despairs and blames her father for marrying her to such a poor husband: "Dieus, com m'a mes perres traïe / qui m'a donee a cest vilein!" ("Oh God, how father took me in, / When he married me to such a clod!") (66-7). This story, like "D'Aloul," goes on to depict the punishment that the husband ultimately suffers because of his ineptitude. He is beaten and threatened with more beatings unless he, whom his wife misrepresents as a great doctor, does not remove the bone from the throat of a princess. The princess coughs out the bone only after the peasant makes her laugh by stripping naked and scratching himself wildly. It is only by humiliating himself, by embracing his "lowness," that the peasant can avoid a beating and, humbled, return home. The foolishness of this husband, like that of the husbands in "D'Aloul" and "De Jouglet," reflects in part on his social class. All three make poor choices as the husbands of noble wives because they can never behave like noblemen.

Although the husbands in these stories are clearly to blame for their domestic failures, their wives are still, to varying degrees, condemned.[19] They are condemned

[19] Unlike Schenck, I assume that the fabliau interest in gender is, in fact, a distinguishing characteristic. Fabliaux often represent women as contradictory, ambiguous figures. For instance, although a fabliau woman's victory over her husband

largely because they, like most fabliau women, respond to domestic unhappiness with deception.[20] For instance, when Aloul's wife is angered by her husband's treatment of her, she defines worthiness as the ability to retaliate by misleading him; "Lors dist que s'ele nel deçoit, / dont sera ele molt mauvaise" ("Then she said that if she didn't deceive him, / She would be very unworthy") (32-33). She ultimately achieves revenge by pursuing an affair with a priest. The wife in "Du Vilain Mire" finds a more unusual solution. As mentioned above, when approached by two royal officers who are looking for someone to cure the king's daughter, she identifies her husband as a physician who will only practice when beaten. This tactic results in several beatings for her husband. The wife in "De Jouglet," despite her rank, also has questionable standards. Like most fabliau women, she considers sex an important measure of a man. She is particularly frustrated with her new husband because he does not initiate sex on their wedding night. She complains, saying,

> Mes il ne set que l'en doit fere:
>
> il ne me taste ne manie.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Se j'eüsse ore mon ami,
>
> Qui m'acolast et me besast
>
> Entre ses braz et m'aaisast,
>
> Mole me venist or miex assez

---

may seem unambiguously positive, it usually characterizes the woman as an ambivalent figure: although we appreciate her success and the pleasure she receives as a result, we reproach her deception. Women who successfully deceive others are, in fact, more dangerous, for they permanently obscure the truth.

[20] Fabliau women are regularly scorned for their sexual desire, their verbosity, and their "natural" ability to deceive. One way in which some fabliau women are condemned is through a correlation of their genitals and their mouths—their sexual appetites are insatiable, and their speech is unstoppable. This correlation characterizes women as emblems of absence, or lack of definite meaning. In many fabliaux, male genitalia or body processes also represent meaninglessness. Two such fabliaux are, for example, "De Jouglet," and "Les IIII Souhais Saint Martin."

Que cis vilains muse enpastez! (141-48)

[He doesn't touch or handle me.

. . . . .

If I had my lover now,

To kiss and hold me

In his arms and give me solace,

I would be getting a whole lot more

Than from this stuffed idiotic clod!]

The reader has no doubt that, in the future, this wife will easily deceive her foolish husband and arrange to meet with her lover. These stories represent feminine identity as transparent and unchanging. Women are predictably lustful and deceptive. However, although fabliau women are predictably false, they are also unpredictable—because they are skilled deceivers. Accordingly, many fabliau women become emblems of uncertainty and proof of the need for a strong, well-defended social hierarchy. This is only one way in which gender stereotypes work to confirm class distinctions.

The Intersection of Class and Gender

Because they characterize identity as fixed and obvious, gender stereotypes can play the role of confirming class hierarchies by representing the nobleman's natural superiority and the churl's natural inferiority. In many medieval texts, including fabliaux, noblemen are consistently associated with masculine qualities, while the lower classes are associated with feminine qualities. These texts suggest that nobles must rule not only because they are superlative, but also because churls are inherently incapable of self-rule. In some texts, women and the lower classes are compared because they are presumed to share similar weaknesses. Like women, churls are

described as unreasoning and appetitive; they need a lord to govern them. Many medieval thinkers held that because women were incapable of governing themselves, their minds should be controlled and instructed by intellectually capable men.[21] Some medieval authors argued that women are "irrational, appetitive, sensual, gullible, vain, and fickle, . . . [they are] embodiments of the 'lower' part of human nature [and require] the guidance of fatherly, husbandly, or priestly authority" (Jager 195).[22]

Many Old French fabliaux imply that both women and churls require the guidance of their betters—guidance that is always lacking in these stories. One reason that fabliau women and peasants require guidance is that they can be proud and arrogant.[23] Further, fabliau peasants deceive others[24]—deception is, of course, a skill most commonly perfected by women in the fabliau. Peasants are, however, much more reliably punished for their deceptions; many fabliau women are never discovered by other characters (though they are always "discovered" by the reader).

Although there are some qualities shared by women and churls in the fabliaux, it is much more common for churls to be "feminized" than to be likened to female characters. Typically, a cuckolded churl is characterized as incapable of mastering his wife. Instead, his wife masters him. A cuckold is emasculated—he becomes the weak, submissive partner in his marriage. The peasant in "Du Vilain de Bailluel" is a

---

[21] In addition to being controlled mentally, through reading practices, women may also be controlled physically, through beatings. A theological dictionary compiled in the fourteenth century argues that "a man may chastise his wife and beat her for her correction; for she is of his household, and therefore the lord may chastise his own" ("Train up a Wife in the Way She Should Go").

[22] I will discuss the association of women and churls in non-fabliau texts further in my chapter on "The Shipman's Tale."

[23] For instance, the stories listed in note 16 above can be described as punishing peasant pride. Another such story is "Du Vilain Asnier." Both "Le Sentier Battu" and "Du Chevalier Qui Fit les Cons Parler" punish pride in women.

[24] For instance, "Le Meunier et les Deux Clers," an analogue for "The Reeve's Tale," depicts a peasant's deception of two clerks who, of course, get their revenge. After many beatings, the peasant in "Du Vilein Mire" ultimately finds his way out of the dangerous situation his wife puts him in by making it seem he has healed sick people.

good example of a foolish and submissive fabliau churl. In this tale, an unattractive farmer comes home, hungry, and is easily convinced by his wife that he is dying.

> Puis li dist por lui decevoir,
> si com cele qui sanz ressort
> l'amast mieux enfouïque mort:
> "Sire," fet-ele, "Dieus me saint!
> Con vous voi or desfet et taint!
> N'avez que les os et le cuir."
> . . . . .
> "Morez certes, ce fetes mon;
> james plus voir dire n'orrez:
> couchiez vous tost, quar vous morez. (Bodel 392)

> [(She) said to him with sly deceit,
> like one who doubtlessly preferred
> to see him decently interred:
> "Milord, God bless my soul," said she,
> "how weak and pale you seem to me!
> I swear you're only skin and bone."
> . . . . .
> "I know for sure you'll soon be dead;
> a truer word you'll never hear.
> Now go to bed; you're dying, dear." (393)]

As soon as she lays him underneath a sheet, she runs to fetch the priest. Walking back together, they discuss their plans. The priest enters and reads his psalms while the wife mourns. Quickly, however, he lays her on the straw for sex. When the peasant objects and threatens to beat him, the priest is unafraid:

"Amis," fet il, "ce puet bien estre,
et sachiez se vous fussiez vis
g'i venisse mout a envis,
tant que l'ame vous fust ou cors;
mes de ce que vous estes mors,
me doit il bien estre de mieus.
Gisiez vous cois, cloez vos ieus:
Nes devez mes tenir ouvers." (396)

["My friend," the priest said, "that may be:
you'd know, however, were you living,
I'd come here only with misgiving
If your soul were in your body yet.
But now that you are dead, I'll bet
My luck improves with your demise.
Just lie back down and shut your eyes;
You mustn't leave them open thus." (397)]

The easily convinced peasant does as he is told. The fableor concludes by saying that he does not know whether the man was interred at dawn or not. The moral is, of course, "c'on doit pur fol tenir celui / qui mieus croit sa fame que lui" ("he must be taken for a fool / who lets his wife's opinion rule") (396-7). No longer the authority in his own household, the ignorant peasant defers to his wife. As a result, he lies prone under a sheet, unable to prevent his wife from cuckolding him or, quite possibly, save his own life.

A similar story is "Du Prestre ki abevete," in which a priest comes to a peasant's house and convinces him that a strange optical illusion occurs when one looks into his house through a hole in the wall. When the peasant and his well-born

wife are eating, the priest pounds on the wall and, in a shocked tone of voice, asks what they are doing. When the peasant replies that they are eating, the priest objects, saying "—'Mengiés, faites? Vous i mentés, / Il m'est avis que vous foutés.'" ("—Eating? What a lie! I'm looking / Straight through this hole at you. You're fucking") (Guerin "Du Prestre" 37-8). When the peasant goes outside to see for himself, the priest enters the house and ". . . il a fait icele cose / Que femme aimme sor toute cose" ("[he] did of all good deeds the one / That women everywhere want done") (57-8). The peasant, amazed, must agree with the priest's statement about the view from the hole.

> Ensi fu li vilains gabés
> Et decheüs et encantés
> [Et] par le prestre et par son sans
> Qu'il n'i ot paine ne [a]hans,
> Et, pour de que li uis fu tuis,
> Dist on encor: Maint fol paist duis. (79-83)
>
> [That's how the peasant got confused,
> Bewitched, befuddled, and confused,
> By the priest and by his own weak brain
> Because of the door, it still is said,
> "Many a fool by God is fed."]

Lower-class men like these are common in the fabliaux. They are cuckolded because they are easily fooled by their wives or their wives' suitors. These men readily believe what they are told and have no ability to discern the truth for themselves. The peasants' weakness is underscored in these stories when they actually witness their wives' adultery and still fail to stop it because either they do not recognize it as such

or they do not realize that they can do so. These men are utterly submissive; they become the inferior, less powerful partners in their marriages.

These feminized peasants, foolish and in desperate need of guidance, prove the relevance of the upper classes. In fabliaux like these, gender stereotypes bolster ideological class distinctions. By using gender characterizations to naturalize a character's social class, such stories suggest that social classes reflect an inherent difference between people. However, fabliaux do not always exclusively characterize "obviously low" characters as readily containable and understandable. Fabliau women, for example, are often impossible to control or understand. There are many fabliaux that focus on the complicating influence of women's speech. In Marie de France's "Del vilein e de sa femme cuntrarïuse," or "The Peasant and his Contrary Wife," for instance, a man admires a meadow, which, he says, was cut very evenly with a scythe, only to be contradicted by his wife. She says, "Ainz fu a uns forces trenches" (9) ("Rather, it was cut with shears"). The husband grows angry with his wife's opposition; she complicates an issue that he understands to be simple (the even pasture clearly indicates careful mowing to him). The husband is enfuriated by this contradiction and he responds violently:

> "La meie veus fere remeindre;
> Par engresté me vols ateindre."
> Li vileins l'ad aval getee,
> Si li ad la lange copee. (17-20)
>
> ["You take away whatever's mine;
> And me, you vilely undermine."
> Down to the ground his wife he flung,
> And then the man cut out her tongue.]

The wife's obstinacy undermines the peasant's authority and robs him of his certainty. By cutting out her tongue, he attempts to stop his wife from complicating this issue. His attempt ultimately fails, however, because the woman can still indicate with her fingers that scissors had cut the pasture. Ultimately, the man is unable to impose a stable meaning on his wife's body. The ambiguity introduced by the wife is still present in the tale's moral:

> Par cest essample veut mustrer;
> Bien le peot hum suvent pruver:
> Si fols parole une folie
> E autre vient, que sens li die,
> Nel creit pas, einz s'en aïre;
> La u il set que l'en est pire.
> Veut sa mençunge mettre avant,
> Nul nel fereit de ceo taisant. (29-36)
>
> [From this example we should learn
> What people frequently discern:
> That when a fool speaks foolishness
> And someone comes who talks some sense,
> The fool will doubt him and get mad
> Although he knows his case is bad.
> He has to get his falsehoods in
> And nobody can silence him.]

Even though the tale is about the failed attempt to silence the wife, the moral seems to suggest that the angry one is the fool who should be silenced.

In many fabliaux, characterizations of a woman's obvious identity contradict characterizations of her unknowability and uncontrollability. An uncontrollable

fabliau woman can be monstrous and terrifying. However, some fabliaux suggest that female initiative and transgression are possibly worthwhile.[25] The Old French fabliaux are remarkable because while many of them reiterate medieval gender and class ideology, they do so by describing dangerously liminal bodily pleasures. In general, fabliaux often emphasize and relish the possibilities for individuals to satisfy their desires outside of their established, legitimized social roles. Although deceptive characters are often implicitly condemned in fabliau, their tricks generate narrative pleasure. This is true, for example, in both "Du Vilain de Bailluel" and "Du Prestre ki abevete." The fact that the peasant can be convinced to believe something so unbelievable for the enjoyment of a priest and a woman is remarkable and the source of the poem's humor. Other fabliaux further underscore the possible worth of transgressive pleasure by dwelling on specific moments and details of that pleasure, rather than brief, general descriptions. In these ways, fabliaux undermine assumptions about the stability of a hierarchized social order that characterizes identity as fixed and immutable—the very assumptions that they reinforce through plot and character simplification. This conclusion is what distinguishes the argument of this thesis from those of many fabliau scholars. This thesis does not acknowledge one of fabliau's effects and dismiss the other—arguing that fabliaux are either ideological or disruptive—but accepts that both effects can occur simultaneously. While fabliau's narrative trajectory and character reduction typically suggest the obviousness of social categories, its appreciation of individual ingenuity often challenges that obviousness. The fabliaux are thus both troubled by and appreciative of the possibilities for private initiative and pleasure. Ultimately, these stories suggest that while class and gender stereotypes can help sustain the sense that social

[25] I will discuss some terrifying fabliau women and the possible worth of transgressive female pleasure in my chapter on "The Wife of Bath's Prologue."

boundaries meaningfully distinguish between individuals, they do not absolutely determine identity.

Recognizing this complexity in the Old French fabliaux is important for Chaucerians because it opens up a space to think about Chaucer's fabliaux differently. The fabliaux in *The Canterbury Tales* are not, as other critics have argued, merely trivial interludes, or "low" stories appropriate for "low" characters. They also do not merely represent an opportunity for Chaucer to improve upon an unsophisticated form. Chaucer uses fabliau because its complex and contradictory treatment of identity is compatible with his project in *The Canterbury Tales*. With fabliau, Chaucer represents the dangers of reducing individuals to their social group and develops a new, more flexible way of thinking about identity and social order.

Chaucer and Fabliau

In his use of fabliau, Chaucer underscores the power of generic boundaries. He repeatedly exceeds these boundaries in order to acknowledge their ideological function and develop fabliau's transformative potential. Although Chaucer's stories do not solve the problems of fabliau definition, determining once and for all which qualities are found in a "real" fabliau, they do consistently take up the fabliau characteristics outlined above as part of a larger project. Chaucer's project is to explore how a text's structure can confirm ideologies of class and gender, and help theorize new social models. Chaucer works not to demarcate fabliau's boundaries, but to explore the function, flexibility and potential of those boundaries. Fabliau's pattern of condemnation and appreciation of individual initiative and transgressive pleasure, its contradiction, is a crucial part of this undertaking in *The Canterbury Tales*.

The *Canterbury Tales* that are most often called fabliaux are "The Miller's Tale," The Reeve's Tale," "The Merchant's Tale," "The Summoner's Tale" and "The

Shipman's Tale."[26] Most Chaucer scholars agree that these stories demonstrate that Chaucer was familiar with the genre of fabliau and had read some of these stories, even though fabliau never flourished as a literary form in England. Beryl Rowland finds many similarities between Chaucer's fabliaux and the Old French stories: "When Chaucer comes to use the fabliau in his maturity he develops many of the qualities that have contributed to its artistic success. His plots are basically similar: they involve an outwitting usually accompanied by some kind of sexual trickery" (206). In general, Chaucer's fabliaux engage with the defining characteristics that are outlined above. Often, they complicate fabliau's simplifying characteristics in order to further the genre's destabilization of class and gender hierarchies.

There are many specific similarities between Chaucer's fabliaux and the Old French stories. "The Reeve's Tale" is the tale with the closest Old French analogue: "Le Meunier et les Deux Clercs." Lindahl says that it is the only one of Chaucer's tales with an "indisputible analogue" in the Old French fabliaux (126).[27] Many scholars conclude that "The Summoner's Tale" also has an analogue, "Li Dis de le Vescie a Prestre."[28] Walter Morris Hart, for instance, disagrees with E. G. Sandras' conclusion that "'plusieurs passages sont imités fidèlement'," and argues that "there are resemblances or similarities . . . which suggest that Chaucer may well have known" a similar tale (277). In this story, a sick parish priest bequests his bladder to two greedy Friars. Clearly, this tale is an analogue only for the first episode in "The

---

[26] However, scholars differ on this list. For example, Roy J. Pearcy excludes "The Summoner's Tale" and D. S. Brewer includes "The Cook's Tale" and, like Janette Richardson, "The Friar's Tale." In "'For craft is al, whoso that do it kan': The Genre of The Merchant's Tale," Leigh A. Arrathoon denies that "The Merchant's Tale" is a fabliau, arguing that such a conclusion is valid only if "we were to focus solely upon the literal level of Chaucer's tale" (310). He argues that it is, instead, an allegorical apologue.

[27] Some scholars even call it a "source," including Pearcy ("The Genre" 350). Burbridge states that while the "exact source . . .has not been identified," there are two versions of "Le meunier et les .II. clers" that "are so close to Chaucer's story line that Chaucer must have known them or another very similar" (30).

Summoner's Tale."[29] Although there is no direct analogue for "The Miller's Tale," it contains motifs—including the "misdirected kiss," the prophesied flood, the hot iron, and the deception of an old foolish husband—that are common to fabliaux. "The Shipman's Tale" has been called the "closest to the French type" of all Chaucer's fabliaux (Lawrence 56). Even though this tale also lacks an unequivocal analogue, it clearly contains a common fabliau motif: "the lover's gift regained" (Spargo 18, n 54). "The Merchant's Tale" also shares some common fabliau characteristics. Like Thomas in "The Miller's Tale," January is an older husband who is cuckolded. Also, this tale, like several fabliaux, hinges on a character's ability to explain away a seemingly unexplainable event.

Despite these, and other, similarities with Old French fabliaux, some scholars deny that Chaucer's tales were inspired by the Old French tales. Carl Lindahl, for instance, disputes fabliau's relevance for *The Canterbury Tales*, arguing that this genre "never achieved popularity in English courtly circles" (126). Lindahl does not develop this argument, pointing instead to Brewer who briefly states that fabliau was "effectively dead before [Chaucer] was born" (297). Apart from its underdevelopment, Lindahl's argument is ultimately unconvincing because fabliau's lack of popularity in England and waning popularity in France does not prove that Chaucer was not familiar with this genre. For instance, the similarity between "The Reeve's Tale" and "Le Meunier et les Deux Clercs" is powerful evidence that Chaucer was familiar with at least one story of this genre. Also, DuVal and

---

[28] Even Lindahl admits that "The Summoner's Tale" has a "distant analogue" (126).
[29] In "Structural Models for the Fabliaux and the Summoner's Tale Analogues," Roy J. Pearcy argues that "The Summoner's Tale" has "not one but two distinct and complementary sets of analogues" (113). He suggests that another set of analogues accounts for the fallacy of accident in the tale: this fallacy is "signalled by an accumulation of accidental properties whereby the identity of subjects sharing these properties is confused" (111). In other words, Thomas' bequest in "The Summoner's Tale" is introduced to the Friar in such a way that he is not aware of the nature of the gift. "Le Vescie a Prestre" does not share this quality and, Pearcy argues, other

Eichmann point out that "Chaucer was intimately familiar with French culture and literature. . . . [He] traveled in France, read the literature, borrowed some of the verse forms, and translated such works as the thirteenth-century *Roman de la rose*, so it is very likely that he was reading French manuscripts with fabliaux in them" (xxviii).

Lindahl's primary argument, however, is that Chaucer's tales, with the exception of "The Reeve's Tale," "could have come from many other sources," especially considering that

> the stylistic connections between Chaucer's tales and the *fabliaux* are rather tenuous. Few critics would fault Muscatine's finding that Chaucer's *Schwänke* and the French form share some perspectives: a sense of realism, a joyful cynicism, a celebration of animal appetites. But such general similarities could easily have issued from a shared source broader than literary convention: a cultural style of the times, or, more likely, the generic nature of the *Schwank*. (126)

If the similarity between Chaucer's tales and the French fabliaux is based on, as Lindahl assumes, merely general "perspectives" and stylistic similarities, it is easy to believe his argument that Chaucer's tales are more usefully considered in the context of the *Schwank*. He cites Linda Dégh's definition of the *Schwank*: it is a "humorous story, 'a relatively long, well-structured realistic narrative without fantastic or miraculous motifs," unfolding a plot whose action 'is obvious and easy to comprehend'" (125). Surprisingly, despite his criticism that Muscatine's description of the similarity between Chaucer's tales and fabliau is too general, Lindahl proposes a similarity between *Schwank* and Chaucer's tales that is every bit as general. Lindahl's definition is so general that it can shed little light on Chaucer's tales—many stories

---

tales, including "*Charlot le Juif* and the story of Conon and the radish" do (113).

could be described as having a "realistic narrative without fantastic or miraculous motifs" and a plot that is "easy to comprehend." Lindahl's argument is further weakened when a more specific relationship between the Old French stories and Chaucer's stories is demonstrated. Of course, I attempt to establish just such a specific relationship in this thesis—by observing both the similarities between Chaucer's tales and the Old French fabliaux and the considered differences. In particular, I argue that Chaucer engages with the Old French fabliau's relation of gender and class.

This thesis studies all of Chaucer's tales specified as fabliau above, as well as "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." Although some scholars recognize that the "Prologue" shares certain qualities with the Old French fabliaux, it is not generally acknowledged to be a text in which Chaucer engages with the genre.[30] Scholarly reluctance to call "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" a fabliau despite its resemblance to those stories is one example of a general ambivalence that scholars have for aligning Chaucer's tales with the Old French fabliaux. While they often call Chaucer's tales fabliaux, they just as often try to qualify that classification. Different designations have emerged just to allay this anxiety:

> Much of the scholarship which these works have attracted examines the extent of their conformity to the definitive features of the genre as

[30] Brewer recognizes that the "Prologue" is "more or less close in form and spirit," but does not consider it a fabliau because it does not "fully accord" with the genre (297). He comes to this conclusion despite recognizing the "absurd[ity]" of "worry[ing] about too precise a grouping" (297). Charles Muscatine also assumes the relevance of studying "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" in the context of the Old French fabliaux. He finds substantial similarities between Chaucer's Wife and the fabliau, "La Veuve" ("The Wife of Bath and Gautier's *La Veuve*"). His conclusion is that "their general correspondence in style and genre, in characterization and background, and in their culminating action—where once, perhaps, an echo of actual diction carries across—suggests that *La Veuve* was one of the poems Chaucer did not read but heard" (114). John Hines finds that the Wife "present[s] her own purported autobiography in fabliau terms" (199). In particular, the "Prologue" demonstrates a "sustained use of the linguistic devices characteristic of the fabliau" (196).

> discernible from the one-hundred-and-sixty or so examples of the fabliaux surviving in Old French literature. The conclusion generally reached is that Chaucer's works are "fabliaux-with-a-difference." This difference is reflected in their frequent designation as "fabliau-tales," and is usually accounted for as resulting from some process of accretion, expansion, or elaboration, whereby the tales in question have taken on the properties of "enriched" fabliaux. (Pearcy "The Genre" 329)

Many Chaucerians are reluctant to give some of Chaucer's tales the designation "fabliaux" without qualification, despite the lack of agreement as to what a fabliau is, exactly.[31]

This desire to distance Chaucer from the Old French fabliaux seems related to a desire to not "sully" Chaucer's reputation by associating him with a genre that, for a long time, generated critical anxiety. For many years, these stories were dismissed as coarse and obscene. Of course, in today's more liberal academic context, scholars no longer dismiss the fabliaux for their obscenity. In fact, the Old French fabliaux are more often taken seriously, and even praised for their style:

> The fabliaux give a feeling of freshness, energy and rhythm, much of which is due to the flexible octosyllabic couplet. Nykrog notes that it was the fabliau that most fully freed the octosyllabic couplet from the heavy sobriety of saints' lives and historical chronicles and allowed the

[31] Even "The Reeve's Tale," the Chaucerian fabliau that most resembles an Old French story, is constantly distinguished. Burbridge finds "The Reeve's Tale" to be very similar to two Old French stories, but consistently argues that it is different from, superior to, its analogues in almost every possible way. Glending Olson also claims that Chaucer's story is superior, giving the reason that it is even *more* of a fabliau than the Old French fabliaux: "Rather than a transformation of fabliau motifs into another type of fiction[,] . . .we find a reassertion, almost a heightening, of some of the genre's dominant traits" (230).

> form to display the full range of its capabilities in comic action and dialogue (1957, pp. 245-48). (DuVal and Eichmann xxiv)

Despite this growing respect, many scholars refuse to admit that fabliau style has a function beyond communicating the plot, describing "everyday life" (70), and suggesting that "life is fun" (Harrison 2).[32] In other words, fabliau scholars rarely analyze these stories as if they are sophisticated literary texts, with perspectives on gender and class that may not fit into the easy categories of aristocratic/bourgeois or feminist/misogynist.[33] It is thus not surprising that Chaucerians consistently claim his tales to be different from the Old French fabliaux. This thesis takes a different perspective on the Old French fabliaux, assuming that they are characterized by a complex, contradictory attitude towards social hierarchies like class and gender, and discovering evidence in some of *The Canterbury Tales*, including "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," that Chaucer was interested in this complex approach to class and gender. The tales discussed here share fabliau characteristics and take up its contradictory representation of personal pleasure and initiative.

I give fabliau's contradiction—the simultaneous condemnation and appreciation of individual initiative—particular weight in this thesis because I believe that Chaucer engages with it in *The Canterbury Tales*. It is this contradiction that suits fabliaux for Chaucer's project in the *Tales*. At a time of social discord, Chaucer was interested in the power of textual representation to confirm or challenge the stability of a hierarchized social order.[34] He pursues this interest in

---

[32] Although, most scholars will admit that there are a few fabliaux, including "Li Lais d'Aristote" and "Conebert," that adopt the style of epics or romances (Hellman and O'Gorman 183-4).

[33] There are obvious exceptions including, among others, Muscatine, Bloch and Gaunt.

[34] In the late fourteenth-century, documentary authority was an important way to defend social hierarchies. It is evident that the rebels who rose in 1381 knew this, because they attempted to appropriate literate authority for themselves by destroying those documents that confirmed their subordination. I will discuss the

part through his engagement with the Old French fabliaux. These texts, because of their contradiction, offer an insight into both the power and the limitations of assumptions about the stability of a hierarchized social order. They demonstrate the power of social expectation and often reinforce the legitimacy of that power by condemning and/or punishing transgressive characters. However, they also demonstrate that this power is never absolute or uncontested, because it can never totally contain personal pleasure and initiative and because there are always competing definitions of class and gender categories. On the one hand, the fabliaux include such challenges as part of their larger attempt to confirm the legitimacy of class and gender hierarchies; this legitimacy is confirmed after it is challenged. On the other hand, such challenges become more than mere ideological opportunities. In many fabliaux, the pleasure and initiative of transgressive characters takes on a further significance—it becomes worthwhile for its own sake. Of course, the disruptive potential of this appreciation is limited by the fabliau narrative pattern, which suggests the inevitability of character behavior. Chaucer expands his fabliau plots, complicates his characters and locates his stories in a particularized context to further explore the disruptive potential of fabliau's contradiction. He suggests that a reductive representation of social organization is dangerous because it inspires social violence.[35] Chaucer's response to this danger is to present a perspective on social order that is not reductive, a perspective that recognizes social complexity and the

---

Revolt, including the importance of documentary authority, further in my chapter on "The Miller's Tale."

[35] As I will discuss in subsequent chapters, Chaucer's complex approach to social transgression was especially important in the late fourteenth-century. At this time, the conventional, hierarchical understanding of social organization caused great social upheaval—most notably in the Revolt. However, at this time of factional violence, direct contradiction of the normative principles of medieval social order was dangerous and necessary to avoid. Paul Strohm discusses the dangers of factional violence and addresses the different strategies employed by Thomas Usk and Chaucer in "Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s." While Usk allied himself and was killed, Chaucer refrained from making public alliances and lived

inevitability of social change. He first uses fabliau to develop this perspective in "The Miller's Prologue" and "Tale." In Fragment I, Chaucer challenges the traditional characterizations of fabliau as the unsophisticated genre of the simple lower classes.

---

through the political turmoil of the time.

Chapter 2

Embracing Surprise in a Fabliau: "The Miller's Tale"

Fabliau in Fragment I

The traditional scholarly association of fabliau with the lower social classes initially seems to be confirmed in Fragment I of *The Canterbury Tales*. When the Miller interrupts the tale-telling process and insists on telling his tale after the Knight's, the Knight's choice of the "high" genre of romance and the Miller's choice of the "low" genre of fabliau seem to explain their conflict, corroborating the respective high and low social status of these two pilgrims. Thus, Charles A. Owen Jr. asserts that "Chaucer's overall purpose in the series of tales [is] a contrast in moral and aesthetic preferences between the gentils and the churls" (195). He suggests that the Fragment deteriorates from the Knight's "chivalric idealism" (196) to the Cook's "moral anarchy," a deterioration "stimulated by the Miller's cynicism about love" (195). Despite their attractive symmetry, analyses like Owen's reduce Chaucer's exploration of gender, genre and class in this fragment to a straightforward opposition between a morally and aesthetically sophisticated noble and a morally and aesthetically limited churl. This chapter will argue that the fragment's engagement with social hierarchies is, in fact, much more complex than Owen assumes. Although Chaucer foregrounds genre's ideological function in this fragment, he does not merely corroborate traditional social hierarchies. Fragment I is not a "false start," but a new beginning that, through an engagement with fabliau, disputes the assumption that a hierarchized social order can be permanently stable (Patterson *Chaucer and the Subject* 40).

In Fragment I, Chaucer acknowledges that genre is a powerful tool that can be used either to obscure or expose social complexity and asserts its potential to develop a new way of understanding and talking about social relations that is not

reductive. He gives the pilgrims' tales a material context—in the frame narrative—to reveal the dangers of such a reduction in late medieval England. The argument that Chaucer tries to escape ideological limitations on his writing is not unusual. Lee Patterson adopts Anne Middleton's definition of courtly "makyng"[36] to argue that early in his career, Chaucer struggled with his function as a poet associated with various courts, which is to produce a "courtly text," a text that asked "not to be interpreted but to be imitated," in order to facilitate "social reproduction rather than . . . cultural understanding" ("What Man Artow?" 119).[37] According to Patterson, Chaucer pursues "a space of ideological freedom" by eschewing an engagement with social context in favor of an exploration of subjectivity (119).[38] Middleton also claims that Chaucer develops a new kind of poetry to resist participating in ideological reproduction. She argues that Chaucer attempts to open up a space for a new literary community—the "new men"—in order to assert a new "ideal of vernacular eloquence . . . which may have been close to [his] own" (17). Paul Strohm agrees that Chaucer strives for a way to reflect on his social world, and claims that Chaucer "works through available genres, refracting experience into literary forms in a way that both respects and renegotiates the meanings they traditionally bear" ("Politics and

---

[36] Middleton argues that Chaucer emphasizes "the socially or cultically reaffirmative function of 'makyng,' and show[s] that it is conceived as a performance in the current scene of polite amusement and secular ritual" (32).

[37] The courtly text was not the only kind of text with methods and goals contrary to the methods and goals of Chaucer's texts. For example, the chronicles, like the courtly texts Anne Middleton describes, work for the reproduction of an ideological agenda, rather than social critique and understanding. Later in this chapter, I will discuss some of the textual strategies employed by the chronicles to achieve this goal.

[38] See also *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, in which Patterson argues that Chaucer was

> on the boundary between distinctive social formations. Not bourgeois, not noble, not clerical, he nonetheless participates in all three of these communities. Surely this sense of marginality, or participating in various groupings but being fully absorbed by none, is related to the sense of subjectivity, the sense of selfhood that stands apart from *all* community, that we recognize throughout his writing and especially in

Poetics" 111). In another essay, Strohm asserts that Chaucer uses poetic form to subtly undermine social hierarchies ("Form and Social Statement"). These techniques, Strohm argues, allow Chaucer the poetic freedom to comment on his social environment while protecting him from the hazards of a conspicuous factional alliance. Like Patterson, Strohm argues that Chaucer, in his poetry, resists serving an ideological agenda. However, whereas Patterson claims that Chaucer seeks to "distance himself from social context" altogether, Strohm claims that Chaucer reflects on that context and pursues social transformation ("What Man Artow?" 119).

This chapter follows Patterson, Middleton and Strohm in claiming that Chaucer resists a straightforward representation of social ideology in his texts, that he develops new poetic practices, works within and around inherited forms, and that he explores the question of subjectivity. However, it will also propose that Chaucer pursues these goals in *The Canterbury Tales* within a specific historical context (provided by the frame narrative)[39] in order to develop a new social model. Chaucer's

---

the *Canterbury Tales*. (39)

[39] When I describe the *Canterbury Tales* frame narrative as providing a specific historical context, I do not mean that it is written in a "realistic" style, or that it offers a verisimilitudinous representation of late medieval England. However, the frame narrative does allude to its late medieval context in many ways. Many of the pilgrims are specifically associated with late medieval England or Europe. For instance, as I will discuss later, the Miller's representation as a troublemaker references the miller figure that appears in texts written by the Rebels of 1381. Also, "The Miller's Tale," which is set in Oxford, foregrounds social boundaries that were changing in the Middle Ages and develops a new subjectivity that accounts for these changes. In a later chapter, I will also describe the conflict between the Friar and the Summoner as alluding to an institutional conflict that was taking place in the late Middle Ages. Chaucer uses such details to introduce historical particularity into his tales. This historicization is to be distinguished from other, stabilizing modes of historicization, such as that, for instance, in "The Knight's Tale." The Knight places his tale in a particular context, but this context does not admit the possibility of unexpected change, in part because the tale is set the distant, mythic past. As such, the context of "The Knight's Tale" does not evoke material reality. On the contrary, it omits the contingencies of embodiment, reiterating ideological norms rather than contemporary practices, which are continually renegotiated. In this way, the Knight suggests that the authority of traditional social hierarchies is permanent. Many medieval chronicles, which will be discussed later in this chapter, share this stabilizing mode of historicization. Unlike these texts, Chaucer's frame narrative,

poetic intervention is more explicitly designed to promote social transformation—or, to develop a new way of talking about the social sphere—than Middleton, Patterson or (even) Strohm suggest. One important, and often neglected, way in which Chaucer works for social transformation is his treatment of genre. Chaucer uses genre, fabliau in particular, to develop a theory of subjectivity that can account for the contingency of late medieval social identity. Rather than reproducing an inherited theory of subjectivity that describes identity as obvious and unchanging, Chaucer suggests that such a theory could provoke social violence—especially in the context of late fourteenth-century England. Accordingly, he departs from the fabliau tradition of representing "churlish" characters as "obviously low." Instead, he complicates his characters and suggests that they are, in fact, surprising. They are not already known to the reader. Making sense of such surprising characters requires a new social model—a model in which social positioning is achieved through the examination of social difference rather than the prescription of inflexible social categories.

Chaucer's texts are thus different from the many other medieval texts that use literary techniques—such as a stabilizing historicization—to establish that social roles are obvious and unchanging. Some medieval authors, including, for instance, the chroniclers and many authors of romance, use such techniques to suggest that the inherited social order is a "natural" order and that any challenge to it is obviously wrong and will inevitably result in punishment and condemnation. In order to characterize social roles delineated by class and gender stereotypes as permanent, such authors often define identity as public, as an inherited status that is always visible. This chapter will focus on the chronicles as examples of such texts. The

---

through an emphasis on embodiment and historical particularity, works to upset rigid social boundaries, offering instead a new theory of social order, the strength of which is in its flexibility rather than its rigidity.

chronicles are relevant for this discussion of "The Miller's Prologue" and "Tale" because Chaucer's tales use historicization to develop a different theory of identity. Conversely, the chroniclers use historicization to confirm the authority of inherited social hierarchies. These texts deny the possibility of unexpected change in order to assert that identity is determined by lineage and that social relationships are predictable. In "The Miller's Tale," and throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer resists this simplified representation of social roles and the subjects who inhabit those roles. Also, attentive to the ways in which such ideologies depend on the naturalizing force of textual representation, Chaucer resists the modes of expression that help represent social identities as obvious and inborn. In the process, Chaucer reimagines the poetic "maker" as an author who can talk about social identities in a way that acknowledges their diversity. Because effacing social heterogeneity can lead to social conflict, he implies, medieval society needs authors who can represent social organization as both complex and coherent.

In showing that contemporary social and literary models can be dangerously reductive, Chaucer opens up a space for a different kind of author; he demonstrates the relevance of a poet with new methods and a new social role. Clearly, one of Chaucer's motivations in redefining the poet's role is his own desire to avoid obvious factional affiliation. As Paul Strohm has argued in "Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s," it was important for late medieval poets to respond subtly to social or political issues lest they become victims of factional violence. Strohm's negative example is Thomas Usk, an author who was sentenced and hanged by the Appellants because he wrote explicitly in support of the royal faction. Strohm reads Usk's story as proof of the importance of a subtle poetics in politically fraught late medieval England. However, this story is also a powerful example of the dangers of rigid political, or social, distinctions that distill a complex network of power into a simple opposition between two groups. In this case, a single conflict polarized the

English political community into two groups, the Appellants and the royalists. Because this polarization concentrated the hostility between members of the nobility, it greatly increased the potential for violence. Another social distinction that distilled power and inspired social violence in late medieval England was the noble/churl binary. The most shocking example of this violence was, of course, the Revolt of 1381. In the Revolt, the rebels rejected their subservience, which conventional social theories represented as innate. It is this kind of simplified social distinction that Chaucer works to complicate by developing a less reductive theory of identity. One way he does this is through his engagement with genre.

Genre is central to Chaucer's project of reimagining identity and social organization. Foregrounding fabliau, Chaucer both investigates genre's ideological function and establishes that it can be used to theorize a new social model. Fabliau is part of this investigation for many reasons. One is that fabliau is identified with the middle and lower classes, who increasingly recognized, and rejected the use of, documentary authority to maintain their subordination.[40] Like the lower class characters it often portrays, fabliau also lacked authority in the late Middle Ages. Even though it is a literary genre with an established tradition, it does not gain authority by referencing that tradition.[41] Another, more important reason is that the Old French fabliaux often represent medieval social hierarchies in contradictory ways. Fabliaux typically suggest the obviousness of social categories[42] such as noble and churl by developing a simple conflict that moves directly to a resolution in which the characters are identified within class and gender ideology. However, fabliaux also

---

[40] I will discuss below how the rebels of 1381 attempted to destroy the documents that they believed were responsible for their social subservience.
[41] This is not to say that fabliau lacks authority over the reader, but that its authority is not public, not a function of its literary genealogy. Fabliau's authority is in the reader's familiarity and identification with its motifs and stereotypes.
[42] As I mention above, more socially conservative writers including the chroniclers often use stylistic and structural techniques to the same end.

challenge the obviousness of these identities by recognizing the value of individual initiative and desire. For instance, when a deceptive woman's pleasure is recognized and appreciated to some extent, the category of abject deceptive woman can no longer define or explain her. Because fabliau's contradiction suggests that subjectivity is influenced by the ideologies that hope to shape it, but that identity is not transparent, stories in this genre ultimately undermine class and gender stereotypes. Chaucer, the only English poet to cultivate this genre, picks up on Old French fabliau's ambivalent response to a simplistic representation of identity. In "The Miller's Prologue," he suggests that generic closure helps characterize identity as obvious and transparent and he associates this characterization with social conflict. Then, in "The Miller's Tale," Chaucer demonstrates how textual complexity, by avoiding a reductive representation of identity and social roles, can render diffuse the dangerously compacted social binaries producing conflict.

Introducing Fabliau in Fragment I: "The Miller's Prologue"

Although Chaucer scholars traditionally describe "The Miller's Tale" as introducing the genre of fabliau in *The Canterbury Tales*, I believe that this genre first appears in "The Miller's Prologue." In other words, fabliau not only describes the plot of "The Miller's Tale," but also the social interactions taking place in the Canterbury frame itself. "The Miller's Prologue" shares the conservative tendencies of the Old French fabliaux, particularly those fabliaux that explicitly address class. Such fabliaux typically depict a sexual and/or social transgression that confirms the validity of traditional class distinctions. In the "Prologue," the Miller, like a fabliau character, transgresses established social boundaries and is publicly denounced as a churl. These boundaries have already been established in "The Knight's Tale" when it characterizes nobility as a fundamental social category and asserts that noble regulatory and exclusionary processes exist for the sake of social order. The pilgrims

largely accept the Knight's representation. One of the first things we are told in "The Miller's Prologue" is that the pilgrims respond to "The Knight's Tale" unanimously: "In al the route nas ther yong ne oold / That he ne seyde it was a noble storie" (MilTPro 3110-1). Just as the nobility of "The Knight's Tale" seems obvious, it seems clear that "The Knight's Tale" should be followed by another noble tale. Thus, the Host calls on the Monk to respond to the Knight and tell the next tale. The Host, interpellated by "The Knight's Tale," decides that the tale-telling process should follow a hierarchical pattern. Of course, the Miller then interrupts and demands to tell the next tale.

Surprisingly, the Miller's interruption does not simply present a challenge to the Knight's affirmation of class ideology within the pilgrim group. In fact, it allows the Miller to be instantly identified within the Knight's model. The Host initially rejects the Miller's proposal, insisting that "Som bettre man" should tell the next tale (3130). He tells the Miller that they should "werken thriftily," or, properly (3131). When the Miller is not persuaded to back down, the narrator tells the reader that the Miller told his "cherles tale in his manere," which, we assume, is the manner of a churl (3169). The narrator also suggests that this churl's tale is not suitable for gentle ears, apologizing to "every gentil wight" for repeating such a tale (3171). He invites the gentles to find another tale, if they wish, stating again that the Miller "is a cherl; ye knowe wel this" (3182). This persistent identification of the Miller as a churl is noteworthy. "The Miller's Prologue" repeatedly declares that the Miller is the Knight's opposite. Not only does the "Prologue" make this distinction, but it also insists that this distinction is obvious and absolute. Just as it is unanimously understood that the Knight's tale is a "noble storie," it is obvious that the Miller's tale is a "cherles tale." As an analysis of "De Berenger au Long Cul" will demonstrate, Old French fabliaux that address class also repetitively identify their characters in reductive ways in order to establish the obviousness of their identities.

"The Miller's Prologue" resembles many Old French fabliaux that explicitly address class. Such fabliaux typically depict a sexual and/or social transgression that confirms the validity of traditional class distinctions. The Old French fabliaux, like the "Prologue," corroborate these distinctions by exposing their characters for what we always knew they were: lustful women and/or churls.[43] There are several fabliaux that explicitly blame their characters' transgression on weakened class boundaries. The narrative movement of these stories demonstrates that marriage across classes leads to a churlish character's (usually sexual) transgression, which then leads to his or her exposure as a churl and, perhaps, to his or her punishment. The narrative represents this causation as unidirectional and undeviating. The most common kind of class disruption in these fabliaux is a noble woman's marriage to a rich but lower class man.[44] These stories characterize sexual transgression as the inevitable result of a churl's advancement. In so doing, they represent nobles and churls as absolutely different.

One such Old French fabliau is Guerin's well-known "De Berenger au Long Cul."[45] In "Berenger," a rich, non-noble man is married to a noble woman because her father is in debt to his father. The husband is reluctant to participate in knightly activity. His wife is dismayed and pointedly mentions that her "lignaige / ou tant a vaillanz chevaliers" (Guerin 46-7) ("her family / included many valiant knights"). He defends himself, claiming, "ge sui chevalier sanz perece, le meillor trestot, par ma mein!" ("I'm not a lazy, slothful knight, / but, by my hand, a nonpareil") (46-7). The next morning, he arms himself and heads for the forest to prove his prowess. However, rather than engage in "real" knightly battles, the cowardly husband merely

---

[43] As I point out below, a few Old French fabliaux are set in noble or gentle households and do not include characters who are churls.
[44] For instance, "Le Vilain Mire," "De Jouglet," "D'Aloul," and "Des Trois Boçus."
[45] It is important to note that "Berenger" exists in two versions. The one I discuss deals explicitly with inter-class marriage. The other one is "quite careful to remove

pretends to be fighting all day. He scars his weapons and shield in order to deceive his wife. The wife discovers his secret by dressing up as a knight and following him into the woods. She meets her husband and challenges him to a battle. If he will not fight, he must kiss her ass. The husband opts for the kiss and his wife, still unknown to him, promptly goes home and takes a lover.[46] In doing so, she not only satisfies her lust, but also rejects her husband's authority. The tale is quite explicit in indicating what has gone wrong:

> ainsi bons lignaiges aville,
> et li chastelain et li conte
> declinent tuit et vont a honte;
> se marient bas por avoir,
> si en doivent grant honte avoir
> et grant domaige si ont il.
> Li chevalier mauvais et vill
> et coart issent de tel gent,
> qui covoitent or et argent
> plus qu'il ne font chevalerie:
> ainsi est noblece perie. (44)
>
> [Fine families are thus undone,
> and castellans and viscounts all
> bring shame upon themselves, and fall;
> by marrying the basely born
> for money, they deserve the scorn

---

those lines more indicative of class bias" (Olson 221).

that causes them so many tears.
For wretched, craven chevaliers
and cowards spring from those who covet
gold and silver so, and love it
more than deeds of chivalry.
Thus perished the nobility. (45)]

The tragedy of this story is clearly the noble family's disregard for the exclusivity of their class, which results in the dilution of their family blood. The class transgression that is this marriage in turn leads to the wife's sexual transgression. Of course, class disruption causing an inversion of gender roles is a common fabliau motif: there are many fabliaux in which a wife is (either explicitly or implicitly) condemned for successfully deceiving her husband.[47] In "Berenger," the wife's victory over her lower-class husband is characterized as "shit" in the concluding moral, "a mol pastor chie lous laine" ("When the shepherd's weak, the wolf shits wool") (60-1). Like many other medieval discourses, fabliau not only characterizes deceptive behavior as "churlish," but also associates it with "the feminine."[48] Women are the most consistently deceptive characters in fabliau and are often held responsible for the advancement of churls.

"De Berenger au Long Cul" reveals the obvious lowness of its characters and blames their transgression on a weak class structure. The identity of the characters is ultimately unmistakable—the husband is a cowardly churl and his wife is a lustful, manipulative "wolf." The unidirectional narrative suggests that their low behavior is inevitable; it is not possible for the husband to resist his cowardice, nor is there a

---

[46] Laurence de Looze argues that the husband's inability to recognize his wife in the moment of the kiss indicates that, "at the imaginary level," a complete "symbolic reversal of sexual roles" has taken place (500).
[47] Another such story is "De La Borgoise d'Orliens."
[48] I will discuss the association between class and gender categories in more detail in

chance his wife could resist her lust. The principal way in which class and gender hierarchies are confirmed in fabliau is through such exposure, or naming. The "Prologue" to "The Miller's Tale" also uses this technique to establish the Miller's identity as a churl. As it would in a fabliau plot, the Miller's interruption, his inappropriate transgression of social boundaries, proves his churlishness.

Although the narrator finally calls the Miller a "churl," "The Miller's Prologue" does not require an authoritative voice that invokes an extended social and textual history of authoritative meaning (like Chaucer's Knight and his character Theseus) in order to expose the Miller. Like an Old French fabliau that exposes a churl without depicting his or her public punishment, the "Prologue" demonstrates that the Miller is a churl without the narrator's explicit condemnation. The Miller is identified as a churl because his interruption is directly preceded by the pilgrims' unanimity and followed by their mutual disapproval as articulated by the Host. In fabliaux, character exposure is accomplished largely through the fabliau narrative pattern, which confirms the social positioning of the characters. The previous chapter has already introduced the directness of fabliau narrative, the refusal "to be expansive and [the adoption of] shorter ways of communication" (Eichmann, "The Artistry of Economy" 68). Instead of providing detailed descriptions, these stories "presuppose the audience's knowledge of narrative situations and count on its complicity so that it be amenable to succinct, evocative signals" (72-3). The principal signals in "The Miller's Prologue" are the pilgrims' unanimous response to "The Knight's Tale" and the Host's ordering of the tale telling process. These acts define the social rules that the Miller goes on to defy.

---

my chapter on "The Shipman's Tale."

The Social and Economic Context of "The Miller's Prologue" and "Tale"

Old French fabliau's affirmation of social hierarchies is strengthened by another characteristic: the lack of a specific historical context. The fabliaux confirm the baseness of their characters by relating events that are not historically located. As a result, the gender and class hierarchies confirmed by the story seem absolute and not relative to the interest of any social group. "The Miller's Prologue," of course, is not timeless; it is located in a particular historical moment—late fourteenth century England. The "Prologue" is part of the frame narrative's contextualization of the pilgrims' tales. Of the frame narrative texts, the "Prologue" is particularly explicit in referencing contemporary social tensions. Of course, the Miller is inspired to respond because of the hierarchical nature of the tale-telling process—a hierarchy that mirrors the late medieval social hierarchy. Also, the miller was a politically provocative figure during Chaucer's lifetime.[49] "The Miller's Tale" continues to invoke the late medieval English context first introduced by the "Prologue." The tale is set in Oxford and foregrounds social boundaries that were changing in the fourteenth century. For instance, the three male characters all have an interestingly "middle" social position. Absolon, of course, is both parish clerk and barber-surgeon and would regularly travel between the town and the abbey. Nicholas is a member of a clerical class no longer securely on top in the monastery but for hire to the needs of a new burgeoning "middle" class, which is represented by John.

Another social boundary that was undermined in late medieval England and that is relevant for "The Miller's Tale" is the boundary between town and countryside. As I will discuss below, it is likely that the power structure of Oxford was affected by the permeability of its urban boundaries. One effect of this permeability was that the town's power elite was no longer determined solely by

[49] As I will mention below, Steven Justice discusses some texts distributed during the

patrimony. It is useful to read both "The Miller's Prologue" and "The Miller's Tale" in the context of urban permeability and the declining significance of lineage. The "Prologue" introduces the traditional, rigid hierarchies that were losing their ability to maintain the social status quo, despite the pervasiveness and ostensible obviousness of the categories (like "churl") that they define. Further, a city experiencing this kind of hierarchical disruption, Oxford, is an appropriate setting for "The Miller's Tale," a tale that explores the inadequacy of traditional social models that attempt to describe identity as a simple reflection of a rigid hierarchy. This tale suggests that these traditional models can generate social violence. Further, it works to reduce this possibility by modifying the fabliau structure so that existing social tensions are complicated rather than consolidated. "The Miller's Tale" also works against dangerous social reduction by developing a new subjectivity, a masculinity and a femininity that are not so clearly rooted in essentialized class positions. This subjectivity can better characterize the inhabitants of late medieval cities.

Many late medieval urban centers had shifting, penetrable boundaries. Because of this permeability there was no absolute distinction between country and city. David Wallace discusses London's permeability: "Both modern historians and medieval Londoners tend to speak of London as a fluid entity, a place to which people come and go, rather than as a permanent, sharply delimited site." (158). One reason for this fluidity was the influx of people into cities from rural areas. During the late Middle Ages, many cities drew their populations from the surrounding rural areas. "The city evolved as a natural creation of its immediate environment, generally with a population of emancipated peasants or sometimes serfs. Even as late as the fifteenth century most immigrants came from the immediate environs of the city,

---

Revolt of 1381 that use the figure of the miller to describe their aims.

although the larger cities attracted newcomers from a larger area" (Nicholas *Growth* 181). City populations grew when people from the country came to the city to seek employment opportunities:

> prosperous village families sent representatives to become tradesmen and craftsmen in town. Lower strata supplied recruits whose business lives were often short. . . . and there were probably those in poverty whose desperation drove them to town in the hope of alms or the benefit of marginally greater and seasonally more constant employment opportunities. (Butcher 91)

Of course, students also regularly immigrated to those medieval cities with universities. Such migrations could form new ties between the city and country because when country-dwellers moved into cities, their rural ties often remained intact; "Family contracts and rural investments, especially within the core of the field of migration, were not necessarily broken by urban residence and often continued to be important" (91). There may well have been networks of family members and friends that helped migrants:

> Modern evidence suggests that in times and places of constant migration there are patterns of movement which lead the new migrant to friends and relations who helped him to find work and lodgings. . . . The evidence displayed by Eilert Ekwall in defence of his thesis that the language of London was influenced by heavy and constant migration from the Midlands of England would sustain the probability that many migrants found friends waiting for them. (McDonnell 123)

Such migrants may well have identified themselves more closely with their inter-city communities than with the city as a whole.

The movement between city and country was also instigated by city dwellers; many city families invested in country property:

> Townsmen, and not just the most prosperous, sought rural investment outlets. For some it was a matter of securing rent income, for some it was a matter of constructing or enlarging upon a family holding which might be subsequently bequeathed to an eldest son, and for a very few, acting on behalf of religious institutions, it was part of a policy of covert action in the land-market designed to evade the strictures of the Statute of Mortmain. (Butcher 91)

Speaking of Southampton, Nicholas says that many families "remained only for two or three generations in the city, then were lured away by rural landownership" (*Growth* 281). Considering this interaction of country- and city-dwellers, it is not surprising that there is evidence "of the close social links and shared culture which existed between the top rank of London citizens and the landed aristocracy. Some townsmen themselves enjoyed landed resources; in 1436 eighty Londoners, mostly merchants, were in possession of land worth £20 per annum or above, according to the (underassessed) income tax of that year" (Dyer *Standards of Living* 193). The perceived status and stability of land ownership encouraged such townsmen to seek rural land ownership while the prosperity of the city encouraged country-dwellers to seek their fortune there.

In the late fourteenth century, small cities like Oxford were particularly characterized by movement across their town boundaries. Some small cities *encouraged* this kind of movement because of economic troubles. Oxford was a city in decline in the fourteenth century. Competition with London and depopulation due to the plague meant that Oxford experienced financial difficulties. Keen writes of the competition in the fulling industry: "Before the end of the thirteenth century the older, urban centres of industry, like Lincoln, Oxford, Northampton and Winchester, where fulling had long been carried out underfoot by the traditional method, were beginning to feel a chill wind of competition" (179). The growing

London economy was one cause for Oxford's economic difficulties. David Nicholas notes that London so dominated the surrounding towns that it

> depressed the commercial economy of the surrounding areas without combining this with political lordship. In the late fourteenth century London had three times the population of the next largest city of England. The metropolis together with twenty-five county or other provincial centres accounted for 7-8 per cent of the total population of England in 1377; of this, London had 2-3 per cent and all other towns with 1,000 or more inhabitants 4-5 per cent. The eleven counties surrounding London contained about 140 'towns' in the legal sense, 23 per cent of the total in England. London alone had 6 per cent of the population of this region in 1377. Canterbury, Oxford, Southampton and Winchester, the other large towns of this area, added only another 3 per cent. Even more than population, wealth was concentrated in London. The city's valuation for the poll tax of 1377 was 43 per cent of the total for the 140 towns in the region. (*Later Medieval City* 93)

Oxford, according to the 1377 Poll Tax records, was one of several towns whose population ranking order "fell noticeably from the taxation ranking order of 1334" (Hilton 22). Unlike most other medieval universities, Oxford's university did not cause, nor was it established because of, major expansion: "Oxford and Cambridge were unusual among universities in being in places that did not develop into major cities. Most of the sixty-five new universities of the period 1200-1500 were established places that were already major population centres" (Nicholas *Later Medieval City* 293). Not only did the university's presence fail to make Oxford wealthy, but it could even be linked to the city's economic troubles: "the multiplication of academic colleges in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Oxford and Cambridge is so far from supporting a thesis of urban prosperity that it could be seen

by the burgesses of [that] university [town] as an objectionable symptom of [its] own decay" (Dobson "Urban Decline" 273). These economic troubles prompted towns like Oxford to broaden the basis on which they admitted men to the freedom of the city.

To address the economic downturn, small cities like Oxford increasingly admitted men to the freedom of the city based on redemption, marriage and favor rather than patrimony. The admission had been an important way for a city to preserve membership in its power elite. For instance, Canterbury, before the plague, maintained this elite by limiting admission: "A substantial number of licensed tradesmen and craftsmen . . . paying annual fines were a distinct non-free element within the community, while a narrow group of freemen enjoyed the privileges of their status which included the right to practise freely trade and craft" (Butcher 93). After the plague, however, relatively high numbers of freemen were admitted (94). At this time, the number of those admitted into the freedom by patrimony dropped significantly; instead, many were admitted by marriage and favour. The increased admission of freemen in medieval towns was necessary, in the face of depopulation due to the plague and regional competition, to restore the city's economic balance. Cities like Oxford needed laborers and craftsmen to meet demand: "Continued population decline . . . meant that the English towns had a real shortage of people by the early fifteenth century. The available labour in the cities was inadequate to meet regional demand" (Nicholas *Later Medieval City* 65). Attracting such workers required admitting more men to the freedom of the city. However, this resulted in a growing influx of people from the countryside and a loss of civic income because those artisans who were admitted into the freedom were free from the payment of tolls (Swanson 107).

Admission by redemption, marriage and favor changed the makeup of the civic elite. This is yet another boundary destabilized in small cities like medieval

Oxford. No longer could inheritance dictate who had commercial and political privilege. The same was true of the oligarchy of wealthy merchants who ran medieval towns. Evidence suggests that "merchants of this period do not . . . represent a closely connected group of families as they had done in an earlier age" (Thomson 50). David Nicholas identifies a telling distinction; he notes that the landowning families were called "lineages," whereas the

> newer and mainly merchant group were [called] "honourable persons" . . . . Although lineage became important to this group, it was also defined on the more fluctuating [basis] of wealth. . . . It was thus more permeable than the ministerial aristocracy. The high mortality of the late Middle Ages made it more difficult than before to keep property intact. Although some top families were able to entail estates, it was unusual although not unheard of for the same property to stay in the family for more than three generations. (*Later Medieval City* 181)

The mobility of land—traditionally, the most stable kind of wealth—registers the profound instability of the urban elites. This instability increasingly characterized the urban networks of power, networks that were already strained because of the plague:

> The urban élite would seem to have been in some disarray. Traditional relationships between wealth, status, age and office were severely threatened. The mutual interests of business and craft fellowship both within the town and between town and countryside must frequently have broken down; the network of credit must have become torn and ragged; the influx of migrants must have given an emphasis to new rural connections at the expense of older urban ones; the organization and performance of religious activities in parish church and cathedral must have suffered marked changes; relationships between leading

> citizens and their families and local landlords must often have been destroyed; and the whole business of government and administration in the town must have presented considerable problems to bailiffs, aldermen, jurats, councillors and the many minor officials. (Butcher 95-6)

The high mortality rate in plague years meant that patterns of inheritance were strained and often broken; "These decades saw the beginning, in [Canterbury] and nearby villages, of the abandonment of attempts to maintain the traditional patterns of inheritance by the search for family and kin to provide heirs" (98-9). The preeminence of patrimony as a social determinant was reduced even more when small cities attempted to increase population by increasing admission to the freedom. Subsequently, the civic elite had to develop new ways of retaining control.

Urban medieval merchant oligarchies increasingly maintained their social dominance not by appealing to their inherited nobility, but by controlling the artisans. The merchants acquired their wealth by extracting the surplus value generated by such craftsmen. Sarah Beckwith explains that the power of the merchant over the craftsman "was not the ownership of capital, but the control of the system of exchange" (260).[50] Did the increased number of admissions to the freedom threaten the merchant's civic dominance? On the contrary, it seems more likely that such admissions served, in part, to establish a kind of urban system of obligation to replace the threatened hierarchy of lineage:

---

[50] "The mercantile character of the urban ruling classes in England necessarily implied the subordination of the manufacturing craftsmen through the regulations imposed on the craft gilds (where they existed). The attempted imposition of the 'one man, one trade' ethos was a generalised expression of merchant domination. In particular, the merchants involved in the sale for export of craft manufactured commodities, especially textiles, feared any situation in which a chain of operations, from the acquisition of the raw material to the marketing of the final product, could be undertaken by the craftsmen themselves" (Hilton *English and French Towns* 101-2).

> it is doubtful that such an extension of the franchise would have been achieved if it had proved a threat to the commercial advantage of the civic elite or the growing merchant class. The franchise extended the obligations more than the opportunities of the artisans. Indeed the increased franchise should rather be seen as a measure of the grip that the merchants had on the economic life of the city, and the extent to which the freedom of the artisans had been circumscribed. (Swanson 109)[51]

It is the simultaneous benefits and possible disadvantages of this strategy that tellingly characterize late medieval urban life. While civic responsibilities ensured one source of civic income, they are a much more disputable basis for social organization than is lineage. Lineage implies a continuous hierarchical line originating in God and extending through worldly authorities. Civic responsibilities imply obligation to a notoriously fluid entity by increasingly mobile tradesmen. Further, this hierarchy is based on economic dominance, not natural or moral superiority.

These two characteristics of late medieval English life—urban permeability and the declining significance of lineage as that basis for the social hierarchy—inform both "The Miller's Prologue" and "The Miller's Tale." The "Prologue" introduces the inherited hierarchies that were pervasive yet decreasingly able to maintain the social status quo. "The Miller's Tale," set in a city faced with the unworkability of a social model based on such rigid, lineage-based hierarchies,

---

[51] Thomson concurs:

> it is . . . probable that the increased number of admissions was prompted by [the borough authorities'] desire to spread the load of civic obligations, and to secure money from the payments made on entry to assist shaky borough finances. Citizenship presumably had certain advantages which made it worth a man's while taking it up, but in a period of increasing civic oligarghy, one may wonder how greatly

develops a new model that does not assume the innateness of social position. It also develops a new subjectivity that has no stable basis in essentialized class distinctions and that can better account for those who live in an increasingly permeable and adaptable urban environment. "The Miller's Tale" performs these functions by representing fabliau characters differently than do many of the Old French fabliaux. The Tale's multidirectional plot allows its characters some complexity rather than exposing them as obviously low. Contextualization is central to Chaucer's engagement with fabliau and his development of a new social model, in part because it suggests the danger of ignoring or attempting to contain social flexibility. A recognition of this flexibility, like that found in "The Miller's Tale," is crucial in late medieval England because reductive representations of the lower orders, like those found in Old French fabliaux and, as I will now discuss, the chronicles, caused social violence.

Reductive Social Representations: The Example of the Chronicles

By using characters, setting and plot in "The Miller's Prologue" and "Tale" to reference some of the crucial changes taking place in late medieval England, by historicizing the fabliau textual strategy, Chaucer develops his own strategy. He demonstrates that the fabliau narrative's ideologically stabilizing function is disrupted when placed in a specific context in which the traditional social structure has only limited authority. This attention to social complexity is central to Chaucer's revised social model, which is articulated throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. According to this model, social positioning is achieved through the exploration and discovery of social difference rather than the rigid prescription of social categories like "noble" and "churl." By historicizing fabliau, Chaucer also suggests the dangers of adopting

---

these outweighed the disadvantages. (54)

such reductive social categories. Many of the categories defended in the fabliaux were highly contested in late medieval England and no longer accepted as obviously true. Members of the Miller's social group were often represented through the discourse of "obvious lowness" and many of them challenged this representation, most notably in the Revolt of 1381.

The rebels of 1381 were routinely characterized as transparently low. For instance, the chronicler from the royal Abbey of St. Albans, Thomas Walsingham, reports that after the threat presented by the rebels had abated, Richard II responded to their requests for social freedoms with the well-known rejection, "Rustics you were and rustics you are still" (311). Richard's statement clearly expresses the conviction that the rebels are permanently rustics, or churls. The chronicles are good examples of texts that develop a reductive social characterization using some of the literary techniques, including narrative expectation, that Chaucer uses. Although "The Miller's Tale" is usually contrasted with courtly romance, the chronicles are relevant for this discussion because the "Tale" develops a different theory of identity through historicization—the "Prologue" not only gives the "Tale" a material context, but the possibility of existing in a time and space where unanticipated change might occur. Unlike "The Miller's Prologue" and "Tale," the chronicles exist in an ahistoricized time. They refuse the possibility of unanticipated change in order to assert the permanence of identity and the predictability of social relationships. The chronicles are part of the tradition that Chaucer departs from because, he implies, it causes social conflict.

The chroniclers shape narratives that demonstrate the rebels' obvious lowness. The chronicles' fundamental assumption is that the rebels are ignorant and incapable of independent action and that these qualities prevent them from achieving their social goals. In the chronicles, this assumption is introduced early on, to create in the reader an expectation that the revolt could never succeed. For

instance, Henry Knighton's description of the revolt is introduced in a way that suggests the inevitability of its failure. Failure was certain, he implies, because the commons are incapable of rational, organized or appropriate social action. He says that the revolt exploded beyond a (possibly just) small defiance of corrupt royal commissioners into a uncontrolled anarchy because the rebels

> forgot themselves, and no longer content with their first purpose, nor satisfied merely by minor crimes, they ruthlessly contemplated greater and unspeakable evils, nor would they be ready to desist from their wicked plans until all the lords and the great men of the kingdom had been utterly destroyed. (211)

Knighton represents the rebels as out of control and unable to imagine a proper scope for their action. He reinforces this characterization later in his narration, saying that

> in many places tenants likewise tried to prevail over their lords, wherefore it is written, "None is harsher than the lowly man when he is exalted." For, ignorant of themselves, they neither gave thought to their own condition, nor looked to the end of what they had begun, but acted like fools who do not look before they leap. (227)

Walsingham employs a similar technique in his chronicle. In his discussion of the revolt, he, like Knighton, begins by establishing the rebels' foolishness and hubris:

> For the rustics, whom we call "Nativi" or "bondsmen", together with other country-dwellers living in Essex sought to better themselves by force and hoped to subject all things to their own stupidity. (132)

By introducing the rebels as foolish and overly ambitious even before they have related the details of the revolt, the chroniclers achieve a specific textual effect. The chroniclers frame their story so that the reader expects that the revolt can only end in failure for the rebels. This initial characterization allows the chroniclers to avoid

telling the story of a rebellion; instead, they tell a story of a resilient social hierarchy that is inevitably reestablished after a brief crisis. Their story primarily demonstrates the commons' obvious lowness and rightful subordination, not their surprising boldness in rejecting that subordination.

The chronicles suggest another reason for the rebels' inability to achieve their agenda: they are fundamentally dependent and require leadership. Thus, Knighton, Walsingham, and the author of the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, use the same analogy to describe the rebels at a certain point in the narrative. After relating the death of Wat Tyler, these chroniclers characterize the rebels as sheep. This comparison allows the chroniclers to suggest that the rebels fail because they are inarticulate and without an organizing intelligence: "words could not be heard among their horrible shrieks but rather their throats sounded with the bleating of sheep" (Walsingham 173). Walsingham explains that Robert Knolles "surrounded the entire band of rustics with armed men, just as sheep are enclosed within a fold until it pleases the labourer to choose which he wants to send out of pasture and which he wants to kill" (179). The Anonimalle chronicler also relates that the king's men "enveloped the commons like sheep within a pen" (167). Finally, Henry Knighton states that Robert Knolles, with his men, "surrounded the wretched crowd in the field, who were as sheep without a shepherd" (221). This analogy does a lot of ideological work for the chroniclers. They use it to account for the rebellion in a way that corroborates traditional social hierarchies. This analogy suggests that the rebellion occurs because the commons need to be guided and governed by their proper leaders. Thus, the chronicles construct the rebellion as evidence that the nobles need to be stronger leaders in order to provide proper guidance for the lower classes and defend traditional social distinctions, not that those distinctions, and the nobility's role as rightful social leaders, are in crisis.

The Danger of Reductive Social Representations

Despite the vigor and stylistic sophistication of the arguments presented by the chroniclers (among other authors of the time), characterizations of the lower classes as inherently ignorant were beginning to be recognized by those classes as ideological constructions perpetuated in part by preventing their access to literate technologies. In the late fourteenth century, such arguments could no longer sustain the sense that a vast segment of medieval society was permanently low. There is evidence that the lower classes recognized that their subordination was effected in part through documents and those who controlled documents. They were increasingly aware that documentary authority does not naturally and inevitably belong to the privileged classes. This awareness is apparent in their attempts to appropriate documentary authority and destroy documents that they believed justified illegitimate social privileges.

The Patent Rolls of rural England around 1377 contain evidence of a series of legal movements by which unfree peasants, villeins, attempted to secure their independence by reference to *The Domesday Book*. *The Domesday Book* is "essentially an Anglo-Normal fiscal document" which surveyed, among other things, lands in the ancient demesne of the Crown (Faith 51). The peasants who engaged in such legal actions did so in the hope of having their land declared ancient demesne:

> The habit of claiming ancient demesne was at least a century old in 1377, the reason lying in the privileges attached to the tenure of the villein sokeman of the ancient demense. In contrast with villeins in general, whose tenure was unprotected at common law, tenants in ancient demesne were able to secure the protection of the King's court. Two royal writs . . . protected them against disturbance in their holdings and infringement of custom. (Tillotson 2)

The sudden increase in these claims, called exemplifications, in 1377 is notable: "Seventeen exemplifications are recorded in the Calendar of Patent Rolls for these months [between March and August], relating to 20 places in Hampshire, Wiltshire, Surrey, and Berkshire, and all issued at the request of tenants" (3). In these cases, peasants used the literate technologies that were typically used to oppress them.

The peasants' process of appropriating literate technologies also involved an argument for the existence of an authoritative text that supported their social agenda. Nick Ronan argues that the peasants' appeal to *The Domesday Book* was part of the "Great Rumor" of 1377:

> Somewhere, so the rumour went, there was an authoritative text which validated the peasants' inherited oral belief in their land rights. Apart from this original text all other written records of seigneurial dues were false imitations, traduced by a compromised bureaucracy, obscured with distorting tropes, and worthy only to be destroyed. . . . *The Domesday Book* became associated with this imaginary text, even though very few of the appeals were successful. (309-310)

Faith interprets this "rumor" as evidence that the peasants' oppression through documentary authority taught them a "reverence for, and trust in, documents that were thought to guarantee privileges or liberties" (62-3). It is clear that these peasants, rather than rejecting the legitimizing authority of documents, tried to appropriate this authority for their own purposes. However, when considered in the context of the events of 1381, the "Great Rumor" seems to indicate that the peasants attempted to appropriate documentary authority not necessarily because they were deferential to documents, but perhaps because they were suspicious of them and willing to believe that documentary authority is a tool that can be used to support a variety of social agendas.

The lower classes' most sustained and intense attempt to appropriate documentary authority occurred, of course, in the Revolt of 1381. In the Revolt, the rebels composed their own texts, attacked other documents, and demanded new charters. In doing so, they demonstrated their understanding that documentary authority does not absolutely belong to the privileged classes. The power of the traditional assumption that the lower classes are naturally subject to this kind of authority was declining. In fact, there is evidence that such assumptions caused, rather than prevented, social conflict. Some such evidence is presented in Steven Justice's book, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*. In it, he suggests that the rebels of 1381 were aware of the role of textual representation in perpetuating the economic and political status quo, and that they were interested in representing themselves differently. Of course, they often used the figure of a miller to express this desire.[52]

One way in which the rebels demonstrated their understanding that documents are tools of their oppression was by destroying documents. Christopher Dyer studies court rolls and legal indictments to identify, during the time of the Revolt, "107 incidents of [document] destruction, including the burning of central estate archives such as those of the archbishopric of Canterbury, Stratford Abbey and Waltham Abbey that affected the records of many manors" ("Social and Economic Background" 12). This kind of destruction was exceedingly common during the time of the Revolt: "it appears that the burning of court rolls was one of the most widespread expressions of rural rebellion" (12). The chroniclers also emphasize the rebels' burning of documents. Of course, their accounts are highly discursive and usually take a clear position against the rebels: "nearly everything written by contemporaries about the rebels of 1381 was written by their enemies"

---

[52] Justice reproduces the rebels' texts on pages 13-15 of his book. Many of these texts use the figure of the miller to embody, as Patterson says, "both their grievances and their desire for an almost apocalyptic reckoning" (*Chaucer and the Subject of History*

(Dobson *Peasants' Revolt* 3). The chronicles can still be helpful, however, in providing evidence for the peasants' resentment of the controlling power of literate technologies.

Throughout his chronicle, Thomas Walsingham claims that the rebels violently attacked all documents and literate individuals. Shocked and disgusted, he describes the rebels' attacks on lawyers and justices, giving a simplistic explanation for their behavior: "the rebels declared that the land could not be fully free until the lawyers had been killed. This sentiment so excited the rustics that they went to further extremes and declared that all court rolls and old muniments should be burnt so that once the memory of ancient customs had been wiped out their lords would be completely unable to vindicate their rights over them" (133-4). Later in his chronicle, Walsingham goes on to contradict his characterization of the rebels as indiscriminate enemies of documents and the literate; in doing so, he unwittingly explains the rebels' goals and methods. He relates that the rebels in Bury St. Edmund were looking for an authoritative text. They

> willed that, in full view of the commons, the monks should . . . return the charters of liberties of the town which Cnut, the founder of the monastery, had once granted, and which his successors as kings to the present day had conceded for the security of the abbey. (246)

This appeal to ancient customs was characteristic of the Rising and was related to the peasants' attempt to authorize their social agenda by appealing to documentary authority. Contrary to Walsingham's characterization, the rebels did not randomly resort to violence against documents. In fact, they adopted an established way of legitimizing their social objectives—they tried to locate a document that proved their claims. Despite the chroniclers' characterization of the rebels as indiscriminate

---

257).

and violent, it seems that they "purposed the destruction of certain kinds of documents and not of others, and—just as important—to have known the difference" (Justice 42). For instance, the rebels destroyed judicial documents, registry books, rolls of the chancery, and charters, but they did not destroy libraries (42).

This pattern of searching for and destroying documents suggests that the rebels, members of the Miller's social group, understood that documentary authority helped maintain the social status quo. Their behavior also suggests that they were beginning to contest their subordination by asserting their own power over documents.

> The search for written proof [demonstrates the rebels'] realisation that political power and power over writing were becoming increasingly synonymous. The development of the rebels' received beliefs into a critical conception of the world was manifested above all in their violent attitude toward the writing of the ruling class, in all its manifestations, and in the emergence of a signifying practice of their own. (Ronan 310)

The rebels clearly challenged the traditional position that documentary authority belonged to the privileged classes because of their natural social superiority. They seem to believe that documents are a tool that can be used to support various social agendas. The context of the Revolt, and the late medieval struggles over the social function of documents and literacy, is significant for "The Miller's Tale." It is brought to mind by the Miller, both because millers were important cultural symbols of social unrest (as indicated by the rebels' texts) and because Chaucer's Miller is repeatedly condemned as a churl in "The Miller's Prologue," and associated with the "low" genre of fabliau.

"The Miller's Tale" suggests the possibility of social violence not only through its teller, but also its setting. Late medieval Oxford was a violent place regularly troubled by conflicts between the university and town communities. Nicholas says that "The homicide rate in late medieval Oxford was quintuple that of most modern American cities, and the killings occurred mainly in student-dominated areas. Virtually all victims were adult males of low social standing. The incidence of violent crime in other English cities was less than half that of Oxford" (*Later Medieval City* 311).[53] The city and university struggled over, among other things, student violence and the regulation of student payments for lodgings in town. Many townspeople, like John in "The Miller's Tale," rented rooms to students. There is a history of conflict over the rental cost of such lodgings that goes back to the thirteenth century. Ultimately, in the early fifteenth century, the University responded to these troubles by banning students from lodging in town (Emden 30). Notably, Chaucer does not intensify this social threat by representing the story's conflict as dangerously concentrated between Nicholas and John. This very easily could have been the case had he followed a more unidirectional fabliau structure. Chaucer modifies the fabliau structure so that there is no one simple conflict in this tale, no one axis on which the conflict occurs. Thus, this tale complicates rather than consolidates existing social tensions. The Miller's characters are not thoroughly exposed by the tale's narrative closure nor are they identified within a fixed social hierarchy. This context of social violence, and the difference between Chaucer's texts and the Old French fabliaux, imply what is at stake in "The Miller's Tale": it is important to rethink social categories because the old, prescriptive representations construct an angry and violent middle stratum.

---

[53] Nicholas does admit, however, that these murders may not have been caused by

Complicating Fabliau Conflict and Identity in "The Miller's Tale"

The difference of "The Miller's Tale" from other tales of this genre is not immediately apparent, for it begins with the standard fabliau opposition between a husband and his wife's lover. Also, like many Old French fabliaux, "The Miller's Tale" associates masculine contest with class difference. This tale suggests that John and Nicholas' social difference explains their conflict over Alison. We are told that Alison is "a piggesnye, / For any lord to leggen in his bedde, / Or yet for any good yeman to wedde" (MilT 3268-70). Alison is, in effect, introduced as a marker of class difference. It seems that the contest between John and Nicholas is, to some degree, informed by their class membership. Class difference again seems to be a dilemma when the Miller uses the word "estaat" to describe the problematic incompatibility of John and Alison.

> [John] knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude,
> That bad man sholde wedde his simylitude.
> Men sholde wedden after hire estaat,
> For youthe and elde is often at debaat. (3229)

Interestingly, although "estaat" can mean social rank or class, this passage does not claim class as the obvious and singular source of the marriage's problems. It seems that there are *many* sources of difference in this marriage—intelligence, age and possibly class—all of which may be related to the tale's conflict.

This description of the tale's conflict as overdetermined is one part of the tale's unusually complex narrative pattern, a narrative complexity which distinguishes "The Miller's Tale" from many Old French fabliaux, and from "The Miller's Prologue." The unidirectional narrative pattern of Old French fabliau means that, typically, the conflict emerges out of one relationship: the deceiver and the dupe.

---

the university population (312).

Raymond Eichmann describes the "movement of action in the fabliau" as "essentially binary" (*Cuckolds, Clerics* 6).[54] Fabliau conflict typically occurs on one main axis. However, in "The Miller's Tale," not only do two quite different and individually active participants, Alison and Nicholas, target the rich churl, John, but Absolon presents himself as another rival for Alison's affections. Absolon is clearly not interchangeable with Alison's lover, Nicholas. Alison's subsequent trick at Absolon's expense, the misdirected kiss, makes her the target of Absolon's revenge, which is directed, ultimately, at Nicholas. Unlike the conflict of many Old French fabliaux, this conflict is neither simple nor unidirectional. This narrative does not directly reveal the deceptive fabliau characters for what we always knew they were, socially disruptive churls. Rather, the characters are surprising. We do not know them absolutely at the end of the story. They are not *obvious* to us.

Two somewhat surprising characters are the men who pursue Alison, Nicholas and Absolon. Absolon is an unusual character to find in a fabliau, a genre largely uninterested in delicate manners outside of explicitly gentle settings.[55] Absolon's manners characterize him as a laughably ineffectual lover.[56] It seems unavoidable that Absolon, like John, will be the dupe of tricks devised by the more savvy characters. However, Absolon surprises us—he successfully repays Alison's trick. Although he does not scald Alison as he presumably intends, he *does* scald

---

[54] There are some minor variations on this pattern. There might be a deceiver who has a passive counterpart. There also might be two interchangeable deceivers, or two interchangeable dupes. For instance, in "De La Borgoise d'Orliens," the adulterous wife's lover is utterly passive in her plot to deceive and punish her husband. In "Le Meunier et les Deux Clers," the miller's wife has no agenda or initiative of her own, but unthinkingly participates in her husband's scheme. The clerics in this tale are similarly interchangeable. The number of participants rarely changes the fact that the conflict occurs on one main axis.

[55] There are Old French fabliaux that explicitly reference romance conventions in the context of an affair between members of the gentility. For instance, "Guillaume au Faucon" and "Le Chevalier Qui Recovra l'Amor de Sa Dame."

[56] It is interesting to note that most ineffectual lovers are new husbands in the Old French fabliaux. For instance, "Du Sot Chevalier" and "Jouglet."

Nicholas. Unlike most fabliau dupes, Absolon retaliates against the character we least expect to be punished. This changes not only the way we think about Absolon, but also the way we think about Nicholas. The tricky clerk who orchestrates the deception of John becomes the subject of another's deception. He gets caught up in a plot that is not his own. Ultimately, there is no *one* author of deception in this tale, as is often the case in the Old French fabliaux.

Alison is also an unusual fabliau character. She is not a supremely manipulative woman who is completely responsible for the story's deception, nor is she an oblivious wife who is easily manipulated by a tricky clerk. It is notable that Alison is extensively described apart from reference to the male characters and before she begins her relationship with Nicholas.[57] Because the story dwells on Alison's significance apart from her love relationships, she avoids being characterized, as fabliau women commonly are, as an empty signifier waiting to be filled with the meaning of a man's sexual desire. Alison continues to demonstrate her relative independence and self-determination in her relationship with Nicholas. For instance, Alison's decision to love Nicholas is not immediate; the narrator tells us that Alison initially resists, "she sproong as a colt dooth in the trave, / And with hir heed she wryed faste awey" (MilT 3282 - 3). Her resistance, although temporary, distinguishes Alison from other fabliau women who are almost instantaneously manipulated into bed. A good example is "De la femme ki fist pendre sun mari" ("The Woman Who Hanged her Husband") by Marie de France. In this story, a woman who is mourning her husband in the cemetery is approached by a knight who

[57] This has provided the basis for other critical musings on Alison's difference as a fabliau woman. Hines describes her difference thus: "Many women in the French fabliaux are described as beautiful, and thus alluring in such a way as to motivate the fabliau plot, but none is made poetically truly so within the text to the extent that Chaucer's Alison is" (115). Some critics remark on her difference in order to claim Alison's "naturalness": she is a "delectable little animal who is not to be won by a protracted, artificial wooing" (Muscatine *Chaucer and the French Tradition* 230).

has endangered his own life by burying a relative hanged as a thief—the authorities have condemned this burial and are searching for the man responsible. Hoping to convince her to replace his relative with her dead husband, the knight propositions the mourning wife.

> Cuintement ad a li parlé:
> Dit li que ele se cunfortast.
> Mut sereit lez, se ele l'amast. (19-21)
>
> [Then cunningly he spoke to her.
> He said that comfort now was near.
> Love, him, and she would soon find cheer.]

She responds *immediately* to his advances and offers her husband's body before he can even ask.

> La prudefemme li respundi,
> "Desfuium mun barun d'ici;
> Puis sil pendum la u cil fu:
> Si n'ert jamés aparceü." (31-34)
>
> [Here's the reply the woman gave:
> "Let's dig my husband from his grave;
> We'll hang him where the thief has been:
> The difference never will be seen."]

The story's moral bemoans the wife's unreliability.

Alison's autonomy is further established when the tale foregrounds her preference. As mentioned above, fabliaux often suggest that the desires and initiative of their characters are possibly worthwhile. In this tale, once she enters a relationship with Nicholas, Alison's attachment to him is described in terms of her

choice. However, the significance of Alison's preference is further underscored by the tale's narrative structure. By complicating the conflict, by including another potential lover, Absolon, the tale makes Alison's choice even more of an issue. The Miller points out that Alison chooses Nicholas over Absolon: "She loveth so this hende Nicholas / That Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn; / He ne hadde for his labour but a scorn" (3386-8). Alison later rejects Absolon in a similarly determined way: "As help me God, it wol nat be 'com pa me.' / I love another" (3699 - 70). Alison's loyalty should not be interpreted as merely a plot device, for there are stories in which an adulterous wife satisfies several lovers, one of whom may be the victim of a misdirected kiss or a hot iron burn. Alison, apparently, chooses Nicholas because she prefers him. She is not merely caught between two men who want to possess her. In other fabliaux, there is rarely a sense that women choose the man or men that they become involved with: women are either forced into sex, quickly manipulated through words, or driven to it by their irrepressible sex drive. Comparing "The Miller's Tale" to its analogues, Benson and Andersson note that the female character of one analogue "has no distinguishable characteristics aside from her stamina [while another] counterpart . . . is *indiscriminately* involved with her husband's apprentice and a priest" (4, emphasis mine).

Chaucer foregrounds Alison's choice and her initiative by adding Absolon to the standard fabliau love-triangle. Not only does she choose Nicholas over Absolon, but she also actively rejects Absolon's courtship at the window. Typically, in the Old French fabliaux, the motif of the misdirected kiss is performed by men to men.[58]

---

[58] "Berenger au Long Cul," of course, is one exception to this rule. This is one example of a pattern I introduced in my first chapter: this Old French story complicates the ideological principles that it seems to confirm. This complication is one of the many "d'ombres troubles" in the Old French fabliaux (Guiette, quoted in chapter 1). Although the Old French fabliaux traditionally have more linear narrative structures, there are many other ways in which they challenge and complicate ideological representations of gender and class.

Alison, however, takes the initiative in responding to Absolon's unwanted courtship. Thus, both Alison's decision to remain loyal to Nicholas, and her initiative in responding to Absolon, seem to suggest that she is somewhat independent and not utterly predictable. Alison's complexity is confirmed by the tale's ambiguous and unusual ending. In the tale's conclusion, Alison is not exposed nor condemned. In fact, she is the only character who is not chastised in some way.

The generic complexity of "The Miller's Tale" means that this tale, unlike fabliaux with more unidirectional narratives, does not confirm what initially seemed obvious about its characters. Rather, this tale undermines what we thought we knew about them. Faced with many choices and problems, the characters are unpredictable. Because its characters are not utterly known at the end, or given unmistakable social identities, this tale can not demonstrate the obvious truth of inherited theories of subjectivity or social hierarchy. Complex, surprising characters challenge the ideological assumption that individuals have an obvious identity and a natural social role that is always visible. Such characters can have only a conditional place within the social hierarchy and, as a result, do not confirm its fundamental legitimacy. For instance, because Alison is neither simple nor transparent, she does not merely function to prove the validity of traditional social or gender hierarchies; she is not merely a marker of class difference or a quintessential deceptive woman. By allowing Alison some complexity and reserving condemnation, the tale leaves room not only for a potential autonomous role for women (and the symbolic category of the feminine), but also for a more positive and autonomous representation of "churls."[59]

While many Old French fabliau narratives demonstrate that their characters are inevitably transgressive and contemptible, "The Miller's Tale" imagines that its

[59] The relationship between the subordination of women and "churls" is further

characters are much less predictable. By defying our expectations for Alison, Nicholas and Absolon, "The Miller's Tale" articulates a social model quite different than that expressed in many Old French fabliaux. Because these characters do not have simple and obvious identities, they do not fit seamlessly into the traditional social hierarchy. Understanding their social position requires a more flexible, explorative theory of identity and social difference. The tale suggests that developing such a theory is necessary to prevent social conflict. In the Miller's and his characters' social environment, social order can be threatened by a hierarchy built on diametrical opposition. This is not to say that the tale utterly rejects traditional social categories, or, for instance, claims for Alison an absolute autonomy. Clearly, she gains only a relative independence. Likewise, the Miller proves not his equality with the Knight, but his ability to participate in the production of social meaning. Ultimately, "The Miller's Tale" recognizes the power of the old definitions of class and gender, but asserts that those definitions should not be adhered to as if obvious and absolute.

"The Miller's Tale" does not unequivocally reproduce traditional class and gender distinctions largely because it does not reproduce fabliau's standard husband/wife/lover conflict. Had it followed this pattern, the tale would have set Nicholas (and the other clerks who close ranks at the end of the story) in conflict solely with John, a wealthy townsman, and this conflict would have implied a strain on Oxford's already troubled town/gown boundaries. By including Absolon, a character with ties to both communities, the story characterizes social conflict as less symmetrical, and less likely to spark violence between Oxford's factions. In fact, Absolon challenges the absoluteness of the story's conclusion in another way. In his conversation with Gerveys, Absolon promises to tell him what has happened the

---

explored in my chapter on "The Shipman's Tale."

next day. This story has a "tomorrow." Not only is the tale historically located, but also it imagines a different temporality. This story allows for the possibility that it is not completely over. Perhaps the clerks' version of events will be challenged in subsequent days as Absolon's story becomes known. Absolon is, as parish clerk, a well-known, visible citizen of Oxford (Bennett 44). It is certainly possible that the cause of Nicholas' burn could become public knowledge. The possibility is certainly intriguing, because it, again, suggests that the characters' social positioning is a process, not a destination. In this way, the tale introduces sequential time into the supposedly timeless world of the fabliaux. Whereas the Old French fabliaux are willing to explore the possible worth of individual desire within the strict limits set by their narrative structure, "The Miller's Tale" expands those limits. In this tale, it is possible that individual desire can influence events beyond the unspecified time and place of fabliau. The Miller's fabliau imagines that its characters can change through time, rather than assigns them one permanent identity. Unlike the characters of many Old French fabliaux, the Miller's characters are not always-already known to us. Rather, they are surprising, as the Miller himself proves to be. By the end of his tale, it is no longer obvious what it means to proceed "thriftily." Accordingly, the tale-telling process proceeds in an unpredictable and non-hierarchical manner.

The Reeve Returns to Traditional Generic and Social Categories

If the Miller disrupts the tale-telling process so that it proceeds in a non-hierarchical manner, how can the uncomplicated obscenity of "The Reeve's Tale" be explained? What is this tale if not a literary step downward? As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Charles Owen is one scholar who argues that "The Reeve's Tale," like "The Miller's Tale" before it, represents a literary degeneration. However, from the perspective of generic and social categories, "The Reeve's Tale" represents not so

much a deterioration as a return to the values espoused by the Knight. Further, the Reeve's textual strategy is to recuperate traditional fabliau plots and characters. Using genre to bolster traditional social categories, he tells a traditional, unidirectional fabliau in order to reassert the validity of those categories. Even though the Reeve attempts to reauthorize the Knight's vision of social order and return to the unanimity inspired by "The Knight's Tale," his tale is ultimately disruptive. Not only does the Reeve's confrontation with the Miller reveal that all "churls" are not alike, but he also associates the Knight's agenda with the "churlish" genre of fabliau.

The Reeve, a pilgrim with a particularly peripheral social position, is uncomfortable with the Miller's socially undermining message. Reeves had a liminal place in medieval society, representing the lord's interests but within the confines of the peasant community (of which he was also a member). The Reeve's social position disinclines him from the Miller's thesis of social destabilization and compels him to align himself with the dominant social theory, which he characterizes as securely authoritative. The Reeve attempts to neutralize the Miller's social challenge by apparently transforming it into a grudge match. He also tries to stabilize the genre previously destabilized by the Miller, by reestablishing that fabliau has a discernable origin. Not surprisingly, then, the Reeve's fabliau resembles its Old French analogue more closely than any other fabliau in *The Canterbury Tales*. "The Reeve's Tale" therefore confirms that fabliau is a genre with a history and an unmistakable set of characteristics, and suggests that social order is not determined by social performance but by inherited authority, generic and otherwise.

"The Reeve's Tale" uses techniques common in the French fabliaux to suggest that any challenge to the "natural" social order is obviously wrong and will unavoidably result in punishment. These techniques include limiting the conflict so that it involves only two groups (the clerks and Symkyn the miller). This

consolidated conflict suggests that social categories are transparent and well defined. Another of the Reeve's techniques is to simplify the narrative and make it unidirectional. This simplification implies that the churl's (Symkyn's) ambition is obviously wrong and that his downfall is inevitable. These techniques confirm Symkyn's identity—he is an arrogant churl—and condemn his pursuit of social advancement. Also, like the Old French fabliaux, this tale uses gender to confirm the legitimacy of rigid social hierarchies. The miller's daughter is reduced to her sexual function, which symbolically represents Symkyn's exaggerated social position. When she is "swyved," she is revealed to be common—an identity that Symkyn has (wrongly) refused (RvT 4266).

In "The Reeve's Tale," the miller, Symkyn, is guilty of the same sin as the chevalier in "Berenger au Long Cul": social ambition and pride. Also like "Berenger," this tale punishes this social sin and exposes the offender as a churl. Symkyn has married a wife "ycomen of noble kyn" and, even though "she was somdel smoterlich," he puts on social airs (3942, 3963). He is described as "deynous," and his wife is "ful of hoker and of bisemare" (3941, 3965). The tale thus establishes Symkyn's identity as an inappropriately haughty lower class man who is so confident in his preeminence that he attempts to deceive two clerks.

Symkyn's pride is also evident when he overestimates his ingenuity. He downplays the clerks' cunning, saying "Yet kan a millere make a clerkes berd, / For al his art" (4096-7). He claims that "The moore queynte crekes that they make, / The moore wol I stele whan I take" (4051-2). Of course, the Reeve assumes the standard fabliau hierarchy of craftiness, at the top of which are clerks—they are the most consistently successful deceivers in the Old French fabliaux. Symkyn foolishly assumes, contrary to this established hierarchy, that he can best the clerks. Once again, Symkyn is inappropriately arrogant. Ultimately, however, the social transgressor is punished and revealed to be merely a churl. The tale's conclusion

definitively punishes Symkyn's pride and reminds him of his proper social role. The conclusion represents Symkyn's downfall as unavoidable; because he wrongly assumes that he is socially superior, he ensures his own shameful undoing. The Reeve does not attempt to complicate this conflict. To do so would blur the social hierarchy the tale works so hard to establish. Rather, he defends traditional social distinctions according to which social flexibility and ambition are inappropriate and readily punished.

Like "The Miller's Tale," "The Reeve's Tale" uses gender to make its point about social hierarchies. However, whereas "The Miller's Tale" complicates the gender and class stereotypes so commonly found in the conservative French fabliaux, "The Reeve's Tale" reinforces these stereotypes. The Reeve's treatment of gender, like his treatment of class, serves to confirm the identity of its characters. For instance, like many women in Old French fabliaux, Symkyn's daughter is not granted any degree of independent thought. Unlike Alison in "The Miller's Tale," Symkyn's daughter immediately assents to Aleyn's advances. In fact, her decision is so insignificant that it is not even mentioned:

> This wenche lay uprighte and faste slepte,
> Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,
> That it had been to late for to crie,
> And shortly for to seyn, they were aton. (4194-97)

The Reeve seems to imply that the daughter might want to cry out, when he says that it is too late to do so, but it is not entirely clear that she does, in fact, want to. Her greeting to Aleyn in the morning, "deere lemman," downplays the possibility that the liaison was non-consensual (4240). Of course, in the Old French fabliaux, a woman who is raped might resist at first, only to ultimately enjoy her rapist's sexual

performance.[60] Either way, "The Reeve's Tale" downplays the significance of the daughter's opinions and implies that her sexual desire is a more essential component of her identity than are her thoughts. In fact, this story diminishes the daughter's agency even more than the Old French version of the tale, "Le Meunier et les Deux Clers." In this Old French story, the daughter is locked up in a chest at night. The clerk who approaches her gives her an andiron ring, claiming it is a golden ring that will preserve her virginity. She is convinced and lets him into the chest. This daughter, unlike the Reeve's character, is convinced and makes a decision. "The Reeve's Tale," by reducing the daughter's identity to her sexual willingness, demonstrates Symkyn's debased social position. He is not, as he believes, socially superior. Instead, his daughter's predictable lack of resistance proves what we already knew: his commonness. Symkyn sees the connection himself when he exclaims, "Who dorste be so boold to disparage / My doghter, that is come of swich lynage?" (4271-2). He assumes that the seduction reflects on his family's social position, that it signifies a social slight. However, because the tale has already undermined his social position, Symkyn's comment confirms not his family's special status, but the foolishness of his claim to that status.

It is clear that the Reeve, anxious to reconfirm the social hierarchies undermined by the Miller, returns to the traditional fabliau structure by developing an uncomplicated conflict that moves immediately to a resolution in which the characters are identified within class and gender ideology. Symkyn's identity as a churl is inevitably revealed by his foolish ambition and pride and his daughter's predictable wantonness. Despite Symkyn's confidence, the tale represents his downfall as unavoidable. He is not, as he assumes, deserving of respect and deference. He is also not cleverer than the clerks he cheats. Symkyn ensures his

[60] The lady in D'Aloul responds in just this way after she is raped by a priest.

embarrassment because he wrongly assumes his noble status. However, in case the tale's direct plot and character reduction do not absolutely reveal Symkyn's churlish wrong-headedness, the Reeve also communicates his condemnation of Symkyn by associating himself with the tale's victors, the clerks. The Reeve is from Norfolk, "Biside a toun men clepen Baldeswelle" (GP 620). The clerks, too, are northerners. They are from Strother, "Fer in the north" and speak with a northern accent (RvT 4015). By allying himself with the clerks, the Reeve further confirms the tale's endorsement of the clerks and its censure of Symkyn. In this way, the Reeve follows the textual strategy of the Knight, who suggests a similarity between himself and Theseus, the model of civilized governance. Just as the Knight adopts a narrative form that "repeatedly directs our attention to the extratemporal and ideal," Theseus expresses "faith in the ultimate wisdom of a divine plan directed by the well-intending Jupiter" (Strohm *Social Chaucer* 137-8). Although his tale does not emphasize the "extratemporal," the Reeve, like the Knight, uses his text to establish the permanence and stability of social hierarchies.

Despite the Reeve's desire to reassert social hierarchies, he cannot completely undo the Miller's destabilization of the social order. In fact, the Reeve's difference further undermines those hierarchies. The difference between the Miller and Reeve demonstrates that the category "churl" is not as coherent as it might have seemed. This category attempts to make equivalent an undeniably disparate group of people. The Reeve's argument with the Miller reveals "the disunity within the peasant class itself" (Patterson *Chaucer and the Subject* 274). The Miller and Reeve are both "churls" who, despite any similarities in their social positions, have very different perspectives on those positions. While the Miller argues for social flexibility, the Reeve fears the possibly destabilizing social consequences of this flexibility. In working for social stability, however, the Reeve allies himself with the noble Knight and unintentionally undermines the distinction between churls and nobles. As a result,

the Reeve unwittingly demonstrates, like his adversary the Miller, the unworkability of such rigid hierarchies. Ultimately, he cannot contain the consequences of the Miller's interruption and these consequences continue to be realized in subsequent fabliaux, including "The Shipman's Tale."

Chapter 3

The Merchant's Two Houses: The Problem of Merchant Wealth in "The Shipman's Tale"

Introduction

"The Miller's Tale" suggests that gender stereotypes have a role in maintaining class distinctions, but does not elucidate this relationship as fully as does "The Shipman's Tale." That class and gender hierarchies are related is not a critical commonplace. One scholar who doubts this connection is S. H. Rigby. In *English Society in the Later Middle Ages*, Rigby examines the possible relationship between different forms of "social closure," including class and gender. While he acknowledges that class and gender inequalities are "intermeshed and interacted in practice," he concludes that they must be "conceptualised separately" (262, 261). Because medieval patriarchy "may not be explicable in terms of its *functionality* for the feudal mode of production," gender and economic inequalities must be analyzed as "independent dimensions or axes of social inequality" (261, emphasis in original). In other words, because the economic inequality of feudalism does not produce gender inequality, these two social constructs must be analyzed separately.

"The Shipman's Tale" belies Rigby's conviction that the practical "interact[ion]" of class and gender does not justify foregrounding their mutual function. In this tale, Chaucer historicizes medieval gender stereotypes to reveal their function in reinforcing social status hierarchies. Specifically, the wife's characterization as a greedy and lustful woman manages a disturbing contradiction generated by her husband's, the merchant's, wealth. "The Shipman's Tale" seems to be about a moral dilemma that is condemned through gender stereotypes but is, in fact, about a challenge to social signification—a challenge that the naturalizing influence of gender ideology works to obscure. When the wife is characterized as a typical greedy, lustful woman, she seems to resemble a greedy merchant and

exemplify the depravity of commercialism. However, the tale suggests that the wife represents herself in accordance with gender ideology in order to manage a contradiction present in her household. Her household is represented in two contradictory ways: it is both "worthy" and "thrifty." By urging his wife to maintain a "thrifty" household, to conserve money in her management of domestic affairs, the merchant implies that his work is risky and not reliably profitable. This implication helps him avoid being thought of, as medieval merchants often were, as usurous or undeserving of his wealth. However, the merchant also requires a "worthy" household because his wealth is only socially visible as it is converted into the trappings of the feudal household. Many merchants displayed their wealth by modeling their households on those of the nobility and by adopting the nobles' habits. In doing so, wealthy merchants undermined the distinctiveness of the upper class. The problem of the tale, then, is merchant wealth, which disputes the assumed transparency of social status. Because it allows merchants to adopt forms of social display previously available only to the nobility, merchant wealth makes it impossible for a nobleman's appearance to naturalize his social status.

The loss of appearance as a reliable social signifier has serious implications for the medieval conception of identity. The identity presumed by the chivalric code is one that is publicly defined and publicly visible. Merchants that are indistinguishable from noblemen reveal that noble identity depends "upon a system of signification . . . that is always open to misuse" (Patterson *Chaucer and the Subject* 186). Unlike "The Miller's Tale," which disrupts the ideological function of the distinction between noble and churl by complicating the category of "churl," "The Shipman's Tale" disrupts this social hierarchy by focusing on a wealthy merchant—a man who fits comfortably into neither category. This tale, in the context of a wealthy merchant's home, demonstrates the deficiency of medieval social ideologies that represent identity, including noble identity, as public, unproblematic and singular. This tale

represents the merchant's reputation as multiply influenced and influencing; it is neither simple nor permanent. His identity is not determined simply by birth and genealogy, but by numerous influences. In effect, "The Shipman's Tale" represents public identity as overdetermined and, importantly, not just *public*. Elements of the merchant's "private" life—such as his domestic relationships—also seem to influence his reputation in unpredictable ways. Thus, his reputation is unpredictably influenced by the complexities of his social environment. This tale's intervention is to suggest that identity is contingent on material circumstances, including wealth. Identity is not absolute and pre-determined, but socially negotiated.

Gendered Representations of Social Status

"The Shipman's Tale" exposes gender's role in stabilizing medieval identity: gender identifications can suggest that identity is natural and obvious. In other words, a nobleman's status could be corroborated by his masculine qualities. In the Middle Ages, identity was traditionally defined as a singular, inherited status. A man's reputation and his honour were believed to be inherited from his family. The function of the chivalric code is not to measure an internal, private state of being. According to chivalric ideology, honour and reputation manifest qualities determined by inherited social position; they constitute a stable, inherited identity.

The qualities inherited by noblemen and manifested in their reputations came to be defined by the chivalric code. Although in later centuries, a man's "collective" honour was thought to be vulnerable to his misdeeds, medieval writers such as Ramon Lull and Christine de Pisan denied such vulnerability (Patterson *Chaucer and the Subject* 177). Patterson points out that the medieval chivalric system does not account for imperfect, damaged or partial chivalric honour; either a man is an honourable knight, or he is not: "there are not good and bad knights but only true and false ones, knights and non-knights" (177-8). The chivalric code described

knightly identity according to certain attributes including, among others, courage, gentle manners and strength. These qualities and behaviors helped the privileged classes to confirm their social difference: "Knightly society often wished to increase its social distance from the bourgeoisie and chose to measure and emphasize that distance by elaborations of the code of chivalry" (Kaeuper 192). The difference of a noble or gentle man was evident in his appearance, including his rich dress, his noble bearing, and his coats of arms, among other things. A nobleman's appearance functions to make visible his lineage.

The qualities of chivalric identity are not only identified with a status group, but they are also, implicitly, gendered. Hierarchies of gender were important ideological tools for the medieval privileged classes. As I will go on to discuss, masculine and noble qualities were often correlated; together, they defined the noble identity. Even in those texts that identify masculine qualities apart from noble ones, their function is parallel. Numerous medieval depictions of noble masculinity reveal the gendering of medieval social hierarchies, which worked to establish the transparency and innateness of noble identity.

Many medieval representations of noble identity suggest that true nobility rests on true masculinity. *Havelok the Dane* provides a good example of the conjunction of masculinity and nobility, their indisputability as social determinants, and their mutual perceptibility, their obviousness. Havelok's appearance and physical abilities characterize him as perfectly manly:

> Full sone it was full loude kid
> Of Havelok, hu he warp the ston
> Over the laddes everilkon;
> Hu he was fair, hu he was long,
> Hu he was wight, hu he was strong;
> Thorught England yede the speche,

Hu he was strong and ek meke;
In the castel, up in the halle,
The knightes speken therof alle,
So that Godrich it herde well:
They speken of Havelok, every del.
Hu he was strong man and hey,
Hu he was strong, and ek full sley. (1060-72)

Here, Havelok is described as tall, strong, and physically adept. The persistent reiteration of Havelok's manly qualities establishes that Havelok is not only manly, but obviously manly. These qualities can be related to his gender rather than his status, because at this time in the story Havelok has not been recognized as the king that he is. For those who see Havelok's triumph, his noble qualities do not indicate preeminent status, but exceptional masculinity. In this poem, the distinctness of masculine from noble traits is potentially problematic: Godrich, sworn to marry Goldeboru to the "beste, the fairest, the strangest ok," schemes to marry her to Havelok, presumed "cherles sone" (1081, 1092). Godrich justifies the treacherous plan by asking: "Where mighte I finden any so hey, / So Havelok is, or so sley?" (1083-4). The story hinges on the assumption that it is possible to perceive a man as extraordinarily manly, without recognizing him as noble.

However, Havelok's superior masculinity ultimately serves a specific ideological function: it corroborates and naturalizes his nobility. Havelok's exceptional masculinity indicates his noble birth. Gender helps to prove that nobles are inherently different and that their difference does not depend on material signifiers. In fact, Havelok is a divinely designated king. His birthmark and supernatural light confirm his nobility. Havelok's appearance is kingly: "Not only is Havelok's body marked by divine authority [through the birthmark and the light], but he is noticeably taller than the other men around him. Like the biblical King

Saul, he stands out in a crowd: he has a royal bearing that separates him from the ordinary" (Herzman). *Havelok* suggests that noble identity is transparent, singular and permanent. While Godrich's evil machinations can obscure Havelok's identifiability for a time, they cannot permanently prevent his royalty from being publicly recognized. This obviousness, established with the help of a gendered characterization, is a crucial part of the medieval theory of public identity.

Although the association between nobility and masculinity is a powerful ideological tool, it does not make an individual defined in these terms immune to crisis. In some medieval texts, nobility and masculinity are so closely linked that one will not persist in the absence of the other: a crisis in one will result in a similar crisis in the other. In *Vox Clamantis*, for example, Gower associates emasculation with the loss of a man's noble identity: "One of noble birth [may] lie prostrate under the effects of love and often recover, yet more often he does not know what the noble course of action should be" (200). He goes on to describe the dangers of loving a woman blindly. He explains that dedication to women can cause "wounds of the spirit. . . . If the knight holds with womanish behavior, his honor dies, bereft of his noble lineage" (201). In this passage, Gower is clearly attentive to the danger that a dishonoured knight could represent. Gower here indicates that "womanish" behavior can destroy a man's honour despite the fact that his honour comes from his lineage. This can be explained by the fact that honour could be thought of as on loan: "Honour, in the chivalric code, could not be contracted into, nor could the bond of lineage be broken. Honour belonged to the collectivity; it was a temporary possession for the individual, held in trust" (Fletcher 126-7). Even so, a dishonourable nobleman could confuse the supposedly certain correlation between honour and nobility. If only some nobles are honourable, it is more difficult to argue for a fundamental relationship between honour and nobility. A dishonourable knight could thus compromise the traditional definition of nobility as an absolute social

category by casting doubt on his family's honour or by gaining some kind of qualified noble status. In order to avoid admitting that nobility is vulnerable in this way, Gower suggests that when such a knight is dishonoured, he is "bereft" of his noble lineage.

Gower also represents the implicit gendering of chivalry in a passage in which he alludes to the biblical story of Jacob, Rachel and Leah:

> The man whom Mars' glorious feats of arms do not delight cannot be worthy of Rachel's embraces. The handsome woman who yields her love to such a man makes a mistake, and does not know what honorable love is. Rather, the infamous Leah is more suitable for such a husband as has little use for deeds of valor. Let such men go to Leah and attach her to themselves; let the timid fellow who cannot be Rachel['s] be Leah['s]. (207)

When Gower states that the unchivalrous knight deserves "the infamous" Leah, rather than "handsome" Rachel, he uses gender stereotypes to express his condemnation of the knight. Here, Leah seems to be more than an ugly woman; she is also "infamous," a woman of ill-repute, perhaps. Love between a chivalrous knight and a beautiful woman is of an entirely different kind than the love between an unchivalrous knight and an disreputable, ugly woman: "honorable love" is not the same as a mere "attach[ment]". In this passage, Gower confirms status boundaries using the stereotype of the ugly, immoral, sexually indiscriminate woman.

The unchivalrous knight's gender identification serves a similar function. This "timid fellow" is not enough of a man for Rachel. He is also not enough of a man in relation to other men: in the Bible story, Jacob, the "knight," is tricked by Laban into marrying Leah. Thus, by declaring that the unchivalrous knight deserves Leah, Gower suggests this knight is emasculated in relation to other men. He is weak and ineffectual and would not be willing to dedicate himself to the seven years of labour

necessary to win Rachel. An ineffectual knight is no knight at all; he is more like a churl, who resembles women more than noblemen.

Gender characterizations serve to represent not only the nobleman's natural superiority, but also the churls' natural inferiority. Nobles must rule not only because they are superlative, but also because churls are inherently incapable of self-rule. Whereas noblemen were consistently associated with masculine qualities in medieval texts, the lower classes were often associated with feminine qualities. Like women, churls were described as unreasoning and appetitive; they need a lord to govern them. For example, in his discussion of medieval theories of heresy, Peter Biller points out that the association of illiteracy with heresy was specifically linked to gender and class:

> [Particularly] significant [is] the widening of "literate : illiterate" in the mid-thirteenth century by the Anonymous of Passau. In his powerfully polarised features of "Church : Heresy" the theme was linked to numbers, rank, power and sex. "A multitude of believers [proves our faith], for every kind of man has our faith: philosophers, the literate [*or* educated], and Princes; but only a few have the faith of the heretics, and these are only the poor, workmen, women, and idiots [=the illiterate]." (5)[61]

Women and the lower classes were compared because they were presumed to share similar weaknesses. Many medieval thinkers held that because women were incapable of governing themselves, their minds should be controlled and instructed

[61] Because the concept of literacy had such powerful connotations in medieval society, it was an effective justification for the social superiority of literate people. Also, this hierarchy was self-perpetuating; because only the dominant members of the dominant classes had reliable access to education, it was difficult for lower social groups to escape illiteracy and the condemnation it elicited.

by intellectually capable men.[62] Some medieval authors argued that women are "irrational, appetitive, sensual, gullible, vain, and fickle, . . . [they are] embodiments of the 'lower' part of human nature [and require] the guidance of fatherly, husbandly, or priestly authority" (Jager 195).

Like women, the lower classes were commonly described as intellectually incapable and unable to properly interpret and understand. This characterization shows up, for instance, in the chronicle of Thomas Walsingham. Walsingham remarks on the rebels' violent attacks on documents and individuals closely associated with documents (in this case, lawyers), saying,

> The insurgents then began to reveal their designs and to execute all the lawyers in the land whom they could capture—not only apprentices but also old justices and all the kingdom's jurors, without respect for piety. (133)

Walsingham suggests that the rebels are the enemies of documentary authority and all it accomplishes; he, like other chroniclers of the Revolt, "claims that the rebels burned documents in order to wipe out the rule of custom and law in England altogether" (Justice 44). He also implies that the rebels have poor interpretive, or reading skills. He suggests that the rebels used no discretion when killing the lawyers; they failed to distinguish between degrees of piety. For Robert Sturges, Walsingham is typical of the medieval tendency to characterize class rebellion in terms of gender ideology:

> Any discussion of the rebellion of the lower orders of a hierarchy against the higher is inevitably, if unconsciously, a gendered act,

---

[62] In addition to being controlled mentally, through reading practices, women may also be controlled physically, through beatings. A theological dictionary compiled in the fourteenth century argues that "a man may chastise his wife and beat her for her correction; for she is of his household, and therefore the lord may chastise his own" ("Train up a Wife in the Way She Should Go").

> especially when the rebellion is, like the Peasants' Revolt in Walsingham's account, imagined as a revolt of the lower body against the head. Caroline Walker Bynum succinctly makes the essential point that women commonly "symbolized the physical, lustful, material, appetitive part of human nature, whereas man symbolized the spiritual or mental." But anatomical men, too, or those culturally constructed as male, can discursively play this feminine role; to quote one further feminist medievalist perspective, the critical task is to promote "an understanding not simply of sexual difference—'man' versus 'woman'—but rather of the various ways in which sexed identities take shape, in all their complexities and contradictions, according to historically specific configurations of power and power relations." The male peasant rebels . . . can thus occupy the "feminine" position, and I would argue that . . . they often do. (11-12)[63]

Such feminizations justified the nobility's rigorous control of the lower classes.

Discursively cast in a feminine role, the rebels were not only described as intellectually lacking, but also as vulnerable when without responsible leadership. In one part of his chronicle, Henry Knighton suggests that poor leadership is, in fact, responsible for the revolt. In Knighton's chronicle, the story of the revolt is preceded by the story of John Legg and three colleagues who requested from the king a commission to investigate tax collectors:

> And the king, alas, accepted that pernicious proposal. When one of them came to a village to inquire into the tax, he would assemble the

[63] While Sturges foregrounds the Pardoner in his book, this thesis has described other of Chaucer's characters in similar terms. For instance, I have implied a similar correlation between gender and class hierarchies in my chapter on "The Miller's Prologue" and "Tale." My chapter on "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" will also establish this correlation.

> men and women before him, and horrible to relate, would shamelessly raise the young girls' skirts, to discover whether they were corrupted by intercourse with men, and thus he would compel their friends and parents to pay the tax for them, for many would rather choose to pay than to see their daughters shamefully mistreated. Those and other such actions greatly provoked the people. (209)

Rather than providing just and responsible leadership, the king's commission perpetuates wrongs on the people. The commons, characterized by feminine vulnerability, are violated by the commissioners. Either the women are shamed, or their families are robbed. The commons are like a woman who is mistreated and shamed, rather than protected by the masculine royal bureaucracy. The money collected by the commissioners is equated with public disgrace. Rather than respecting the weakness of the feminized commons, the king's commission shames them.

John Gower takes this characterization of the commons' dependence one step further, representing the rebels, "unreasoning brutes," as various kinds of animals. Gower first describes them as asses, or "wild beasts" who were "violently wild and untamed"; "their asinine behavior . . . labeled them as stupid and wild, for they had no power of reason" (54-5). When he characterizes the rebels as pigs, he says that they are driven by their appetites: "The gluttony of the pigs grew so that a rich man in the city could hardly procure his modest and proper foods" (58). One quality that is consistently associated with the rebels is unthinking violence. Accordingly, Gower's peasants require the guidance of their betters: "Just as lopsided ships begin to sink without the right load, so does the wild peasantry, unless it is held in check" (209). These are the traits that are elsewhere ascribed to women. By calling into question the churls' capacity for rational or independent thought, Gower questions their masculinity. Thus, Gower's descriptions assume the gendering of medieval

social hierarchies: in many medieval texts, nobles are to churls as men are to women. They also reveal the implicit association between masculinity and unproblematic meaning. Noblemen are not, like women and churls, governed by bodily desires or plagued by interpretive troubles. The association of status and gender helps to fully locate an individual in the social hierarchy because representations of gender characterize an individual's social status as a foundational part of his or her identity. Gender fixes the link between the self and the social hierarchy, and characterizes that hierarchy as natural. In effect, gender helps make identity public.

Chaucer on Gender and Public Identity

Chaucer introduces the traditional conception of noble masculinity several times in *The Canterbury Tales* and explores the ways in which the notions of a public identity and a permanent social hierarchy are inadequate in the late medieval social context. For instance, despite the Knight's desire to represent noble masculinity as stable and recognizable, "The Knight's Tale" introduces the possibility that nobility is an identity that is not only inherited, but also achieved. Similarly, although "The Merchant's Tale" attempts to maintain the distinction between ruling and non-ruling classes, it suggests that social authority is contingent and not determined by birth. Finally, as the subsequent section will address, "The Shipman's Tale" continues this destabilization by registering the profound impact of merchant wealth on noble identity. Ultimately, this tale theorizes identity and social positioning in a new way.

The Knight's representation of noble masculinity is largely conventional; in "The Knight's Tale," nobility and masculinity are correlative and inevitably visible. These attributes are evident when Arcite poses as Philostrate the page. Despite the fact that he is altered by lovesickness, Arcite is a physically impressive man: ". . . he was yong and myghty for the nones, / And therto he was long and big of bones" (KnT

1423-4). However, like Havelok, Arcite's nobility is apparent in other ways: he is clearly "gentil of condicioun" (1431). His gentility is so obvious, in fact,

> That thurghout al the court was his renoun.
> They seyden that it were a charitee
> That Theseus wolde enhauncen his degree,
> And putten hym in worshipful servyse,
> Ther as he myghte his vertu exercicse.
> And thus withinne a while his name is spronge,
> Bothe of his dedes and his goode tonge,
> That Theseus hath taken hym so neer
> That of his chambre he made hym a squier,
> And gaf hym gold to mayntene his degree. (1432-41)

Like Havelok's nobility, Arcite's nobility is perceptible, even when disguised. It is inevitable that his stable, inherited identity will be recognized publicly. However, Arcite is not Havelok and the concept of noble masculinity in "The Knight's Tale" is not as rigid as that in *Havelok the Dane*. The Philostrate episode in "The Knight's Tale" has potentially dangerous implications for medieval social hierarchies: it admits the desirability of social mobility when noble—i.e. masculine—characteristics are apparent. It also admits that such qualities are potentially present in a non-noble man. Unlike Havelok who is advanced through his marriage to Goldeboru as part of Godrich's evil plan, Arcite is advanced when nobles request his advancement. His advancement is characterized as popular and positive, whereas Havelok's advancement is ostensibly criminal—so much so that Goldeboru "wolde been ded by hire wille" (*Havelok* 1130). Unlike the episode in Havelok, Arcite's advancement is "truly disruptive" (Hansen 212). His "social mobility" is particularly subversive in the context of the Canterbury pilgrimage. The other Canterbury pilgrims might not

assume with the Knight that Arcite's exemplary qualities are present only in a nobleman.

Chaucer's Merchant also tells a tale that simultaneously confirms and undermines the possibility of a stable, noble identity. While he confirms the social distinction between ruling and non-ruling classes (and allies himself with the former group), he also questions whether January's noble birth automatically qualifies him as a social authority. January, too confident in his authority and the power of his will, underestimates the complexities of his inter-class marriage. He prefers a wife and an advisor not because of their wisdom, but because they demonstrate the power of his authority. The Merchant sarcastically[64] articulates the arguments in favor of wifely advice[65] (arguments that January may well make); he says that a man should "Do always so as women will thee rede" (MerT 1361). However, even when this argument is introduced in such an acerbic tone, January's position that only young women are suitable wives is disturbing because it is one example of his inclination to solicit only self-serving advice (1416). His conviction in the strength of his authority is so absolute that he cannot imagine a young wife who does not serve her husband—and he cannot imagine that a good wife should do anything but echo her husband's opinions. The operative word here, of course, is "young." He decides to choose a young wife because, he says, "a young thing men may guy, / Right as men may warm wax with handes ply" (1429-30). According to January, not only is an older woman "but bene-straw and greet forage" (1422), but also she is "half a clerk" (1428). In other words, January claims he will follow the advice of a woman he has taught to reflect his opinions.[66] January's naïve perspective on wives strongly resembles his

[64] I read the Merchant's opening discussion of the "glorious thyng" that is marriage as a highly cynical summary of January's naïve attitude (1268).
[65] On the medieval tradition of "wifely eloquence" (222) see Wallace, chapter 8. On advice literature in the context of late fourteenth-century political life, see Ferster.
[66] Elaine Tuttle Hansen has discussed May as "made in the image of both January

perspective on advisors. The more successful of his advisors, Placebo, resembles January's perfect wife. Placebo, like a malleable wife, attempts only to agree with his lord's will, not to guide his lord to make wise decisions. He is the perfect "warm wax" that is molded by January's desires. January is only interested in listening to himself—he does not recognize that gaining informed advice from appropriate advisors is part of his duty to his estate.

January is so intent on serving his own desires, so convinced by the power of his will, that he fails to consider the maintenance of his household's status. Despite his concern lest his "heritage sholde falle / In straunge hand" (1439-40), he risks undermining that heritage by marrying a woman "of smal degree" (1625). He marries her not because he needs her dowry, as would a character in the Old French fabliaux. Rather, he marries because of her beauty, youthful malleability, and most importantly, for the satisfaction of exercising "his owene auctoritee" (1597). Like his decision to ignore Justinus, January's decision to marry May, the kind of wife seemingly least capable of providing informed advice, seems irresponsible. It is the decision of a capricious lord, not a "worthy knyght" (1246). Despite his noble birth, January is an unsuitable lord because of his automatic assumption of authority—his "egocentrism," to use Anne Laskaya's word (94). He is so convinced that his authority is absolute that he does not give the business of governance the serious consideration it deserves. January, despite his confidence, is largely characterized as an ineffectual lord. This ineptness of January's governance is corroborated by his gender characterization.

As Elaine Tuttle Hansen has pointed out, "The Merchant's Tale" has a consistent "thematic interest in the feminization of men" (254). Of the men in the tale, January is the one who is most obviously feminized. January, an old man, is

---

and her maker" to different ends in Chapter 9 of *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*

laughable as a newlywed. Old and weak, January must ply himself with aphrodisiacs before his wedding-night encounter with May. Further, the Merchant indicates the pathetic nature of January's sexual advances by foregrounding his physical repulsiveness and ineptness. He mentions the "thikke brustles of his berd unsofte" (1824) that January "rubbeth" about May's "tendre face" (1827) during the "labour" of lovemaking (1842). Most revealing of January's deficient masculinity is, of course, May's opinion of it. At first the Merchant shrouds May's perspective in suggestive mystery: "But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte, / Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte, / In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene" (1851-53). Finally, however, he indicates that "She preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene" (1854). In her study of the tale from the perspective of medieval medical theories, Carol Everest suggests that May's attitude confirms January's lack of manliness:

> He may attempt to restore his humoral balance through stimulating potions, and he may deceive himself that he is as sexually competent as a younger man, but the proof of his failures lies in May's dissatisfaction and in the suggestion that a younger, more virile man must produce his heir. (92)

Implicit in Everest's argument is an association between January's lack of virility and his disturbing self-deception. As he gets older, January loses not only masculine potency, but also the discerning, balanced perspective of good lordship.[67]

---

(249).

[67] Many scholars have argued that the inadequacy of January's perspective is emphasized by the tale's use of reflection imagery. January, of course, found May when he took a

> . . .mirour, polisshed bryght,
> And sette it in a commune market-place,
> Thanne sholde he se ful many a figure pace
> By his mirour; and in the same wyse
> Gan Januarie inwith his thoght devyse
> Of maydens whiche that dwelten hym bisyde. (1582-7)

As Laskaya says, "Even though January believes he will find some kind of 'truth' in

The Merchant is critical of January and yet he does not suggest a new standard for social governance. In fact, as will be discussed shortly, he demonstrates his own knowledge of courtly discourses. The Merchant's qualified critique reveals his tale's strategy: "The Merchant's Tale" recuperates the noble standard January fails to consider and protect and represents the Merchant as its new defender. Whereas January, the emasculated knight, represents an overconfident, arrogant, and ineffectual approach to governance, the Merchant represents a more modest and careful approach. The Merchant, like the Shipman's merchant, represents himself as troubled and wary rather than self-assured: "We wedded men lyven in sorwe and care. / Assaye whoso wole, and he shal fynde / That I seye sooth, by Seint Thomas of Ynde" (MerPro 1228-30). Further, in his criticism of January, who dismisses Theofrastus (MerT 1295-1310) and concurs with Placebo's dismissal of Solomon (1485-90), the Merchant implies his respect for such authorities.[68] January is confident only in his own authority, holding that his "owene conseil is the beste" (1490). Regardless of conventional warnings, he is utterly convinced that his married life "is a paradys" (1265). Because the tale characterizes January as an arrogant knight who foolishly maintains an unconventional and over-simplified opinion of marriage, it allies the reader with the knowing, more skeptical merchant who does not dismiss

---

marriage, the Merchant-narrator interprets January's desire for a wife as if it were only a desire for artificial appearances, for shadows, for reflected images" (93). The Merchant consistently characterizes January as a man who projects his own desires on the world rather than one who strives to honestly understand that world. As Hansen points out, January, looking in the mirror sees "a reflection, an image, not the thing itself; as much scholarly discussion of this passage already suggests, it reminds us of the acknowledged vanity and imperfection of human sight. Moreover, if January is looking as if in a mirror, he is likely at some point to see a part of himself" (250). See also Robert B. Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction*, Leigh A. Arrathoon, "'For Craft is al, whoso that do it kan': The Genre of the *Merchant's Tale*," and D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*.

[68] Patterson argues that the Merchant encourages the reader "to 'deffie Theofraste and herke me' (1310) [which] is a perilous course" (336). Nonetheless, he concludes that "however much he mocks his authorities, the Merchant also accords them respect" (336).

prevailing perspectives on common marital troubles in favor of his own authority. In so doing, the tale disputes the assumption that January, by virtue of his birth, is the authority responsible for defending social values. Instead, the Merchant is validated as a less arrogant, more prudent version of that authority.[69]

Even though the Merchant suggests that an authoritative identity is not fundamentally determined by birth, he does not dismiss the possibility of a meaningful difference between the ruling and non-ruling classes. In fact, he aligns himself with the ruling classes in the tale. This is evident not only in the Merchant's criticism of January and his contrary self-representation, but also in his established knowledge of aristocratic and courtly discourses. "The Merchant's Tale" is, as Patterson says, "governed by courtly norms of value" (335). Throughout the tale, the Merchant demonstrates his familiarity with courtly values and culture through both his writing style and his description of January's noble household.[70] He does so in order to construct his own identity as authoritative and insert it on the side of the ruling hegemony while simultaneously undermining one of the nobility's central assumptions: the absolute significance of noble birth.

Status and Gender in "The Shipman's Tale"

The contingency of status categories is an issue in "The Shipman's Tale," as it is in "The Knight's Tale" and "The Merchant's Tale." However, unlike these other tales, "The Shipman's Tale" focuses on non-nobles who have experienced social mobility

[69] Lindahl argues that the Merchant suggests his criticism of (and superiority to) January through the character of the wise advisor, Justinus (152).

[70] Patterson discusses some of the ways in which the tale iterates these courtly norms: "The protagonist of the *Tale* is, after all, not a merchant but 'a worthy knight,' and the Merchant never allows us to forget that the action takes place within a courtly context and that much of the behavior it represents—both marital and extramarital—is governed by courtly norms of value" (335). Patterson goes on to describe the courtly elements of the tale, including both the Merchant's reference to courtly practices, and his use of elements of courtly writing such as classical allusion,

and challenged the transparency of noble masculinity. In this tale, gender ideology, which informs the wife's representation of herself and her husband, functions to corroborate class ideology. The merchant's wife can be read as a typically vain and weak woman whose gendered characteristics are associated with the perceived qualities of her social group: the wealthy merchants. The wife is associated with, and blamed for the sake of, commercialism: the spirit or frame of mind characteristic of merchants. The negative influence of commercialism first seems the obvious target of the poem when the wife performs a morally reprehensible commercial exchange. She provides the link between commercial exchange and moral depravity when she puts a price on her chastity. The wife's adultery could indicate that a natural gender difference confirms the threat of commercialism. The wife's desire for clothes could indicate her detestable greed. Read in this way, the wife resembles a corrupt and dangerous merchant. Such a reading would conclude that the feminine is condemned in this tale and that commercialism is condemned by its association with the feminine.

Albert Silverman makes just such an argument. In his influential paper, "Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," he designates the problem of the tale as "the commercialization of the marriage relationship" (330). Silverman discusses commercialism in the context of the wife's claim that her husband lacks "manliness" (332). He quickly repudiates the wife's claim, saying that "*of course* we cannot take the wife's testimony about her husband's parsimony and lack of manliness as factual" (332, emphasis mine). He blames the wife's debt on her "extravagance in buying clothes, rather than the merchant's close-fistedness" (332). Silverman argues that the wife's claims are important, however, as an example of how she "like the Wife of Bath, . . . treats material welfare and happy sexual relations as going hand in hand"

---

the "'heigh style' of epic apostrophe," and Boethian metaphysics (335).

(332). In effect, Silverman condemns commercialism by associating the wife's commercial attitude towards marriage with her typically feminine lust and greed.

Many other scholars have followed Silverman's lead and agreed that "The Shipman's Tale" condemns commercialism. Mary Flowers Braswell summarizes some of the scholarship that reads the tale as a denunciation of commercialism:

> As various scholars have noted, the Shipman's fabliau is the most "commercial" of Chaucer's tales. The complexities of the business world and the power of money to distort relationships are themes central to understanding it. One critic has called the tale "Chaucer's most highly developed attempt at defining the nature of the bourgeois mercantile ethos" and notes that the whole world of the merchant is brought under critical scrutiny: "his professional, social, personal, and financial obligations." Another maintains that in their "mercantile/sexual" bargain, both wife and monk become "merchants" too. Furthermore, in an action which dehumanizes the wife—her offer of "pleasance and service" for money—she becomes merely the "interest" on her own loan![71] (296)

Critics in the tradition Braswell describes make the connection between mercantile activity, which "distort[s]" relationships and "dehumanizes" people, and the wife's infidelity—the worst example of what commercialism can do.[72]

---

[71] The critics Braswell mentions are, respectively, Scattergood, Stock, and Schneider.

[72] Hines follows very much in this tradition:

> . . .there can be little question that the interaction of the monk and the wife forms a dramatic exemplification of unworthiness in human behaviour. In more symbolic terms, a damning inditement of medieval culture might be found in the situation and behavior of the wife. Here is a character economically dependent on the opposite sex, and who has instant and sole recourse to her vagina as her bargaining counter in negotiations with these two men. But we cannot trust this wife's claim that she is starved of cash by her husband. We must also attribute some significance to the fact that the wife takes the lead in talking

Other critics have made the connection between the wife's infidelity and reprehensible trade more subtly. Paul Strohm, for instance, in *Social Chaucer*, comes to the familiar conclusion that the tale "serves to reveal the shabbiness of these new forms of arrangement," namely, "the extension of a mercantile ethos to all spheres of activity" (102, 100). Although Strohm does not explicitly blame the wife, he does characterize the friendship of Daun John and the merchant as the one relationship that has the "potential for escaping" an economic motivation. Once the wife approaches the monk for money, the "sworn brotherhood" is "eligible for quick renegotiation" (100). Once again, the wife is held responsible for throwing the household into crisis.

I find it interesting that there is relatively little critical condemnation of the merchant, who has presumably introduced the commercial ethos into his household.[73] Lee Patterson, for instance, concludes that the merchant is "oddly invulnerable" to the corrupting effect of commercialism, which is most apparent in the despicable conduct of the wife and monk (357): "while the merchant husband may be the locus of mercantile values in the *Tale*, he displays throughout a personal probity and moral integrity . . . that is wholly admirable" (356). Michael McClintock also characterizes the merchant as the victim of his wife: "The last play of the story, the wife's trick, puts the wife in a league with the monk as one who makes of every relationship a game, leaving the merchant alone victim of the *bon tour*, the only

---

smut and negotiating with the monk. (82).

Hines goes on to establish that in "substance and spirit there is much in [the wife's] portrayal that coincides with the stereotype of women found in medieval antifeminist literature" (85).

[73] Three exceptions are Janette Richardson (*Blameth Nat Me*), R. H. Winnick and Thomas Hahn. Winnick places blame for the great moral failures in the poem on the merchant, who is "grossly defective; in his avaricious and vainglorious quest for worldly gain, he is as blind to the dangers of such behavior as he is to his wife's adultery and the monk's betrayal" (178). Thomas Hahn studies the Merchant's profession and the tale's correlation of money and sex, to conclude that the Merchant is engaged in "screwing society and from this deriving a deep sexual

character in the Tale who does not play a game with any other character. He plays only a financial game; he manipulates money, not other people" (135). McClintock does, however, acknowledge the moral ambiguity of the merchant's dedication to his financial maneuvers. Hines' conclusion is less complicated. He argues that the merchant, "so unsatisfactory as a target figure, can be seen as a fabliau champion: a man consummately successful in business and in bed, enjoying the good life and able to 'cozen' a profit out of his usurious dealings. He could be the ultimate fabliau trickster, able to convert the target figure into the victor with his triumphant indifference to the facts of his wife's dealings with the monk" (90-1).[74]

The negative correlation between commercialism and adultery is readily explained when placed in the context of medieval critiques on the monetized market and commercial activity. As will be discussed in the chapter on "The Summoner's Tale," there are many medieval texts that characterize money as disgusting and vile:

> Concern often took the form of revulsion. Poems, drawing and ecclesiastical polemics alike made the point that money was filthy and disgusting waste, that while it might glitter deceptively, it was an agent of rot and decay. (Rosenwein and Little 25)

Medieval scholastic writers repeatedly voiced their concern that the possibility of earning profit encouraged merchants to be guilty of usury or avarice. Merchant wealth thus had disturbing moral implications; "The profit made by a merchant had long been considered unjust because he did not seem to do anything other than buy goods at one price to sell at a higher. . . . [A] merchant, however honest, whose

---

excitement" ("Money, Sexuality, Wordplay" 243).

[74] Other critics who defend the merchant, according to Patterson, are Scattergood, McGaillard and Nicholson. It must be noted, however, that while Scattergood recognizes the merchant's good qualities, he also recognizes his faults: "this merchant is not entirely free from the obsessiveness with gain which moralists said was characteristic of his class" (222). More importantly, Scattergood questions the merchant's outlook which, he argues, "lacks an imaginative dimension" (226).

purpose was to accumulate riches . . . [was] guilty of avarice" (Little 178-9). Because commerce was believed to encourage sinful behavior, medieval authors often associated it with despicable characters. For instance, a character in *Piers Plowman*, who "marchaunden with moneie and maken . . . eschaunges" is described as filthy with sin: "that glotoun with grete othes his garnement hadde soiled / And foule beflobered it, as with fals speche" (Langland XIII, 394, 400-1).

Some studies of "The Shipman's Tale" are influenced by this critique of commercialism. Patterson alludes to the history of medieval anticommercialism and acknowledges its relevance for "The Shipman's Tale," which "dramatize[s]" this anxiety (*Chaucer and the Subject* 355). This tradition also seems to inform Janette Richardson's argument in *Blameth Nat Me*:

> Because of their interweaving associations, sex, diet, animalism, and trade become as one: they are equated on a single horizontal plane. Thus, Chaucer embodies within the tale a value judgment on the mercantile philosophy which is overtly extolled. If trade, like sex and diet, is merely animal in nature, then it is not a preoccupation worthy of man's proper state, for man stands higher on the scale of being than the animal partly because of his spiritual potentialities, his ability to apprehend the eternal which does not pass "soone as floures faire". (114)

The disgust that medieval authors display when they discuss money is echoed by many contemporary critics when they discuss adultery in "The Shipman's Tale." Many analyses of this tale share this tone of disgust when they condemn the wife for her immoral commercialism.

Medieval texts that emphasize the moral dangers of commerce provide evidence for the contemporary analyses of "The Shipman's Tale" that condemn the merchant's wife. However, it is easy to overemphasize the hegemony of the anti-

mercantile perspective in medieval texts. In fact, commerce was often acknowledged to have obvious social benefits: "The church had long mistrusted those who spent their lives engaged in trade, yet the increasing centrality of this activity to medieval economic life forced ecclesiastical writers to address the possibility of being both a good merchant and a good Christian" (Robertson 214). The late medieval attitude toward money was thus ambivalent. Money is "repulsive at the same time as it is attractive" (Little 34). This ambivalence informs the representation of commercialism in "The Shipman's Tale"; the tale is not exclusively anti-commercial. Analyses that quickly conclude that "The Shipman's Tale" follows in the anti-mercantile tradition often do so because they are too eager to offload responsibility onto the wife. Accordingly, the wife is blamed (mostly because of her negative, "typically feminine" qualities, lust and vanity) for connecting two realms, the domestic and commercial, which, it is argued, should remain separate. The assumption is that whereas the mercantile world requires the mobility of commodities, the domestic world does not tolerate such mobility. This, certainly, is the merchant's assumption, and a common fabliau theme.[75] Critics who hold this position often reproduce medieval gender ideology. They read the wife as a stereotypical morally weak woman and assume that she facilitates the destructive effects of commercialism.[76] In so doing, they fail to acknowledge the ways in which "The Shipman's Tale" resists this easy interpretation and adopts a more complicated perspective on the relationship between commercialism (social status) and gender. For "The Shipman's Tale" asserts not the ideology of domestic stability, but the

[75] I think the merchant's confidence resembles January's overconfidence in "The Merchant's Tale." Both men too readily assume that they can control their environment.

[76] Justice makes a similar point about critics who too readily agree with the chroniclers' ideological argument that the rebels of 1381 indiscriminately destroyed documents (43-4).

inadequacy of this ideology to explain the relation of the domestic realm to the larger social context.

Although the tale introduces the possibility that the wife represents the moral depravity of commercialism, it also resists this conclusion. It does so by contextualizing the wife's complaints to the monk and thus pointing to her incompatible obligations. She is expected to maintain a household that is simultaneously "thrifty" and "worthy."[77] The wife manages this contradiction by framing it in the terms provided by traditional medieval gender ideology—she uses a conventionally gendered complaint when appealing to the monk for money. As I will discuss below, she deliberately misrepresents her husband and herself according to gender ideology in order to explain her debt, which makes no sense in the context of her "worthy" household. By contextualizing the wife's behavior, Chaucer challenges the traditional use of gender ideology to confirm social hierarchies. The tale reveals that the wife's behavior comes out of specific historical circumstances—in particular, the conflicting ways in which medieval ideology managed merchant wealth; it is not entirely determined by her gender. She is not just "naturally" inclined to immoral behavior. Rather, she represents herself and her husband in accordance with gender norms for the sake of social intelligibility. Although the wife does not deliberately subvert gender ideology, her actions in context reveal that gender is discursive and performative and not part of an unchanging identity.

In her complaint to the monk, the wife represents herself and her husband in conventional terms: she needs money because all women like to have nice clothes and because her husband, who does not satisfy her sexually, also does not provide for her financially. The wife is often disparaged by critics because her "accusations are

---

[77] V. J. Scattergood also recognizes a contradiction in the tale. For him, the tale contrasts characterizations of the merchant as "a representative of his class (the thrifty and practical attitudes to wealth . . .have rightly been characterized as

not borne out" in the tale (Braswell 299). This contradiction is not necessarily evidence of the wife's depravity. The wife's misrepresentation does not come out of her confusion of material and sexual welfare, or her despicable equating of money and sex. The wife approaches the monk and describes her husband as the worst of men in order to manage a contradiction that he does not acknowledge. The husband's refusal to give his wife money reflects on him as much as it reflects on her. His refusal is part of a larger domestic strategy: in general, he is concerned with domestic prudence. He entreats his wife to run a "thrifty" household: "honestly governe wel oure hous. / Thou hast ynough, in every maner wise, / That to a thrifty household may suffise. / Thee lakketh noon array ne no vitaille" (ShT 244-47). Clearly, the merchant expects his wife to be as careful and cautious as he is. We are told that the merchant does his business soberly. He believes that such conduct is necessary in a business that is so unpredictable. Further, he assumes that the uncertainty of his profession should determine not only his behavior, but also his wife's domestic management.

However reasonable and even admirable the merchant's interest in frugality seems, it is problematic in the context of this tale for two reasons. Firstly, the merchant is not fully allowing for the appropriate division of responsibility in marriage. The wife, not the merchant, is primarily responsible for prudence in the household. In her paper on the tale of Melibee, Carolyn P. Collette identifies a medieval literary tradition in which noble women are instructed in prudence, in "how to govern themselves, their households, and their husbands" (419). For instance, the Menagier de Paris calls his wife the "sovereign mistress of [her] house" (trans by Power 45). Secondly, the merchant's frugality is problematic because his wife has a role in the household that is unlike her role as the "thrifty" housekeeper. We are told

---

'merchant talk')" and as "a spender of wealth, a 'waster'" (212).

that he had "alday so greet repair / For his largesse, and for his wyf was fair" (21-2). These things make the merchant's house a "worthy hous" (20). The wife's obligation to run a worthy household casts doubt on the conclusion that she is merely greedy. It also adds weight to her self-representation as a conscientious, affectionate wife. Theresa Coletti argues that the wife's expenses are not excessive: "Despite the tale's initial suggestion that a beautiful wife costs too much, the husband proves willing to pay the price for such appearances" (244). The Menagier de Paris seems to agree that a wife's appearance is valuable. He emphasizes the importance of proper dress. Although he condemns "new devices" and "frippery," he also directs his wife to "have great care and regard for what you and I are able and can afford to do, according to the estate of your kinsfolk and mine, with whom you will have to resort and repair daily" (Power 50). He is critical of those who dress poorly and claim to "have no care of themselves" (51). He argues that such women lie and "know not how to maintain the honourable estate either of themselves alone, or even of their husbands and their lineage" (51).

It seems that this "worthy" household is very different from the "thrifty" household. The wife is faced with two incompatible obligations. The incompatibility of the wife's two duties suggests that the merchant's domestic instability stems not from the negative influence, the innate immorality, of the commercial ethos. Rather, it occurs because there are two conflicting ideologies at work. The first ideology justifies the merchant's profession by characterizing it as perilous. Accordingly, the merchant represents himself as vulnerable and careful and his household as modest and thrifty.[78] The other configuration governs the social visibility of wealth. The

[78] Interestingly, in an unambiguously noble context, wifely thrift is not necessarily desirable. As discussed above, "The Merchant's Tale" implies that January is foolish to dismiss Theophrastus, who tells men, "Take no wife . . .for husbandry, / As for to spare in household thy dispence; / A true servant doth more diligence / Thy good to keep, than doth thine owen wife" (1296-99). January is quite convinced that a wife

merchant's wealth is only socially visible as it is converted into the trappings of the feudal household. In other words, the merchant's wealth is not marked as such—as *merchant* wealth—when socially displayed.

It seems, then, that the wife's immoral commercialism is not the problem of this tale. Her gendered representations of herself and the merchant are citations of gender ideology that are necessary to manage the two competing ways of understanding "worth." Different definitions of "worth" appear elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales*. Patricia Eberle explains the complex signification of "worth" in Chaucer's "General Prologue": "The mixture of courtly and commercial language in the *General Prologue* evokes in the mind of an audience a mixed world ... where both a knight and a merchant can be called 'worthy,' a term of praise traditional for the nobility, but, at the same time, a term with its ultimate roots in the world of finance" (166). "Thrifty" is also a word with two incompatible implications. Of course, "thrifty" has a financial definition; it can mean frugality or economy. However, this word has other meanings elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales*. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, the Host uses this word to describe a desired narrative strategy in "The Miller's Prologue." He tries to hold off the Miller by telling him that they should "werken thriftily" (MilTPro 3131). In this context, "thrifty" represents a kind of propriety. Thus, "thrifty," like "worthy," can indicate value that is determined by an inherited standard. By juxtaposing these two words in "The Shipman's Tale," Chaucer reveals the constructedness of both standards.

Although the merchant strives for an absolute standard through his "thriftiness" that resembles the naturalized standard of chivalric honour, the tale's juxtaposition reveals that both standards actually work in a much more performative way. The tale demystifies the means of their production and their ideological

---

will "[keep] his good and [waste] never a deal" (1343). Also see IV, 1380-2.

function. The crisis of this tale, then, is not a moral crisis, but a crisis of signification. By visibly straddling two ideologies, a straddling that is disguised for the nobility, merchants obscure the boundary between the uncertain mercantile world and that of elite consumption (which is usually reserved for the nobility). In so doing, they undermine the assumed stability and obviousness of social status and identity—not only the social status of merchants, but of all social groups.

The Merchants' Challenge to Noble Identity

In the late Middle Ages noble identity was, like merchant identity, uncertain and performative, but this performativity was disguised in several ways. For instance, noble identity was naturalized by association with bloodline, wealth and gender. These associations worked to establish the noble identity as absolutely different and stable. However, the late Middle Ages saw significant changes in class structure that caused a crisis of social signification for the nobility. At this time, the kinds of social display previously reserved for the nobility were increasingly available to other social groups, particularly merchants. Lee Patterson argues that one characteristic of the late medieval bourgeoisie was not to "promote specifically bourgeois values, whatever these might be, but . . . [to pursue] an aristocratic value" detached from its social origin (*Chaucer and the Subject* 324). While I disagree with Patterson's argument that Chaucer's bourgeois characters participate in the "effacement of social location," his argument about the bourgeoisie's adoption of aristocratic values and modes of living is confirmed throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, including "The Shipman's Tale" (324). Particularly evident in "The Shipman's Tale" is the bourgeois aspiration for the "noble" household. The medieval merchant,

> wishing to be thought "estatly of his gouvernaunce," . . . modeled his habits on those of the gentry. . . . The tradition that gave the hall its central importance in the house was common to town and country and

> linked with the desire to entertain guests as handsomely as possible. The fondness for startling heraldic themes in the decoration of the main bedroom . . . is in part to be explained by this same desire to impress. The gateway towers and the great arched gates that gave entrance to the courtyards were obviously conceived with the same intention. (Thrupp 144)

Felicity Heal points out that the household was of great symbolic importance in late medieval England, being "the principal focus not only of elite consumption but also of social exchange" (179). The household was the primary place where nobles displayed their good lordship and largesse to family members and peers (180). Mertes adds that the medieval family "was a political and economic as well as a social unit in the middle ages" (64). However, as household display became available to wealthy merchants, the noble household could no longer corroborate the natural superiority of the nobility or the absolute difference of noble birth.

The uncertain signification of social display inspired anxiety in many medieval authors. Henry Knighton's familiar complaint is, for instance, that

> the lesser people were so puffed up . . . in their dress and their belongings, and they flourished and prospered so in various ways, that one might scarcely distinguish one from another for the splendour of their dress and adornments: not a humble man from a great man, not a needy from a rich man, not a servant from his master, not a priest from another man, but each imitating the other, and striving to shine in some new fashion and to outdo his superior in the splendour of his pomp and habit. (Martin 509)

The Knight of La Tour-Landry tells a story that communicates the same concern that those of higher birth are not readily identifiable:

> It hapned that I was in a companye of knyghtes and ladyes/ And a grete lady tooke of her hood and humbled her self curtoysly vnto a tayloure/ And ther was a knyght that said to her/ Madame why haue ye taken of youre hoode vnto a taylloure/ And she answerd that she had leuer to take it of to hym than to haue lefte it vnto a gentyll man/ And that was reputed for ryght wel done/ and as for the best tau3t of all the other. (Caxton 25)

Kilgour cites a similar story about Boucicaut who "graciously saluted two courtesans and, when rebuked by his comrades, answered that he preferred to make such a mistake rather than be failing in his duty toward a lady" (113, n.1). Wealthy merchants clearly posed a greater danger to social signification than tailors and courtesans, for they had more money to spend on luxuries.

> The social fluidity caused by the fluidity of wealth went far toward obliterating those distinctions between classes that, in fact, create social classes. With more income to spend on luxuries, members of the middle class could purchase the clothing, the houses, and the material possessions that would allow them to resemble those in the upper ranks of society. In social terms, the necessary relationships between *valor imposita* and *bonitas intrinseca* had been ruptured and it was no longer easy to determine social status. (Fisher 22)

This resemblance caused medieval nobles enough anxiety to inspire legal action.

In medieval England, sumptuary laws were instituted in an attempt to limit dress according to social status. Ostensibly, these laws were "formulated for moral and economic reasons: to arrest the flow of imported luxuries and to arrest unChristian preoccupation with dress" (Fisher 22). However, comments like Knighton's above imply that these laws were established because of a perceived threat to social signification. "For their part, nobles did what they could to secure

the system of class difference through [these] laws and other such means" (Halpern 245). Thrupp suggests that the sumptuary legislation was attempted "partly because fashion was tending to obscure class distinctions" (148). Evidence suggests that, despite the nobles' social fear, such laws were not adhered to. Baldwin calls the sumptuary laws passed in Edward III's reign "insufficien[t]," finding evidence in the "continual censures" in Ricardian texts "on the luxuries and absurdities in dress prevalent during the reign of Richard II" (67). These laws certainly did not succeed in fixing status categories. Kermode studies medieval texts that address social categories and concludes that "given that some commentators elevated merchants above gentlemen in the social hierarchy, or at the very least, equated the two, it may be a mistake to dwell on such designations" (17). These designations were further undermined by the interaction between nobles and merchants.

In the late Middle Ages, wealthy merchants became dangerously similar to nobles not only in appearance, but also in the spheres they inhabited and the activities they engaged in. Classes were difficult to distinguish because "commercial enterprise was not simply the means of livelihood of a distinctive class, but rather another dimension of the entire social order" (Bennett 130). Thus, merchants were not the only ones to engage in trade:

> Members of all classes were able to profit, even if only on a fairly limited or humble scale, from trade and manufacturing. In the countryside it is difficult to draw a line between the peasant with his handicrafts and the rural tradesman with his smallholding, and distinctions higher up the social scale are often equally blurred. Roger Jodrell was one of many prosperous freeholders with mercantile connections. He was married to the daughter of a prominent York merchant, and he and his wife were members of the Trinity Guild at

> Coventry. Many old-established landed families were interested in the commercial and industrial development of their estates. (130)[79]

This pervasiveness of commercial activity blurred class boundaries.

Wealthy merchants also disrupted the process through which the nobility reproduced their class. To ensure the continuity of the nobility, nobles traditionally chose noble wives for their sons: "there is a tendency to choose wives only from the first permissible degrees of consanguinity. Because of this, regular cycles of exchange are possible. Marriage retains its importance as a means of ensuring the cohesiveness of a relatively small group" (Duby 119). However, with the financial success of merchants, it became increasingly common for nobles who were eager for an infusion of cash to marry their children into merchant families. As a result, bloodlines were mixed and noble families were less able to claim their social difference. Such marriages demonstrated two important things about medieval society. For one thing, a merchant's daughter was not absolutely different from a noble's daughter; she could be assimilated into the noble household. Also, inter-class marriage underscores the fact that money was important for nobles as well as merchants; money was always a necessary part of the process through which nobles sustained their nobility.

The merchants' adoption of rich dress and their interaction and intermarriage with nobles suggested a similarity between merchants and nobles and challenged the principle that social hierarchies and values are absolute and uninfluenced by social

---

[79] All over medieval Europe, nobles and wealthy merchants were increasing difficult to distinguish. This was not only because merchants could afford to indulge in the same luxuries as nobles, but also because nobles were beginning to engage in commerce. In 13th century Florence, for example, "Increasingly, as a result of marrying wealth or of enaging in trade on their own account, the nobility was becoming indistinguishable from the merchant class" (Pearce 35). Pullan describes a similar transformation in Venetian nobles: "Though lineage, birthright and privilege were dear to them, Venetian nobles departed in several respects from traditional notions of what was proper to noblemen. . . . Most heretical, perhaps, was their direct involvement in commerce, their seeming confusion of the roles of the captain and the justice with that of the self-seeking merchant" (158).

circumstances. In fact, as Joel Kaye has discussed in his book *Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century*, the marketplace itself undermined this principle. In the market, value is not transcendent, but determined through exchange. This troubled many natural philosophers. Jean Buridan, for example, was concerned that "money can measure only relative and ever-changing economic values, not the essential qualities and natures that are of concern to philosophy" (Kaye 9). The market was also troubling because it governs itself mechanically. Kaye points out that such an understanding of the market was not limited to scholastics, but was wide-spread: "noteworthy in [the fourteenth century], was the penetration of the concept of the market as a dynamic, self-regulating system into the consciousness of people not directly engaged in commerce" (24). This concept was particularly disturbing because this mechanical system of determining value *worked*; it was the only efficient way to set prices. Commerce performed a necessary social function. Accordingly, medieval scholastics who wrote about trade became motivated to justify it. One strategy of justification, apparent in "The Shipman's Tale," was to emphasize the risks inherent in trade: "Because it lessened the probability of anticipated profit, the amount of risk inherent in any credit transaction or partnership increased that transaction's legitimacy in scholastic opinion" (Fisher 105). Ironically, risk, or uncertainty, was relied upon to manage the market and limit the extent to which merchants could profit.

Merchants, who generated and were justified by uncertainty, had an ambiguous place in the medieval symbolic economy. David Wallace discusses how merchant wealth circulated in the symbolic economy of fourteenth century Italy, pointing out that it could not be "discretely represented in . . . religious art or literature. . . . [Rather, it was] made apparent only as it disappear[ed] into an economy of Church-sanctioned images" (196). This strategy for representing merchant wealth resembles the merchant's strategy in "The Shipman's Tale." The

contradiction generated by this strategy—the merchant's household being both worthy and thrifty—indicates that, as Wallace says, the place of merchant wealth "in the totality of social, political, and spiritual life [could not] be adequately theorized" (196). The uncertain position of merchants in the symbolic economy was one of many ways in which merchant wealth changed medieval social theory. Merchant wealth affected the entire symbolic economy because it meant that identity could not be theorized as it had been: public, permanent and obvious. "The Shipman's Tale" most directly addresses the consequences of merchant wealth on the conception of identity and on the social hierarchy in its use of the word, "creaunce." Like "worthy" and "thrifty," "creaunce" is a concept whose multiple meanings challenge the stability of the social process it describes.

Identity and Reputation: "Creaunce"

Merchants disrupted the conventional conception of identity—particularly, and most obviously, noble identity. Because domestic display was available to wealthy merchants, it no longer corroborated the absolute difference of noble birth. As a result, the reputation established through such domestic display could no longer be understood to directly manifest a fixed social identity. In effect, merchant wealth disrupts the signification of the worthy household. We have seen that this uncertain signification is apparent in the multiple meanings that "worthy" and "thrifty" can have in "The Shipman's Tale." Ultimately, the tale suggests that the meaning of these words can no longer be taken for granted, in part, because identity itself is no longer a fixed social category. In order for an individual to be unambiguously "worthy," he must have a recognizable public identity. How do you define "worthiness" in relation to a merchant who pursues both commercial and noble "worth"? This tale moves away from a theory of identity as publicly transparent and manifested in social position. Rather, the tale asserts that reputation, the publicly accessible part of

identity, is socially negotiated, not intrinsic. Instead of arguing that one's social positioning reflects an intrinsic "truth" about him/her, this tale represents social positioning, through its treatment of reputation, as a social negotiation. Reputation is not a stable, reliable social indicator in this tale. Rather, as the tale's use of the word "creaunce" indicates, it is multiply determined and determining.

The social challenge presented by merchants confuses the social function of reputation. In this tale, it seems that the merchant, like Chaucer's Merchant, disassociates reputation from the stable social indicator, birth. The tale, in fact, gives us no information about the birth of the merchant and his wife—unlike many of the Old French fabliaux that are interested in issues of class.[80] Instead, the merchant treats reputation like a commodity that has exchange value. The merchant claims that his business reputation allows him to "creaunce." At first, the tale's use of the concept "creaunce" seems to confirm the degradation of the merchant's world. Unlike "The Man of Law's Tale," which uses the word to mean "belief" or "creed,"[81] "The Shipman's Tale" uses the word to describe a kind of financial transaction. The merchant says that merchants may "creaunce," or obtain credit, while they have a good reputation (ShT 289). Reputation enables commercial exchange. The merchant's conception of reputation is clearly different from the feudal conception. Feudalism assumes that reputation is a kind of measurement of public worth that takes as its standard the presumably unchanging qualities of a nobleman. In other words, reputation, in feudalism, assumes a certain natural status because of its

---

[80] I have given examples of such stories in my chapter on "The Miller's Tale."
[81] For instance, the Sultan's evil mother argues for continued dedication to Mohammed thus:

> What sholde us tyden of this newe lawe
> But thraldom to oure bodies and penance,
> And afterward in helle to be drawe,
> For we reneyed Mahoun oure creance? (MLT 337-340)

linkage with nobility. According to this model, reputation inspires "creaunce," or faith, because it is an extension of inherited social identity.

Surprisingly, despite their apparent difference, the merchant's characterization of reputation resembles the feudal conception in an important way: they both assume that reputation's social circulation is predictable in some way. Although the merchant's reputation is not associated with a fixed social identity, it *is* characterized as having a definite result. The merchant claims that his reputation directly results in his ability to obtain credit. Both of these understandings stem from the desire for a process of social positioning that is structured and reliable. However, this tale ultimately challenges the assumption that reputation is a known quantity. The merchant underestimates how his wife and domestic life inform his reputation; his domestic and commercial activities are not as separate as he assumes. Ultimately, the tale suggests that social positioning is, in fact, achieved through a continuing, ever-changing process of negotiation.

We might well be skeptical of the merchant's assumption that his caution in business directly and unproblematically facilitates his monetary gain. Certainly, it seems that the merchant's careful behavior gives him a kind of symbolic capital that is necessary for him to accumulate economic capital. However, it is not clear that his symbolic capital circulates as simply as he assumes. This poem seems to confirm Bourdieu's principal that symbolic capital is not reducible to economic capital.[82] The merchant, for instance, does not recognize that his reputation is derived in ways other than his careful business practice. The tale implies that the merchant's good name comes not only from his sober attitude, but also from his worthy household.

---

[82] Randal Johnson summarizes Bourdieu's position: "Bourdieu thus developed, as an integral part of his theory of practice, the concept of *symbolic power* based on diverse forms of capital which are not reducible to economic capital" (7, emphasis his). One of these forms of capital is "symbolic capital," which "refers to degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour" (7).

The wife's presence in the household, for instance, seems to provide the merchant with some symbolic capital. The merchant has many guests, we are told, because of his generosity and his beautiful wife. However, it is not apparent exactly how this benefits the merchant. Because the exchange value of symbolic capital is not obvious, it is not readily managed as a commodity. The difference between this symbolic capital and the merchant's economic capital is foregrounded when the wife knocks on the merchant's counting house door, asking, "Ne be ye nat ashamed that daun John / Shal fasting al this day alenge goon? / What, lat us heere a messe, and go we dyne" (ShT 221-3). The wife recognizes, unlike her husband, that responsible money management is not entirely different from the management of social activities in the household. The merchant does not recognize that his good name is overdetermined. Had he recognized the multiple sources of his reputation, he may have been less dismissive of his wife's requests for money.

This tale thus reveals reputation to be a complex social indicator. As a largely unknown quantity, reputation does not readily fulfill its role within feudalism, nor does it satisfy the merchant's desire for a reliable, systematic business practice. When read in this way, reputation does not inspire "creaunce," or a belief in a stable identity. Neither does reputation directly translate into financial credit. Rather, reputation is part of the continuing process in which social status is negotiated. The process of obtaining credit is not only a financial activity, but also a social one. Although the merchant does not recognize it, when he lends money to the monk, he is engaged in a process much like the one his lenders engage in when they lend him money. The broad significance of "creaunce" is evident in the merchant's statement "we may creaunce whil we have a name" (284). Although the merchant is discussing merchants' good names, this statement also describes the monk's ability to obtain credit from the merchant because of their friendship.

Of course, when the monk obtains economic credit from the merchant, he is able to do so not merely because of their sworn brotherhood, but because he has previously earned symbolic credit as the merchant's friend. We are told that "Free was daun John, and manly of dispence, / As in that hous, and ful of diligence / To doon plesaunce, and also greet costage" (43-5). In this tale, all of the characters obtain some kind of credit—only some of which is economic. At the end of the tale, the wife excuses spending the monk's money, saying that she had assumed that the monk was reciprocating for the years of "beele cheere" that he often had in their house (409). Although this excuse is a lie, it reveals her belief that the merchant has earned symbolic credit from the monk that could encourage financial compensation. This financial compensation is different from the merchant's expectation of return for his careful business behavior. While it financially acknowledges a good reputation, it is not explicitly commercial nor does it imply that symbolic capital has an exchange value. Also, the feudal understanding of compensation for largesse recognizes the value of giving; the monk would amass symbolic capital from such a gift to the merchant. Obviously, the same would not be true for the merchant's business lenders. More importantly, however, the wife's lie draws attention to the value of that kind of "worthy" household exchange that she presides over, an exchange that is also clearly part of the merchant's business.

When obtaining credit is recognized as a social, as well as economic, process, it helps explain social positioning as not an identity predictably obtained through inheritance or careful business practice. Rather, it is a constant process of negotiation in a symbolic economy. This new identity conceives of the domestic in a new way. Rather than a place of formal, ritualized social exchange that manifests a stable social identity, it is a place where complex influences come together in unpredictable ways. In this tale, the bourgeois life is not represented as "inevitab[le]," as Patterson claims (365). On the contrary, the tale suggests that social

identity—either noble or bourgeois—is not an inevitable, natural status confirmed by gender and class difference. Social values are negotiated in the merchant's household—they are not taken for granted. Clearly, the tale's understanding of "creaunce," of how reputation informs social status, is flexible. This is not a direct transaction that results in a social status. Rather, "obtaining credit" is a continuing, cyclical process in which one's social position is continually reconfirmed and renegotiated. The previous chapter has already argued that the fabliaux in Fragment I articulate the necessity of rethinking social hierarchies. The next chapter will argue that "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" achieves the same effect. In the context of "The Shipman's Tale," this reconception of social status is necessary because a variable social status can account for the merchant's changing fortunes.

A New Role for Gender

When reputation is understood as a socially negotiated public identity, gender can no longer perform the ideological function of corroborating and naturalizing social position. In fact, the traditional relationship between gender and social position is transformed in this tale. The tale introduces the traditional association between gender and social norms only to expose and undermine the assumption that gender helps reveal an individual's "true" nature, and hence corroborates his or her social position. Because identity and reputation have been exposed as contingent in this tale, the gendered representations of the merchant and his wife are unconventional. For instance, unlike most unfaithful wives in the Old French fabliaux, the merchant's wife is not rigorously condemned. Similarly, even though the merchant is ostensibly the "dupe" in this fabliau and the source of the tale's disturbing commercialism, he is not mocked as insufficiently manly, as a cuckold would be in the Old French fabliaux. In fact, the merchant's homecoming is distinctly passionate:

> His wyf ful redy mette hym atte gate,

> As she was wont of oold usage algate,
> And al that nyght in myrthe they bisette;
> For he was riche and cleerly out of dette.
> Whan it was day, this marchant gan embrace
> His wyf al newe, and kiste hire on hir face,
> And up he gooth and maketh it ful tough.
> "Namoore," quod she, "by God, ye have ynough!"
> And wantownly agayn with hym she pleyde. (ShT 373-81)

Unlike January's sexual encounters with May in "The Merchant's Tale," the merchant's encounter with his wife is mutually satisfactory. The wife's rebuff is not serious, but playful. It confirms her approval of their lovemaking.

The tale's conclusion is certainly surprising. When the merchant and wife meet at home, their relationship is remarkably undamaged. The merchant

> comes home to a convivial welcoming that is slightly unsettling to us, perhaps, but apparently not to the wife. By all rights a disruption should finally occur at this point: in the fabliaux adultery always leads to a conflict of some sort, and the tale seems to be leading to a revelation of the intrigue. [But,] neither disruption nor revelation happens. (Nicholson 591)

The tale's surprisingly happy domestic conclusion suggests that the wife is not reduced to her infidelity and the merchant is not reduced to his cuckoldry. Their gender characterizations do not reveal their "true" identities. As previously argued, the wife's gendering does not prove the natural immorality of commercialism. In fact, she demonstrates the constructedness of gender ideology when she characterizes herself as lustful and greedy for the sake of social intelligibility. Her understanding of the correlation of lust and greed is apparent in her playful and knowing use of the language of exchange at the end of the tale:

Ye han mo slakkere dettours than am I!
For I wol paye yow wel and redily
Fro day to day, and if so be I faille,
I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille,
And I shal paye as soone as ever I may.

. . . . .

By God, I wol nat paye yow but abedde! (413-24)

Clearly, the wife does not take seriously her identification as a "dettour." The tale's positive ending ensures that readers also do not reduce her to this designation.

The merchant and his wife, like the characters of "The Miller's Tale," are not exposed by the tale. The tale does not portray these characters inevitably adopting familiar class or gender-specific behaviors. Rather, the tale reveals that they develop their behaviors in response to the complexities of their social environment. Thus, while the merchant's wife reproduces inherited knowledges, that reproduction lacks ideological force because the tale provides the reader with a context that explains its history. The wife, like the Wife of Bath, both internalizes gender ideology and reveals its contingency. Instead of suggesting that the wife's reproduction of gender ideology reveals the "truth" about her and her class, the tale reveals that her reproduction is specific to, or dependent on, her variable social location. Her gender identity is thus not fixed and predictable. Rather, it is, like her husband's reputation: potentially ever-changing.

Chapter 4

Hearing a Fabliau Woman: Chaucer's Wife of Bath

Introduction

Like "The Shipman's Tale," "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" explores the constraining effects of gender stereotypes. Like the wife in that tale, the Wife of Bath is a locus for debate about the power of these stereotypes. Bold and audacious, the Wife of Bath is arguably the most conspicuous character in *The Canterbury Tales*. Her brash boasting and aggressive arguments about gender and marriage certainly mark her as one of the pilgrims most difficult to ignore—for both her fellow pilgrims and medieval scholars. To a large extent, the Wife's notoriety fails to attract support for her critique of anti-feminist stereotypes. In fact, it serves to make her and her critique not *visible*, but *invisible* to us as readers. As with the women of Old French fabliaux, the Wife's insolence and argumentativeness largely mark her as a representative of the essentialized group of "Woman," rather than a specific woman who can reveal instabilities in late medieval gender and social ideology. In this way, the Wife resembles the Miller, whose aggressive social challenge marks him as a "churl" so clearly in "The Miller's Prologue." Both characters seem to fit easily into their respective gender or class categories—at first. However, unlike the Miller, whose character is complicated only when he tells his tale, the Wife complicates her essentialized representation in the "Prologue." There, the specificities and effects of her engagement with medieval gender ideology eventually become visible.

In "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," Chaucer explores both fabliau's conservative tendencies, as he does in "The Miller's Prologue," and its subversive effects, as he does in "The Miller's Tale." After the first part of the "Prologue," in which the Wife represents herself according to medieval gender stereotypes, there is a moment when the Wife seems to become visible as something other than the

notorious stereotype of the errant woman. In the story of her relationship with Jankyn, the Wife's lived pleasure and pain become intelligible and possibly worthwhile. By "lived pleasure and pain," I do not mean to suggest that any part of "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" provides us with a direct, transparent perception of the "truth" about the Wife or her experience.[83] Rather, the episode with Jankyn shifts the prologue's focus from authoritative perspectives on women's inferiority to the Wife's personal, subjective, and historically and temporally specific responses to her subordination.[84] This episode reveals that the Wife's self-representation according to gender stereotypes has been a citation[85], not an unavoidable gravitation

---

[83] Joan Scott's article, "The Evidence of Experience" provides an important discussion of the dangers of assuming that experience can ever be transparent:

> When the evidence offered is the evidence of "experience," the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as incontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation—as a foundation on which analysis is based—that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. By remaining within the epistemological frame of orthodox history, these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place. They take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference. They locate relevance outside its discursive construction and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualizing it. (399)

[84] Many scholars have noted that "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" and/or "Tale" can be characterized as having a "subjective" element. I mention Lee Patterson below. H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. also notes that the tale can be read in terms of a "public" and a "private" feminism. In his article, "Of a fire in the dark: Public and private feminism in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," he explains that his purpose is "to show that there is a difference between the two kinds [of feminism], but also to show that these forms or modes are complementary as well as opposed, that there is a dialectical relationship at work in the Wife's situation and her responses" (158).

[85] I use the word "citation" as does Judith Butler in her discussion of gender and sex norms in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Butler uses the word to indicate the constructedness of gender and sex performance. She says that "The forming, crafting, bearing, circulation, signification of [a] sexed body will not be a set of actions performed in compliance with the law; on the contrary, they will be a set of actions mobilized by the law, the citational accumulation and dissimulation of the law that produces material effects, the lived necessity of those effects as well as the lived contestation of that necessity. Performativity is thus not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms" (12). She goes on to point out that

toward her "true" errant nature. The Wife's emotional complexity indicates that while she internalizes medieval gender stereotypes, that internalization has a history and is an involved process, not a passive and seamless assimilation.

One consequence of the Wife's sudden visibility is that binary representations of gender difference are exposed as having internal instabilities—it becomes clear that patriarchal authority produces the Wife's response to that authority. For me, two questions emerge from this recognition: why is the Wife's lived pleasure and pain suddenly made visible at this climactic moment in her narrative? and why is the Wife's initial, stereotypical self-representation revealed to be not her "natural" response, but an internalization of gender norms? While Lee Patterson has read the prologue's subjective element as evidence that the poem is unconcerned with political or social issues, I will argue that it has profound social implications.[86] The Wife's negotiation of authority is apparent because she displaces the misogynist connotations surrounding feminine mobility at a time in late medieval England when there was an increased willingness to imagine the worth of social mobility. The visibility of the Wife's lived pleasure and pain registers the changing conditions of the reproduction of gender and social categories and attests to the increased ability, and need, to conceive of the worth of experiences from a wider, more mobile, group of people. As the economic influence of the middle social strata increased in the late Middle Ages, their desires and abilities were becoming socially intelligible and difficult to account for using a binary model of social difference. This chapter does not represent an attempt to enter into the long-

---

"These regulatory schemas are not timeless structures, but historically revisable criteria of intelligibility which produce and vanquish bodies that matter" (14).

[86] See Susan Crane's "The Writing Lesson of 1381" for a critique of Patterson's position in "'No Man His Reson Herde': Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the *Canterbury Tales*." Patterson expands on this argument in *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, chapter 6.

standing debate about the Wife's social status.[87] Rather, I mention the Wife's profession, and assume the economic significance of rural small-commodity producers (of which she may be one), to suggest that the wandering woman—the Wife—is visible in part because of the changing social significance of mobility. By making visible the negotiation, the livedness, of medieval gender ideology, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" demonstrates a new reading model, unlike the binary model, that can account for multiple categories of social intelligibility and the possible mobility between those categories. This model imagines that meaning and power do not originate from a single point, but that they emerge through circulation between various social groups.

The Wife as Fabliau Woman

In the first part of her "Prologue," the Wife seems to describe herself in accordance with medieval anti-feminist discourse. This discursive tradition has been very well documented and I will only briefly outline some of its characterizations of femininity. In medieval anti-feminist texts, women are symbolically associated with the surface rather than meaning, the body rather than the mind, and errancy rather than constancy.[88] For example, women were associated with surface rather than

[87] Following E. M. Carus-Wilson (262), D. W. Robertson and Mary Carruthers argue that the Wife is a not a weaver, but a wealthy clothier who is involved with her business at a high level. Other scholars, like Manly, argue that the Wife is only a weaver given to boasting; Manly suggests that when Chaucer says "Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt / She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt" (GP 448), he "indulges in irony to a degree not always recognized" (Manly 229). Finally, noting the limited information Chaucer provides us about the Wife's work, Lee Patterson claims that it is merely an analogy for her place within medieval gender ideology. He argues that "Chaucer makes her a weaver . . . not because he is interested in exploring the condition of the independent businesswoman in late-fourteenth-century England but because her weaving fits with the traditional stereotype of woman's generic identity" ("'Experience Woot Well'" 135).

[88] Although these characterizations are common in medieval literature, it is easy to overemphasize the hegemony of such negative stereotypes of women. Alcuin Blamires offers a useful corrective to this tendency in *The Case for Women in Medieval*

meaning in medieval discussions of literary composition and interpretation. Carolyn Dinshaw notes, for instance, that "language (signifying activity) is essentially structured in relation to gender" (15). Specifically, the text itself is often represented as feminine while the process of reading or interpreting the text is represented as a masculine activity. The text was often described as feminine because its meaning was thought to be covered by an "attractive, but deceptive, exterior" (Bisson 195). Accordingly, women came to represent a loss of textual certainty:

> we cannot separate the concept of woman as it was formed in the early centuries of Christianity from a metaphysics that abhorred embodiment, and that woman's supervenient nature is, according to such a mode of thought, indistinguishable from the acute suspicion of embodied signs—of representations. As Philo Judaeus maintains, woman's coming into being is synonymous not only with the naming of things, but with a loss—within language—of the literal: "And God brought a trance upon Adam, and he fell asleep; and He took one of his sides" and what follows (Gen. ii, 21). These words in their literal sense are of the nature of a myth. For how could anyone admit that a woman, or a human being at all, came into existence out of a man's side?" (Bloch *Medieval Misogyny* 37)

Because women supposedly confused the literal, they were often characterized as anti-intellectual. For instance, in his treatise, "The Monk's View of Womankind," St. Jerome makes the proposition that "wise men . . . should not wed," and defends his statement, saying,

> First, [marriage] impedeth the study of philosophy; no man can serve his books and his wife with equal zeal. A married woman hath many

---

Culture.

> needs; precious robes, gold and gems, great expenses, handmaidens, furniture of all kinds, litters and a gilded car. Then he must listen, all night long, to her wordy complaints. . . . However learned a teacher there may be in any city, we may not leave our wife, nor can we burden ourselves with her at his lectures. . . . Moreover, no wise man can ever be in solitude; for he hath all that ever were good, or that ever shall be; and his free mind roameth at will throughout the universe. That which he cannot embrace in body, he can grasp in mind; and, where men are lacking, he speaketh with God. Never will he be less alone than in his solitude. (23-25)

For Jerome, women are both the symbolic and practical enemies of intellectual work. Their worldliness not only means that they are unintellectual, but that they are enemies of all important, productive pursuits; women are anti-intellectual.

The characterization of women as opponents of intellectual work also had a medical justification. Thirteenth-century commentator Albertus Magnus argued that "since women are colder, their sense of touch and therefore their minds are less acute" (Cadden 185). For Albertus, complexion also explains feminine inconstancy:

> Women's complexion is more humid than man's. [The nature] of the humid receives an impression easily but retains it poorly. The humid is readily mobile, and thus women are unconstant and always seeking something new. Hence when she is engaged in the act under one man, if it were possible, she would like at the same time to be under another. . . . In short, I should say, every woman is to be avoided as much as a poisonous snake and a horned devil. (qtd by Cadden 185)[89]

[89] While these quotations represent a common perspective in medieval medical discourses, it is important to note that these discourses do not universally represent sex and gender difference as absolute and strictly hierarchical. In his discussion of

According to such theories, women are lustful and capricious; they are driven by their physical desires. They value earthly goods and pleasures because they lack both self-control and the insight necessary to recognize that such things have only a limited benefit. Women are thus largely associated with the fallen body and its ephemerality, materiality and absence of authoritative signification. Even the twelfth-century nun, mystic and medical theorist Hildegard of Bingen, whose perspectives on women are positive in comparison with those of other medical theorists, argues that "man is to woman as soul is to body" (191): "man signifies the divinity, woman the humanity of the Son of God" (qtd by Cadden 191). While, for Hildegard, this configuration recognizes the "equivalence of the sexes as represented by their mutual dependence and oneness," her characterization also reflects the popular understanding that a woman is more appropriately distinguished by her bodily desires than her mind or spirit (Cadden 191). Women were commonly described as intellectually and morally weaker than men and more powerfully driven

---

the "one-sex model," Thomas Laqueur has convincingly argued that women and men were not always seen as absolutely different. According to this theory, "women had the same genitals as men except that, as Nemesius, bishop of Emesa in the fourth century, put it: 'theirs are inside the body and not outside it.'" (4). According to this theory, sex difference is on a continuum; "the boundaries between male and female are of degree and not of kind" (25).

Joan Cadden finds similar flexibility in her discussion of various medieval humoral theories: "One's disposition, or temperament, was, according to medieval theory, closely related to one's general constitution, or complexion. The four qualities—hot, cold, moist, and dry—lay at the foundation of a system of four elements, four humors, and four temperaments" (Cadden 184). According to these theories, men were generally thought to have more heat and were subsequently characterized as stronger and of firmer flesh. Women, who were cooler and moister, were described as weaker and more sedentary. However, the complexion generally associated with one's sex was not the only determinant of one's gender; "Complexional qualities account for individual differences too" (185). Although women were thought to be *generally* cooler and moister, *individual* women could be hotter and drier—"The notion of a masculine female or a feminine male is not uncommon in the late Middle Ages" (201). "Masculine" women might have firmer flesh and grow extra hair. Similarly, a "feminine," cooler, man could be physically weak. Despite the unequivocally misogynistic statements made by many medieval proponents of the humoral model, it, like the one-sex model, allowed for a flexible understanding of gender.

by their bodies. For many medieval thinkers, this mind/body binary explained women's increased vulnerability to bodily temptation; women's corporeality meant that they are less capable of resisting sins such as lust and greed, and less capable of restraining their speech. As I will discuss below, the women of Old French fabliaux are often guilty of these sins—as is the Wife of Bath.

Many of these negative stereotypes about women appear in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." For instance, the Wife's profession, cloth making, associates her with the profession attributed to the first errant woman, Eve, who was said to spin.[90] For instance, Eve is described as spinning in this well-known medieval proverb: "When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman?" Spinning and weaving were "the archetypal feminine occupation[s]" (Rowland 141-2). The Wife's occupation can thus characterize her as "archetypal, the eternal Eve, possessing all the vices ascribed to her in an ascetic male-oriented tradition" (142). The Wife's widowhood functions in similar ways, for widows, of all medieval women, were characterized as *particularly* lustful, greedy and wayward; "The randy widow is

---

[90] Both Laura Hodges and Adelaide Bennett discuss the negative connotations of spinning in their essays found in *Equally in God's Image*. However, it is important to note that the Wife's profession does not only signal errancy. Gail McMurray Gibson, for instance, discusses the positive treatment of spinning in "The Threat of Life in the Hand of the Virgin." Karma Lochrie also discusses positive characterizations in her discussion of Margery Kempe in *Covert Operations*. She argues that spinning was not necessary errant, because it was a woman's proper work in the home. Lochrie notes that Kempe is advised to return to her spinning in order to avoid danger: "when she is being accused of Lollardy, the men of Beverley urge her out of concern for her welfare to quit this dangerous life of hers: 'Damsel, forsake þis lyfe þat þu hast, & go spynne & carde as oþer women don, & suffyr not so meche schame & so meche wo' . . . The typical work of married women is here a metaphor for safety and security, and it is offered by the men of the town as sympathetic advice to Kempe" (151). However, Lochrie goes on to note that while women's work is not problematic within the home, it is problematic "outside the parameters of the household economy" and "outside of her marriage" (151). Even though the Wife performs a "traditionally female occupation," it is questionable whether this work is understood within the confines of her married relationships (151).

The Wife's profession has another association that also does not signal errancy. As I will discuss later, her work also identifies her with the increasingly significant late medieval cloth industry.

virtually always a figure of mockery, but she is mocked less in fun than in outrage and even horror" (Patterson *Chaucer and the Subject* 292).[91] The Wife's arguments further bolster misogynist stereotypes. Although the Wife ostensibly argues against patriarchal condemnations of women, medieval gender categories still work to structure the basic framework of her argument, and hence to limit how it might represent things differently. She endorses the antifeminist stereotypes she cites by boasting of her ability to deceive and manipulate men, her success at increasing her wealth through marriage, and her sexual desire. For instance, assumptions about women's perversity are implicit in the Wife's descriptions of her desire for money and sex. She explains that she married her first three husbands in order to gain "hir lond and hir tresoor" (WBPr 204). She also understands her subordinated place in medieval society in terms of her body which, like money, is presumed to circulate. When chiding one husband, the Wife claims that he, presumably to protect her chastity, would lock her up in his money chest:

> Thou shalt nat bothe, thogh that thou were wood,
> Be maister of my body and of my good;
> That oon thou shalt forgo, maugree thyne yen,
> What helpith it of me to enquere or spyen?
> I trowe thou woldest loke me in thy chiste! (313-17)

She condemns her husband for his miserly ways, but not for treating her like a commodity. In fact, she treats herself the same way: "The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle; / The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle" (477-8). She also uses a market metaphor to describe her love for Jankyn:

> We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye,

[91] I will discuss the Wife's widowhood and her profession in more detail when I address how the Wife represents social mobility, the significance of which was changing in the late Middle Ages.

In this matere a queynte fantasye:
Wayte what thyng we may nat lightly have,
Therafter wol we crie al day and crave.
Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we;
Preesse on us faste, and thanne wol we fle.
With daunger oute we al oure chaffare;
Greet prees at market maketh deere ware,
And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys:
This knoweth every womman that is wys. (515-24)

The Wife seems to demonstrate the validity of anti-feminist stereotypes; she accepts that there is an economy of sex much like that of money and that both of these economies can be easily manipulated because they are not intrinsically meaningful. She says, "Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle" (414).[92] Like the women in misogynist texts, the Wife is a lustful, greedy woman who is, at this point, reduced to an object of economic exchange. Accordingly, the Wife is unable to authorize her body or desires.

The validity of gender stereotypes also seems obvious when the Wife attempts to justify her multiple marriages and sexual activity within marriage. Throughout this speech, the Wife asserts the worth of her body and her desires by citing authoritative texts written by men. As scholars including Lee Patterson and Elaine Tuttle Hansen have argued,[93] the Wife's argument is unconvincing because she must rely on the words of male authorities to make it; her argument reveals that

[92] It is interesting to note that the Wife assumes that the marital economy is a money economy, not a feudal one. At this point, the tale is playing into late medieval anxieties about the emerging money economy (which I discussed earlier in Chapter 3). Ultimately, however, it is one way in which the Wife is characterized as socially mobile.

[93] In, respectively, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) and *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, University of

she is subject to conventional authoritative voices, not that her lived experience challenges that authority. She assumes, like those male authorities she argues against, that a valid, convincing argument depends on the citation of patriarchal authorities. In other words, those authorities exert a guiding influence on the Wife's text. As a result, the Wife's argument does not supplant, but depends on the male authorities she cites. Ultimately, her argument fails to seriously challenge gender stereotypes.

The Wife's internalization and reproduction of an essentialized identity is one way in which her Prologue resembles a fabliau. As discussed in the previous chapters, fabliaux typically include similar reductive characterizations as part of a larger effort to develop characters with obvious, public identities. Simple, uncomplicated characters help establish the public nature of identity and, thus, the stability of a hierarchized social order. Although fabliaux often enjoy sexual and social transgression, many of these stories simultaneously characterize such transgression as destructive and dangerous. Transgressive characters are typically denounced as "obviously low" through characterizations of their sexual appetites. For example, fabliau women are often condemned through a correlation of their genitals and their mouths—their sexual appetites are insatiable and their speech is unstoppable. This correlation characterizes women as emblems of absence, or lack of definite meaning. Fabliau women are thus identified as the enemies of ideological certainty. Many fabliaux characterize women in this way, then contain them through discovery and/or punishment. In doing so, stories such as "Du Chevalier Qui Fit les Cons Parler" suggest a solution to the social uncertainty and chaos that women represent.

Guerin's "Du Chevalier Qui Fit les Cons Parler," or, "The Chevalier Who Made Cunts Talk," depicts the fantasy of imposing a coherent meaning on a woman's

---

California Press, 1992).

body. In this fabliau, a young chevalier is rewarded for his kindness to three nymphs by gaining the ability to make cunts talk. If the cunt is prevented from talking for any reason, he is also given the ability to make assholes talk. A lady hears of his ability and bets him that he cannot perform this feat on her body. Having made the bet and returned to her chamber,

> plein son poinc a pris de coton,
> si en enpli molt bien son con,
> bien en estoupa le pertus,
> a son poing destre feri sus. (Guerin "Du Chevalier" 250)
>
> [she took in hand some cotton wool
> and with it stuffed her cunt quite full
> and plugged it tightly to the crown,
> then used her fist to tamp it down. (251)]

When the chevalier calls on her cunt, it cannot speak. He is saved only by his additional ability to talk to assholes. The woman's asshole explains that "Mes se li coton estoit hors, / bien sai que il parleroit lors" ["were the stuffing out / [the cunt] then would answer you, no doubt"] (252-3).

The chevalier's ability to talk to cunts reveals the general ambivalence fabliaux have for women's speech. Women often lie in the fabliaux and use their speech to gain control over and enjoyment through their sexual organs. Through their speech, women are characterized as unreliable entities that can never be trusted or fully understood. The chevalier's ability is useful precisely because it allows him to escape the effects of a woman's deceptive speech. In this story, a woman's genitals, unlike her lips, *apparently* provide direct access to the "truth" about her because, as Burns says, the "female identity resides in . . . that stereotypically female orifice, the vagina" ("This Prick" 188). Interestingly, this story is still able to maintain the common

fabliau assumption that women have no access to "truth." Because women are, by nature, untrustworthy and untruthful, the truth-telling voice from the women's genitals is aristocratic and masculine. Thus, when the chevalier addresses a cunt, he calls it "Sire con," or "Sir Cunt" (Guerin "Du Chevalier" 242). The cunt that reveals the truth about women speaks with an upper-class man's voice because fabliau women have no "truth." The chevalier is only able to discover the truth about a woman because he is able to bypass the woman herself. Appropriately, as Burns points out,

> Having lost in this struggle for power against her male opponent, the female protagonist forfeits the independence of her speech. She is told by witnesses to the contest that her losing means she must now be silent. . . . [Thus,] the victorious knight [gains] the power to impose silence on her speaking lips. ("This Prick" 201)

The success of the chevalier's manipulation of the lady's genitals means that the chevalier has, in fact, gained power over both of the threatening areas of a woman's body. The chevalier has successfully imposed a stable meaning on a woman's body.[94]

Uncontainable Fabliau Women and their Specific Pleasures

As we have seen, the Wife represents herself according to the same kinds of stereotypes that guide characterizations of fabliau women, such as the lady in "Du Chevalier Qui Fit les Cons Parler." The Wife is lustful, willful, untrustworthy, and ultimately accountable to a patriarchal authority. There are moments in "The Wife

---

[94] See de Looze (1994) for a different approach to this tale. de Looze argues that because the lady does, in fact, win the bet (the chevalier is, after all, unable to make her cunt speak), the tale's "rhetoric of true speech is . . . a sham, and the supposed link to biological difference is bogus. Far from either eliciting or imposing a discourse of truth, the knight wins by substituting anal for the wagered vaginal speech" (510). The knight is rewarded, and is acknowledged as the winner because he is "backed up by the count and the whole masculine chivalric order" (510).

of Bath's Prologue," however, in which the Wife, like many fabliau women, seems impossible to contain. These moments are interesting because they include both a rejection and an acceptance of anti-feminist arguments. Ostensibly, the Wife denies anti-feminist characterizations of women. She argues with her husbands who describe women's desire as dangerously out of control. They compare

> . . . wommenes love to helle,
> To bareyne lond, ther water may nat dwelle.
> [They] liknest it also to wilde fyr;
> The moore it brenneth, the moore it hath desir
> To consume every thyng that brent wole be. (WBPr 371-75)

However, although she condemns such a characterization of the uncontrollability of women's desire, she uses a similarly disturbing image to suggest that it is impossible for men to ever completely know or control their wives:

> Sire olde fool, what helpeth thee to spyen?
> Thogh thou preye Argus with his hundred yen
> To be my warde-cors, as he kan best,
> In feith, he shal nat kepe me but me lest;
> Yet koude I make his berd, so moot I thee! (357-61)

The Wife suggests that it is futile for her husbands to attempt to know her movements because her ability to deceive is extraordinary. She could deceive anyone—even Argus.[95] In fact, the Wife suggests that women are *naturally* deceptive; "al swich wit is yeven us in oure byrthe; / Deceite, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive / To wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve" (400-3). Here, the Wife adopts an essentializing attitude toward women as she ignores women's specificities. She

[95] The Wife's comment is remarkably similar to one made in "De la Borgoise d'Orliens": "Fame a trestout passé Argu; / par lor engin sont deceü / li sage des le tens Abel" ("for woman, leaving Argus miles behind, has hoodwinked with her wiles the

describes herself, and all women, as the Old French fabliau describe women: predictably false. However, the Wife's descriptions of women as uncontrollable do not only serve to characterize women as terrifying and (appropriately) lacking social authority. Her characterizations of ungovernable women also challenge these ideological representations of women, as do similar characterizations in the Old French fabliaux.

Although fabliau women are chaotic and dangerous, they are also powerful and effective in resisting their containment. Thus, while fabliaux often attempt to inspire the suppression of women's chaotic speech and desire, they also represent women's mouths and genitals as unrestrainable—fabliau women often frustrate the ideological desire for certainty and control. These stories suggest the impossibility of either understanding the true meaning of a woman's speech or satisfying a woman's sexual desire. Even though the women in such fabliaux are often predictable, there usually remains a degree to which they cannot be understood or controlled. There are many fabliaux that focus on the complicating influence of women's speech. In Marie de France's "Del vilein e de sa femme cuntrarïeuse," or "The Peasant and His Contrary Wife," for example, the husband grows angry because his wife complicates an issue that he understands to be simple. Even though he responds to her contradiction violently—by cutting out her tongue—she is still able to articulate a position contrary to his.

Another Old French fabliau in which a woman cannot be controlled is Gautier le Leu's "La Veuve," or "The Widow." This is a story in which a woman's monstrous sex drive and genitalia represent an unsolvable problem. In "La Veuve," a widow is so overwhelmed by her lust that she throws off her widow's weeds and seeks another husband:

---

wisest men since Abel's time") (310-13).

une dolçors al cuer li point,
qui le soslieve contremont;
et li doiens le resomont,
qui desire a mangier car crue
qui n'est de paon ne de grue,
ains est de l'andolle pendant
u les plusors sont atendant. (le Leu, "La Veuve" 350)

[A sweet sensation pricks her heart and lifts up her spirit, and arouses in the bearded counselor under her skirts an appetite for meat, neither peacock nor crane, but that dangling sausage for which so many [women] are eager. (le Leu, "The Widow" 148)]

Descriptions of the Widow's sex drive are accompanied by descriptions of the discrepancy between appearance and reality such as: "Ensi va acontant ses fables / qui ne sont mie veritables" (le Leu, "La Veuve" 344) and "On puet de fust veïr l'escorce, / mais on ne set qu'il a dedens" (360) ("So she carries on, acting her part, in which there is scarcely a word of truth" (le Leu, "The Widow" 146) and "You can see the bark of the tree, but you can't tell what lies underneath" (151)). The Widow's genitalia, which the story names her "Golïas," or "Goliath," represent just such an interpretive challenge. Indeed, it is not entirely clear that Goliath has an "underneath" that can be discovered. The Widow's Goliath is a menacing image in the story. It seems out of control; we are told that the Widow cannot restrain "her hairy Goliath [that] so pricks and excites her" (le Leu, "The Widow" 152): "Golïas tant l'argüe et coite, / et li fus don't ele est esprisse, / qu'ele en a un saciet a prisse" (le Leu, "La Veuve" 364-6). The woman's new husband is clearly threatened by her monstrous sex drive:

je ne vos puis tenir covent.

Golïas bee trop sovent.
jo ne le puis asasiier,
tos i morrai de desiier. (368)

["I cannot keep my agreement with you. Goliath gapes too often. I can't satisfy him; I'm likely to die before I do" (le Leu, "The Widow" 153)]

The husband, apparently, is intimidated by Goliath's consuming emptiness. The characterization of Goliath as an insatiable, consuming void can be read as an image of the Widow's ultimate unknowability.

In these stories, characterizations of the women's obvious identities clearly contradict characterizations of their unknowability. Although the fabliaux often reproduce the ideological fantasy of compliant women with fixed identities, they also represent women as impossible to fully understand or control. We have seen that many fabliaux describe this possibility as monstrous and terrifying. The Widow, for example, is a detestable archetype of the lustful, deceptive Woman. However, not all fabliaux reproduce this generalization. Some fabliaux suggest the possible worth of female pleasure by dwelling on specific moments of that pleasure. Many emphasize and relish in the possibilities for individuals to satisfy their desires outside of their established, legitimized social roles. For instance, in the story "Le Dit des Perdriz," or "The Partridges," the peasant's wife is characterized by, and condemned for, her appetites. When her husband gives her two partridges to cook, she does so then cannot restrain herself from tasting them:

Quant Diex li dona a avoir
ne bëoit pas a grant avoir,
mes a toz ses bons aconplir.
L'une pertris cort envaïr:

andeus les eles en menjue" ("Le Dit des Perdiz" 59).

[The wife set the spit and took a pinch of the skin, for she was very much given to gluttony whenever God provided something to eat. She did not seek after great wealth, but only to fulfill all her little desires. She rushed to attack the first partridge and ate both its wings. ("The Partridges" 123)]

Even though this woman is dismissed for her gluttony, the story invites the reader to experience the pleasure of her illicit meal by describing a moment of it in gratifying detail. After eating one of the partridges, she is tempted by the second. When she does not see her husband coming,

la langue li prist a fremir
sus la pertris qu'ele ot lessie;
ja ert toute vive enragie,
s'encor n'en a un petitet!
Le col en tret tout souavet,
si le menja par grant douçor;
ses dois en leche tout entor.
"Lasse!" fet ele, "que ferai?
Se tout menjüe, que dirai?
et conment le porrai lessier?
J'en ai molt trés grant desirrier.
Or aviegne qu'avenir puet:
quar toute mengier le m'estuet!" ("Le Dit des Perdiz" 60)

[When she saw that [her husband] wasn't coming, her mouth began to water for the partridge that was left. She would go mad if she didn't

> have just a little piece of it. She pulled off the neck very gently and ate it with great gusto, licking her fingers all over. "Alas!" she said. "What shall I do? If I eat it all, what shall I say? But how can I keep from eating it? I have such a great desire for it! Now come what may, I must eat it all!" ("The Partridges" 124)]

The rest of the story concerns the wife's clever solution to her problem—she shifts the blame onto the local priest. Not surprisingly, the story's moral dismisses the brief but delicious insight into the wife's pleasurable experience. The author concludes, explaining that he "told this tale as a lesson to show that woman was made to deceive. She turns lies into truth and truth into lies" ("The Partridges" 126):

> Par example cis fabliaus dist:
> fame est fete por decevoir;
> mençonge fet devenir voir,
> et voir fet devenir voir,
> et voir fet devenir mençonge. ("Le Dit des Perdiz" 64)

However, like many fabliaux, the moral's dismissal of the wife's deception does not erase the reader's memory and enjoyment of her illicit pleasure.

Another Old French fabliau, "De la Borgoise d'Orliens," or, "The Wife of Orléans," also suggests the possible value of a deceptive woman's pleasure. This is the story of a burgher's wife who, having befriended a young clerk, agrees to become his lover. Her husband becomes suspicious of the friendship and decides to try and discover if his wife is unfaithful. He announces that he is going away on business and, that evening, he returns to the house disguised as the lover. Although she says nothing, the wife recognizes her husband and realizes that he intends to trap her; "Quant el le prist a aperçoivre, / si repensse de lui deçoivre" ("De la Borgoise" 310) ("no sooner had she understood this than she began to think how best she might take her husband in his own trap" ("The Wife of Orleans" 3)). Ultimately, she

arranges to have her husband beaten in the name of her marital fidelity while she joins her lover in bed. The husband is thoroughly fooled: "Par mon chief, el s'en delivra / com preude fame et comme sage!" ("De la Borgoise d'Orliens" 320) ("'I swear,' he said, 'she behaved like a wise and virtuous woman'" ("The Wife of Orleans" 7)). Like most fabliaux, "De la Borgoise d'Orliens" assumes the deficiency of the socially chaotic fabliau world. It is disturbing that individuals like the wife can achieve personal pleasure at the expense of social harmony. The shortcoming of the fabliau world is evident in the story's highly ironic ending. While the wife enjoys herself in bed, her husband is beaten and thrown on a dung heap; he even considers himself lucky when it is over:

> Mes ce l'a molt reconforté
> et mis hors de mauvés penssé
> qu'il sent sa fame a si loial;
> un oef ne prise tout son mal
> et pensse, s'il en puet garir,
> molt la voudra tozjors chierir. ("De la Borgoise d'Orliens" 320)
>
> [Despite his pain, however, the burgher was not cast down but was much cheered by the idea that he had such a loyal wife. Really he didn't care a farthing for all his pain, and he thought that if only he could recover from his wounds he would always love and cherish his good woman. ("The Wife of Orleans" 6)]

The wife could not have manipulated her husband more perfectly.

The disturbing lack of stable social order is not entirely condemned in "De la Borgoise d'Orliens." This story dwells on the pleasure experienced in this episode. After the husband's nephews have (unknowingly) beaten him, they go home and enjoy some good wine:

En la meson sont reverti;
de bons vins orent a foison,
toz des meillors de la meson,
et des blans et des auvernois,
autant com se il fussent rois. (318)

[they went back into the house, where they found a great plenty of wine, both white and red, the finest in the house, and they sat and drank like kings" ("The Wife of Orleans" 6)]

The wife's liaison is similarly pleasurable:

. . . la dame ot gastiaus et vin
et blanche toaille de lin
et grosse chandoile de cire;
si tient a son ami concile
toute la nuit dusques au jor. ("De la Borgoise d'Orliens" 318)

[the wife took cakes and wine to her chamber and white linen napkins and a great wax candle; and she and her lover passed the whole night together until the day broke. ("The Wife of Orleans" 6)]

This fabliau, like many stories in this genre, appreciates these possibilities for private initiative and pleasure, even though they are simultaneously disturbed by them.

The Wife's Specific Pleasure and Pain

Like these French fabliaux, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" provides a perspective on the specific pleasures of a woman who might otherwise have been easily dismissed, like the Widow, as an emblem of the manipulative, appetitive Woman. In fact, the "Prologue" represents an episode in her life that is much more particularized than

analogous moments in the Old French fabliaux. In this part of the "Prologue," the Wife's generalized existence gains details and specificities. This section reveals both her pleasure and her pain. When this happens, she is granted a degree of complexity and independence beyond the stereotypes of medieval gender ideology; because of this episode, "Alison of Bath represents a momentary imagining of something other than the prototypical woman of antifeminist satire" (Dickson 61). As a result, the Wife does not merely reproduce and confirm her subordination. She no longer simply corroborates the validity of gender stereotypes, but destabilizes that ideological perspective that would understand her merely as a subject of patriarchal authority who is incapable of offering an alternative perspective on that authority.[96]

Although the relevance of the Wife's lived experience is not evident in the first part of her "Prologue" because it is guided by patriarchal authority, in the part of the "Prologue" dedicated to her relationship with Jankyn, the Wife's lived pleasure and pain, the specificities of her engagement with authority, are made visible. Like some Old French fabliaux, the "Prologue" focuses on the Wife's specific emotions and suggests their possible worth. However, in this extended exploration of the Wife's character, Chaucer also reveals something about the Wife's initial self-representation according to medieval gender ideology. This self-representation is revealed to be not merely the natural and unavoidable dependence of the feminine on the masculine. Rather, it comes out of specific moments and relationships and is a product of the patriarchal authority that defines itself in opposition to that perversity. When the Wife's reiteration of gender ideology is revealed to have a

[96] Susan K. Hagen also notices a discrepancy between the Wife of Bath and the authorities she cites. Hagen concludes that she "embodies in personality, experience, and associative speech something deliberately different from the authoritative patterns for these traits" and argues that understanding the Wife requires "a reading of the tale that includes women's real experience rather than male projections of that experience" (115). Thus, Hagen also attends to the Wife's "subjectivity," albeit in a very different way.

history—it is not a predetermined response, but one she gradually develops—it becomes clear that the gender distinctions she seemed to confirm are not unchanging and eternal, but developed over time in specific historical contexts. Thus, the Wife's story about Jankyn is located in a contemporary landscape in which she attends community events like plays, weddings and processions, not in the unspecified, ahistoricized time of antifeminist satire and many Old French fabliaux. The Wife's opening conversations with her first three husbands also manifest this ahistoricized atemporality. I disagree with Beryl Rowland, who argues that throughout the Wife's entire story, "we feel that we are being provided with details and events from fourteenth-century domestic life" (140). The Wife's tales of her first three husbands are not "realistic" and do not create "the effect of authenticity" as does the tale of her last husband, Jankyn (140). These first three relationships are utterly unspecified. The Wife makes no attempt to distinguish the three husbands at all: "The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde" (WBPr 197). She also does not differentiate between her responses to the three husbands:

> They loved me so wel, by God above,
> That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love!
>
> . . . .
>
> I governed hem so wel, after my lawe,
> That ech of hem ful blisful was and fawe
> To brynge me gaye thynges fro the fayre.
> They were ful glad whan I spak to hem faire,
> For, God it woot, I chidde hem spitously. (207-8, 219-23)

In this description, the Wife's behavior is predictable and unchanging, as are the responses of the three husbands. The story of the Wife's fourth husband, while it does mention some specific places (like his burial under the "roode beem" (496)) and a specific moment (when she returned "fro Jerusalem" (495)), is also largely

ahistoricized and nonspecific. In this narration, the Wife describes them both, and their conflict, in a general, indeterminate way—she punishes him "For angre, and for verray jalousye" (488) because he is a "revelour" (453). These generalized comments, despite their more detailed setting, are not as surprising and disruptive as the Jankyn episode, which focuses more extensively on the specificities of the Wife's relationship with Jankyn and their emotional struggle.

The story of the Wife's relationship with Jankyn is different from the first part of the "Prologue" in that it is not described in the abstract, universalizing satiric mode. Their argument about his book of wicked wives is located in a particularized, domestic setting: it takes place in the household as the result of Jankyn's domestic practice of sitting by the fire and reading from his book of wicked wives;

> . . . every nyght and day was his custume,
> Whan he hadde leyser and vacacioun
> From oother worldly occupacioun,
> To reden on this book of wikked wyves. (682-85)

In the Jankyn episode, the Wife's struggle with gender stereotypes is part of a specific power relationship: it takes place in the context of her relationship with Jankyn and is one of the means by which power circulates in their marriage.

As the Wife's relationship with and feelings for Jankyn are particularized, she becomes less predictable and uncomplicated—in particular, in terms of her relationship to monetary exchange and sex. She is no longer clearly greedy: she pointedly notes that she married Jankyn "for love, and no richesse" (526). She also says, "to hym yaf I al the lond and fee / That ever was me yeven therbifoore" (630-1). However, has the Wife's lust also disappeared? The Wife certainly desires Jankyn sexually:

> As help me God, whan that I saugh hym go
> After the beere, me thoughte he hadde a paire

Of legges and of feet so clene and faire

That al myn herte I yaf unto his hoold. (596-9)

Although she desires Jankyn, this desire is not reducible to the loveless sex of her first marriages or to the simple lust of women in the Old French fabliaux. Love, tenderness, disappointment, and longing also play a part in her relationship with Jankyn. She asks, "Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose, / The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?" (786-7). Certainly, the Wife's question is valid: *who would have* supposed that the Wife responds to anti-feminist sentiments with woe and pain, rather than irrational anger or irritable nagging? She is no longer the easily categorized and loathed lustful, errant woman objectified by her text—her desire is more complex and more difficult to dismiss as worthless. Even when the Wife slaps Jankyn "on the cheke" and dramatically declares that she will die from his blow, she continues by describing how finding peace between them was a long and difficult process that caused "muchel care and wo" (808, 811). This emotional complexity allows the reader to recognize that the Wife is not as predictable and transparent as the first part of the "Prologue," organized according to the anti-feminist model, suggests.

Of course, we can recognize the possible worth of this fabliau woman's desires to a greater degree than in most fabliaux because the story is told from her point of view. This is not a common characteristic of fabliaux, which are usually told from the perspective of an uninvolved third-person narrator. By locating the narratorial voice in the fabliau wife, Chaucer is able to reveal the conflicted and imperfect ways in which medieval ideology is internalized. When the Wife includes the specific Jankyn episode in her text, a notable departure from her anti-feminist antecedents, she indicates that, while she has internalized gender ideology, the conditions of her reproduction of that ideology are determined by her lived experience. Unlike her antecedents, the Wife assumes the relevance of her lived

pleasure and pain and includes details of those emotions in her story; her experience affects her representation of gender stereotypes. Clearly, the Wife's understanding of what a convincing argument looks like differs somewhat from that of the authorities she cites. By giving gender ideology a history, she reveals her own involvement in negotiating the significance of that ideology. In a sense, in relating the story of Jankyn and in tearing his book, the Wife "tears" her own previously anti-feminist text, rendering it much more fragmented and open-ended. As a result, the "Prologue" suggests that the Wife, and others who are typically dismissed as "obviously low," may be more complicated and worthwhile than we might assume, and than the Old French fabliaux, because of their structural design, often illustrate. As he does in "The Miller's Tale," Chaucer moves beyond a traditional fabliau structure to particularize a character's identity and present a new perspective on gender and social hierarchies.

"The Wife of Bath's Prologue" also moves beyond the traditional fabliau structure in the scope of its plot. Although the French fabliaux hint at a more complex representation of gender and other social hierarchies in their representation of unlimitable women and their pleasures, these stories often occur in a brief space of time, with few, if any, allusions to preceding, subsequent, or tangentially related events.[97] By expanding its scope and complicating its plot, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," like "The Miller's Tale," produces character complexity and a perspective on the complex mechanism through which social attitudes are developed and perpetuated over time. Both poems resist the fabliau tendency to reduce characters to their types. The Wife of Bath and the Miller's Alison could have been described

[97] When a fabliau depicts events over a longer period of time, these events will often all relate to a single conflict or dilemma. For instance, "De l'Enfant Qui fu Remis au Soleil" depicts events that take place over fifteen years. However, the events of the story all surround a wife's infidelity and her husband's subsequent revenge for that infidelity.

only in terms of their pursuit of bodily pleasures. By resisting this common fabliau tendency, these two Chaucerian tales suggest that identity is much more complex and variable than the late-medieval social theory can account for. Further, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" suggests that while traditional hierarchies and stereotypes can powerfully influence an individual's beliefs, those hierarchies are transformed and interrogated in the process of internalization. Although "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" focuses primarily on the gender hierarchy, rather than class boundaries like "The Miller's Tale," both tales suggest the danger of defending rigid hierarchies that have lost their explanatory power. Ultimately, this critique develops a new model that is necessary to read individuals who, like the Wife, are represented as "obviously low" or dangerously mobile.

Reading the Wife

The process of reading the Wife becomes much more complex after the Jankyn episode because she is no longer simply equivalent to the essentialized Woman, the spinning widow, constructed by anti-feminist texts. The Wife's emotional complexity proves the deficiency of the reading model that understands her according to a binary model of gender difference. The Jankyn episode reveals the limitations of the binary model's explanatory power. A binary model can not completely explain the Wife. Making sense of the Wife requires a more complex reading model than that assumed in anti-feminist texts. Pierre Bourdieu's "The Logic of Practice" articulates just such a perspective on the relationship between social reality and individual negotiation of that reality. In this book, Bourdieu suggests the need to recognize both that "the social ground . . . shapes consciousness" and "that social reality is to some extent shaped by the conceptions and representations that individuals make of the social world" (Johnson 4). This mutual influence is demonstrated in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" and it changes the way we read the

Wife and the traditional gender distinctions that initially seem to guide her self-representation. After the Jankyn episode, the reader can reconsider the beginning of the "Prologue" using a more flexible model that takes lived experience into account, and recognize the explicative limitations of a hierarchized, binary model of social difference. By making visible the Wife's emotional complexity and negotiation of authority, the "Prologue" demonstrates that meaning is determined through a process of exchange between inherited knowledges and historically located subjects. Meaning, then, is not static: there is no one source of power or signification.

When the Wife's reiteration of gender ideology is placed in a domestic history, the constructed, contingent nature of its control becomes apparent. However, this begs the question: why is the worth of the Wife's desire visible? One possible answer is that mobility, which was condemned through the image of the wandering woman, was less unambiguously negative in late medieval society. As social boundaries became more permeable, and economic influence was less consistently limited to the nobility, or to any single unchanging group of people, more people became socially significant: the realm of social intelligibility was broadening and becoming increasingly elastic. This new way of perceiving of social meaning and power is apparent through the Wife's "Prologue" not only because her profession links her with social groups that were increasing in economic influence and cultural intelligibility, but also because those social groups were influential for the very reasons that anti-feminist texts condemned women like the Wife: mobility, or the evasion of strictly defined social borders. Although it is possible, it is not necessary to argue with Mary Carruthers that the Wife was a "capitalist entrepreneur"[98] in order to suggest that her newly visible desire is related to social

[98] Other scholars have resisted this conclusion because some scholarship on the medieval wool trade seems to suggest that it is improbable, although not impossible. Beryl Rowland summarizes the arguments against Carruthers' conclusion:

change.[99] The Wife's challenge to gender ideology is related to social change because those gender distinctions that condemn her mobility legitimize a social model that condemned social mobility and was declining in explanatory power. As this model became less feasible, the traditional gender distinctions that legitimized it also became questionable—"The Wife of Bath's Prologue" registers this ideological shift.

Recognizing Social Mobility

There are two ways in which the Wife's destabilization of the wandering, lustful woman stereotype might indicate the changing significance, the increasing intelligibility, of social mobility. I have already suggested how the misogynist implications of the Wife's profession, cloth making, and her widowhood are undermined by the visibility of her emotional complexity. Both rural cloth-makers and widows were distinguished by their social mobility. As a cloth-maker, the Wife is a member of a social group, many of whose members were increasingly influential and mobile. As a widow, she is a member of one of the most mobile, and powerful, groups of women. Mark Amsler argues that the Wife's widowhood connotes power; "that the wife is a wealthy widow endows her with a power—sexual, economic, textual, and political—which is peculiar to England and the fourteenth century" (68).

Evidence that widows, among medieval women, were relatively free of patriarchal control can be found in many recent documentary studies of medieval

---

> Experts in the medieval wool trade seem to be in general agreement regarding the position of women in the industry. Although women on occasion occupied managerial posts, they were mainly employed as wool sorters, wool wrappers, carders, spinners, weavers, and dyers. However, women did sometimes take over the family business in the wool trade, either as exporters or manufacturers. (139)

[99] Another argument for the relevance of the Wife's profession is made by John A. Alford. He argues that the significance of the Wife's clothmaking is emphasized in her composition: "her clothmaking is implicit in her textmaking. Both literally as a weaver of cloth and figuratively as a weaver of words, she is the supreme embodiment of her art" (120).

women. Medieval widows were some of the most economically independent medieval women:

> Of all medieval women, widows are often the most visible for, being without a husband and beyond the responsibility of a father, they were allowed to act independently and were no longer subsumed within the persona of their husbands as 'one flesh' or, to use the phraseology of the medieval lawyers, they were no longer 'femmes couvertes.' In particular, unlike married women, they were free to make testaments and wills, and it is through these documents that they often speak to us most forcibly. (Barron xiii)

Widows often inherited land from their husbands and controlled their own financial affairs. They were involved with more conservative forms of investment, like real estate, as well as with commercial investment, which was growing along with the flexible, less stringently hierarchized social structure and money-based economy. Judith Bennett studies women in the medieval countryside and discovers that a widow would face "many more public opportunities and responsibilities than she encountered as a married woman" (23). Maryanne Kowaleski notes that, in medieval Exeter, "a widow not infrequently continued to manage her husband's [merchant] business" (146). In her study of women in business in medieval Montpellier, Kathryn L. Reyerson asserts that widows comprised "the most [economically] active group among Montpellier women" (135). She explains that "because of their independence and potential means—they were free from their husbands' constraints and probably from their fathers' as well—widows were better equipped to participate in more diverse economic areas" (137). Speaking specifically of the textile industry, Heather Swanson notes that widows' "degree of financial security" enabled them to engage in entrepreneurial pursuits (42). Kowaleski confirms that "women in the cloth trade represented the greatest range of female participation and success of any one

occupational group" (152). Widows are condemned in antifeminist medieval literature because their independence interfered with the "feudal strategy to maintain landholdings within families or to strengthen a lord's position by controlling the marriages of his vassals' children, especially daughters. . . . Unmarried widows . . . were suspect because they destabilized the political economy of feudal marriage" (Amsler 69). Of course, as discussed in a previous chapter, other factors, such as population decline, also eroded the lines of inheritance at the end of the fourteenth century.

The Wife's profession also foregrounds social mobility: as well as associating her with Eve's work after the Fall, spinning, the Wife's cloth-making also associates her with a social group—those involved with the textile industry—that was of great economic significance; "the late fourteenth century was a new period of growth of the wool textile industry. . . . The growth of the industry at the end of the fourteenth century is proved by the considerable rise in the export figures (which are considered reliable)" (Hilton "Social Concepts" 144). E. Carus-Wilson agrees, saying that at the end of the fourteenth century, England's export of textiles and wool "was evidently enjoying a boom" (249). This boom not only made cloth merchants wealthy, but increased employment and prosperity in general:

> Peasants and artisans also prospered, and the prosperity of both may in part be attributed to the expansion of the cloth industry. For this, in addition to giving employment to many whole-time artisans, also gave employment part-time to many agricultural workers, especially to small-holders such as cottars, and to those wives and daughters everywhere who made up that vast army of spinners needed to keep weavers supplied: thus it put money into the pockets of almost every family in the cloth-making regions—and cloth-making was then widespread over many parts of the countryside. (251)

One area that had increased economic activity was Bath. This meant increased prosperity for women like the Wife of Bath: "Bath city records . . . show us women as prosperous property owners as a result of their textile labours" (Holloway 27).[100] Cloth making grew in importance partly because of the increasing freedom of both rural peasants who would produce the wool and rural commodity producers who turned that wool into cloth. The rural commodity producers were less restricted than their urban counterparts, who were regulated by merchants, gilds, and their exclusion from or admission to the freedom[101]: "Unlike the urban economy which was of an essentially corporate type, the situation in the country areas was such that it was possible to allow the workers a relatively large degree of freedom" (Kellenbenz 49).[102]

Increased rural mobility in later medieval England was made possible in part by population declines. In rural areas, smallholders and serfs increasingly sought, and were able to evade the restrictions imposed by their lords and the seigneurial courts. Increasing rural prosperity inspired a gradual process of

> testing the regime: serfs successfully left their manors, attempted to conceal the marriages of their daughters, and secretly acquired free land. Customary tenants also sought to evade the restrictions on the sale and leasing of land, and neglected or wasted their buildings. They

---

[100] Manly also characterizes Bath as "a part of England in which weaving had been a flourishing industry for at least a hundred and fifty years. Moreover, a notable feature of the weaving industry was the prominent part taken in it by women" (227).

[101] Several medieval historians, including M. M. Postan, Georges Duby, and Rodney H. Hilton, have argued that the rural economy was the most dynamic element of the late-medieval English economy. Other historians, such as Robert Brenner, argue that the money economy was, in fact, more powerful. In Chapter 5 of *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, Lee Patterson outlines this debate. Patterson is, of course, a strong proponent of the former position.

[102] Although, as I have discussed in my chapter on "The Miller's Tale," mobility increased in urban as well as rural areas. The population decline caused the breakdown of "traditional relationships between wealth, status, age and office" (Butcher 95).

> [also] failed or refused to perform labour services. (Dyer "Social and Economic" 30)

Christopher Dyer summarizes the tenants' evasions of seigneurial control, saying, "the existence of a strand of open and self-conscious opposition to seigneurial control sometimes emerges from episodes recorded in even the most routine series of court records" (30). The peasants' "successful resistance to the lords' pressure for the transfer of surplus" resulted in a prosperous, self-sufficient peasant economy (Hilton "Feudalism" 219). These observations about rural peasants can be extended to explain the prosperity and economic influence of small commodity producers, perhaps including the Wife, because such producers purchased goods from rural tenants. In her book *Medieval Artisans*, Heather Swanson argues that the late medieval population decline not only caused the extension of pastoral farming, particularly among smallholders, and the accumulation of holdings among the wealthier peasantry, but that such accumulation enabled some peasants to establish themselves as woolchapmen and begin operations as clothiers. She says that the cloth industry in Suffolk, Essex and the West Country

> initially obtained supplies locally, and . . . small farmers [who were] able to accumulate capital in the form of lands and stock . . . gave the impetus to this rural [cloth-making] industry. These small scale producers were . . . in a position to take advantage of the increasing supply of wool. (143-4)

The increasing economic importance of the cloth industry, and of the rural commodity producers on the whole, does not represent the unequivocal overturning of an old system by a new one.[103] Rather, it caused a gradual testing of the

[103] This does not mean that rural tenants did not *attempt* to completely overturn the old system. Dyer suggests that the Revolt of 1381 may have been the rebels' attempt to cast off the "hand of lordship and that this may have been inspired by increased

established networks of power. Ultimately, and more importantly for "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," this economic shift caused the expansion of the realm of social intelligibility. The instabilities internal to medieval social and gender binaries were becoming visible because the social conditions through which those binaries were produced and sustained, such as the limitations on rural commodity producers and smallholders, were changing.

Clearly, the small commodity producers did not threaten to put the wealthy urban merchants out of business, any more than the smallholders threatened to bankrupt their landlords or widows threatened to become the dominant group in the medieval economy. However, these groups, because of their increased ability to cross social boundaries, had a significant and conspicuous economic and cultural impact. Christopher Dyer argues that their economic mobility inspired the rebels of 1381 to pursue further freedom. The rebels' increasingly flexible situation, according to Dyer, heightened their resentment of "not just . . . serfdom and servile tenures, but also . . . the very existence of lordship" (42). Certainly in the context of the Revolt, the vibrancy of the rural economy registered as an appreciable social development. While many landlords experienced economic difficulties, there is

> evidence of growing prosperity among the peasantry. Smallholders would have enjoyed the benefits of rising wages. There seems to have been a general increase in the numbers of animals owned, judging from the tenant animals presented for trespassing on the lords' demesne lands. . . . The value of land remained remarkably high, and the tenants seem to have had large amounts of cash at their disposal. . . . Disputes

---

prosperity ("Social and Economic" 20). He notes that the rebels of 1381 were rural men "whose economic position was improving before 1381" and suggests that "any economic explanation of the revolt must be expressed in terms of rising expectations" (35, 10). This will be discussed further below.

> recorded in court rolls reveal a lively trade in grain, wool, cheese, animals and timber, sometimes in large quantities. (22)

Of course, the assertion of the rebels' freedom in the Revolt was not, for the most part, perceived as worthwhile. However, there were many other, more subtle, ways in which the economic growth of these mobile groups readily translated into cultural significance, and could less absolutely generate condemnation.

One way in which these increasingly influential groups could become culturally intelligible is through charitable donations. In the late Middle Ages, such donations were increasingly made by non-aristocratic laity. As Jenny Kermode explains, religious donation became a popular means through which an individual could ensure social recognition and comment:

> whatever the depth of individual belief, religion was a vehicle for expressing many social concerns and for making personal statements. As the wealthiest and most numerous group of testators, the merchants of York, Berverley and Hull were in a better position than most townsfolk to . . . exploit the ambiguous potential of religious display for self-advertisement. (117)

In her study of merchant funerals, Thrupp concludes that London merchants were troubled by decisions about "the nature of the feast to be held after the memorial service, or 'month's mind' a month later and again after the anniversary service or 'obit,' and the amount of the alms to be given away on each of these occasions" because these things "would all reflect upon [the merchant's] status" (152-3). Public recognition for charity was not limited to wealthy merchants, however. Many lay-persons, with differing degrees of wealth, were publicly recognized for their charity because when donations were made to parish churches, the donor's name might appear on the donated object or in the church's bede-roll, a list of church benefactors. Those names on the bede-roll would have been read out loud in the

church at regular intervals in recognition of the donors. According to Eamon Duffy, although the bede-roll was a way to identify "parochial membership in such a way as to exclude the 'poverty of the parish' . . . in prosperous urban communities" (154), it served less to distinguish between rich and poor in rural areas:

> in rural communities the gap between rich and poor might not be so firmly fixed, and the notion of what it was to be a parishioner more generously conceived. It is clear from the surviving bede-roll of a small and poor village community like Morebath on Exmoor that the sum required to qualify as a "gode doer" to the parish might be very small. (154)

Charitable donations were thus one way in which newly prosperous groups could gain visibility in their communities. Charity could prove not only the donors' parochial piety and affluence, but also their involvement in the community. A characteristic of late medieval wills is their emphasis "in obituary provisions for a corporate remembrance. . . . [T]he stipulation that 'oon of the churchewardeynes, or bothe, be at the dirige and masses' is not [unusual]. Indeed, testators frequently required the presence of a wider representation of the community" (Duffy 134-5). Such charitable parishioners attained their community's recognition and suggested a correlation between their personal initiative and corporate values. One way in which emergent social groups could achieve cultural intelligibility is by establishing this correlation.

A New Reading Model

This analysis of the various ways in which the Wife reminds us of groups who had increasing social mobility in late medieval England can account for the visibility of her negotiation of authority in the Jankyn episode. Changes in the economic structure of late medieval England meant that a wider group of people registered as

economically consequential and that the make-up of this group was not static. Thus, it became increasingly futile to attempt to fix social groups and understand power in terms of a vertical hierarchy. This shift meant that the explanatory power of the old ways of thinking about social difference, according to a binary model, was declining—the attempt to maintain strict social categories was decreasingly effective.

Through the Jankyn episode, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" demonstrates an interpretive strategy that can account for social mobility. The "Prologue" neither unambiguously reiterates nor disputes medieval gender ideology because it does not represent gender or social difference according to a binary model. Rather, the Wife's lived pleasure and pain reveals that social power and meaning are determined in specific social contexts through a process of negotiation and exchange. An understanding of meaning-making and social power that does not demand either that all social actors fit into a binary, or that all power or meaning emanates from one source, can tolerate the contrary significations of the Wife's weaving and widowhood—which both support and challenge medieval gender stereotypes. The "Prologue" does not require that we read the Wife as *either* the predictably lustful wife of anti-feminist texts *or* the aggressive champion of an emerging social power.[104] Rather, the interpretive strategy taught in the "Prologue" encourages the reader to recognize that there can be multiple sources of social power and meaning—multiple

---

[104] In "'Of his love daungerous to me'", Elaine Tuttle Hansen argues that these two categories represent two major scholarly schools of thought on the Wife:

> At one end of the spectrum of opinion, some have insisted that the Wife is to be seen as a victim of the antifeminism so rampant in her day, ironically trapped in the misogynist culture she explicitly names as the enemy and blind to the ways in which her tactics further embed her in the assumptions she tries in vain to defy . . . . At the other end of the spectrum, many have argued that the Wife knows that she is doing all this and therefore represents an independent, strong woman, a historically plausible counter to the idealized or demonized female character found in both religious and secular writings throughout the

categories of social intelligibility. This reading model does not depend on strict social boundaries and a single, stable origin of power. As gender distinctions are realized through the Wife's process of negotiation and struggle, social power and meaning are realized through a similarly flexible, involved process. Inherited knowledges and power relationships are internalized, struggled over and reproduced by diverse social groups from various social locations. Such a model can, as was increasingly necessary in the late Middle Ages, account for the worth and social relevance of the experiences of a wider group of people.

The Wife is not the only pilgrim on the Canterbury pilgrimage who brings into question binary models of gender and social difference. Other newly intelligible pilgrims tell tales that challenge the validity of binary logic. I have already discussed how the Miller and the wealthy merchant of 'The Shipman's Tale" undermine social binaries. Texts like "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," "The Miller's Tale" and "The Shipman's Tale" among others, reveal the internal instabilities of binary models of difference because, in *The Canterbury Tales*, these models are continually contextualized; they are placed in subjectively, socially or textually specific contexts. When gender and social ideologies are historicized, they no longer appear to be timeless or eternal. Historicization makes it possible to recognize, as Dollimore says, the "historical contingency of meaning" (86). As the next chapter will explain, "The Summoner's Tale" is another text that foregrounds the significance of its context. Although the Summoner attempts to erase the destabilizing effects of a fourteenth-century institutional conflict, it finds its way into his tale. Social ambiguity, it seems, is tenacious.

Middle Ages. (274)

Chapter 5

"The Summoner's Tale" and the Persistence of Social Ambiguity

Introduction

The three previous chapters have read the relationships of Fragment I, "The Shipman's Tale" and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" to the French fabliaux in order to discover Chaucer's interest in genre and its ability to shape a reader's response to class and gender hierarchies. "The Summoner's Tale" is also interested in genre's persuasive ability, and the power of historicization to reveal that identity is not an unchanging, inherited status. In this tale, Chaucer again takes up fabliau's tentative appreciation of individual desire and continues to complicate the late medieval representation of identity. In the process, he suggests that social authority is multiple and conditional. The tale indicates the futility of striving for a unified, absolute authority, even with the aid of sophisticated narrative strategies. The Summoner tries, unsuccessfully, to do just this. In his attempt to condemn the friar without representing division in the church, the Summoner suggests that the Friar John's moral corruption inspires the laity to reject him. At the outset, "The Summoner's Tale" seems to be an exemplum, a brief narrative form used to illustrate a moral. In this case, the tale's moral purpose is to condemn the friar's greed. However, as Larry Scanlon says, the "central event" in "The Summoner's Tale," when Thomas rebukes the Friar with a fart, "is more characteristic of a fabliau than an exemplum—exempla generally turn on miracles, not scatology" (163). The section of the tale that comes after this moment can more usefully be described as a fabliau than an exemplum.

Like "The Miller's Tale," "The Summoner's Tale is preceded by a prologue that informs its exploration of and with fabliau. "The Summoner's Prologue" employs some fabliau techniques to confirm the significance of the tale's fabliau

moment and reveal his strategy, one that is common to many Old French fabliaux. The Summoner does not argue for his rival's, the Friar's condemnation. Rather, the Summoner attacks friars by erasing their specificity and by associating them with bodily functions and visceral drives. The Summoner condemns the Friar by reducing him to a type. The friars in hell are not individuals, but a swarm of men as indistinguishable as insects:

> Right so as bees out swarmen from an hyve,
> Out of the develes ers ther gonne dryve
> Twenty thousand freres on a route,
> And thurghout helle swarmed al aboute. (Sum Pro 29-32)

The friars are not only indistinguishable from each other, but they are also virtually identical to devils: "Freres and feendes been but lyte asonder" (10). Of course, central to this condemnation is the Summoner's location of friars in the devil's ass. By associating the friars not only with the devil, but also with the foulest part of the body, the anus, the Summoner, like a fableor, makes their wrongdoing seem obvious and unarguable.

The Summoner continues to use fabliau techniques such as these in his tale. Although the tale follows the pattern of exemplum in its initial concern with the Friar's moral failure, it focuses on class dynamics and follows a fabliau pattern after its turning point. The first, exemplum, part of the tale assumes the stability and authority of the Friar's claim to glossing ability and condemns his selfish misuse of that authoritative discourse. This section, the exemplum, attests to the Friar's limitations, not that of the church authority he represents. When the tale shifts from exemplum to fabliau, at the moment when the Friar touches Thomas, the Friar's immoral selfishness is placed in a lay, not clerical, context. Interestingly, in this lay context, self-interested behavior is not represented as unquestionably wrong.

Thomas and Jankyn's self-interested behavior is not unequivocally condemned, as is the Friar's.

In this chapter, I argue that "The Summoner's Tale" resembles first an exemplum and then a fabliau and it claims a distinct difference between these two sections of the tale. I will exaggerate the difference between exemplum and fabliau in the tale—set up "straw genres," in a sense—in order to discuss one of the Summoner's narrative techniques that might otherwise go unnoticed. This is not to say that these two genres are unproblematic categories that are always absolutely evident, or that the Summoner is consciously and deliberately employing two genres. However, even though the Summoner may not identify the two generic patterns that his tale follows, it is clear that he uses two textual strategies and assumes their difference—the tale's contradiction makes this clear. Recognizing these two textual strategies is necessary in order to identify his agenda. He takes advantage of their difference in order to place the friar's chastisement in a lay context, not a moral or clerical one, and, in so doing, to demonstrate the stability of the church's institutional boundaries. This chapter argues that these two strategies resemble two genres, exemplum and fabliau, and that the effects generated by "mixing" these genres ultimately demonstrate the impossibility of ever erasing social contingency, even with the help of generic limitations on the text.

The tale's shift from exemplum to fabliau is significant because it produces a contradiction between two differing ways of characterizing ingenuity. Because of the tale's dual generic trajectories, the transgression and its punishment in this tale do not mutually work towards a single ideological goal. Although the tale initially demonstrates clerical authority in its condemnation of the Friar for neglecting to use his glossing abilities for morally productive purposes, ultimately, this authority is undermined when the tale's fabliau section offers a different definition of social "productivity."

This contradiction leads me to ask why the Summoner makes the shift to fabliau and why he considers the Friar's immorality in a lay context. The answer to this question lies in the way "The Summoner's Tale" demonstrates that historicization, or exploring the ways in which textual meanings are historically specific and constructed, can reveal the complexities that a text's organization conceals. Although all texts, not just generically uncertain texts like "The Summoner's Tale," are produced out of historical contradictions, such contradictions are resolved, or at least obscured, in much of their narrativization. In Chapter 1 of her book, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*, Mary Poovey offers a succinct summary of the power of narrative, focusing particularly on the danger of narrative for literary critics and historians. She says, because "causation is never unidirectional[,] . . . the kind of linear narrative that many literary critics and historians employ necessarily obscures the critical complexity of social relations" (18). The same is, of course, true of all texts to differing degrees. In their desire for narrative coherence, or as a result of their structural boundaries, texts obscure the complexity of the issues they address.[105] However, these contradictions can be rediscovered by returning a text to its history. This is Jonathan Dollimore's claim in his discussion of materialist cultural critique in *Sexual Dissidence*:

> Ideology typically fixes meaning, naturalizing or eternalizing its prevailing forms by putting them beyond question, and thereby also effacing the contradictions and conflicts of the social domain. Materialist cultural critique aims to contest ideology in this sense, and via several strategies. First, by restoring meanings to their histories, it tries to show how meaning is powerfully controlled. . . . At the same

[105] I have already discussed how this is true for the Old French fabliaux

> time this critique shows the historical contingency of meaning but in a way which does not then imply the arbitrariness of meaning, if by that is meant that it can be simply, subjectively, or unilaterally altered. (86)

To discover the obscured meanings in "The Summoner's Tale," the reasons for its generic contradiction, this chapter will look to the tale's historical context, as suggested by the frame narrative of *The Canterbury Tales*.[106] Because this text is placed in a specific time and place—late fourteenth-century England—by the frame narrative, its contradiction can be read in the context of fraternal disruptiveness in the symbolic and economic order of the late medieval church: because friars were both successful in achieving church goals and disruptive of church hierarchies, they challenged the unity of the church's institutional identity.

This argument contradicts those scholars who argue that Chaucer's Friar and Summoner are ahistoricized representatives of their respective estates. For instance, Jill Mann argues that the conflict between the Friar and the Summoner has an origin in estates satire: "Friars are consistently presented in literature as hating and being hated by the clergy" (48). A central argument in Mann's book is that Chaucer's pilgrims are characterized according to their social positions: the pilgrims each "correspon[d] to a certain mental stereotype of the characteristics of their social class" (14).[107] I do not deny that the pilgrims are characterized in such a way to reference conventional definitions of their social functions, nor do I dispute that Chaucer was influenced by estates literature. With Peggy Knapp, I assume that this tale "is woven of strong discursive cable, partly from old anti-fraternal material and

---

[106] Paul Strohm also finds that the Friar's and Summoner's tales have a "particularized historical frame," but finds it within the tales themselves and their treatment of sworn brotherhood (*Social Chaucer* 97).

[107] I do not mean to dismiss Mann's book, which has a much more sophisticated argument than I can summarize here. I must point out that she does not describe the Canterbury pilgrims as simple reproductions of those characters in estates satire. For instance, she recognizes many ways in which Chaucer allows his characters some

partly from live, local debates" (57). Chaucer shapes his texts so that they echo the "social and institutional realities" of late medieval England (Hahn and Kaeuper 91). This chapter will primarily argue that the Summoner adopts a dual-genre textual strategy because of the nature of the friars' disruption of the late medieval church hierarchy. The tale reminds us, for instance, of a "very real conflict into which the friars' assumption of the right to absolve [(among other rights)] brought them in local parishes in fourteenth-century England" (Knapp 58). The antagonism between Chaucer's Friar and Summoner is explained by conflicts like this one, not just the characterizations of estates satire.

On a more general note, this chapter assumes that Chaucer's pilgrims remind us of the late fourteenth-century context because, throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's pilgrims not only represent, but, *reflect on* their social functions: "Rather than being representatives of social functions, . . . the pilgrims become individuals who have been assigned those functions, men and women enacting externally imposed roles toward which each has his or her own kind of relationship" (Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject* 27). Chapter 4 has already defined the reading model that Chaucer develops as one in which individuals are not just reduced to their social role. *The Canterbury Tales* encourages a reading that recognizes that conventional social identities are internalized and negotiated. The use of genre in "The Summoner's Tale" represents another way in which Chaucer makes this point: by undermining genre's ability to reproduce strict social categories, Chaucer suggests that ideology is not inescapable. Individuals like the Summoner do reflect on their social positions and can, even inadvertently, change those positions.

The late medieval context specifically relevant for "The Summoner's Tale" is initially introduced in "The Friar's Prologue" when the Friar tells the Wife that she

---

ambiguity.

need not "speken but of game, / And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name, / To prechyng and to scoles of clergye" (1275-77). The Friar speaks for "auctoritees," here, in order to preserve the realm of authoritative discourse for himself (and, presumably, his fellow friars). His subsequent attack on the Summoner reveals that his attempt to claim authority is less directed to the Wife than it is to the Summoner, a member of the secular clergy. There were numerous conflicts between friars and the secular clergy in the late Middle Ages, many of which were related to institutional authority. The friars were threatening to the secular clergy in part because of their independence from the secular clergy's power structure. The friars also had intellectual authority because they were generally better educated than the secular clergy. This education helped them to preach successfully and gain the favor, and financial support, of the laity. The friars' success in preaching and providing ecclesiastical services to the laity caused a decline in the demand for the services of the secular clergy; this situation obviously led to great conflict between these two groups. This context of institutional discord explains the Summoner's move to fabliau. In locating the friars' chastisement in a lay context, in changing genres, the Summoner represents the laity, those responsible for the friars' success, differently in order to resolve the problem of the friars' contradiction. In "The Summoner's Tale," the laity are suspicious of Friar John and are responsible for his chastisement. Accordingly, he can cause no institutional schism. However, the Summoner is not able to completely efface the friars' disruptiveness. By shifting genres, he reproduces the contradiction that he attempts to obscure.

Ultimately, the Summoner's attempt to dispel the institutionally divisive influence of friars is unsuccessful. He does not establish the church's internal cohesiveness and independent authority. By shifting his focus from morality to lay authority, the Summoner demonstrates that church and lay authority are not independent of each other and that social values are determined by not one set of

principles and assumptions, but by many. His failure to prove the independence of church authority is particularly evident when he produces a contradiction between two definitions of socially productive behavior: the Summoner, in generically different moments of the text, represents self-interested behavior in different ways. First, he represents such behavior as immoral, and then he represents it as worthwhile. This contradiction reveals the futility of his attempt to construct a stable authority—and the needlessness of such an attempt, for the tale demonstrates that the lack of an absolute social authority does not result in violence and chaos.

"The Summoner's Tale" as Exemplum

In the first, exemplum part of "The Summoner's Tale," Friar John emerges as a problematic character because of his immorality. The story clearly condemns the Friar's greed and hypocrisy and failure to preach the Word of God. As Whittock points out, "the friar in the tale himself exemplifies all the deadly sins, and is the ironical subject of his own sermonising" (136). However, in the first part of the tale, even though the Friar fails to defer to moral authority, the stability of that authority is not brought into question. The exemplum section asserts that the Friar's selfish behavior is wrong; the moral principles according to which he is judged are, for the most part, uncontested. Read according to the moralizing practice of the exemplum, Friar John's principal moral duty, which he fails to perform, is to use his glossing, or interpretive ability to indicate transcendent truth.

As a friar, Friar John "embodies the power of glossing" (Scanlon 167). Friars were commonly associated with such interpretive skills because they were both well educated and dedicated to doing "the work of preaching and evangelising" (Butler and Wilson 53). Of course, "preaching was the *raison d'être* of all the major mendicant orders" (Burton 124). The Friar is trained to use his glossing ability to locate and communicate truth and is clearly aware that he is responsible for using his

interpretive abilities for instructive ends. He even alludes to this responsibility in the attempt to legitimize his authority: he boasts about his ability to gloss, or locate "the secret meaning of the text, its spiritual kernal" (Knapp 57). Friar John tells Thomas that he will teach him

> . . . al the glose.
> Glosynge is a glorious thyng, certeyn,
> For lettre sleeth, so as we clerkes seyn. (SumT 1792-4)

The Friar suggests that his authority lies in the potential productivity of his interpretive skills; these skills allow him to look beyond a text's surface to its essence or inner meaning, which he can then reveal to others. The Friar claims that he is unlike those gluttons who say "buf!," a belch, and then "cor meum eructavit!" (1934); in other words, he is unlike those individuals who mistake expressions of material existence for truth. Friar John further disassociates himself from materiality when he characterizes the confessor as an individual who is "slowe / To grope tendrely a conscience" (1817). According to this understanding of interpretation, the confessor gains insight by reaching beneath the confessing person's material, or bodily, existence to his or her inner reality, or conscience. The Friar justifies his authority by his ability to reach beyond the material to the essence, to move beneath surface meaninglessness to inner meaningfulness and fecundity.

The Friar suggests that glossing ability conveys authority because textual insight is the extension of a more profound insight into transcendent religious truth. He assumes that if such insight were limited to texts and people in the material realm, it would not be as authoritative, for there would be no guarantee of its integrity. Accordingly, in his attempt to gain authority, the Friar maintains that he can perceive unseen Christian truths: he claims that friars see more of "Christes secree thynges, / Than burel [lay] folk, although they weren kynges" (1871-2). The Friar implies that he can find truth within a text or human being because he has

access to transcendent truth; he can interpretively reach beyond materiality to the absolute, divine origin. Of course, Friar John's assertion of the power of glossing is not revolutionary. By the late Middle Ages, there was a long, well-established tradition of thinkers who characterized interpretation as a process of reaching beyond materiality to inner, essential meaning.

Hugh of Saint-Victor, for example, describes the text as a place of discrimination and nourishment; for Hugh, it is "a vineyard and garden" (qtd by Illich 57). Ivan Illich says that when "Hugh reads, he harvests; he picks the berries from the lines" (57). Hugh's metaphor is a variation of the "fruit and chaff" metaphor that characterizes interpretation as a process by which one discards the chaff to find the fruit. By locating the meaningful center, interpretation can be productive and beneficial. Many other metaphors were used to characterize interpretation in this way. For instance, interpretation was metaphorically represented as the process of reaching beyond a woman's veil. As Carolyn Dinshaw writes,

> The representation of the allegorical text as a veiled or clothed woman and the concomitant representation of various literary acts—reading, translating, glossing, creating a literary tradition—as masculine acts performed on this feminine body recur [in many medieval] narratives. (17)

According to this model, the literary text is veiled truth. Once again, the interpretive process is characterized as productive. Dinshaw also points out that St. Jerome conceived of interpretation as having productive, civilizing effects.

> Jerome . . . represents the reading of the pagan text as a captive woman's passage between men, her marriage, and her domestication. The reader is drawn to the text by its attractive appearance; the text is then interpreted—stripped of its stylistic and fictional blandishments, revealing and preparing its wisdom for Christian use. (23-4)

Jerome's veiled woman is ultimately prepared by the reader to reproduce truth. Her "procreative sexuality [is a] crucial [metaphor] for meaningful literature" because it characterizes reading and writing as activities that can produce tangible, beneficial results (Kruger 126). However, many medieval thinkers believed that the average flawed, "literalist" reader, is not capable of seeing the truth for himself. Eric Jager says, "he plucks 'leaves' out of Scripture, while ignoring the 'fruit'" (75).[108] Such thinkers believed that this kind of reader needs expert guidance.

According to the Friar's theory of interpretation, a trained individual can use reading and writing to locate transcendent truth and reveal that truth to others who are less able to see beyond the veil. Some medieval thinkers held that locating textual truth required an expert like the Friar because interpretation is fraught with obstacles. For example, the consequences of the Fall were thought to interfere with an individual's ability to discern the truth. Jager explains that

> Before the Fall, the two aspects of the sign were perfectly related to each other, the material sign serving as a transparent vehicle for what it signified. The Fall, however, had profoundly ruptured the sign. . . . The Fall [also] explained the condition of humans themselves as users

---

[108] Anne Clark Bartlett discusses the authorial fear of women's misreadings, in particular:

> That some male authors recognized a clear danger in what they perceived as feminine "misreadings" is clear from the concern they express over women's interpretation. For example, Richard Rolle, who wrote several Middle English devotional treatises for women, assures his female audience that reading is ultimately not very important for them. In *The Form of Living*, he advises: "You should not desire greatly many books; just hold love in your heart and in your deeds, and you have all that we (clerics) may preach or write." . . . These observations illustrate what critics have traditionally viewed as Rolle's anti-intellectualism, but when directed toward women, they make explicit the medieval commonplace that *female* and *well-educated* were terms that were incompatible. Other Middle English devotional authors demonstrate their skepticism about women's literacy more subtly. They repeatedly remind their female audiences of the differences between the literal and figurative senses of signification. (25-6)

> of signs. Exiled from the Garden and from God's presence into a world containing only traces of an absent God, they now had to labor for the knowledge they had lost with the Fall. (58-9)

According to this theory, the Fall's disruption of human understanding creates the need for learned, expert interpreters and an appropriate hierarchy of learning. The church provides those at the top of this hierarchy, for it trains churchmen like the Friar to look beyond the fallen world and see the truth that they can then convey to believers.

Clearly, there is a well-developed justification for the Friar's authority: he answers the perceived moral need for educated interpreters. The first part of "The Summoner's Tale" asserts that Friar John should be such an interpreter and use his glossing ability as he was trained to use it: to guide others to the truth. The Friar, however, does not do his moral duty. He glosses in the sense of "flattering or cajoling [people] for the purposes of material gain" (Hanning 9). Self-interest is at the root of the Friar's immorality: "Just as the friar's appeals for charity are blatant self-love, and the professed poverty of his calling a cover for avarice, so in his preaching he converts the text of the Word of God to self-interested gloss" (Cooper 179). Despite the fact that Friar John fails to live up to his moral responsibility, his negative example is not represented as undermining the potential moral benefits of glossing in the exemplum section of the story. At this point, it seems that such benefits exist but cannot be gained through the Friar's activities. In fact, the stability of moral authority as represented in the exemplum part of the tale accounts for the unequivocal condemnation of the Friar; the Friar's immoral selfishness is clearly wrong. The stability of moral authority is not threatened by the Friar's immorality because his immorality functions to unify readers: the unity of reader response assumed by the tale indicates the universality of Church authority. Exemplum demonstrates the power and unity of the church by producing a universal reader.

"The Summoner's Tale" as Fabliau

However, when the Friar, in the gesture that most clearly indicates his immoral self-interest, gropes beneath Thomas' buttocks for his reward, he departs from the intellectual realm of potential metaphorical meaningfulness and semantic stability to the fabliau realm of bodily conflict and social contest.[109] Appropriately, in this distinctive fabliau moment, the medieval metaphor of interpretation (which describes interpretation as reaching beyond the veiled surface to a productive body) is literalized: the Friar reaches beneath a covering and touches a physical body rather than a legitimizing metaphorical one. This metaphor is literalized because, in the fabliau world, there is no definitive possibility for metaphorically (or otherwise) locating stable transcendent truth. In fabliaux, interpretive insight cannot confer authority definitely because interpretation takes place in a context in which power relations are constantly being tested and reasserted. This is not to say that moral precepts in this tale are completely equivocal and, hence, meaningless. However, the fabliau part of the tale qualifies the perception that such precepts are absolutely stable and detached from their manifestation in the social realm. Fabliau's qualification indicates the contested nature of social mobility and ingenuity. By contextualizing the exemplum's position on the Friar's behavior and showing that his self-interestedness has social consequences,[110] the tale reveals that morality does not only emanate from intellectual exercises. In fact, it is enacted and worked out in the social realm. Once it is clear that moral issues like the value of self-interest are

[109] Having admitted the latter part of the tale's resemblance to fabliau, Scanlon concludes that the tale is more like an exemplum than a fabliau because, he says, it "does not share the thematic concerns of Chaucer's other fabliaux" (163 note 29). I intend to show that this tale, like Chaucer's other fabliaux, is concerned with social relationships and social order.

[110] As will be discussed later, his behavior encourages Thomas and Jankyn to have fun at the expense of social hierarchies.

also social issues, they can be debated rather than merely dismissed. Thus, fabliau allows "The Summoner's Tale" to articulate the medieval uncertainty about the merit of individual initiative and self-interested behavior and suggest that there is no one authoritative position. In keeping with the contentious nature of this issue in late medieval society, "The Summoner's Tale" uses fabliau to investigate and dispute the value of such behavior rather than condemn it unequivocally. On one level, as will be discussed later, the story maintains that such self-interest is important in a mobile social environment for an individual to achieve independence and experience pleasure. However, this fabliau moment also admits that selfishness has negative connotations: rather than reaching up towards transcendent truth and stable meaning, the Friar reaches up toward what is, from an ideological perspective, the very emblem of meaninglessness, a man's anus. The Friar's touch is unfruitful from this conventional perspective because it indicates his possible social disruption. A potentially disturbing consequence of the Friar's behavior is the destabilization of social hierarchies. The Friar's actions allow a churl and a squire to speak instead of the "proper" authorities. These lower class characters do not defer to authority; they exhibit their ingenuity and independence from social constraints.

The first character that usurps authority to punish the Friar is, of course, Thomas. Thomas is a "typical" fabliau hero in that he responds to the Friar's attempted deception with vulgar bodily retaliation: a fart. We have seen that in the exemplum world, authority is based on linguistic and interpretive ability and on proximity to transcendent truth. However, because fabliau characters do not have access to transcendent truth, fabliau transgression is corrected through individual ingenuity. Thus, among other things, fabliau characters use physical gestures to assert their authority. "De Jouglet" is a good example of this. The minstrel, Jouglet, demonstrates his exceptional cleverness by convincing his foolish ward to eat many pears on the day of his wedding and warning him not to empty his bowels:

"En non Dieu," fet Jouglés, "amis,
sachiez que l'en ne chie mie
le jor c'on espeuse s'amie,
quar ce seroit trop grant ledure." ("De Jouglet" 90-93)

["In the name of God," said Jouglet, "my friend,
Know that one doesn't shit
On the day he weds his beloved,
Because that would be too great an insult."]

As a result, the bridegroom is extremely uncomfortable, especially when he finds himself in bed with his bride. Ultimately discovering the source of his discomfort, she advises him to punish Jouglet for his trickery:

Qui, por celui et por celi,
se vous a ainsi atorné,
or tost n'i ait lus demoré!
Il gist delez ceste paroit:
Chiez a son chevés tout droit;
si getez sa chemise puer. (192-7)

[Whoever that may be
Who put you in that fix—
Well, quick! No more delay!
He's lying by that wall.
Shit right at the head of his bed
And throw his shirt outside.]

Ultimately, Jouglet's trick turns back on him when the bridegroom's shit is spread around Jouglet and his possessions. It is clear at the end of the tale that the contest

is between the lady and the minstrel. It is she who calls out to him in the morning to play a song. After he reaches for his shirt and finds only a pile of shit, she directs him from one pile of shit to another. By the end of the tale, Jouglet is covered in shit. The bride has bested him; she has repaid him for meddling with her foolish husband.

"The Summoner's Tale," like "De Jouglet," foregrounds physical punishment. Thomas' obscene bodily deed is one way that he can chastise the Friar's discursive manipulation. However, Thomas does not only punish the Friar with a fart. The power of Thomas' resourcefulness is particularly evident in this moment when he, a lower class man, further manipulates the Friar's manipulation of an authoritative discourse: "What dismays Friar John is less Thomas' rude gift than his stipulation that John divide it evenly among his twelve brothers" (Lancashire 17). By making the Friar promise to divide his gift equally with his brothers, Thomas both insults the Friar's order and compels the Friar to use his interpretive abilities for a ridiculous purpose. In so doing, Thomas demonstrates that inventiveness is a powerful social skill.

Thomas's clever retaliation poses a problem, which is that "Authority has been offended" (Andreas 146). Appropriately, the Friar "rushes to the local 'lord' for retribution and vengeance, claiming his order and the social 'degree' it represents have been grievously offended" (147). Friar John emphasizes his grievance by emphasizing Thomas' lowly social status: he calls Thomas a "cherl" (SumT 2153).

> By denouncing Thomas as a "cherl" the friar makes a belated attempt to put the villager in his feudal place as a social inferior. The term "cherl" refers in part, of course, to the crudity or bad manners of Thomas's gift. But "cherl" is primarily meant, especially in the context of the friar's visit to the lord's court, as a stinging reference to Thomas's social class as commoner rather than as of noble birth . . . . The passage marks its first use in the tale, but from now on the term

> "cherl" will be repeated insistently by each new character, appearing ten times within 137 lines, an extraordinary density far greater than anywhere else in Chaucer. "Cherl" is, in fact, the dominant term of the passage, and the key to its concern with social status and social transgression. (Georgianna 152)[111]

Following the friar's lead, the lord is shocked and disturbed by the sophistication of Thomas's insolence:

> The lord sat stille as he were in a traunce,
> And in his herte he rolled up and doun,
> How hadde this cherl ymaginacioun
> To shewe swich a probleme to the frere?
>
> . . . .
>
> O nyce, proude cherl, I shrewe his face!
> Lo sires, quod the lord, with harde grace!
> Who evere herde of swich a thyng er now? (SumT 2216-29)

The lord cannot understand how a mere "cherl" could present such a challenge to the Friar's authority. By questioning the Friar's interpretive abilities, Thomas calls into question the validity and soundness of traditional social distinctions. The lord, an authoritative character who had assumed the constancy of those social distinctions, is understandably concerned.

The Friar is further chastized when neither he nor the lord, but the squire, Jankyn, solves the dilemma of "ars-metrike." Thomas's rude gesture has become, as

---

[111] Georgianna goes on to point out that the friar destabilizes the feudal environment that he introduces himself into—first, he represents himself and Thomas as members of a social hierarchy, then, he ponders the exact value of Thomas's fart—a distinctly non-feudal approach to the problem. In other words, the friar resorts to his familiar "mode of free enterprise" (156). In so doing, the friar unwittingly turns Thomas into a scholar whose text is to be glossed (167). Ultimately, the lord, like Friar John, ignores Thomas' feudal gift, the fart, and dwells on the problem of the

Timothy O'Brien says, an "intellectual problem of how to divide this fart among the friar's brothers, a problem that resists both the logical and arithmetical solutions of a lord and yields only to his resourceful squire" (1). The squire's solution is to get a cartwheel and have the Friar's brothers

> . . . knele doun, by oon assent,
> And to every spokes ende, in this manere,
> Ful sadly leye his nose shal a frere.
>
> . . . .
>
> Thanne shal this cherl, with bely stif and toght
> As any tabour, hyder been ybroght;
> And sette hym on the wheel right of this cart,
> Upon the nave, and make hym lete a fart. (SumT 2262-70)

Once again, a non-authoritative character asserts himself and has a voice in condemning the Friar. The value of Jankyn's ingenuity is clear when the lord agrees to give Jankyn with a "gowne-clooth" for his solution. The story does not assume that Jankyn is obligated to provide his lord with the service of his problem-solving abilities; rather, it assumes Jankyn's talent has value for which he can negotiate compensation.[112]

---

fart's precise value.

[112] Georgianna sees this compensation, as well as Thomas' fart, as both feudal gifts, rather than compensation within the friar's "cash-based profit economy":

> Rather than being an impersonal medium of exchange, as is money, the gown is a token of the giver's regard for the recipient. The gift itself cannot be easily exchanged, nor can its value be precisely calculated. . . . Friar John's denouncement of Thomas as a churl takes us back into the world of feudal relations, which the groping friar has set aside in the interest of cultivating his business with Thomas. (158)

As evidence of the tale's ultimate endorsement of the feudal hierarchy, Georgianna points to the lord's identification with Thomas at the end of the tale: he calls Thomas "*my* cherl" (SumT 2238, italics mine). For Georgianna, this signifies the lord's confirmation of "the hierarchical social structure put forward by the friar when he arrived at the court, that the feudal lord owns and is responsible for the actions of those living in 'his' village" (169). Clearly, the lord assumes the power and relevance of

Clearly, the fabliau part of the story chastises the friar's immorality. The Friar receives not only a fart, but also intellectual embarrassment by a "cherl." However, because the fabliau section is located in a lay context in which the characters are subject to lay rather than clerical authority, this generic shift disrupts the exemplum section's ideological function. The fabliau destroys the illusion of a unified body of readers all subject to clerical authority. Suddenly, the universal reader of exemplum is no more: the fabliau constructs a different reader, one that is defined through different assumptions. This reader's difference is most evident in the tale's central contradiction that self-interested behavior is both immoral and possibly valuable. Whereas the exemplum section unequivocally condemns the Friar's self-interested behavior, the fabliau section does not unequivocally condemn Thomas' and Jankyn's self-interested behavior because such behavior is not obviously worthless in a lay context. In fact, the tale seems to suggest that such behavior can be socially beneficial.

However, the tale does not unambiguously perform the ideological function common to many fabliaux either. Because the two genres are merged, the identity of the character provoking the ingenious behavior is not, as is often the case in fabliaux, a low-born, sexually transgressive person who has disrupted lay authority; rather, it is a friar. Whereas the Old French fabliaux are full of greedy and lustful priests who attempt to take advantage of their relationships with parishioners, friars appear only rarely, and have no clear signification in the French fabliaux: "Although the various orders of *regulares*, with the characteristic foibles of each, would seem to offer idea

---

this social structure. However, Georgianna's argument is weakened by the fact that the tale does not suggest the lord's authority beyond his *assumption* of authority—the tale's focus is primarily on the lower class characters' ingenuity, not on the lord's control or ownership of that ingenuity. The ingenious characters drive the plot whereas the lord merely responds to their inventiveness. Further, the lord does not give Thomas the gown as a gift for a loyal vassal. Rather, he gives the gown when Jankyn requests it in payment for his ingenious solution.

targets for broad comedy, . . . their appearance in the fabliaux [is] quite rare" (Harrison 23-4).[113] Because friars have no obvious social significance in fabliau, Thomas' clever retaliation and Jankyn's clever solution do not obviously reaffirm the social hierarchy. In fact, to an extent, Thomas and Jankyn challenge the stability of this hierarchy. This challenge is evident in the lord's shocked reaction to the sophistication of Thomas' insolence. The social hierarchy is further undermined when Jankyn, not the Friar or the lord, solves the problem of "ars-metrike." Clearly, the tale's lower ranked characters, including Thomas and Jankyn, are neither simple nor obvious in this tale. Thomas, for instance, is ultimately praised for his "heigh wit" (SumT 2291). Like the churls in Chaucer's other fabliaux, these characters are surprising. Fabliau's interest in and qualified appreciation of individual initiative and pleasure means that these characters are granted some degree of independent thought and action. They are not "obviously low."

Curiously, the Summoner, who represents himself as the legitimate representative of clerical authority, tells a tale that is ideologically ambivalent and that appreciates the ingenuity it simultaneously condemns. Although it seems to obscure the Summoner's intentions, in fact, this contradiction helps reveals his goal and the problem he attempts to address in his text. It is possible to trace the effects of this contradiction because, through the frame narrative of *The Canterbury Tales*, the tale clearly arises out of a specific historical moment.

Without a historical context, this tale's narrative could efface the significance of its contradictory representations of self-interest and ingenuity. Contradictions like the one in this tale are produced in other texts, including the Old French fabliaux. However, they have less of an effect in the French fabliaux because they

---

[113] Harrison attributes this to the friars' participation in the inquisition: "After a horror like the Albigensian 'crusade' of 1209, in which hundreds of women and children were massacred in the church at Béziers, the jongleurs can scarcely be

generally occur outside of a specific historical moment and, as a result, often represent social and gender hierarchies as natural and absolute. Without historicization, the contradictions in these stories do not readily reveal the complexity of class and gender relations that is manifested in, yet obscured by fabliau narrative.

If "The Summoner's Tale" was not historically located, the effects of its generic contradiction might be similarly contained. However, Chaucer's tale *is* historicized: it comes out of a debate between the Friar and the Summoner, two men who work in different capacities for the fourteenth-century church. Because their conflict has a history, we can see that this story participates in a larger struggle over institutional power and territory. Although there is no direct correlation between a specific event in the late fourteenth-century English church and "The Summoner's Tale," historical contextualization can reveal the social instabilities out of which this textual contradiction emerges: late medieval friars were both highly successful in achieving church goals and disruptive of the church hierarchy. Friars revealed the church's institutional limitations, its inability to perfectly contain or control the contradictions generated by its attempt to clarify, divide and organize the world.

The Institutional Context of "The Summoner's Tale"

Medieval attitudes toward the friars were typically ambivalent; the friars were simultaneously condemned for their disruptiveness and admired for their success in preaching to the laity. The inherent contradiction of the friars' institutional role is apparent already at their point of origin: they were first incorporated by the church because they were established at a time when there was growing discontent with the

---

blamed for steering clear of the *regulares*." (24).

medieval church—discontent that, in other cases, led to heretical movements like Lollardy. Leith Spencer argues that "the borderline between Lollards and radical Mendicants was far from clear" until the 15th century (161). The radical Mendicant groups, like the heretical groups, were "by-product[s]" of a "newly arisen urban and secular culture" with religious needs that came into conflict with the "traditional assumptions about the nature of the Christian life" (Lawrence, *The Friars* 1). Ironically, these orders that had potentially heretical origins were one of the pope's weapons against heresy and heterodoxy. Lawrence explains that friars were well-suited for this task: "As international organisations, dedicated by their founders to the papal obedience and the service of orthodoxy, the Mendicant Orders were perfectly fitted for this role" (*The Friars* 181). Spencer calls the friars "champions against heresy" (58)—this was particularly true starting in the thirteenth century. It was at this time that they began to be active in inquisitorial work (*The Friars* 190). The friars were chosen for this work because of their specialized training and skills: "The theological training of the friars and their superior pastoral skills made them the chosen instruments of the papacy for the task of extirpating heresy" (188). The friars also functioned as defenders of orthodoxy in the trials of Wyclif in 1381-2. During this time, the Blackfriars Council at Oxford initiated John Wyclif's final condemnation as a heretic.

Because of their work against heresy, the friars assumed that they had the respect and support of the laity:

> [the] general assumption that the lay public accepted the basic premises upon which the friars' teaching was founded is nowhere more clearly seen than in their treatment of the topic of heresy itself, a crime which had, in earlier centuries, been treated as the most pernicious of threats to the social order and common good by both secular and ecclesiastical institutions alike. (Paton 282)

However, despite their orthodox function and lay support, supporters of the secular clergy continued to characterize the Mendicant orders as corrupt and dangerous into the fourteenth century. The friars were reproached in this way because they threatened the social authority and economic health of the secular clergy.

Although friars were often praised or condemned on moral grounds, much like those used by the Summoner to condemn friars in "The Summoner's Tale," they were clearly more remarkable for their institutional, not moral, disruption. The friars were a threat to many members of the established church hierarchy primarily because their lay ministry was so effective. Accusing the friars of moral wrongdoing was a way for the anti-mendicants to legitimize their condemnation of the friars' disruption of church hierarchy. Penn Szittya says,

> The hypocrisy, worldliness, and corruption that infected other elements in the church touched the friars as well, especially in the fourteenth century; certainly the struggle with the secular clergy was a real political battle for power, authority, and income. Many of the charges leveled at the friars were true. But as recent research in bishops registers and the Franciscans' own statutes has shown, others were also clearly false. (5)

As Szittya mentions, one of the major social conflicts involving friars was the struggle for power and resources between the friars and the secular clergy. The friars had papal approval to perform religious services, including confession, preaching and sepulture, which had previously been provided only by the secular clergy.

> The bull *Nimis iniqua* of Gregory IX (1231) instructed the bishops to allow the friars almost unlimited freedom of action for the purpose of their pastoral mission. . . . [The friars] siphoned congregations away from parish churches, and with them, of course, went the flow of pious bequests, which were diverted into trust funds administered for

> the friars. (Lawrence *The Friars*
>
> 152-3)

The friars were increasingly successful as confessors; they drew congregations, and the pious bequests of those congregations, away from parish churches.

The friars were particularly disruptive of church organization because they functioned independently of it. As Lawrence says, the friars "constituted a second force, independent of the established hierarchy, working alongside the secular clergy" (152). The friars' independence within the church meant that the clergy's concerns about the friars' appropriation of resources could not be addressed through established means.

> [T]o the consternation of the clergy, the friars were outside the normal channels of ecclesiastical authority. . . . The traditional pyramid of authority in the church descended from the archbishops to the bishops to the parish clergy. . . . But when the friars first appeared[,] . . . they were exempt from the authority of the bishops, who had no power to expel them or even to force them to coordinate their activities with the local priest. Even the power of the purse—for example, in benefices—was not available to a bishop against the friars because their begging made them independent of the moneys of the church. (Szittya 8-9)

Even in the fourteenth century, after the bull in 1300 that required friars to gain consent before preaching in a parish church, the conflict between the friars and the parish clergy continued.[114]

Interestingly, the friars' freedom from church hierarchy did not cause them to be less effective in achieving their goals. In fact, Burton attributes their preaching

---

[114] For instance, the periods 1303-20 and 1350-60 were times of such conflict at the

success to their positioning outside of power structures: "The appeal of the friars as preachers lay in the fact that they themselves were not part of the social and political hierarchy" (125). Lawrence also attributes friars' academic success to their independence: "when a man became a friar, he opted out of the race for preferment. At the schools he was free to pursue scholarship with a sense of detachment and security hardly open to his secular colleagues" (*Medieval Monasticism* 211). It seems that the friars' positioning outside of church organization was, to some degree, responsible for their effectiveness. Indeed, the friars were hugely successful in pursuing their orthodox, church-authorized objective, which was to preach to the laity.

The friars represented a significant threat to the power of the secular clergy because they so successfully performed this task which was, according to the medieval church, needed for the moral improvement of the laity. The church had known for some time that there was a dearth of educated preachers. Even into the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, parish priests were minimally educated and monks did not regularly venture into the parishes. As a result, the laity had limited access to informed religious instruction. It was especially important that such preachers be well-educated in the late Middle Ages because the laity were becoming increasingly educated themselves: Lawrence says "by this time, Literacy had ceased to be a clerical monopoly. Commercial activity on any scale demanded of its practitioners at least a degree of formal literacy" (*The Friars* 9). The friars, for the most part, provided the answer to the problem of the laity's lack of learned moral instruction. The friars were typically highly educated; even the Franciscans gave up St. Francis' hostility to learning, and became scholars, philosophers and theologians (Butler 53). Because their mandate was to "teach and preach in the English towns,"

University of Oxford.

the friars' lifestyle necessitated moving between the circle of the intellectual elite and that of the semi-literate (55).

> The friar was brought up in the cloister, where he learned such wisdom as books and educated society can give. He lived the life of a cleric among clerics . . . where the newest ideas and latest reports circulated. From this centre he was sent out on beat to certain specified villages and towns. (Trevelyan 145)

The friars' approach was clearly very effective, for they were able to teach and preach to increasing numbers of people. Thus, the friars' presence was both beneficial and disruptive; their very ability to minister successfully to the laity caused great discord within the church. Although the incorporation of the fraternal orders into the church's official structure avoided a direct confrontation between the church and the friars, this incorporation also made the friars' difference disturbingly proximate. Rather than obvious enemies, unambiguously "other" and dangerous, the friars were ostensibly orthodox orders that undermined the church's institutional integrity.

The Friars and Social Mobility

The perception that friars were simultaneously successful and divisive mirrors the contradictory ways in which medieval society responded to a broader social change: the increasing possibilities for lay social mobility. In the late Middle Ages, social mobility, especially that made possible by the expanding money economy, was considered possibly worthwhile, but worrisome. The friars can be associated with this change in the medieval social/economic structure because their success can also be explained by the suitability of their social positioning to the emerging money economy. They functioned in ways that made them successful in the new economy. Fraternal involvement with the market economy was disturbing for many because the principles that structured this economy were not yet acceptable in medieval

society; medieval people were still unsure about the morality of exchanging money. Indeed, the fraternal orders were initially opposed to the principles that propelled the new economy. However, the friars' approach to preaching as well as their spirituality "belonged unmistakably to the very society that they rejected" (Rosenwein and Little 23).

Because they relied on money, rather than the acquisition of land, for their income[115] and moved between different social groups regularly, the friars were well positioned for success in the late Middle Ages. The friars were suited to the emerging money economy despite the fact that, initially, they did not have a positive attitude toward it. The principles that structured the fraternal orders were in direct opposition to many organizing principles of the money economy. The conversion of St. Francis, for example, "had been the repudiation of the life of a merchant" (Rosenwein and Little 23). Ironically, however,

> Mendicancy's very commitment to poverty put it in a much stronger position to respond to a money economy than the proprietary Church. Its institutional expansion was directly driven by the money it raised, rather than depending on the acquisition of land. (Scanlon 164).

The medieval economy was, of course, increasingly driven by the exchange of money: "A new world was emerging, one in which money, capital and credit played an ever increasing role" (Lawrence *The Friars* 2).[116] The friars, being based in the towns, were at the center of this economic transformation. Their mobility, or avoidance of the

---

[115] Of course, another group that was threatened by the friars' growing power, the monks, took this more traditional approach to fund-raising.

[116] Although I have previously argued in my chapter on "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," that the late medieval rural economy was vital and progressive, I believe it is still important to recognize the growing significance of the money economy. Unlike Patterson, I believe it is possible to recognize the power of both rural and urban economies without reproducing an opposition "between the *Naturalwirtschaft* of country and the *Geldwirtschaft*of an innovative, mobile, and avant-garde town" (*Chaucer and the Subject* 247).

"Benedictine notion of stability of place" (Little 159), resembled that of the changing social environment: "It was a society more mobile . . . than before" (Lawrence *The Friars* 3). Eventually, the friars actively encouraged their affinity with the principles of the new economy; their approach was clearly influenced by the fact that they functioned in a marketplace in which they had to compete for resources.[117]

The friars took up the challenge presented by the emerging market-based economy by gearing their religious services to the needs of their primary audience, the laity. The friars' responsiveness to their social environment is particularly evident in their preaching techniques. In his extensive study of the friars' sermons, d'Avray argues that a collection of Guibert de Tournai's sermons "was intended to meet the needs of 'the more simple', so that the audience ultimately envisaged was more probably lay. . . . Some modifications were made to suit the sermons for this function" (123). Trevelyan also remarks on the friars' ability to adapt their sermons to the popular market: "the friars understood and practiced the art of popular preaching only too well. They knew how to make a discourse on the seven deadly sins attractive, by telling a long story of a miser carried off by the devil, or a murderer detected in the act. The arts of sensationalism were their stock-in-trade" (145-6). The friars even invented new technologies so that they could be more efficient and effective in their exegetical work. For instance, Clanchy notes that "friars were the force behind the demand for more portable books because they had to move from place to place, yet they were also expected, the Dominicans in particular, to be well read" (135).[118] However, the most explicit evidence that the friars were complicit in the emerging market economy is found in the content of their sermons.

---

[117] We have already seen that the friars competed with parish priests; also, as Smalley points out, "the pub and bawdiness [were] rival attractions to . . . the preacher" (26).
[118] Smalley also notes that the friars had "worked out a type of architecture specially

That the friars were influenced by the milieu of the medieval marketplace is evident in the language and imagery of their sermons. In his study of mendicant sermons, d'Avray notes that "the language of the friars was permeated with a market-place vocabulary" (211). For instance, d'Avray discusses a sermon by Guillaume Peyraut that, although it is not explicitly addressed to merchants, describes confession as a commercial transaction. In his sermon, Peyraut suggests that "The exchange which takes place in confession is a happy one, for the money which the sinner brings is very base, and that which he brings back is very precious: he leaves his sins there and acquires the grace of God" (qtd by d'Avray 210). Peyraut's use of commercial imagery suggests that both he and his audience would be aware of the various details of business relationships and would not assume that such relationships were necessarily immoral. In fact, friars like Peyraut who used commercial imagery in a positive way, helped change social assumptions about commercial transactions; in the early Middle Ages, many people assumed that such transactions "almost necessarily entailed lying and cheating" (Rosenwein and Little 26). The friars' positive use of commercial language reveals that they did not "repudiate the money economy, . . . [in fact,] they did accept and did participate in some of its crucial aspects" (27). Indeed, friars participated in one of the most crucial aspects of the money economy: its moral justification.

We have seen in "The Summoner's Tale" that medieval friars were condemned on moral grounds. This was in part because their social mobility "lacked moral justification" (Rosenwein and Little 25). The friars were threatening because they not only participated in a new social practice, but also could help legitimize that practice by developing an authorizing discourse. Rosenwein and Little argue that the friars helped to

---

adapted to the needs of the laity" (28).

> [confront] and [de-mystify] the taboo of monetary commercial transactions, starting by outright rejection, then by incorporating elements of commercial practice into their spirituality, and finally by helping to justify worldly commerce in a modified and carefully circumscribed form. (31)

For example, in one of his sermons, the friar Guibert de Tournai "tries to show that a rich man can be a good man"; de Tournai is, to some degree, "prepared to justify the wealth of urban élites" (d'Avray 214). To this end, he cites the example of Abraham, who "was rich in gold and silver (Gen. 13:2)" (215). He thus attempts to legitimize the principles of the new social structure by appealing to Biblical authority.

The friars also helped authorize Albertano of Brescia's profession as an author. David Wallace explains that Albertano preached in support of the friars and feasted with them and his fellow guildsmen. The friars were useful to Albertano because they helped him "root himself in both religious and secular aspects of urban culture while recognizing the claims and powers of a dominant magnate class" (220). Albertano associated with friars because "the development of the kind of urban culture envisioned by Albertano required both the formation of professional elites and the development of a city-centered, rather than rural-monastic, spirituality" (219). The friars were well suited to help develop this new, city-based spirituality.

Fraternal Disruption and "The Summoner's Tale"

"The Summoner's Tale" registers the power struggle between the friars and the secular clergy and reflects the ambivalence for social flexibility that increasingly characterized medieval society. This context can help answer the question of why the Summoner condemns the Friar in a lay context. The Summoner condemns the Friar in this way because he is concerned not with fraternal immorality, but with the

friars' institutional divisiveness (caused by their success with the laity), and their justification of a disturbing economic change. The social and historical context of this tale reveals that although the Summoner's attempt to reestablish clerical boundaries requires him to frame his critique as a moral one, he uses lay ingenuity to chastise the Friar because he is concerned with the realization of the Friar's ecclesiastical goals in lay communities and because he wants to preserve the hegemony of a traditional clerical order. "The Summoner's Tale" attempts to shift the representation of those responsible with the Friar's success: the lay population. In this tale, the laity are not willing to believe and financially support the Friar; rather, they are suspicious of him and capable of recognizing and punishing his greed.

The Summoner underscores this rejection by locating his story in a place where the friar's audience would be most readily impressed by his preaching. The story takes place in Holderness, a remote rural deanery in Yorkshire which, according to David Wallace, was "in steady social and economic decline" in the 14th and 15th centuries (145). People living in such an area would typically have access only to the parish facilities for their edification unlike those in an urban area where there might be a university (145). There was no friary in any town near Holderness, nor was there a friar based in Holderness in the Middle Ages (145). By setting his story here, the Summoner suggests that the Friar does not impress even those who would be most eager for and impressed with an educated preacher.

If "The Summoner's Tale" existed outside of the frame narrative, outside of a historically specific context, its contradiction would not clearly point to the historical contingency of the Summoner's position on friars and church authority, or his unwitting representation of social complexity. Uninformed by the Summoner's struggle for resources and influence, the tale would contrast Friar John with those, including the other characters and the audience, who recognize his behavior as

morally wrong. In so doing, it would suggest that the moral standards defended by legitimate church authorities are definite. However, when read in the context of factional struggle in the church, the Summoner's text reveals his agenda and fails to accomplish it without qualification. While the characters in the tale reject Friar John and recognize his immorality, their rejection does not prove the uncontested nature of sanctioned morality. On the contrary, the nature of their rejection sheds light on the institutional discord that the Summoner wishes to obscure. Accordingly, morality, as defined and defended by numerous church authorities in medieval society, is revealed to be a contested space. A further subversive effect of the Summoner's unwitting challenge to church authority in his tale is that this tale opens up a space for a lay, individual voice—like the Wife of Bath, for instance—that he may want to shut down. Although he tries to represent the church as the ultimate authority, the Summoner ultimately establishes the value of behavior that is independent of social hierarchies. In his tale, lay characters respond to the friar, but their response is not determined by either clerical or lay authorities.

The frame narrative's contextualization allows the complexities and contradictions of the social to find their way into this tale and explain its generic shift. This shift points to a social conflict and indicates what is at stake in that conflict. The Summoner struggles to condemn the enemy within, the friar, while continuing to represent the church as a single, unified authority. However, he is unable to reconcile these two goals and ends up reproducing, not containing, the contradiction represented by the Friar. While the Summoner's generic categories obscure the contradiction represented by the Friar, they do not efface it.

Consequently, when the Summoner attempts to redraw the "us vs. them" lines, those lines become confused for the reader, because he includes the reader both on the side of destabilized church authority and on the side of the socially disruptive laity. Rather than constituting a universal reader, "The Summoner's Tale"

communicates the problems inherent in attempting to contain social complexity and teaches, like "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," a new reading model that recognizes the complexity of the social domain. This new reading model changes how we read seemingly dissimilar genres like exemplum and fabliau and where we locate the process of interpreting a text. Textual interpretation involves not only unveiling the kernal of truth within the text, but also tracing the text's participation in meaning-making beyond its own generic borders. When such a reading model is applied to social hierarchies and relationships, it is possible to see the multiple authorities that structure the social sphere and to recognize the benefits of a multiply determined, flexible social model. The Summoner's failure to fix and stabilize church authority is not represented as a dangerous failure that could result in social violence. Rather, the Summoner unwittingly demonstrates that a flexible social organization promotes social order.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that Chaucer develops a new theory of identity and social order through his exploration of Old French fabliau's ambivalent response to reductive representations of identity. My first chapter discussed the Old French fabliaux and outlined major debates in fabliau scholarship. I have argued, contrary to a common critical perspective, that these stories represent social organization as a difficult issue that is only partially addressed by class and gender hierarchies. When the Old French fabliaux suggest that their characters' desire is possibly worthwhile, they question the explanatory power of these hierarchies. However, simplified plots and characters often circumscribe the transformative potential of these stories, and can even reinforce inherited assumptions about the strength of a hierarchized social order. This is the contradiction that characterizes many Old French fabliaux: many fabliaux both appreciate individual initiative and assert the validity of rigid ideologies of gender and class. In so doing, they imply that while these social hierarchies can powerfully influence individuals, they can never guarantee social order because they can never completely control individual desires.

In my subsequent four chapters, I have argued that Chaucer, in his fabliaux, takes up fabliau's willingness to recognize the worth of individual ingenuity and pleasure. For Chaucer, identity is not public and permanently decided by genealogy, but complex and socially negotiated. Further, he suggests that social organization should not be understood according to a binary model, or a rigid hierarchy. Chaucer's fabliaux demonstrate the need for a new theory of social order, one that can conceive of the worth of experiences from a wider group of people. Such a reevaluation was necessary in the late Middle Ages to prevent social violence. Chaucer transforms the inherited theories of identity and social organization by complicating his stories'

plots, by particularizing their characters, by revealing gender's role in bolstering class distinctions, and by historicizing his fabliaux.

My second chapter, focusing on Fragment I of *The Canterbury Tales*, argued that because the plots of Chaucer's fabliaux are not unidirectional and structured to prove their characters' churlishness, they indicate that their characters are multifaceted and unpredictable. "The Miller's Prologue" introduces fabliau's use of reduced plot to confirm a churl's identity. The "Prologue" is structured to demonstrate the Miller's obvious lowness. However, the plot of "The Miller's Tale" is more complex than those of the Old French fabliaux that explicitly address class. It is not structured to prove the characters' obvious lowness, but to suggest their difference from such stereotypes. This tale thus works to further fabliau's destabilization of medieval class and gender hierarchies. It suggests that a new understanding of identity—one in which identity is more than a simple reflection of a rigid hierarchy—is necessary to avoid the social violence that traditional social models can generate.

In my third chapter, I discussed "The Shipman's Tale" to assert that Chaucer undermines existing ideological configurations of identity and social organization by revealing gender's role in naturalizing class categories. The merchant's wife in this tale represents herself according to a gender stereotype in order to manage her household's disruption of the class hierarchy. This disruption is most evident in the tale's juxtaposition of her two obligations to make her household both "thrifty" and "worthy." These contradictory obligations are problematic in the tale because they demonstrate that the merchant challenges the medieval conception of identity. His wealth allows him to adopt forms of social display previously available only to the nobility and thus makes it impossible for a nobleman's appearance to naturalize his rank.

My chapter on the Wife of Bath argued that she is granted a degree of specificity in her "Prologue" and is thus revealed to have a more complex relationship to gender stereotypes than is initially apparent. In the part of her "Prologue" dedicated to her relationship with Jankyn, the Wife reveals her emotional complexity and negotiation of authority. She demonstrates that she has internalized gender stereotypes through a long and complex process and does not merely reproduce them involuntarily. The Wife's reiteration of gender ideology in a domestic history thus reveals that gender ideology's control is only constructed and contingent. The Wife, the mobile woman, is possibly worthwhile in her "Prologue" because she is a member of the mobile middle social strata, whose desires and values were becoming intelligible in the late Middle Ages.

Central to the last chapter on "The Summoner's Tale," and this entire thesis, is the argument that Chaucer introduces social complexity into fabliau's otherwise closed narrative space by historicizing his fabliaux using the frame narrative and other literary techniques. Their social context explains the broader significance of Chaucer's stories. For instance, the frame narrative explains why the Summoner shifts genres—from exemplum to fabliau—within his tale. Exemplum allows the Summoner to achieve the certainty of a condemnation on moral grounds, while fabliau allows him to associate condemnation of Friar John with the laity (rather than the clergy) in order to avoid representing division within the church. Ultimately, because the Summoner produces a contradiction between two different attitudes toward self-interested behavior, he is not able to conceal the social ambiguity that disturbs him. The Summoner's failure proves that social ambiguity is not easily obscured, even with the help of generic strategies.

Together, Chaucer's fabliaux reimagine social position as a status achieved through the exploration of social difference rather than the assertion of inflexible social categories. According to this new social theory, identity is socially negotiated,

and is not determined only by birth. Chaucer's engagement with fabliau suggests that generic boundaries can imply a correlation between their characters and the stereotypes that propose to explain them, but they can never prove this correlation when considered in that text's broader context. This context will always show that individuals, and their society, are more complex than these hierarchies propose.

Naturally, this thesis has left unanswered some questions about Chaucer's use of fabliau. The most obvious omission is a discussion of male religious in the fabliaux. This is a substantial topic that exceeds the scope of this project. Numerous Old French fabliaux feature religious men and there are many theories that attempt to explain this fascination. A useful continuation of this thesis would be to discuss the male religious in Chaucer's tales in the context of the Old French fabliaux. Considering Chaucer's interest in the fabliaux and their interest in male religious, this kind of study would certainly be beneficial, especially considering the appearance of many similar characters in *The Canterbury Tales.*

Another useful project would be to consider the Old French fabliaux in their historical context, as I have done for Chaucer. This kind of contextualization of the fabliaux is rarely done and would prove interesting for scholars of the Old French stories. Such a study might also be of interest to other medievalists, however, for it could further explain the social conditions that account for this genre's appearance and perhaps shed more light on Chaucer's interest in it.

Works Cited

Alford, John A. "The Wife of Bath Versus the Clerk of Oxford: What their Rivalry Means." *The Chaucer Review* 21 (1986): 108-32.

"D'Aloul." *The French Fabliau B.N. MS. 837.* Vol I. Ed. and tran. John DuVal and Raymond Eichmann. New York: Garland, 1984. 162-201.

Amsler, Mark. "The Wife of Bath and Women's Power." *Assays* 4 (1987): 67-83.

Andreas, James. "'Newe Science' From 'Olde Bokes': A Bakhtinian Approach to 'The Summoner's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review* 25 (1990): 138-151.

"Anonimalle Chronicle." *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381.* Ed. and tran. by R. B. Dobson. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1983. 105-111, 123-131, 155-168, 235-237, 305-306.

Arrathoon, Leigh A. "'For craft is al, whoso that do it kan': The Genre of The Merchant's Tale." *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction.* Ed. Leigh A. Arrathoon. Rochester, Michigan: Solaris Press, 1986. 241-328.

Ashdown, Emily Jessie. *British Costume During XIX Centuries, Civil and Ecclesiastical.* London: Nelson, 1954.

d'Avray, D. L. *The Preaching of the Friars: Sermons Diffused from Paris before 1300.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1985.

Baldwin, Frances Elizabeth. *Sumptuary Legislation and Personal Regulation in England.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1926.

Barbazan, Etienne. *Fabliaux et contes.* Paris: Crapelet, 1808.

Barron, Caroline M. "Introduction: the Widow's World in Later Medieval London." *Medieval London Widows, 1300-1500.* Ed. Caroline M. Barron and Anne F. Sutton. London: Hambledon Press, 1994. xiii-xxxiv.

Bartlett, Anne Clark. *Male Authors, Female Readers: Female Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Beckwith, Sarah. "Making the World in York and the York cycle." *Framing Medieval Bodies.* Ed. By Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994. 254-276.

Bédier, Joseph. *Les Fabliaux: Études de Littérature Populaire et d'Histoire Littéraire du Moyen Âge.* 6th edition. Paris: Champion, 1982.

Bennett, Adelaide. "Appendix: The Recalcitrant Wife in the Ramsey Abbey Psalter." *Equally in God's Image: Women in the Middle Ages.* Ed. Julia Bolton Holloway, Constance S. Wright, and Joan Bechtold. New York: Peter Lang, 1990. 40-45.

Bennett, J. A. W. *Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

Bennett, Judith M. "Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside." *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski. Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988. 18-36.

Bennett, Michael J. *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Benson, Larry D. and Theodore M. Andersson. *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux: Texts and Translations*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971.

Biller, Peter. "Heresy and Literacy: Earlier History of the Theme." *Heresy and Literacy, 1000-1530*. Ed. Peter Biller and Anne Hudson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 1-18.

Bisson, Lillian M. *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Blamires, Alcuin. *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Bloch, R. Howard. *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

—. *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Bodel, Jean. "Du Vilain de Bailluel." *Gallic Salt: Eighteen Fabliaux Translated from the Old French*. Trans by Robert Harrison. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. 391-7.

"De la Borgoise d'Orliens." *Gallic Salt: Eighteen Fabliaux Translated from the Old French*. Ed. and tran. Robert Harrison. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. 307-21.

Braswell, Mary Flowers. "Chaucer's 'Queinte Termes of Lawe': A Legal View of the *Shipman's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review*. 22.4 (1988): 295-304.

Brewer, D. S. "The Fabliaux." *Companion to Chaucer Studies*. Ed. Beryl Rowland. Rev Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. 296-325.

Burbridge, Roger T. "Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* and the Fabliau 'Le Meunier et Les .II. Clers." *Annuale Mediaevale* 12 (1971): 30-36.

Burlin, Robert B. *Chaucerian Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

Burns, E. Jane. *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

—. "This Prick Which is Not One: How Women Talk Back in Old French Fabliaux." *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*. Ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993. 188-212.

Burton, Janet. *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000-1300*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Butcher, A. F. "English Urban Society and the Revolt of 1381." *The English Rising of 1381*. Ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. 84-111.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Butler, Lionel and Chris Given-Wilson. *Medieval Monasteries of Great Britain*. London: Michael Joseph, 1979.

Cadden, Joan. *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Carruthers, Mary. "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions." *PMLA* 94 (1979): 209-22.

Carus-Wilson, E. M. "Trends in the Export of English Woolens in the Fourteenth Century." *Medieval Merchant Venturers: Collected Studies*. London: Methuen & Co, 1967. 239-264.

Caxton, William, trans. "The Book of the Knight of the Tower." Ed. M. Y. Offord. London: Oxford University Press. Early English Text Society, 1971.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Friar's Prologue." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 122.

—. "General Prologue." *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton, 1987. 23-36.

—. "The Knight's Tale." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Ed Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 37-66.

—. "The Man of Law's Tale." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Ed Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 89-103.

—. "The Merchant's Tale." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Ed Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 154-168.

—. "The Miller's Prologue." *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton, 1987. 66-67.

—. "The Miller's Tale." *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton, 1987. 68-77.

—. "The Reeve's Tale." *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton, 1987. 78-84.

—. "The Shipman's Tale." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Ed Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 203-208.

—. "The Summoner's Prologue." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 128-9.

—. "The Summoner's Tale." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 129-136.

—. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. 105-116.

Clanchy, M. T. *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.

Collette, Carolyn P. "Heeding the Counsel of Prudence: A Context for the *Melibee*." *The Chaucer Review* 29.4 (1995): 416-33.

Coletti, Theresa. "The *Mulier Fortis* and Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 15.3 (1981): 236-249.

Cooke, Thomas D. *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux: A Study of their Comic Climax*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1978.

Cooper, Helen. *The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

The Count of Caylus, "Mémoire sur les fabliaux," *Mémoires de Littérature, tirés des registres de l'Academie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, XX (Paris, 1753)*.

Crane, Susan. *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's* Canterbury Tales. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.

—. "The Writing Lesson of 1381." *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*. Ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. 201 - 221.

Dickson, Lynne. "Deflection in the Mirror: Feminine Discourse in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 15 (1993): 61-90.

Dinshaw, Carolyn. "Chaucer's Queer Touches / A Queer Touches Chaucer." *Exemplaria* 7 (1995): 75 - 92.

—. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

"Le Dit des Perdiz." *Selected Fabliaux*. Ed. B. J. Levy. Hull: University of Hull, 1976. 59-64.

Dobson, R. B. *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*. London: Macmillan, 1970.

—. "Urban Decline in Late Medieval England." *The English Medieval Town: A Reader in English Urban History*. Ed. By Richard Holt and Gervase Rosser. London: Longman, 1990. 265-286.

Dollimore, Jonathan. *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

Du Boulay, F. R. H. *An Age of Ambition; English Society in the Late Middle Ages*. New York: Viking, 1970.

Duby, Georges. "The Aristocratic Households of Feudal France." *A History of Private Life*. Vol II. Ed. Georges Duby. Trans by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 35-155.

Duffy, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

DuVal, John and Raymond Eichmann. Introduction. *The French Fabliau, B.N. MS. 837*. Ed. John DuVal and Raymond Eichmann. Vol I. New York: Garland, 1984. xiii-liii.

Dyer, Christopher. "The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381." *The English Rising of 1381*. Ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. 9-42.

—. *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Eberle, Patricia. "Commercial Language and the Commercial Outlook in the General Prologue." *The Chaucer Review* 18.2 (1983): 161-74.

Eichmann, Raymond. "The Artistry of Economy in the Fabliaux. *Studies in Short Fiction*. 17 (1980): 67-73.

—. Introduction. *Cuckolds, Clerics, & Countrymen: Medieval French Fabliaux*. Ed. John Du Val. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1982. 1-12.

Emden, Alfred B. *An Oxford Hall in Medieval Times*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.

"De l'Enfant Qui fu Remis au Soleil" *Gallic Salt: Eighteen Fabliaux Translated from the Old French*. Ed. and tran. Robert Harrison. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. 380-89.

Everest, Carol A. "Sight and Sexual Performance in the *Merchant's Tale*." *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the* Canterbury Tales *and* Troilus and Criseyde. Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998. 91-103.

Faith, Rosamond. "The 'Great Rumour' of 1377 and Peasant Ideology." *The English Rising of 1381*. Ed. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. 43 - 73.

Faral, Edmond. "Le Fabliau latin au moyen âge." *Romania*. 50 (1924): 321-85.

—. *La Vie quotidienne au temps de Saint Louis*. Paris: Hachette, 1938.

Ferster, Judith. *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

Fisher, Sheila. *Chaucer's Poetic Alchemy: A Study of Value and Its Transformation in* The Canterbury Tales. New York: Garland, 1988.

Fletcher, Anthony. *Gender, Sex & Subordination in England 1500-1800*. London: Yale University Press, 1995.

de France, Marie. "De la femme ki fist pendre sun mari." *Fables*. Ed. and tran. by Harriet Spiegel. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987. 92-95.

—. "Del vilein e de sa femme cuntrariuse." *Fables*. Ed. and tran by Harriet Spiegel. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987. 238-41.

Gaunt, Simon. *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Georgianna, Linda. "Lords, Churls, and Friars: The Return to Social Order in The Summoner's Tale." *Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in* The Canterbury Tales. Ed. Susanna Greer Fein, David Raybin, and Peter C. Braeger. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991. 149-72.

Gibson, Gail McMurray. "The Thread of Life in the Hand of the Virgin." *Equally in God's Image: Women in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Julia Bolton Holloway, Constance S. Wright, and Joan Bechtold. New York: Peter Lang, 1990. 46-54.

Gower, John. "Vox Clamantis." *The Major Latin Works of John Gower*. Ed. Eric W. Stockton. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962. 49-288.

Guerin. "De Berenger au Long Cul." *Gallic Salt: Eighteen Fabliaux Translated from the Old French*. Trans. Robert Harrison. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. 42-61.

—. "Du Chevalier Qui Fit les Cons Parler." *Gallic Salt: Eighteen Fabliaux Translated from the Old French*. Ed. and tran. Robert Harrison. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. 219-255.

—. "Du Prestre ki abvete." *Cuckolds, Clerics & Countrymen: Medieval French Fabliaux*. Trans by John DuVal. Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1982. 45-6.

—. "Long-Assed Berenger." *Gallic Salt: Eighteen Fabliaux Translated from the Old French*. Trans. Robert Harrison. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. 42-61.

Hagen, Susan K. "The Wife of Bath: Chaucer's Inchoate Experiment in Feminist Hermeneutics." *Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in* The Canterbury Tales. Ed. Susanna Greer Fein, David Raybin, and Peter C. Braeger. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991.

Hahn, Thomas. "Money, Sexuality, Wordplay, and Context in the *Shipman's Tale*." *Chaucer in the Eighties*. Ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986. 235-49.

Hahn, Thomas, and Richard W. Kaeuper. "Text and Context: Chaucer's *Friar's Tale*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 5 (1983): 67-101.

Halpern, Richard. *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

—. "'Of his love daungerous to me': Liberation, Subversion, and Domestic Violence in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale." *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Wife of Bath—Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. Boston: St. Martin's, 1996. 273-89.

Hanning, R. W. "Roasting a Friar, Mis-taking a Wife, and Other Acts of Textual Harassment in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*. 7 (1985): 3-21.

Harrison, Robert. Introduction. *Gallic Salt: Eighteen Fabliaux Translated from the Old French*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. 1-35.

Hart, Walter Morris. "The Summoner's Tale." *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's* Canterbury Tales. Ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster. Humanities Press, 1941. 275-87.

"Havelok the Dane." *Middle English Verse Romances*. Ed. Donald B. Sands. Exeter: University of Exeter, 1986. 55-129.

Heal, Felicity. "Reciprocity and Exchange in the Late Medieval Household." *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*. Ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 179-98.

Hellman, Robert and Richard O'Gorman. Afterword. *Fabliaux: Ribald Tales from the Old French*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1965. 181-94.

Herzmann, Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury. Introduction. *Havelok the Dane*. www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/daneint.htm.

Hilton, Rodney. "Feudalism and the Origins of Capitalism." *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism: Essays in Medieval Social History*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 1990. 205-221.

—. "Social Concepts in the English Rising of 1381." *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism: Essays in Medieval Social History*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 1990. 205-221.143-53.

—. "Towns in English Medieval Society." *The English Medieval Town: A Reader in English Urban History*. Ed. By Richard Holt and Gervase Rosser. London: Longman, 1990. 19-28.

Hines, John. *The Fabliau in English*. London: Longman, 1993.

Hodges, Laura. "Noe's Wife: Type of Eve and Wakefield Spinner." *Equally in God's Image: Women in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Julia Bolton Holloway, Constance S. Wright, and Joan Bechtold. New York: Peter Lang, 1990. 30-39.

Holloway, Julia Bolton, Constance S. Wright, and Joan Bechtold. "Woman and the Distaff." *Equally in God's Image: Women in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Julia Bolton

Holloway, Constance S. Wright, and Joan Bechtold. New York: Peter Lang, 1990. 27-29.

Illich, Ivan. *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Jager, Eric. *The Tempter's Voice: Language and the Fall in Medieval Literature*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.Kaeuper, Richard W. *War, Justice and Public Order: England and France in the Later Middle Ages*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1988.

Jauss, Hans Robert. "Theories of Genres and Medieval Literature." *Modern Genre Theory*. Ed. David Duff. Harlow, England: Longman, 2000, 127-47.

Jerome, St. "The Monk's View of Womankind." *Life in the Middle Ages*. Ed. and tran. G. G. Coulton. Vol IV. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967. 22-28.

Johnson, Randal. Introduction. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. By Pierre Bourdieu. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. 1-25.

Johnston, Ronald C. and D. D. R. Owen, eds. *Fabliaux*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1957.

"De Jouglet." *The French Fabliau B.N. MS. 837*. Vol I. Ed. and tran. John DuVal and Raymond Eichmann. New York: Garland, 1984. 118-135.

Justice, Steven. *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Kaye, Joel. *Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century: Money, Market Exchange, and the Emergence of Scientific Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Keen, M. H. *England in the Later Middle Ages*. London: Routledge, 1973.

Kellenbenz, Hermann. "Rural Industries in the West from the End of the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century." Trans. K. E. M. George. *Essays in European Economic History: 1500-1800*. Ed. Peter Earle. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974. 45-88.

Kelly, Henry Ansgar. *Chaucerian Tragedy*. Cambridge: Brewer, 1997.

Kermode, Jenny. *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Kilgour, Raymond. *The Decline of Chivalry: as Shown in the French Literature of the Late Middle Ages*. Gloucester: P. Smith, 1966.

Knapp, Peggy. *Chaucer and the Social Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Knighton, Henry. *Knighton's Chronicle: 1337-1396*. Ed. and tran. by G. H. Martin. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

Kowaleski, Maryanne. "Women's Work in a Market Town: Exeter in the Late Fourteenth Century." *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*. Ed. Barbara Hanawalt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. 145-64.

Kruger, Steven F. "Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer's 'Pardoner's Tale.'" *Exemplaria* 6 (1994): 115-139.

Lancashire, Ian. "Moses, Elijah and the Back Parts of God: Satiric Scatology in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*." *Mosaic* 14 (1981): 17-30.

Langland, William. *The Vision of Piers Plowman*. 2nd ed. Ed. A. V. C. Schmidt. London: Everyman, 1995.

Langlois, Charles. *La vie en France au moyen âge de la fin du XIIe au milieu du XIVe siècle*. Paris: Hachette, 1926.

Laqueur, Thomas. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Laskaya, Anne. *Chaucer's Approach to Gender in the* Canterbury Tales. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995.

Lawrence, C. H. *The Friars: The Impact of the Early Mendicant Movement on Western Society*. London: Longman, 1994.

—. *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Europe in the Middle Ages*. London: Longman, 1984.

Lawrence, William Witherle. "Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*." *Speculum* 33 (1958): 56-68.

LeGrand d'Aussy, Jean-Baptiste. *Fabliaux ou Contes, Fables et Romans du XIIe et du XIIIe Siècle*

Leicester, H. Marshall, Jr. "Of a Fire in the Dark: Public and Private Feminism in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*." *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 157-78.

le Leu, Gautier. "La Veuve." *Gallic Salt: Eighteen Fabliaux Translated from the Old French*. Ed. and tran. Robert Harrison. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. 343-379.

—. "The Widow." *Fabliaux: Ribald Tales from the Old French*. Trans. Robert Hellman and Richard O'Gorman. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1965. 145-156.

Lindahl, Carl. *Earnest Games: Folkloric Patterns in the* Canterbury Tales. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Little, Lester K. *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978.

Lochrie, Karma. *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

de Looze, Laurence. "Sex, Lies and Fabliaux: Gender, Scribal Practice, and Old/New Philology in 'Du Cheualier Qui Fist les Cons Parler'." *The Romanic Review* 85.4 (1994): 495-516.

Lorcin, Marie-Thérèse. *Façons de sentir et de penser les fabliaux français*. Paris: Champion, 1978.

McClintock, Michael W. "Games and the Players of Games: Old French Fabliaux and the *Shipman's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 5.2 (1970): 112-36.

McDonnell, K. G. T. *Medieval London Suburbs*. London: Phillimore, 1978.

McGaillard, John C. "Characterization in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*." *Philological Quarterly* 54 (1975): 1-18.

Manly, John M. *Some New Light On Chaucer*. New York: Holt, 1926.

Mann, Jill. *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the* General Prologue *to the* Canterbury Tales. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

Ménard, Philippe. *Les Fabliaux: Contes à rire du moyen âge*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984.

Mertes, Kate. *The English Noble Household, 1250-1600: Good Governance and Politic Rule*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.

Middleton, Anne. "Chaucer's 'New Men' and the Good of Literature in the *Canterbury Tales*." *Literature and Society*. Ed. Edward Said. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. 15-56.

Muscatine, Charles. *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964.

—. *The Old French Fabliaux*. London: Yale University Press, 1986.

—. "The Social Background of the Old French Fabliaux." *Genre* 9.1 (1976): 1-19.

—. "The Wife of Bath and Gautier's *La Veuve*." *Romance Studies in Memory of Edward Billings Ham*. Ed. Urban Tigner Holmes. Hayward, California: California State College, 1967. 109-114.

Nicholas, David. *The Growth of the Medieval City: From Late Antiquity to the Early Fourteenth Century*. London: Longman, 1997.

—. *The Later Medieval City 1300-1500*. London: Longman. 1997.

Nicholson, Peter. "The 'Shipman's Tale' and the Fabliaux." *ELH* 45 (1978): 583-96.

Nolan, Barbara. "Promiscuous Fictions: Medieval Bawdy Tales and their Textual Liaisons." *The Body and the Soul in Medieval Literature*. Ed. Anna Torti. Cambridge: Brewer, 1999. 79-105.

Nykrog, Per. *Les Fabliaux: Etude D'Histoire Littéraire et de Stylistique Médiévale.* Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1957.

O'Brien, Timothy D. "'Ars-Metrik': Science, Satire and Chaucer's Summoner." *Mosaic* 23 (1990): 1-22.

Olson, Glending. "The *Reeve's Tale* as a Fabliau." *Modern Language Quarterly* 35 (1974): 219-30.

Owen Jr., Charles A. "The Design of the Canterbury Tales." *Companion to Chaucer Studies.* Ed. By Beryl Rowland. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968. 192-207.

Paris, Gaston. "Les contes orientaux dans la littérature française du moyen âge." *Revue Politique et Littéraire* 2nd series, 8 (1875): 1010-1017.

"The Partridges." *Fabliaux: Ribald Tales from the Old French.* Trans. Robert Hellman and Richard O'Gorman. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1965. 123-27.

Paton, Bernadette. *Preaching Friars and the Civic Ethos: Siena, 1380-1480.* London: Centre for Medieval Studies, 1992.

Patterson, Lee. *Chaucer and the Subject of History.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.

—. "'Experience woot well it is noght so': Marriage and the Pursuit of Happiness in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale." *The Wife of Bath.* Ed. Peter G. Beidler. Boston: Bedford, 1996. 133-54.

—. "'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee.*" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer.* 11 (1989): 117-175.

Pearce, Spencer. "Dante: Order, Justice and the Society of Orders." *Orders and Hierarchies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe.* Ed. Jeffrey Denton. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. 33-55.

Pearcy, Roy J. "The Genre of Chaucer's Fabliau-Tales." *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction.* Ed. Leigh A. Arrathoon. Rochester, Michigan: Solaris Press, 1986. 329-84.

—. "Structural Models for the Fabliaux and the *Summoner's Tale* Analogues." *Fabula* 15 (1974): 103-13.

Pearsall, Derek. *The Canterbury Tales.* London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985.

Poovey, Mary. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Power, Eileen, trans. *The Goodman of Paris.* London: George Routledge & Sons, 1928.

Pullan, Brian. "'Three Orders of Inhabitants': Social Hierarchies in the Republic of Venice." *Orders and Hierarchies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe.* Ed. Jeffrey Denton. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. 147-168.

Reyerson, Kathryn. "Women in Business in Medieval Montpellier." *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*. Ed. Barbara Hanawalt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. 117-144.

Richardson, Janette. *Blameth Nat Me: A Study of Imagery in Chaucer's Fabliaux*. Paris: Mouton, 1970.

—. "The Façade of Bawdry: Images Patterns in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*." *ELH* 32 (1965): 303-13.

Rigby, S. H. *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class Status and Gender*. London: Macmillan, 1995.

Robertson, D. W. "'And for my Land Thus Hastow Mordred Me?': Land, Tenure, the Cloth Industry, and the Wife of Bath." *The Chaucer Review* 14 (1980): 403-20.

—. *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962.

Robertson, Kellie. "Common Language and Common Profit." *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*. Ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. 209-228.

Ronan, Nick. "1381: Writing in Revolt. Signs of Confederacy in the Chronicle Accounts of the English Rising." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 25 (1989): 304-314.

de Roquefort-Flaméricourt, J. B. B.. *De l'Etat de la poésie françoise dans les XIIe et XIIIe x siècles*. Paris: Fournier, 1815.

Rosenwein, Barbara H. and Lester K. Little. "Social Meaning in the Monastic and Mendicant Spiritualities." *Past and Present* 63 (1974): 4-32.

Rowland, Beryl. "Chaucer's Working Wyf: The Unraveling of a Yarn-Spinner." *Chaucer in the Eighties*. Ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986. 137-49.

Rychner, Jean. "Les Fabliaux: Genre, Styles, Publics." *La Littérature Narrative d'Imagination*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961. 41-54.

Scanlon, Larry. *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Scattergood, V. G. "The Originality of the *Shipman's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 11 (1977): 210-31.

Schenck, Mary Jane. *The Fabliaux: Tales of Wit and Deception*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1987.

—. "The Morphology of the Fabliau." *Fabula* 17 (1976): 26-39.

Schneider, Paul S. "'Taillynge Ynough' The Function of Money in the *Shipman's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 11 (1977): 201-209.

Schroeder, Mary C. "Fantasy in the Merchant's Tale" *Criticism* 12 (1970): 167-79.

Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993, 397-415.

Silverman, Albert H. "Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*." *Philological Quarterly* 43 (1953): 329-36.

Smalley, Beryl. *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960.

Spargo, John Webster. *Chaucer's* Shipman's Tale: *The Lover's Gift Regained*. Helsinki: Folklore Fellows' Communications, 1930.

Spencer, H. Leith. *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

Stock, Lorraine K. "The Meaning of 'Chevyssaunce'" Complicated Work Play in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*." *Studies in Short Fiction* 18 (1981): 247.

Strohm, Paul. "Form and Social Statement in *Confessio Amantis* and *The Canterbury Tales*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1 (1979): 17-40.

—. "Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s." *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*. Ed. By Lee Patterson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 83-112.

—. *Social Chaucer*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Sturges, Robert S. *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory: Bodies of Discourse*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Swanson, Heather. *Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Szittya, Penn. *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Thomson, John A. F. *The Transformation of Medieval England 1370-1529*. London: Longman, 1983.

Thrupp, Sylvia L. *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.

Tillotson, J. H. "Peasant Unrest in the England of Richard II: Some Evidence from Royal Records." *Historical Studies* 16 (1974-75): 1-16.

Togeby, Knud. "The Nature of the Fabliaux." *The Humor of the Fabliaux*. Ed. Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1974. 7-13.

"Train Up a Wife in the Way She Should Go." *Life in the Middle Ages*. Ed. and tran. G. G. Coulton. Vol. III. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967. 119.

Trevelyan, George Macaulay. *England in the Age of Wycliffe*. London: Longmans, Green, 1912.

"Du Vilein Mire." *Gallic Salt: Eighteen Fabliaux Translated from the Old French*. Trans. Robert Harrison. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. 62-85.

Wallace, David. *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Walsingham, Thomas. "Chronicon Angliae." *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*. Ed. and tran. by R. B. Dobson. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1983. 103-104, 131-134, 168-181, 243-248, 256-261, 269-277, 306-313.

Whittock, Trevor. *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

"The Wife of Orleans." *Fabliaux: Ribald Tales from the Old French*. Trans. Robert Hellman and Richard O'Gorman. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1965. 1-7.

Williams, Clem. "The Genre and Art of the Old French Fabliaux: A Preface to the Study of Chaucer's Tales of the Fabliau Type." Ph.D. diss. Yale University, 1961.

Winnick, R.H. "Luke 12 and Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 30.2 (1995): 164-190.