

# The Merchant's Tale (2)

## Sexuality, Obscenity, and Genre in the *Merchant's Tale*: The Case of *Fabliau*

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The *Merchant's Tale* is often considered to be one of the masterpieces of the *Canterbury Tales*. A lowbrow story told in a high rhetorical style, the tale's richly allusive fabric interweaves sources and analogues both classical and biblical, Latin, French, and Italian, as well as self-reflexively referencing other parts of the *Canterbury Tales*; in the *Merchant's Tale*, perhaps, we can see the man behind the curtain, the poet Chaucer at work. But in addition to all this high style and erudition, the *Merchant's Tale* also has something of a reputation for crude and obscene content: the elderly bachelor Januarie seeks out a much younger bride, May, and, after a series of perhaps less-than-erotic romps, introduces her to a purpose-built sex garden where he hopes they will engage in those acts which are "nat doon abedde" (MerT 2051). Throwing a wrench in the works is May, who naturally has fallen in love with Damyan, a young squire in her household, with whom she hatches a plan to cuckold her husband, now blind. May copies the key to the garden and lets Damyan inside, where he lies in wait in a convenient pear tree. When May declares herself to have a craving for pears, Januarie delightedly assumes that his wife is pregnant and rushes to assist her in climbing the tree in search of the fruit which will satisfy her desire. May and Damyan seize the opportunity to consummate their lust just as the god Pluto intervenes on behalf of Januarie, restoring his sight and revealing the explicit scene unfolding before him. Januarie's response to witnessing his wife "struggle" (MerT 2374) with Damyan in the tree is full of both anger and obscenity, whereby he declares "He swyved thee; I saugh it with myne yen" (MerT 2378) – the Middle English *swyve* being roughly approximate to our modern *fuck*.

The verb *to swyve* is found six additional times in the *Canterbury Tales*, in the stories told by the Miller, Reeve, Cook, and Manciple. As well as an appreciation for vernacular obscenity, these tales share with our *Merchant* an affinity toward the popular French genre of *fabliau*, short comic narratives with a distinctly vulgar bent. The mismatched

marriage of elderly Januarie to fresh May would have been familiar to medieval readers as derived from the *senex amans* or “aged lover” trope common to the genre, but in the *Merchant’s Tale* it is the purposeful contrast between the earthy physicality of Chaucer’s fabliau and the high rhetorical forms it contaminates that speaks most strongly to the tale’s interest in sexuality. This chapter explores how the *Merchant’s Tale*’s play with genre, and particularly the fabliau, a literary form known for both its sexual brashness and generic equivocation, interferes with readers’ – both medieval and 21st century – perception of what is (both sexually and generically) permissible.

## Tools

### THE FABLIAU IN OLD FRENCH

Until Chaucer’s time the fabliau (plural: fabliaux) was almost exclusively a genre of French literature, flourishing in the thirteenth century in both Old French and Anglo-Norman, a dialect of French peculiar to England. The word *fabliau* derives from the Old French *fable* or “story,” and ultimately from the more semantically broad Latin *fabula*, which has meanings ranging from general narrative or newsworthy account to a fictitious tale. Somewhere in the region of one hundred and fifty Old French fabliaux have survived, depending on how one defines the genre. In terms of format, the fabliau is a *conte* or short story, often using octosyllabic verse, a verse form of eight syllables per line common to other vernacular genres including romance and certain types of chronicle. But what makes a fabliau a fabliau, as opposed to any other variety of short narrative tale? It is commonly said that the fabliau has at its heart three basic human needs: food, sex, and money, or what Charles Muscatine has characterized as the veneration of “materialistic hedonism” (83). Because of this, tricksters, jokesters, clever lovers, and cuckolded husbands populate these narratives, which often skew heavily toward the ironic – usually because the narrator, their audience, and a handful of the characters themselves share information not known to other characters.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the fabliau is its narrative style, which displays a bawdiness that routinely shades into obscenity. The easiest way to illustrate this point is to look to a particular example: the famous fourteenth-century manuscript Harley 2253, held at the British Library, contains a number of Old French fabliaux, not least of which is a short poem of scarce three hundred lines. [1] The initial set-up of this poem adheres to the conventions of another genre: courtly or chivalric romance, a popular medieval form that in many ways is the mirror image of fabliau, revolving around the highly idealized behavior of knights and their ladies as paragons of military prowess and virtue. [2] The Harley tale concerns the adventures of a down-on-his-luck knight and his clever squire – classic romance fodder – but ultimately, the reader enters a much more sexually charged, and indeed surreal, world than the aristocratic milieu of romance. Its title? *Le chevalier qui fist les cons parler*, or, *The knight who made cunts talk*. You can imagine how the plot unfolds from there (or you can read it in

translation [here](#)). These narratives are peppered with what we today might call “four-letter words” rather than the temperate euphemisms of other more genteel forms; obscenities such as *coun* (cunt), *cul* (asshole), *vit* (prick), *foutre* (to fuck), *merde* (shit), *crote* (turd), and *pet* (fart) are the currency of fabliaux, and suggest that, as Laura Kendrick proposes, their “sole satisfaction...seems to be the breaking of verbal and behavioral taboos” (81). A good example of this kind of vulgar diction may be found in the famous fabliau *Les .iiii. souhaits Saint Martin* or *The Four Wishes of Saint Martin*: a peasant is granted four wishes by the saint as reward for his devotion and allows his wife to make the first wish. Naturally, she uses this power to fulfil her own libidinous desires by asking Saint Martin to cover her husband with erect penises:

Je demand, dist ele, en non Dieu,  
Que vous soiez chargiez de vis,  
Ne vous remainnent oeil ne vis,  
Teste, ne braz, ne piez, ne coste  
Ou partout ne soit vit planté.  
Si ne soient ne mol ne doille,  
Ainz ait a chascun vit sa coille;  
Toz dis soient li vit tendu,  
Si samblerez vilain cornu

[I ask, she said, in the name of God / that you be loaded with pricks, / that there remains on you nary an eye, face, / head, arm, leg, or side / without having pricks everywhere planted on them. / And that these not be soft and tender, / but that each prick have its own balls, / and that at all times the pricks be extended, / so that you will resemble a horned peasant.][3]

This grotesque transformation is described in excruciating detail, and then fire is returned as the husband wishes “Que tu raies autretant cons / Comme je ai de viz sor moi” [That you should have as many cunts as I have pricks on my body]. The husband doubles down on the error by then wishing all the cocks and cunts should disappear, and the final wish must be spent in restoring husband and wife to their original bodily state, with a single set of genitalia each. Along with this bodily restoration comes the reassertion of male authority within marriage, as the narrative supplies a moral for the tale that, in typical misogynistic fashion, blames the troubles entirely on the wife and warns all husbands that “cil ne fet mie savoir / Qui mieus croit sa fame que lui” [the man hardly behaves wisely / who trusts his wife more than himself]. But still, might even the normalized bodies of man and wife suggest the potential for the further radical reshaping of the boundaries of (heterosexual) society? Do they open up the potential for queer, feminist, or otherwise radical readings of the text? Or, do they simply shore up the heteronormative, misogynist attitudes of mainstream culture?

**CHAUCERIAN FABLIAU?**

Chaucer is the fabliau's greatest English champion: while French versions of these tales would certainly have circulated across the Channel, aside from the thirteenth-century *Dame Sirith*,<sup>[4]</sup> the only surviving fabliaux in Middle English prior to the late-fourteenth century belong to Chaucer. In fact, among all the stories in the *Canterbury Tales*, six are fabliaux – more than a quarter of the total number – making fabliau a dominant genre in the work. It is generally accepted that the *Miller's*, *Reeve's*, *Cook's*, *Summoner's*, *Merchant's*, and *Shipman's Tales* adopt the generic characteristics of fabliau to some degree – and with the exception of the *Summoner's* and the fragmentary *Cook's Tale*, they all share the same narrative frame of the aged husband and his younger, adulterous wife. The most famous of Chaucer's fabliaux is certainly the *Miller's Tale*, a bawdy romp concerning yet another mismatched couple, the young Alisoun and the “riche gnof” John (MilT 3188), as well as two competing adulterous suitors, that infamously concludes with a red-hot “kultour” (MilT 3812) or metal plow blade stuffed “amydde the ers” (MilT 3810) of Alisoun's lover Nicholas.

To a certain extent, Chaucer's fabliaux are exactly what we expect them to be: raunchy, ribald tales characterized by their humor and irreverence, and set in a debased bourgeois world full of young men seeking to *swyve* other men's wives. And yet without exception, these tales prove themselves to be anything but standard fabliau fare. In the *Miller's Tale*, for example, Chaucer's own interest in astrology bleeds into the narrative and the classic fabliau trope of the lover's ruse is predicated on complex astrological prediction and biblical rhetoric – learning quite beyond the ken of your average Miller! This is perhaps the most significant way in which Chaucerian fabliau differs from its Old French analogues: its erudition and play with literary allusion. Coming earliest in the text, the tales of the *Miller* and *Reeve* serve as the reader's introduction to Chaucerian fabliau, and perhaps it is not surprising that they cleave most strongly to the approved fabliau model of sexual comedy, exploring the binaries of public and private, sacred and profane. By the time we reach the *Merchant's Tale*, as we shall see, the expectations of fabliau are so destabilized by the intervention of multiple competing allusive modes, that the very concept of genre itself seems called into question. Or perhaps, as Holly Crocker has elegantly suggested, this indeterminacy is actually a hallmark of fabliau itself, a form “radically transactional in [its] ability to fragment the generic boundaries that provide recognizable shape to other poetic bodies,” and with them the coherence of physical desire and attendant socio-sexual mores tied up in the form's investment in sexuality (1).<sup>[5]</sup>

We may never know why Chaucer so passionately resurrects what is essentially a dead genre, but it is clear that from the fabliau form he mines not only a library of humorous and obscene narratives, but also a toolbox of established principles of style and substance ready to be exploited regardless of where he finds his source material. Moreover, the irreverent, if workaday, world of the fabliau proves a useful stage on which for Chaucer to play out his own learned critiques of contemporary society.

## Text

The man we meet in the prologue to the *Merchant's Tale* is the very embodiment of what we today might call toxic masculinity: [6] reactive, bitter, and staunchly anti-feminist, the Merchant's hyperbolic critique of womanhood in general and his own wife in particular is very nearly a parody of itself as he asserts that his spouse would give even the devil himself a run for his money. Provoked by the Clerk's tale of pious and patient Griselda, the Merchant's own story is his attempt to set the record straight on wives. We are shocked, then, when, fewer than twenty lines into the tale, the reader is suddenly ambushed by an emotional and rhetorically sophisticated encomium to the "blisful" (MerT 1259) state of married life, derived largely from French poet Eustache Deschamps' (1346-1406) *Miroir de Mariage* [*Mirror of Marriage*] and Albertanus of Brescia's (c.1195-c.1251) *Liber de amore et dilectione Dei & proximi* [*Book of the Love and Delight of God and Neighbor*] and *Liber consolationis et consilii* [*Book of Consolation and Counsel*]. The presence of the encomium here suggests two significant things: first, that the *Merchant's Tale* is characterized by rapid shifts in narrative or generic mood, and second, that unlike Chaucer's other fabliaux, the true subject of this story is not the absurd *senex amans* but the social and sexual institution of marriage itself.

At its core, the *Merchant's Tale* is certainly a fabliau, framed by the classic episodes of the mismatched marriage of Januarie and May at the beginning and the fruit tree at the end. So while our worthy knight might rely on devotional or even sacramental ideals in order to justify his sudden decision to marry, his marital encounters with May strongly suggest the realities of a fabliau world and the undignified nature of sexual intercourse. The wedding night makes a good example here: along with May we suffer Januarie's kisses, "With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte,/ Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere" (MerT 1824-5) and his crowing the morning after, as "The slakke skyn aboute his nekke shaketh" (MerT 1849). The only concern here is January's own pleasure, a fact confirmed by May herself when we get her acerbic appraisal of events: "She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene" (MerT 1854). May's negative assessment of her husband's sexual prowess suggests that she herself has both an inner erotic life and a capacity for pleasure, though it is clear that her development as an erotic subject is interrupted by her marriage rather than fuelled by it. This interruption is made literal in yet another scene of forced sexual performance whereby May's contemplation of Damyan's letter is followed by Januarie's husbandly demand that she "strepen hire al naked" for his pleasure: "He seyde hir clothes dide hym encombraunce,/And she obeyeth, be hire lief or looth" (MerT 1958-61). Consent, it seems, need play no real part in married sex in Januarie's household, and there is little here to suggest that the "blisful lyf" (MerT 1259) hoped for by Januarie is also visited upon his wife.

Still, it is worth noting that if the *Merchant's Tale* is a fabliau, it tries very hard to conceal this fact: through the end of the wedding feast, nearly halfway through the text, the tale is markedly lacking in the physicality, vulgarity, and good old-fashioned smut that typically characterizes the genre. With the exception of the meat market scene where Januarie peruses the "Many fair shap and many a fair visage" (MerT 1580) on offer, there is little of lust. Indeed, the tale's opening lines, "Whilom ther was dwellynge in Lumbardye/A worthy knyght, that born was of Pavye/In which he lyved in greet

prosperitee” (MerT 1245-7) strongly suggests the exotic, aristocratic milieu of courtly romance, rather than the typically bourgeois setting of fabliau. Whereas romances like the famous *Gawain and the Green Knight* and even Chaucer’s own *Knight’s Tale* revolve around questions of knightly idealism and devotion, January’s potential as a courtly hero is removed through direct reference to his advanced age and his unmarried yet un-celibate lifestyle. And yet, even after the midpoint of the tale, when the love triangle has been established, the wedding night’s activities accomplished, and the narrative rededicated to lewdness and sexual play, the fabliau still retains some of that romance essence, a vulgar parody of courtly love.

Damyant’s love for May is expressed in the formulas of courtly romance: he is “ravysshed” (MerT 1774) by love, “brenneth” (MerT 1876) in the fires of it, is tormented by Venus, and generally takes on the mantle of the lovesick knight. But Damyan, too, falls short of the ideal and his affair with May is revealed as rooted in the same physicality as that displayed by the lecherous Januarie – though at least here, outside of the bounds of matrimony, it is allowed to be reciprocal. Unlike Aurelius, the analogous squire of the *Franklin’s Tale*, who attempts to reconfigure the very coastline of Brittany in order to win his lady, Damyan resolves merely to send a letter, and finds even such a domestic task fearful: “Mercy! And that ye nat discovere me, / For I am deed if that this thyng be kyd” (MerT 1942–43). Meanwhile, May herself plays not the resisting role of the courtly lady, but proves easy quarry, immediately succumbing to Damyan’s ministrations. And in case the reader is still not certain of May’s carnal appetite, her response to Damyan makes it explicit: creeping into her would-be lover’s room, she “threste” (MerT 2003) the missive under his pillow and, taking his hand, “harde hym twiste” (MerT 2005). If this is romance, it is one deeply infected by the sordid world of fabliau. Indeed, the first thing May does after determining to take Damyan up on his offer is to stash his guilty missive in the “pryvee” (MerT 1954), literally encasing the trappings of romance in shit and sharpening the narrative’s drive to reveal the material world of bodily desire that exists within the idealized courtly environment.

The final act of the *Merchant’s Tale* masterfully registers the interpretive gap between the high style of Chaucer’s poetry and the generic expectation of fabliau set up by the May-Januarie romance. The allegorical force of the garden setting creates a cacophony of high literary references, from the Fall of Humankind in Eden, to the Garden of Love in Guillaume de Lorris’ 13<sup>th</sup>-century courtly allegory *Roman de la Rose* (to which, take note, the doddering character of Age is specifically denied entrance), and of course Chaucer’s own *Knight’s Tale*. The slippage between these learned analogues and Januarie’s pleasure-garden is made explicit from the start. As he exhorts his wife to join him, Januarie paraphrases the *Song of Solomon* (MerT 2138-48), that great work of Old Testament erotic poetry that describes physical desire through the voices of a pair of lovers. At its height, the *Song*’s male narrator famously describes his beloved as a locked garden, and she in turn offers him entry and access to its fruits. Our narrating Merchant, however, glosses these lines as “Swiche olde lewed wordes” (MerT 2149); there is a punning double-entendre here, as through negation Chaucer draws our attention to the highly learned nature of Januarie’s words (the Middle English *lewed* meaning both “lewd” and “unlearned”) while simultaneously effecting an

abrupt change in register, transforming the sacred invitation to marital sex into a lecherous fabliau fuck.

And in fact this is exactly what we receive, as the faux-courtly lovers May and Damyan finally consummate their affair not with tender felicity but rather the abrupt physicality of the barnyard: “And sodeynly anon this Damyan / Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng” (MerT 2352-53). With his sight magically restored by “Fairye” (MerT 2234) king Pluto, Januarie witnesses his own cuckolding, and our fabliau is essentially complete, but its resolution fails to conform to the expectations of the genre. As in the *Miller’s Tale*, the audience’s enjoyment stems both from a sense of *schadenfreude* or delight in the misfortune of another – the aged husband is cuckolded and knows it – and an understanding of the basic sexual morality of fabliau – old men who marry young women are violating a known law (MilT 3227-28). The Merchant, however, does not end on this laugh, nor does he follow his source in Boccaccio’s 14<sup>th</sup>-century novella collection *Decameron*, which makes clear that the young lovers will continue their affair. Rather, once May has delivered her excuses, she “leep down fro the tree” (MerT 2411), abandoning Damyan, and the tale concludes with our “glad” (MerT 2412) knight stroking his wife’s womb, leading her back to their home and, presumably, to the marital bliss he has been seeking all along.

May’s excuse to Januarie focuses on the slippage between perception and reality (MerT 2408-10), and perhaps she inadvertently provides us with an apt cipher for the *Merchant’s Tale* itself, that clichéd cry of the caught-out: *it’s not what it looks like!* If, through all its twists and turns, references and allusions, we were still willing to believe we were reading a fabliau, here perhaps that perception finally fails, the fabliau fails,<sup>[7]</sup> and with it the comfort of a clear vision of sexual morality, licit or illicit. As a final provocation, let us return somewhat obliquely to the Old French fabliau of *The Four Wishes of Saint Martin* mentioned above. Like the final act of St. Martin, the conclusion of the *Merchant’s Tale* sees Chaucer metaphorically remove all the extraneous *vits* and *cons* from his story, seemingly restoring the hetero-misogynist values of everyday society. But rather than a satisfactory resolution, we are left with myriad questions: what will happen to Damyan, left semi-nude in the pear tree, and will his interrupted (but not definitively terminated) relationship with May persist? What do we make of May’s reminder to Januarie that he might see “ful many a sighte” in the next few days as his eyesight returns (MerT 2406)? What do we imagine the sexual relationship between Januarie and May will look like now? How does May’s willingness to walk off into the sunset with her husband ask us to (re)read the previous scenes of their sexual congress? And perhaps most critically, is May’s pregnancy genuine, and what ramifications does it have for the fabliau obsession with bodies and their mutability? There are no clear answers, and even Pluto and Prosperpine are unable to come to any firm agreement on the ethics of Januarie and May’s actions, compelling readers to make their own assessment of the characters and their sexual appetites.

## **Coda: Readerly Pleasure**

Amidst the constant deployment of courtly and rhetorical genres in the *Merchant's Tale*, it is easy to forget that fabliau is intended to be a genre of pleasure, of erotic enjoyment experienced vicariously by the reader, and the *Merchant's Tale* is no exception. Both narrative and erotic climax are achieved when May and Damyan finally consummate their adulterous lust in those two explosive lines, yet scholars have often been disturbed by the precipitousness of the sex act, worrying that it is too abrupt to be anything other than violent, thereby abandoning poor May to yet another unsatisfying sexual encounter. But again, this is fabliau, not romance, and there is evidence that at least some late-medieval readers found May's "thronging" to be titillating. Both the New College and Harley 1758[8] copies of the *Merchant's Tale* see the interpolation of several lines directly following *in he throng*, describing both Damyan's impressive member and May's sexual satisfaction in explicit terms:

A greet tente a thrifty and a long  
She sayde it was the merriest fytt  
That euer in her lif she was at yet.

In addition to introducing a fuller use of vernacular sexual language, these lines authorize for May a more complete female sexual subjectivity than that granted by Chaucer himself. It is worth noting that these lines remained in the standard edition of Chaucer between 1532 and 1775, when Thomas Tyrwhitt removed them. This means that they were part of the received version of the *Merchant's Tale* for a few well-known authors you may be familiar with: Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Alexander Pope (who professed a particular love for the *Merchant's Tale*!). Modern readers sometimes forget that even canonical authors like Chaucer can incite transgression, and it is important not to lose sight of the fact that sexual obscenity – and its attendant readerly pleasure – is very much part of the material history of the *Merchant's Tale*.

## Transformation

1. Is the *Merchant's Tale* a fabliau? Why or why not? How does it change the tale or the *Canterbury Tales* to name the *Merchant's Tale* a fabliau?
2. Take a look at some of the shorter Old French fabliaux in the Dubin, Harrison, or Hellman & O'Gorman volumes below, or any of the linked texts in this chapter. Compare Chaucer's fabliau with these earlier versions: in what ways are they similar or different? Do you agree that the Old French fabliaux draw a more definitive line between the permissible and the impermissible in terms of sexual desire and action? Which version of the fabliau is more transgressive? Why?
3. Who is the more sympathetic partner here? Why, in a story told by an anti-feminist wife-hater, is Januarie treated with such disdain? Conversely, why is Damyan let off the hook by



the Merchant? What can the Merchant's final word on each of the main characters tell us about the limits of the licit in the tale? You may want to take a look at the Prologue and Epilogue to the *Merchant's Tale* as well.

4. In the *Merchant's Tale*, May participates in both consensual and coercive sex. How do you understand her sexual power and how is it expressed? In what ways do the interpolated lines discussed in the final section of this chapter impact your reading of May as a sexual being?
5. How much does the tale tell us about whether May's implied pregnancy at the end of the tale is genuine? How does May's potentially pregnant body impact your reading of the tale's final scene? Old French fabliaux are particularly invested in the changeability of bodies – remember the magically appearing and disappearing genitals of *Saint Martin*. Does May's pregnancy play into this pattern?
6. In what ways does the Merchant interact with other tales? His prologue begins with a direct echo of the *envoy* following the Clerk's tale, and May seems to be a kind of anti-Griselda, but how does the tale speak to the *Canterbury Tales'* other wives – the Wife of Bath, Alisoun (Miller), Constance (Man of Law), Cecilia (Second Nun's Tale)?

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#### Notes:

[1] Harley 2253 is one of the most important manuscripts to survive from the medieval period. Containing texts composed in all three languages of medieval England – Middle English, French, and Latin – its contents range from political songs and religious texts to lyric, romance, and fabliau. The British Library's online record for Harley 2253, including images, is available [here](#), and you can find Susanna Fein's 3-volume edition and translation of the texts [here](#).

[2] Chivalric romance is the principal type of romance found in medieval Europe from the 12<sup>th</sup> century on. See for example Chretien de Troyes (12<sup>th</sup> century), the anonymous *Gawain and the Green Knight* (late 14<sup>th</sup>-century), and Malory's prose romance *Le Morte Darthur* (1485).

[3] Translation as found in Kendrick's *Chaucerian Play*.

[4] Found in Bodleian Library Digby 86, dated to around 1275. You can read it [here](#).

[5] For more on medieval theories of genre, see the further reading section.

[6] This term has become something of a buzzword in popular culture, but it has its roots in academic psychology and gender studies. See, for example, R.W. Connell's work

on “hegemonic masculinity” or her more recent reexamination of the concept in “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept” (2005).

[7] Or, perhaps, as Holly Crocker reminds us, such indeterminacy may be not the end of the fabliau, but rather its ultimate gift – the breakdown of its generic boundaries defining the thing itself.

[8] The manuscripts in question are Oxford, New College, MS D.314 (mid-15<sup>th</sup> century) and British Library MS Harley 1758 (c. 1450-60). The entirety of the British Library manuscript may be viewed from [here](#).