

A Noble Tale: The Knight's and Miller's Tales as an  
Subversion of Genre Expectations

by

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## CHAUCER'S INFLUENCES

It is important to begin any discussion of *The Canterbury Tales* with an examination of Chaucer's influences. While it is tempting to the modern reader to view the collection as a timeless work of literature, the tales as they are written were heavily influenced by the literary conventions of the time. In the Miller's Tale, Chaucer borrowed the French fabliau genre to create a work in the English vernacular; likewise, the Knight's Tale leans heavily on the tradition of the romance. To explore how these literary expectations are subverted in the tales, we must first examine the conventions of each genre.

The fabliau is a contentious genre among modern medievalists. The first recorded use of the term occurred in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century in the opening lines of a piece entitled *Des trois boçus*<sup>1</sup>. The exact definition of a fabliau varies, but all sources agree that these short tales were popular in medieval France and distinctive for their metrical style and comic subject matter.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Bédier, who published a study of the genre in 1893, concluded that the fabliau was intended for a bourgeois audience—although he also acknowledged that the stories were not entirely unheard or unwelcome in courtly circles.<sup>3</sup> While the content of a typical fabliau tends towards low-brow humor, most of the fabliaux that survive in writing today are not as crude in

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<sup>1</sup> Schenck, Mary Jane Stearns. *The Fabliaux: Tales of Wit and Deception*. (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1987) p. 1. Google Books.

[http://books.google.com/books?id=sehkbFYv4tEC&dq=fabliau&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.com/books?id=sehkbFYv4tEC&dq=fabliau&source=gbs_navlinks_s). October 3, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> "fabliau." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/199767/fabliau>. October 3, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Kibler, William W. "Fabliaux." *Medieval France: An Encyclopedia*. (Psychology Press, 1995) p. 332. Google Books.

[http://books.google.com/books?id=4qFY1jpF2JAC&dq=fabliaux+orient&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.com/books?id=4qFY1jpF2JAC&dq=fabliaux+orient&source=gbs_navlinks_s). October 3, 2010.

their style as they are in their content. Nearly all have a three-part structure consisting of an introduction, narrative and conclusion, and the octosyllabic verse that most are written in shows of the competence of their authors.<sup>4</sup> Roughly 150 fabliaux survive in written form today.<sup>5</sup> It is possible that what we can deduce from the remaining fabliaux is only the tip of the iceberg of a much larger body of work that modern audiences will never be able to recover. Many of the fabliaux still in existence borrow heavily from the oral tradition, and we cannot know for certain whether more stories of a similar nature were lost or never written down at all.

Given the oral genesis of the fabliau, it is not surprising that the origins of the genre are a matter of debate among modern academics. Nineteenth-century scholars, most notably Gaston Paris, believed that the genre was imported from the Orient.<sup>6</sup> Later scholars have countered that the subject matter of most fabliaux has as much in common with earlier classical and European texts as it does with eastern stories.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most confusing aspect of our current definition of the fabliau as a genre is the nationality of the works in question. It can be argued that the fabliau is an exclusively French genre, and that similar pieces of literature from other countries cannot by definition be described with the same term; Chaucerians counter that the British author included at least five, and possibly six, fabliaux in *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>8</sup> To determine whether Chaucer's bawdy tales can be classified as fabliaux, we

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<sup>4</sup> Shenck, *The fabliaux*. p. 2. October 3, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Harrison, Robert. *Galic Salt: Glimpses of the Hilarious Bawdy World of Old French Fabliaux*. (University of California Press, 1974) p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Shenck, *The Fabliaux*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Kibler, *Medieval France*, p. 333. October 3, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Kibler, *Medieval France*, p. 332. October 3, 2010.

must examine the author's influences and the literary traditions to which he had access.

Chaucer is often considered to be a distinctly English author. Although Chaucer was not the first English author to write in the vernacular, he gets a good deal of the credit for proving that the language could function as a vehicle for high art. The fact that Chaucer was able to gain respect as an English author owes a great deal to King Richard II. Richard brought poets, including Chaucer, to his court; he commissioned *Confessio Amantis*, a work in English by John Gower, and paid for the performances of plays in the vernacular.<sup>9</sup> French had been a "high" language since the Norman invasion in 1066, and the form of English spoken in Chaucer's time was an unregulated combination of French and Anglo-Saxon. It is possible to view the use of English as a literary language as a sign of emerging English nationalism, and to view Chaucer's use of the vernacular as a rejection of traditionally French forms of literature. The truth, however, is somewhat more complicated. Chaucer travelled through Europe as a diplomat during his lifetime, and his work includes continental influences.

We have nearly 500 documents mentioning Geoffrey Chaucer; most are official records that relate to his job as a civil servant.<sup>10</sup> Chaucer was born in London sometime around 1340. His father was in attendance on the Court, and young

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<sup>9</sup> Terry Jones, Terry Dolan, Juliette Dor, Robert Yeager, Alan Fletcher. "Chaucer and Richard II." *Who Murdered Chaucer?: A Medieval Mystery*. (Macmillan, 2006) p. 35. Google Books. [http://books.google.com/books?id=TtRtJ0L3X3gC&dq=chaucer+vernacular&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.com/books?id=TtRtJ0L3X3gC&dq=chaucer+vernacular&source=gbs_navlinks_s). October 3, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Beidler, Peter G. "Chaucer's Life." *Backgrounds to Chaucer*. The ORB: Online Reference Book for Medieval Studies. <http://www.the-orb.net/textbooks/anthology/beidler/life.html>. October 4, 2010.

Geoffrey served as a page to the Earl of Ulster, the second son of Edward II.<sup>11</sup> This position probably allowed Chaucer to learn the French language and the customs of the aristocracy. In 1360, Geoffrey accompanied the Earl on a military campaign in France. Chaucer was captured and held in France until he was ransomed by King Edward III. Geoffrey returned to the English court as a *valetus*.<sup>12</sup> He wrote *The Book of the Duchess* for Sir John of Gaunt around 1369.<sup>13</sup> *Duchess* borrows heavily from French literary styles despite its English subject matter.<sup>14</sup> From 1370 to 1380 Chaucer served as a diplomat. In 1372, he spent a year in Italy.<sup>15</sup> Although Chaucer was probably fluent in Italian before his journey to the continent, this trip marks the beginning of Italian influences in his writing. *The House of Fame* drew inspiration from Dante's infamous dream-vision. On a second trip in 1378, Chaucer was introduced to the work of Petrarch and Boccaccio.<sup>16</sup> During this period, Chaucer also visited Flanders, France, and Lombardy. Around the age of forty-six, Chaucer lost his appointments and suffered some financial hardship. During the following year, in 1387, his wife died. Although Chaucer lived to the age of 60, it is possible that he wrote *The Canterbury Tales* as early as 1387. John of Gaunt's return to power in 1369 resulted in more appointments for Chaucer.<sup>17</sup> In his later years, he read his works aloud at the English court and formed a friendship with John Gower, another

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<sup>11</sup> Skeat, Walter William. "Introduction." *Chaucer: the prologue to the Canterbury tales*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891. p. vi. Google Books. [http://books.google.com/books?id=b9w-AAAAYAAJ&dq=Skeat+chaucer&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.com/books?id=b9w-AAAAYAAJ&dq=Skeat+chaucer&source=gbs_navlinks_s). October 3, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Beilder, "Chaucer's Life." October 4, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Skeat, *Chaucer*, p. vi. October 3, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Beilder, "Chaucer's Life." October 4, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Skeat, *Chaucer*, p. vi. October 3, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Beilder, "Chaucer's Life." October 4, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Skeat, *Chaucer*, p. vi. October 3, 2010.

early adopter of the English vernacular.<sup>18</sup> Chaucer died with a comfortable pension in 1400.<sup>19</sup> All of the Chaucerian manuscripts that survive today were copied after his death in professional, not monastic, workshops.<sup>20</sup>

Chaucer did indeed spend time in France, but how influential was French literature on his own writing? Much of the poetry that he wrote while serving as a *valetus*, after his return from France, mimics French styles. He imitated French poets, including Froissart, Machaut, de Meun, Granson, and Deschamps. Until the early 1370s, most of his work had far more in common with French literature than it did with English poetry. While other English poets preferred the traditional alliterative style, Chaucer used the end rhyme common to French literature—and the fabliau.<sup>21</sup> In the *Legend of Good Women*, one of Chaucer's longer works, the Goddess of Love tells Chaucer (who appears as the narrator of the prologue), "Thou hast translated the *Romaunce of the Rose*,/That is an heresyse ayeins my lawe".<sup>22</sup> This is not the only time in Chaucer's writing that he advertises one text that he has written within another; his retraction of *The Canterbury Tales* is also a tongue-in-cheek nod to other texts he has written, some of which have been lost. A partial English translation of the French poem *Roman de la Rose* does indeed exist from that time period, although Chaucer was almost certainly not the translator of the entire text. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this reference to *Roman de la Rose* is the fact that Chaucer borrowed heavily from the tale whether or not he actually translated it. *Legend of*

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<sup>18</sup> Beidler, "Chaucer's Life." October 4, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Skeat, *Chaucer*, p. vi. October 3, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Beidler, "Chaucer's Life." October 4, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Beidler, "Chaucer's Life." October 4, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey. "Prologue F." *The Legend of Good Women*. ll. 329-330. eChaucer. <http://www.umm.maine.edu/faculty/necastro/chaucer/texts/lgw/lgwf07.txt>. October 3, 2010.

*Good Women*, like *Roman de la Rose*, begins with an allegorical dream in which the flower-inspired god of love appears to the narrator. In typical Chaucerian fashion, the story is subverted. Instead of receiving advice about love, as in the French tale, the narrator is blamed for writing stories that do not portray women in a favorable light. In order to make up for this failing, Chaucer vows to write a series of stories about honorable females throughout history—although with his trademark satirical wit, he includes some accounts of less than admirable ladies in his accounting of womanly virtue. *Legend of Good Women* is not the only work by Chaucer to display the poet's continental influences. Nearly all of the stories in *The Canterbury Tales* are continental, not English, in origin. The idea of travelers telling stories to pass the time on the road is borrowed from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Instead of following the tales of twenty nobles fleeing from the bubonic plague, as the *Decameron* does, *The Canterbury Tales* follows pilgrims from all walks of life on a pleasant journey.<sup>23</sup> Chaucer borrowed more than Boccaccio's structure; the subject matter of many of his tales can also be found in the *Decameron*.

Chaucerian scholars consider at least five, and possibly six, of the Canterbury tales to be fabliaux. The Miller, Reeve, Shipman, and Summoner tell tales in the traditional style, with bawdy humor based on sex and scat. The Cook's tale follows the form of a fabliau, but the story is incomplete. The Merchant's tale is harder to classify. Although the tale is told in the same lyrical end-rhymed format, the piece is far longer and more rhetorically complex than the typical fabliau. Despite the intricacy of the language, the subject matter is decidedly low-brow.

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<sup>23</sup> Beilder, "Chaucer's Life." October 4, 2010.

But can any of Chaucer's tales be categorized as fabliaux? According to scholars who consider the genre to be *by definition* French, Chaucer is excluded merely because he chose to write in English. Chaucer's reliance on Italian as well as French sources is also problematic, given the fact that Chaucer probably lifted several of the tales that are considered fabliaux from the *Decameron*. If these tales existed in French before Boccaccio wrote them down, those works did not survive or were never written down. Still, while we cannot declare any of Chaucer's tales to be definitively fabliaux, we can acknowledge that the English author borrowed heavily from the genre in his own writing. Indeed, Chaucer used the lewd French genre to create a distinct form of literature that is humorous on more than one level. The fabliaux-like stories in *The Canterbury Tales* function as bawdy anecdotes, but they also serve a higher satirical purpose as commentary on other literary genres. Chaucer's unique blend of low-brow subject matter and courtly style can be read as a satire of literature—particularly of the romance genre, with its strict rules about the nature of love.

Romance as a genre has been studied academically for far longer than fabliau. Although there were probably romances that were influenced by through the oral tradition, authors and transcribers have made a greater effort to preserve romances in writing. Like fabliaux, romances originated in the courts of France in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century. Romances featured chivalry among nobility first and foremost. Love and religion were also common themes. Today, medieval romances are usually thought of as a high-brow pursuit, but the original meaning of the word old French word *romanz* was “the vulgar tongue”—that is, a tale told in the French vernacular



rather than in the high language Latin. Eventually, the term came to mean “story,” and a *romanz* was understood to be a tale that was similar in structure, and often directly borrowed from, Latin stories but written in French.<sup>24</sup> Some scholars will argue that romance is by this definition a genre that can be written *only* in French, and that a romance translated into any other language is not by definition a romance any more. This definition is far too restrictive. Chaucer wrote in English, his own vernacular, and he was knowledgeable of French romances and their Latin roots. Even if he did not write a romance in the sense that he did not write in French, he demonstrated a clear understanding of the styles and conventions of romances.

The specific code by which nobles and their loves were often supposed to abide in these tales was known as courtly love. There is a great deal of scholarly debate over whether or not courtly love was a real phenomenon, or whether the idea was a literary invention. Since our records of the private lives of even well-known nobles in this period are incomplete—and since the infidelity and lack of chastity that characterize many tales of courtly love would be unlikely to be recorded in the first place—modern scholars can talk definitively about courtly love only as a literary tradition. Andreas Capellanus’s 12<sup>th</sup>-century book *The Art of Courtly Love* laid down a rigid and almost certainly satirical set of rules for the genre, enumerating at one point a 31-item list that all lovers must follow. We can read this text as an over-the-top satire, but it also functions as an astute enumeration of the tropes of love and relationships that can be found in romantic literature. The list paints an overstated portrait of a lover in a typical romantic tale, one who is constantly turning pale in the

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<sup>24</sup> “romance.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/508347/romance>. November 2, 2010.

presence of his beloved, experiencing heart palpitations, and eschewing basic bodily functions. It also defines courtly love as a secretive and possibly contradictory pursuit, since “When made public love rarely endures” even though “It is not proper to love any woman whom one should be ashamed to seek to marry.”<sup>25</sup> We cannot know for certain whether Chaucer ever read Capellanus. He was certainly no stranger to French authors, and his familiarity with the romance genre and the popularity of *The Art of Courtly Love* makes it probable that he was at least aware of Capellanus’s work. He certainly seemed aware of the conventions of courtly love, since he included several of the tropes that Capellanus had identified in the *Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer’s familiarity with French literature included a great deal of the romance genre. As I discussed earlier, he quite probably had a hand in translating part of *Roman de la Rose*, and he later saw fit to mock his own work on the text by including a slyly subversive re-imagining of the opening dream sequence in *Legend of Good Women*. The various stories set out in *Legend of Good Women* could be said to be miniature romances in their own right, since the tales are repurposed from Latin and follow the exploits of noble women and men. In typical Chaucerian fashion, many of these stories are twisted, with the narrator identifying Medea as a good woman and telling a series of tales in which women are wronged or betrayed. *Anelida and Arcite* is an early, less sophisticated attempt at romance. *Troilus and Criseyde* is a romance played straighter than the tales in *Legend of Good Women*, although Chaucer’s satirical side still shows through at times.

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<sup>25</sup> Capellanus, Andreas. “Book Two: On the Rules of Love.” *The Art of Courtly Love*. trans. Paul Halsall. Internet Medieval Source Book. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/capellanus.html>. November 4, 2010.

Chaucer's familiarity with both the fabliau and romance genres allowed him to include the two in the Canterbury Tales. The Knight's tale has been written to be clearly recognizable as a romance, while the Miller's tale is equally identifiable as a fabliau. The Knight's tale is the first in the set, and the Miller's tale has long been recognized as a lewd parody of the opening romance. On closer inspection, however, the Knight's story cannot be said to be a romance told entirely straight, and the Miller's tale uses sophisticated techniques that seem out of place in a bawdy story told by a drunk pilgrim. Elements of each genre are mixed in different ways in each tale to create a "romance" with implications that call the notion of love and nobility into question and a "fabliau" that borrows the literary conventions of a romance.

### **GENRE SUBVERSION IN THE TWO TALES**

After the General Prologue, the first pilgrim to tell a story is the Knight. The Knight's tale is a romance, with multiple suitors competing for the love of one lady. Two cousins, Arcite and Palamon, share a close bond of friendship. When the two are captured and imprisoned by the duke of Athens, both lay eyes on the duke's niece Emily. The cousins fall madly in love with Emily, and their quests for the same woman destroy their friendship. Arcite is released from his imprisonment but disguises himself to stay close to his love. Palamon escapes, but encounters and does battle with his ex-friend in the midst of his getaway. The Athenian duke chances upon the two dueling; he declares a tournament for Emily's hand in marriage. Arcite wins the battle, but is killed before claiming his prize. Emily, who had prayed to remain a virgin, marries Palamon.

The Knight's tale certainly has all of the characteristics of a romance, and generations of scholars have treated it as such. The story purports to be a retelling of a classical tale, with the nephews of the King of Thebes falling capture to the Duke of Athens. Chaucer chooses to tell the tale in the elevated language suitable to the genre. The conventions of a typical story of courtly love are followed to a tee—in fact, the story is an exaggeration of a typical romance, with the two lovers acting out rules of courtly love to such extremes that they do not even speak to their beloved. And yet, modern scholars have begun to question the idea that the Knight's Tale is indeed a romance. C. David Benson neatly expresses the idea that all is not as it seems in this romantic tale, noting that,

Because it deals with knights and ladies, love and fighting, and no other obvious classification suggests itself, most critics have been content to label this tale a romance. Yet despite some surface similarities, the essence of the *genre*, what might be called “the spirit of the romance” is absent.<sup>26</sup>

The Knight's tale has all the trappings of a romance, and yet, something about the work as a whole falls flat when viewed as a work of the romantic genre. As Benson points out, Chaucer does display a mastery for writing romances elsewhere within the Canterbury Tales: in the Wife of Bath's Tale, the Squire's Tale, and to a lesser extent in the Tale of Sir Thopas. The tenor of the Knight's Tale must, then, be purposeful. Why did Chaucer choose to use the conventions of this genre to pen a tale that does not add up to a romance? As is the case in many of the Canterbury tales, Chaucer's deliberate use and abuse of artistic conventions can be read as a satire of the genres he purports to write. To fully understand the Knight's tale as a “failed” romance, we

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<sup>26</sup> Benson, C. David. “The Knight's Tale as History.” p. 107. *The Chaucer Review*. Vol. 3, No. 2 (Fall, 1968). Penn State University Press. Jstor. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25093080>. November 8, 2010.

must look at its immediate successor in the tales; the Miller's Tale directly borrows the structure of its predecessor to tell a different sort of story that is, on closer inspection, as much a romance as the Knight's Tale.

Immediately after the Knight's Tale, the Host asks the monk to tell the next story of the set—but the drunken Miller interrupts, yelling and swearing that, “by armes and by blood and bones,/I kan a noble tale for the nones”<sup>27</sup>. He then proceeds to tell his exceedingly lewd tale. The contrast between the lofty Knight's story and the Miller's crude tale is used humorously, and the dissonance between the two highlights the rudeness of the fabliau. And yet, while the Miller fails to tell a “noble tale”, the story that he *does* tell is a subtle reworking of the grand romance that came before it. In this ribald tale, a young scholar named Nicholas takes up lodging in the home of a carpenter named John. Nicholas proceeds to woo John's wife, Alison; eventually she is won over and agrees to have sex with him. The two contrive an elaborate plan to get John out of the house: Nicholas claims to have knowledge of an astrological event that will surpass Noah's flood, and he convinces John to sit in a bathtub hung from the roof. As John sleeps in the bathtub, Nicholas and Alison have sex. Afterwards, they are visited by Absalon, a parish clerk who is infatuated with Alison. Absalon begs his love for a kiss, and she responds by leaning out of the window so that the clerk inadvertently kisses her rear end. Distressed by what he has done, Absalon hatches his own plan: he heats up a poker and returns to the house to beg for another kiss. Nicholas, attempting to get in on the joke, sticks his own ass out of the window. Absalon brands Nicholas with the poker, and the wounded scholar's

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<sup>27</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey. “The Miller's Prologue.” *The Canterbury Tales*. ll. 17-18. Electronic Literature Foundation. <http://www.canterburytales.org/>. October 26, 2010.

cries for water convince John that the flood waters are rising. The unwitting carpenter cuts the rope that his bathtub is hanging from and plummets to the ground, breaking his arm. The townsfolk gather around the scene and discover that John has been cuckolded.

Like most fabliau, the Miller's Tale is in verse. The entire tale is told with rhyming couplets. Most of the lines are ten syllables; eight is the usual number for fabliau, but other structures are not unheard of in the genre. The subject matter of the tale is definitely fitting with fabliau—indeed, the story seems to be lifted from two other continental fabliau, “The Misdirected Kiss” and “The Second Flood.”<sup>28</sup> At first glance, the tale appears to be a completely formulaic example of the genre. The subject matter is low-brow and coarse; characters fart, have sex, trick each other, and so on. The story is a classic example of the idea of “fabliau justice”, in which some characters are punished elaborately and others escape without any penalties at all for their misbehavior.<sup>29</sup> And yet, just as the Knight's tale cannot be classified as a straight romance, the Miller's tale is more than a fabliau.

The similarities between the structures of these two tales are easy enough to spot. The two tales are told in rhyming couplets, with each line containing ten syllables. Both tell the stories of two men who are rivals in love: Arcite and Palamon in the first, Nicholas and Absalon in the second. In both stories, the dueling lovers fall for a beautiful young woman. In the Knight's tale, the object of the lovers' affections is Emelye, while Alison is the object of desire in the Miller's tale. This young woman

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<sup>28</sup> Benson, Larry Dean. “Introduction.” *The Riverside Chaucer*. Third edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 8. Google Books.  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=E4DXD7Sk7WcC&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.com/books?id=E4DXD7Sk7WcC&source=gbs_navlinks_s). October 26, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 8. October 26, 2010.

is controlled by an older man: Theseus in the first, John in the second. A lover is given a chance to win the object of his affection by playing to his strengths. In the Knight's tale, the two men enter a tournament of strength for their love, while clever Nicholas uses his wits to win time alone with Alison. When the time comes for a fight, neither man wins completely, and the ultimate justice of the situation is called into doubt. In a way, the Miller does indeed manage to tell a "noble tale"; his story is essentially the Knight's tale, subverted through retelling. And yet, the Knight's tale may be as much a subversion of a romance as the Miller's Tale. As we examine some of the elements that the two tales share in greater detail, we will see that the Miller's Tale succeeds at certain artistic conventions where the Knight's tale fails.

First, we will compare the characterization of the two lovers in each tale. Arcite and Palamon are presented as friends and equals, two cousins who have been imprisoned after battle in the same tower. When the two set eyes on Emily, they follow the conventions of courtly love to a fault. Palamon, upon catching sight of Emily, "cryede A!/As though he stongen were unto the herte."<sup>30</sup> Arcite, believing that his friend has been wounded, responds with the appropriate amount of concern. This reaction is remarkably similar to the physical symptoms that lovers in romantic tales face, according to Andreas Capellanus: "When a lover suddenly catches sight of his beloved his heart palpitates."<sup>31</sup> From there, the description of the lovers' affliction grows so exaggerated that it becomes completely ridiculous. Palamon describes the

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<sup>30</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Knight's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*. ll. 220-221. Electronic Literature Foundation. <http://www.canterburytales.org/>. November 8, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Cappelanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*. November 8, 2010.

vision of Emily as something that “hurt right now thurgh-out myn eye”<sup>32</sup>—hardly a pleasant description of love. Arcite, upon seeing Emily, feels great pain as well, and the suffering that the two of them feel becomes the first point of contention in the tale: “And with that sighte hir beautee hurte hym so,/That if that Palamon was wounded sore,/Arcite is hurt as moche as he, or moore.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, the tale fails as a romance in part because the story is less about the relationship between the lovers and Emily than it is about the competition between the knights themselves. The one-upmanship that follows between the trapped knights creates more humor than it does pathos. Immediately after reasserting the strength of their bond (Palamon goes so far as to declare “Neither of us in love to hyndre other”<sup>34</sup>) the two immediately begin bickering over who saw Emily first and thus can claim her as his love. They get into a surprisingly erudite rhetorical argument—an unusual aside for a tale of love and adventure—as Arcite points out that his cousin claimed to be unsure as to whether Emily was a woman or a goddess, and thus his adoration is “love as to a creature”<sup>35</sup> while Palamon’s admiration is only “affeccioun of hoolynesse”<sup>36</sup>. They continue in a similar vein, debating the finer points of love, until both realize that they are locked in a tower and their argument is fruitless. Chaucer inserts this sort of rhetorical debate throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, occasionally as a genuinely thought-provoking argument but more often as a source of comic relief in which one character gives a completely outrageous line of reasoning. This is demonstrated most aptly in the

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<sup>32</sup> Chaucer, “The Knight’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 238. November 8, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Chaucer, “The Knight’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 256-258. November 8, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Chaucer, “The Knight’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 277. November 8, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Chaucer, “The Knight’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 301. November 9, 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Chaucer, “The Knight’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 300. November 9, 2010.



Merchant's Tale, when an obsequious character named Placebo gets into a fight with the voice of justice himself. Here, *both* characters choose equally foolish claims, and their argument is so pointless that it can be summed up thusly:

We stryven as dide the houndes for the boon,  
They foughte al day, and yet hir part was noon.  
Ther cam a kyte, whil they weren so wrothe,  
And baar away the boon bitwixe hem bothe.<sup>37</sup>

The entire tower sequence is an elegant deconstruction of the romance genre, with the two knights striving over an utterly fruitless argument and cutting each other down with rhetoric rather than with swords. Why, Chaucer asks the reader, is a romance worth reading if the protagonists' struggles have no impact at all on the plot? Are knights worth reading about merely because they are knights, even when they are locked away in a tower and unable to do anything except bicker over an impossible to reach woman? The knights do eventually manage to get out of the tower and resolve their dispute with swords rather than with words, but even then the final tournament is proposed by Theseus—and the ultimate victory is granted not by strength of character but by a bizarre divine intervention. Arcite wins the final tournament and thus the hand of Emily, but Pluto, sent at the request of Saturn, startles the knight's horse. The wound that Arcite receives in this fall festers, and with his dying words he asks Palamon to marry Emily in his stead. Throughout the tale, neither knight has any true agency. They long for Emily, but cannot woo her; they fight for their love, but the gods ultimately decide their fate. Are these two really the ideal protagonists of a romantic tale? Let us compare these shiftless knights to the dueling lovers of the Miller's tale.

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<sup>37</sup> Chaucer, "The Knight's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 319-332. November 9, 2010.

While the knights have very little interaction with Emily at all, the two lovers in the Miller's tale showcase their individual talents while wooing Alison. Nicolas is described in the tale as quite a dish, a clerk who is "lyk a mayden meke for to see"<sup>38</sup>, "sweete as is the roote / Of lycorys"<sup>39</sup> (an ironic statement, given his not at all sweet-smelling performance later in the tale), capable of making music and studying a number of sciences. While he is never described as particularly brave in battle, his skills as a lover far surpass Arcite and Palamon's. In the first interaction between Nicholas and Alison that we see in the tale, Nicholas is overly bold. In fact, he goes so far as to attract the attention of his landlord's wife by catching her "by the queynte"<sup>40</sup>. Here, Chaucer uses *queynte* to refer to a woman's genitals; as I will discuss later in the comparison of Alison and Emily, this multi-purpose term is used to sly effect in both the Knight's and the Miller's tales. Despite this apparent over-reaching (as it were) on Nicholas's part, he successfully woos Alison and convinces not only to sleep with him but to profess her love. The lines in which he does so are brief, especially in comparison to the raunchy attempt at seduction that comes before, but the section is worth noting:

This nicholas gan mercy for to crye,  
 And spak so faire, and profred him so faste,  
 That she hir love hym graunted atte laste,<sup>41</sup>

Here, Nicholas switches tactics and seduces Alison with words. Significantly, he speaks "fairly"—a word that implies that he is using the language of romances to his advantage. From our earlier list of Nicholas's accomplishments, we know that he is a

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<sup>38</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 16. November 18, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 20-21. November 18, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 90. November 18, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 102-104. November 18, 2010.

learned scholar who possesses a great number of books; in this section, he uses his knowledge of the traditions of romantic love to seduce a woman. When we remember that the Miller's tale directly follows a romance in the Canterbury tales, and that it apes the structure of this romance to a remarkable degree, and that the Miller promises to tell the reader a noble tale, we begin to understand the significance of putting a knight's words in a clerk's mouth. Unlike the knights, who long from afar and have their fates decided by coincidence and divine intervention, Nicholas is a man of action. He gets what the knights could not, and he does so by aping the language of a romance. He so convinces Alison of his desirability that she is willing to swear her devotion. Nicholas eventually goes further in his cooption of romantic tropes for less-than-noble goals when he tricks the carpenter John by shutting himself in his room,

For for no cry hir mayde koude hym calle,  
 He nolde answeere for thyng that myghte falle.  
 [...]  
 This nicholas sat evere capyng upright,  
 As he had kiked on the newe moone.<sup>42</sup>

This behavior is bizarre enough in its own right, especially when Nicholas begins to sprout nonsense about astrology and the end of the world. Here, Nicholas once again borrows from the tradition of the romance to further his own goals. He appears to be insane, but it is a very particular sort of insanity. Instead of immediately going to the carpenter and espousing his theory of the new flood, he shuts himself in his room and pretends to refuse food, drink, and sleep. Indeed, his "insanity" is in keeping with the traditions of courtly love, in which a lover's very metabolism seems to shut down.

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<sup>42</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 231-259. Electronic Literature Foundation. [http://www.canterburytales.org/canterbury\\_tales.html](http://www.canterburytales.org/canterbury_tales.html). November 18, 2010.

Capellanus reminds us that in stories of courtly love, “He whom the thought of love vexes, eats and sleeps very little.”<sup>43</sup> Let us remember, however, that once again Nicholas takes on this appearance of a romantic hero not out of genuine emotion but to get what he wants. Despite his apparent malady, while he is shut away in his room and not under observation he makes sure to “And eet and sleep, or dide what hym leste”<sup>44</sup>. Nicholas is an expert at using the tropes of a romance for his own purposes. His foil does exactly the opposite: he lives his life as he imagines a courtly lover ought to, but he completely fails to win Alison.

Absalon the parish clerk is less favorably described, with hair “strouted as a fanne large and brode”<sup>45</sup> and a prudish attitude about “fartyng, and of speche daungerous.”<sup>46</sup> Still, the narrator tells us that Absalon is much desired among the wives in his parish, and that he is skilled at his job and at the art of music. While Nicholas uses the language of romances for his own nefarious purposes, Absalon lives the lifestyle of a romantic hero. Despite the easy sex that he could get from his admirers, he “Hath in his herte swich a love-longynge / That of no wyf took he noon offrynge”<sup>47</sup>. This behavior seems out of place in a fabliau, but it is perfectly at home in a romance—where, as Capellanus observes, “A true lover does not desire to embrace in love anyone except his beloved.”<sup>48</sup> Absalon goes further in his attempt at aping a hero of a romance by sneaking out in the middle of the night to stand under Alison’s window and serenade her. He sends her gifts (including food and mead),

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<sup>43</sup> Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*. November 18, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 235. November 18, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 129. November 18, 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 152. November 18, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 163-164. November 18, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*. November 18, 2010.

plays her elaborate music, and persists all day and night, but to no avail: Alison remains devoted to Nicholas. Why Alison prefers Nicholas is fairly obvious: while Nicholas is an expert at using the behavior of a courtly lover to sweet-talk a woman and trick her husband, Absalon blunders through the motions of a romance. Like Nicholas, he also stays up at night—but instead of pining privately, he uses his time to disturb the sleep of Alison and draw the attention of her husband John. The most obvious misuse of romantic tropes occurs in the scene just before the first kiss, when Absalon attempts to woo Alison with an over-the-top speech. He uses a series of metaphors to explain his love, and ends up bypassing romance entirely with lines like, “I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.”<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, in the midst of this sickeningly sweet speech, Absalon claims that he is behaving in the *exact* manner of Nicholas during his mock madness—but here, he seems convinced that his ailments are a sign of love. He claims to “swelte and swete”<sup>50</sup>, and soon after he declares that his longing is so great that “I may nat ete na moore than a mayde.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, his ailments seem to match up remarkably well to Cappelanus’s list of lovers’ woes. Later in the sequence, we even get a literal sense of what the Miller meant when he promised the audience a noble tale, when Absalon describes his joy in anticipation of a kiss by declaring that he is “a lord at alle degrees”<sup>52</sup>. The kiss, of course, turns out to be a cruel jape, and Absalon is so completely cured of his desire for romance that “Of paramours he sette nat a kers; / For he was heeled of his maladie.”<sup>53</sup> While Absalon’s attempts at courtly love end here, he still apes the hero of a romance in his

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<sup>49</sup> Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 518. November 21, 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 517. November 21, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 521. November 21, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 538. November 21, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Chaucer, “The Miller’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 570-571. November 21, 2010.

revenge. Instead of a knight's sword, he find the "colde stele"<sup>54</sup> of a poker, and in the scene where he returns to the window, his vindication is described in language that is startlingly epic given the subject matter. This time Absalon, like Nicholas, adopts the traditions of a romance in order to get what he wants; here, he promises a love-gift in order to convince the two to open the window again. The final battle, as it were, is described thusly:

This nicholas anon leet fle a fart,  
As greet as it had been a thonder-dent,  
That with the strook he was almoost yblent;  
And he was redy with his iren hoot,  
And nicholas amydde the ers he smoot.<sup>55</sup>

The confrontation is comic, in part because the hyperbolic language is at odds with the crudity of the events themselves. Why would Chaucer choose to use such epic language in a description of a fart? Again, we must remember that not only are the Knight's and Miller's stories adjacent in the Canterbury tales, but the plots of the two narratives could be said to be roughly parallel. This climactic scene occurs in the Miller's Tale in the same place in the story as the tournament for Emily's heart in the Knight's tale. In the Knight's tale, neither man can truly be said to win completely: Arcite is victorious in the tournament, but Palamon gets the lady. The end result is set up as an ironic result of divine meddling, since each man gets *exactly what he asked for* from his respective deity. The Miller's tale is an exact reversal of this scenario. Neither Nicholas nor Absalon escapes unscathed from this encounter, and each gets a suitable "punishment". The fastidious Absalon, who is so squeamish of farting, is

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<sup>54</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 599. November 21, 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 620-624. November 21, 2010.

farted upon in a spectacular fashion; Nicholas, who is so tenacious in his pursuit of pleasure, is branded.

Next, let us examine the women in these two tales. On the outset, Emily is a suitable heroine for a romance: she is beautiful, noble, and worth fighting over. Likewise, Alison's lustiness is suitable to a character in a fabliau. On closer inspection, however, the two women are not as suitable for their genres as they initially appear. Emily is so reluctant in love that she seems to dismiss the idea entirely, while Alison is more than the typical cuckolding wife.

In the beginning of the Knight's tale, we learn that Emily is the younger sister of Queen Ypolita, who came to Athens after her sister wed Duke Theseus. Since Theseus conquered their homeland, the reader is left to imagine whether this marriage is a happy one; we see very little of Ypolita in the story. Emily's position on marriage, however, is painfully clear. She is a follower of "Dyane the chaste"<sup>56</sup>, and throughout the story she makes her intent to imitate her goddess clear. The temple of Diana is described as full of grisly reminders of those who did not keep their chastity. "Depeynted been the walles up and down"<sup>57</sup> with pictures from classical mythology of women who have been turned into bears or trees, men being torn apart by dogs for peeping and other scenes of woe befalling the unchaste. While the two lovers pray to their respective gods, Emily goes to the temple of Diana hoping for a very different outcome from the tournament. In a rite of sacrifice to Diana, Emily declares,

Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I

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<sup>56</sup> Chaucer, "The Knight's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 1197. November 28, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Chaucer, "The Knight's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 1200. November 28, 2010.

Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,  
Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf.<sup>58</sup>

Here again, Chaucer stretches the conventions of the genre to their ultimate limit in order to play with the notion of what makes a story a romance. A woman in a story of courtly love may hesitate at first, but this is more than feminine uncertainty; Emily declares in no uncertain terms that she does not wish to have a husband, or even a lover, at all. Can a woman who swore that “Noght wol I knowe the compaignye of man”<sup>59</sup> really function as the heroine of a romance? Emily asks her goddess to turn away the affections of Arcite and Palamon—or, if this is impossible, to send her whoever desires her more. While the knights may attempt some of the conventions of courtly love, the adoration in this story is suspiciously one-sided.

Since this is a story by Geoffrey Chaucer, a dirty pun comes hard on the heels of this serious religious rite. Over and over in the scene, we see the word *queynte* used for a variety of purposes. Emily asks Diana to make sure that the ardor of her two suitors “Be queynt, or turned in another place”<sup>60</sup>. Here, the word is used in the sense of *quenched*. Later in the passage, Chaucer gives us this usual couplet:

But sodeynly she saugh a sighte queynte,  
For right anon oon of the fyres queynte<sup>61</sup>

*Queynte* is used again in the sense of *strange* in the first line and again as *quenched* in the second. In lines 1482 and 1483, we see the same repetition of the word, once more meaning *quenched*. This is the signal that Diana gives before appearing before

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<sup>58</sup> Chaucer, “The Knight’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 1450-1452. November 28, 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Chaucer, “The Knight’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 1457. November 28, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Chaucer, “The Knight’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 1467. November 28, 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Chaucer, “The Knight’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 1479-1480. November 28, 2010.



Emily to deliver the unhappy news that she will marry one of the knights. The term is used too many times in such quick succession to be a mere accident of word choice; Chaucer deliberately picked this expression, rather than an array of possible synonyms, as a pun. As we shall see in the discussion of the Miller's tale, there is yet another meaning to the word *queynte*, one that Chaucer was well aware of. *Queynte* could also be used in literature of this time period to refer to a woman's genitals.<sup>62</sup> This juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane is a common theme in the Canterbury Tales—we will see the same technique again in our discussion of the Miller's tale—but the repeated use of a slang term for a woman's genitals is particularly noteworthy in a scene about a woman pleading for her chastity. How seriously can the reader be expected to take a serious scene strewn with crude puns? This playful use of language has the opposite effect as the faux-dramatic language of the farting scene in the Miller's tale. While the fart is turned into an event worthy of drama, the tearful prayer becomes a farce.

Emily's feelings about marriage are entirely ignored by the two knights, Theseus, and even the gods. Can a character who rejects the idea of love itself be considered the heroine of a romance? According to Capellanus, our source for concise information on the tropes of courtly love, Emily is a poor choice indeed for the two knights. Number five on his list of the rules of courtly love is the warning that, "That which a lover takes against his will of his beloved has no relish."<sup>63</sup> Emily is a woman impelled to marry a man she does not know by a brother-in-law whose own

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<sup>62</sup> Cosman, Madeleine Pelner. "Queynte." *Medieval Worldbook: More than 4,000 Terms and Expressions from Medieval Culture*. (New York: Fall River Press, 2007.) p. 197.

<sup>63</sup> Cappelanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*. November 29, 2010.

relationship with his wife is dubious, given his conquest of her country. Chaucer's actual attitude towards female autonomy is a matter of great debate among scholarly circles; the tales, after all, contain conflicting messages about the duties and rights of women, since each story is related by a different narrator whose opinions color the tale. It is worth mentioning, however, that the "marriage group" later in the series pits three opposing views on marriage against each other, and that the final lay by the Franklin resolves the argument. George Lyman Kittredge concluded in his influential essay "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage" that the Franklin's idea of marriage almost certainly reflected the actual views of Chaucer-the-author, and that "Love *can* be consistent with marriage [...] Indeed, without love (and perfect, *gentle* love) marriage is sure to be a failure. The difficulty about mastery vanishes when mutual love and forbearance are made the guiding principles of the relation between husband and wife."<sup>64</sup> If this idea of mutual love as a key ingredient in a successful marriage was the position that Chaucer supported, then Emily's failure to love says a great deal about her relationship with her future husband. Perhaps, Chaucer suggests, Emily is a poor choice for a subject of courtly love because sustainable love is a mutual occurrence rather than a one-sided emotion. We see a hint of dissatisfaction, if not outright trouble, in the narrator's final description of the couple. Palamon is said to be, "alle wele, / Lyvyng in blisse, in richesse, and in heele".<sup>65</sup> Palamon gets everything he wanted from the arrangement, and seems perfectly happy in marriage. The narrator neglects, however, to mention Emily's feelings on the matter. While he does not say

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<sup>64</sup> Kittredge, George Lyman. "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage." *Modern Philology*. Vol. 9, No. 4 (Apr., 1912), pp. 435-467. University of Chicago Press. p. 467. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/432643>. November 29, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Chaucer, "The Knight's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 2249-2250. November 29, 2010.

outright that she is unhappy, he does say this: “nevere was ther no word hem bitwene, / Of jalousie, or any oother teene.”<sup>66</sup> These lines could be taken to mean that the couple never bickers—but the phrase “any oother teene” suggests that the pair does not speak very much at all. The narrator *never* mentions the possibility that Emily eventually falls in love with her husband, and the final description of their relationship focuses exclusively on Palamon’s well-being.

While Emily is reluctant in affection to the point of rejecting the idea of marriage entirely, Alison is an entirely different sort of love interest. Emily is more or less incidental to the action in the Knight’s Tale; anyone or anything else could have stood in equally well for the catalyst of jealousy between the two cousins. Alison, however, is far more than a bit player in the story. Her importance is illustrated first in her physical description. For a woman whose otherworldly beauty convinces two knights to fight to the death, Emily’s actual physical description is noticeably scanty. We see her compared to a lily, the month of May, a red rose, a goddess, and so on, but the only physical detail that is revealed in the text is the fact that she has unusually long and yellow hair. Alison, by contrast, gets a whopping thirty-seven lines devoted to her description. Lines 47-84 are a detailed account of her physical features, her clothing and her desirability. Chaucer’s treatment of this description is, of course, less than reverent. If the narrator’s description can be imagined as a camera panning across Alison’s body, the image we get is not a head-to-toe shot. Our first physical view of Alison is the apron, or *ceynt*, that hangs below her waist. From there, we get a detailed description of various items of clothing that she wears on her loins

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<sup>66</sup> Chaucer, “The Knight’s Tale,” in *The Canterbury Tales*, s ll. 2253-2254. November 29, 2010.

and backside; the narrator pans up to her face, then back to her waist with a description of her girdle.

It is shortly after this passage that we see the continuation of the *queynte* pun in the Miller's tale, used here overtly in the context that gave Emily's tearful scene in the Knight's tale a bawdy alternate meaning. Again, the word is used twice in the same couplet, as so:

As clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte;  
And prively he caughte hire by the queynte,<sup>67</sup>

The first *queynte* may be used again in the sense of *strange*, but the second refers directly to a woman's sexual organs. If this is not clear enough, Nicholas is shown shortly thereafter holding Alison by the "haunchebones"<sup>68</sup> (the pelvis). The sexuality that Emily attempts to avoid in the Knight's tale is realized here, with the same words taking on a very different meaning. It is worth mentioning, of course, that this particular attempt at wooing Alison is anything but "subtle."

It is worth mentioning that this exchange, in which Nicholas first attempts to win Alison's affection, is more than superficially similar to the sacrifice scene in the Knight's tale. Like Emily, Alison actually *does* profess reluctance. Indeed, she reacts to handy Nicholas's unsubtle come-on thusly:

And she sproong as a colt dooth in the trave,  
And with hir heed she wryed faste away,  
And seyde, I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 89-90. November 29, 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 93. November 29, 2010.

<sup>69</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 96-98. November 29, 2010.

Her behavior is not an exact parallel to Emily's—she is married, after all, and the narrator makes it clear that she had no desire to live a virginal lifestyle—but she does profess at least token resistance to the idea of loving Nicholas. Since this is a piece that very much buys into the logic of a fabliau, Alison's reluctance is quickly rendered moot by a well-worded speech from Nicholas. It should be noted that Alison grants Nicholas her *love*, not just her lust. In a continuation of Chaucer's juxtaposition of sex and religion, Alison "swoor hir ooth, by seint thomas of kent, / That she wol been at his comandement"<sup>70</sup>. It is worth mentioning that Saint Thomas of Kent could well be the very same saint that the pilgrims of the tale are going to see, since Thomas Becket was martyred in Canterbury and his relics remained in the area. This oath to love outside of marriage sworn on a Christian relic—a religion known for its support of marital fidelity, especially in Chaucer's time—is a nice counterpoint to the failed sacrifice of Emily, in which a pagan goddess professes her inability to keep Emily from marrying someone she does not love.

Alison's agency in this story deserves a more thorough analysis. Chaucer sets her up as the perfect opposite of Emily, who is entirely at the disposal of a succession of men (first, she is commanded to marry by Theseus, then she is asked by Arcite to marry Palamon). Indeed, while Emily passively instigates the fight between Arcite and Palamon that leads to the final battle, Alison is *directly* responsible for the prank that shocks Absalon and scalds Nicholas. Where Emily cries, Alison laughs: "Tehee! quod she"<sup>71</sup> after tricking Absalon into a very unconventional sort of kiss. Even when the tryst between Alison and Nicholas is discovered, Alison manages to swing the

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<sup>70</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, ll. 105-106. November 29, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, l. 554. November 30, 2010.

sympathy of her neighbors in her favor by telling them that her husband is insane. Alison is inarguably a fabliau heroine, but Chaucer's juxtaposition of her triumph in love with Emily's defeat makes the Miller's tale into a more complex story than the typical fabliau. The parallel plot structures of the two tales force the reader to compare Alison and Emily. It is Alison, not Emily, who ultimately succeeds in love.

The conclusion of the Knight's tale is particularly significant in a discussion of the story's genre. Indeed, the moral logic of the Knight's tale has as much in common with a fabliau as it does with a romance. Scholars have discussed the "fabliau justice" of the Miller's tale at great length—that is, the peculiar moral code common to fabliaux that ensures the triumph of unlikely heroes. Larry Dean Benson sums up the purpose of this unconventional system of morality thusly:

The fabliau, in short, is delightfully subversive—a light-hearted thumbing of the nose at the dictates of religion, the solid virtues of the citizenry, and the idealistic pretensions of the aristocracy and its courtly literature<sup>72</sup>.

The Miller's tale is a clear example of this fabliau morality, as unchaste Alison misbehaves with impunity while her husband and lovers receive various painful or humiliating punishments. If the Knight's tale were written as a straight romance, its moral system would be consistent with the tropes of a typical romance—but in its way, the Knight's tale adheres not to the conventions of a romance but the subversive moral structure of a fabliau. Emily, who wishes to remain a virgin, is denied in her desire to remain chaste. This is consistent with the conventions of fabliaux, in which lusty young girls like Alison are triumphant. Women who desire to remain chaste—

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<sup>72</sup> Benson, Larry Dean. "Introduction." *The Riverside Chaucer*, p.8. December 3, 2010.

for instance, the Miller's wife and daughter in the subsequent Reeve's tale—fail in their attempts to avoid breaking their vows. Arcite wins the tournament, and thus *should* win the right to marry Emily, but he dies in a fall from his horse. In a typical romance, his victory in the tournament should have been enough to prove his love for Emily—but this is not a typical romance, and so his downfall is not the result of a failing of character but of a freak accident. Only Palamon, who prayed to Venus (the Roman goddess of love and lust) gets what he wants at the end of the tale. He is rewarded not for his strength of character or prowess on the battlefield, but for his desire to possess a woman who does not love him. For all the veneer of romance in the Knight's tale, it is every bit as much a “noble tale” as the Miller's paean to infidelity and slapstick humor. By following up this pseudo-romance with a parallel tale, retold with a non-noble cast of characters, Chaucer strips away the facade of a romance to reveal the darker themes underneath. The Knight's tale may be using the techniques of a high-brow form of literature, but its moral system owes more to fabliau justice than it does to the noble pursuits of a romance.

### **CHAUCER'S INFLUENCE ON ENGLISH LITERATURE**

In the Knight's tale, elements of the fabliau can be seen in the nature of the plot, the characters of the lovers and Emily, and the underlying subversive system of morality. Likewise, the Miller's tale contains elements of a romance in its aping of the previous tale's structure, the behavior of the two lovers, and the character of Alison in contrast to Emily of the Knight's tale. Each tale has been held up as an

example of its respective genre, and indeed, each demonstrates Chaucer's superior rhetorical style and flair for the English language in one of its earliest respected literary incarnations. The subtle intrusions of the fabliau in the Knight's tale and the romance in the Miller's tale do not detract from the stories as individual works; neither do they point to a flaw in the Canterbury tales as a whole. Indeed, Chaucer's clever use and misuse of the tropes of these two genres is entirely intentional. He subverts the conventions of a romance with a set of characters with no autonomy and a dubious moral code. By doing so, he forces the reader to think critically about the very nature of the romance as a genre. Does the nobility of the protagonists, the pretense at borrowing a work from a classical text or the impeccable language of a work make a story into a romance? Likewise, can a story with *precisely the same* plot structure, character arcs and moral code be considered a pure fabliau simply because it uses lower-class characters and a format borrowed from oral storytelling? This mixing of genres to surprise and challenge the reader is a common feature of the work of Geoffrey Chaucer. Even his romances, such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, contain elements of low-brow humor and dubious moral conclusions. Many of the fabliaux in the Canterbury tales are dazzling displays of linguistic ability, rhetorical skills, and high-brow allusions. The farting scene in the Summoner's tale has been compared to Biblical descriptions of the Pentecost, and the argument on the nature of marriage in the Merchant's tale is a deft display of two sides of a philosophical debate. Why would Chaucer choose to mix and match the elements of high literature and crass storytelling? The answer can be found in the larger text of the Canterbury tales, which works not only as a set of diverting tales but as a compilation of a wide variety of



literary genres. By putting fabliaux next to romances, an exemplum responded to by a Breton lai, and so on, Chaucer presents us with examples of different literary traditions from a diverse background of medieval European sources. He gives these tales narrators of varying levels of reliability, adding another level of complexity as the reader experiences each tale not only as its own unit but as a product of a distinct character in the party of pilgrims. Why would Chaucer, who could have secured a comfortable degree of fame merely by writing in the genres of his earlier works, choose to attempt such a sundry assortment of genres in such an ambitious work? A probable answer lies in the background in which the Canterbury tales were written and presented to the English royal court. This was the era in which King Richard II was promoting the English vernacular as a legitimate language, and inviting authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower to produce works of literature in their native language rather than in French or Latin. Chaucer is often identified, even in the modern age, as the father of English literature; he was one of the first authors to produce stories of the sort favored on the continent in the English vernacular. It is natural, given this new support of English as a language worthy of literary endeavor, that Chaucer would experiment with a variety of European genres in order to prove that an English writer could produce work as deft and worthwhile as a continental scholar. Given Chaucer's well-known preference for satire, it is unsurprising that these attempts at stories would contain a deeper layer of meaning—indeed, a deeper discussion of literature itself. It has been said of Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy that the book was “a masterwork of postmodernism before there was any modernism

to be post<sup>73</sup>, and the same could be said of the Canterbury tales. By mixing and matching the conventions of a romance with those of a fabliau, and vice versa, Chaucer created two stories with more profound implications than their mere texts. Each functions as a story, and each is also a subtle deconstruction of a genre. What is a romance, after all, if its structure and justice system are anything but noble? What is a fabliau, if its characters strive towards romantic ideals? In creating one of the most influential works of English literature, Chaucer was simultaneously playing with the concept of storytelling itself. The Knight's tale and the Miller's tale function on four distinct levels: as amusing stories in their own right, as parodies of each other, as products of their respective narrators and as a deeper dialogue on the nature of the fluid boundaries between disparate literary genres.

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<sup>73</sup> Scott, A. O. "An Unfilmable Book, Now Made Into a Movie." *New York Times on the Web*. 27 Jan. 2006. 3 Dec. 2010  
<http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/01/27/movies/27shan.html?scp=1&sq=tristram%20shandy&st=cse>.

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