

Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale": Fabliau

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Abstract

The Canterbury Tales, composed by Geoffrey Chaucer (1340–1400), is the most celebrated literary work of the English Middle Ages. The volume is a wonderful collection of stories purportedly told by a diverse company of English men and women on pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. Chaucer died in 1400 to leave it unfinished. The book includes a prologue and 24 tales of varying length. The tale which is about to be discussed here, the Miller's Tale, is the second tale of the book.¹ It will be tackled generically as a Fabliau.

Keywords: Canterbury, Tales, Miller, clerk, young, aged, triangle, younglady, love, bawdy, laugh, boat

1. Fabliau

His hot love was cold and quenched and quashed;
For from that time that he had kissed her arse,²

To put it in a simple and precise definition, a fabliau is a humorous short story that is usually written in verse about low or middle class people. It is more obscene than other stories, primarily through sexual situations, and frequently involves trickery of one sort or another.³ Jay Ruud defines fabliaux as comic tales in verse that thrived in the north of France beginning in the late twelfth century. There are about 160 surviving fabliaux, as Ruud believes, "written typically in octosyllabic couplets" in a direct, plain style that is suitable to their contemporaneous realistic settings and characters of lower or middle class. Despite the fact that the term means "little fable," fabliaux generally lack moral purposes and are characterized by their "bawdy subject matter."⁴

Malcolm Andrew describes fabliau as a short comic tale which typically involves trickery and sex. Andrew goes on to say that:

The fabliau ... came to prominence on the continent of Europe during the thirteenth century. While most surviving examples are French, fabliaux were also written in several other languages, including Italian, German, and Latin. They are, essentially, brief comic poems which relate stories of mundane contemporary life, featuring stereotyped characters from the lower and middle orders of society, involved in material and sexual competition, exchange, and deception. Their prevailing attitude is fundamentally amoral: while they sometimes offer aphoristic comments, these are concerned with being careful rather than

with being good. Thus they tend to provide an opposing view to that of romance – with its exotic settings, aristocratic protagonists, and elevated ideals. Nonetheless, they appear to have been written largely for the amusement of learned and aristocratic audiences.⁵

Most fabliaux consist of about 200 – 400 lines or fewer, in spite the fact that there are some fabliaux that consist of about 1300. The significant writers of fabliaux are Philippe de Beaumanoir, Gautier le Leu, Jean Bodel, and most prominently Rutebenf. Yet, fabliaux are almost always of unknown authorship.⁶

2. The Miller's Tale

Once upon a time there was dwelling at Oxford
A rich churl, who took in lodgers,
And by trade he was a carpenter.
With him there was dwelling a poor scholar,
Who studied the liberal arts, but all his fancy
Was turned to learn astrology,

(TCT, 149)

Some time ago, the Miller narrated, there was a rich, old carpenter, named John, who lived in Oxford and who took in a lodger named Nicholas. Nicholas was a clerk and was also a student of astrology. He was able to predict the possibility of drought or rain. Also, he was a clever young man, handsome, a marvelous harp player and singer, and a lover whose passions were carefully concealed under a shy, boyish manner and appearance. He liked to mess around with women, and lived off his friends.⁷

This carpenter had newly wedded a wife
Whom he loved more than his life;
Of eighteen years she was of age.
Jealous he was, and held her as in a cage,
For she was wild and young, and he was old
And deemed himself likely to be a cuckold.

(TCT, 150-1)

It happened that the carpenter was married to an eighteen-year-old girl named Alison, who was many years younger than him. The Miller went on to describe every single detail in her appearance through "animal imagery," as Gillian Rudd puts it. All the description concluded in that Alison was a bright, lively, and pretty girl.⁸ Rudd states that the action of a fabliau usually revolves around the sexual adventures of a woman "bent on tricking and cuckolding her foolish husband, who may deserve his cuckolding" because he was stupid enough to marry a woman who is far younger than he, or because he abuses or otherwise ignores his young wife.⁹ It is common in a fabliau that it is, inevitably, a priest, monk, or poor divinity student, as in this tale, who helps the wife plan her husband's cuckolding.¹⁰

It was not long before Nicholas fell in love with Alison. One day he grasped her and asked for sex. At first, Alison made a claim of objecting, but the

young clerk soon overcame her objections and made her promise him that she would give him what he wanted, sex, when they would have a chance. Alison, however, warned Nicholas that John was so jealous about her. Nicolas asked her not to worry because a clerk like him surely could fool a fool carpenter like her husband.¹¹ Grant L. Voth points out that a common plot for a fabliau is a love triangle. The triangle is often formed with an old dumb husband, a young beautiful wife and another clever young man. The young man, who loves and, sexually, appetites the young wife manages, as Voth believes, through deception and help of the latter to obtain sexual winnings.¹²

Now there was of that church a parish clerk,
Who was called Absolon.

(TCT, 153)

Sometime later, it happened that Alison went to church and there another young clerk, named Absolon, saw her and he immediately fell in love with her beauty as he passed the collection plate. On the tongue of the Miller, Chaucer described this clerk as being very dainty and particular. He even somewhat acted like girls. The final touch to his personality was that he was so polite that the one thing he could never tolerate was people who expelled gas in public. That evening with guitar in hand he strolled the streets looking for women when he came to the carpenter's house. Beneath Alison's window he softly sang. The carpenter was awakened but discovered his wife unimpressed with the youth's entreaties. In fact, Absolon tried everything he could think of, but Alison was very infatuated with Nicholas that she paid no little attention.¹³

This carpenter was gone to Osney,
And sweet Nicholas and Alison
Agreed to this conclusion,
That Nicholas shall invent a wile
This silly husband to beguile;
And if the game went aright,
She should sleep in his arms all night,

(TCT, 156)

One day, when the stupid carpenter had gone to work at a nearby town, Nicholas and Alison agreed that something must be done to get the carpenter out of the house for a night. They worked out a plan whereby they would play a trick on the husband, Old John the carpenter. If the plan succeeded, they would spend the night together. It happened that Nicholas, gathering plenty of food and ale, locked himself in his room. He told Alison to say nothing if her husband asked where he was. After several days the carpenter missed the youth's presence and thought "Something is wrong with Nicholas" (TCT, 157). When told Nicholas might be dead in his room, the carpenter and his serving boy went to Nicholas's room and pounded on the door. When there was no answer, they knocked down the door and found the youth lying on his bed, gaping as though dead, at the ceiling. The carpenter was confused.¹⁴

And at last this sweet Nicholas

Began to sigh deeply, and said, "Alas!
 Shall all the world be lost again so soon?"
 This carpenter answered, "What say you?
 What! Think on God, as we do, men who labor!
 (TCT, 158)

The fool carpenter felt sorry for Nicholas and tried his best to talk with him but Nicholas was silent and motionless. After John prayed for a bless to his lodge, Nicolas moved and spoke. He told John that the whole world would be lost. The fat-headed carpenter was confused again.¹⁵ Ruud argues that scholars have a debate whether the fabliaux are of a "courtly or bourgeois" origin, but modern scholars stand up with "the assumption of a literate audience familiar with the conventional plots of the courtly romance that many fabliau plots parody." So, it is possible that the audience and the author of the fabliaux, as Ruud thinks, are members of the upper middle class and the aristocratic class. Because the cleric or poor student is almost always pictured with a great deal of sympathy in the tales, one anticipation is that many of the authors are members of that group and intentionally or unintentionally try to make fun of people who are lower than them socially.¹⁶

I have found in my astrology,
 As I have looked in the moon bright,
 That now, on Monday next, at quarter night,
 Shall fall a rain and that so furious and wild,
 That not half so great was Noah's flood.
 This world," he said, "in less than an hour
 Shall be drowned, so hideous will be the shower;
 Thus shall mankind drown and lose its life".
 (TCT, 159)

Nicolas told John that he is about to tell him a secret that he should not reveal to anybody. The carpenter promised to keep it and Nicolas spoke of a vision he had seen in his trance that Oxford was soon to be visited with a rain and flood similar to the one experienced by Noah. The alarmed carpenter wondered what could be done to escape this dilemma.¹⁷

But when you have, for her and you and me,
 Gotten us these kneading tubs three,
 Then shall you hang them in the roof full high,
 That no man our preparations may espy.
 And when you thus have done, as I have said,
 And have our provisions in them laid,
 And also an axe, to smite the cord in two
 (TCT, 161-2)

Nicolas told John to follow his advice. After narrating what had happened with Noah, he counseled him to fasten three boat-like tubs to the ceiling of the house and provide them with provision. Now Nicolas told John to include axes with their provision with which they could cut the ropes and allow the tubs to

float. Finally, he ordered him to hang the three tubs some distance apart. After that, John rushed to his wife and revealed the whole story to her. Cunningly, she acted as if she had not known anything and asked him to save her life.¹⁸ Ruud points out that fabliaux are mainly satirical, and their chief goals are the clergy, stupid husbands, as in this tale, and women in general, who are possible to be pictured as cunning, unscrupulous, and having many sexual relationships. Hence, fabliaux have been attacked of being against females, despite that it might be clearly noticed that the woman in the tales are presented as clever and having intellectual superiority to their foolish, "cuckolded" husbands. It maybe that "the characterization of women in the fabliaux is a reaction against the elevation of women in the courtly love tradition characteristic of the romances that the fabliaux were parodying."¹⁹

The sleep of the dead, from all his labor,
Fell on this carpenter right as I guess

.....

Down from the ladder crept Nicholay,
And Alison, full soft adown she sped;
Without words more, they went to bed

(TCT, 164)

The stupid carpenter hang the tub-like boats in place, and the evening before the predicted flood all the three climbed and entered their boats and prayed as Nicolas has ordered. The carpenter at once fell into troubled sleep. After the jealous husband, John, fell asleep, Alison and Nicolas descended the ladder from their tubs and sped downstairs. Without a word, they headed straightforward to bed and had sex. Later that night, the young parish clerk Absolon had heard that the carpenter was not seen for the whole day in the city and had thought that he was away. He was thrilled.²⁰ Robert E. Lewis declares that fabliaux are mainly characterized by skillfulness, toughness, and being practical and willing to take chances and to do whatever is necessary for obtaining benefit of someone else's progress. The chief violations of the fabliau world, as Lewis believes, are naivety, softness, whim which is always going to be burst out, and idealism which is always going to be destroyed by reality.²¹

"Then make you ready," said she, "Here I come!"

And to Nicholas she said quietly,

"Now hush, and you shall laugh all your fill."

(TCT, 166)

After dressing himself in good clothing and doing all that made him look handsome, Absolon stole beneath Alison's window and asked her for a kiss. She dismissed him but he entreated her. Being afraid the youth would awake the neighbours, she agreed to give him what he had asked for, a kiss. In fact, she decided to play a trick on this bothersome clerk.²² It is clear that the selected quotation above is a piece of a dialogue between Alison and Nicholas on one side and Absolon on the other side. A reader of the complete text of the Miller's Tale

can easily notice that more than half of it is composed with dialogues. Ruud states that fabliaux use a good proportion of dialogue more than that is common in other medieval literary genres.²³

And out the window she put her hole,
And Absolon, fared no better or worse,
But with his mouth he kissed her naked arse
(TCT, 167)

Alison extended her naked bottom out of the window and the young clerk kissed it most sonorously. When he discovered how Alison had tricked him, young Absolon strode away in anger. He was not completely cured of his lovesickness. Therefore, he made up a plan to revenge and went across the street to a blacksmith. Absolon went to the blacksmith and aroused him. He borrowed a red-hot poker from him. Returning to the carpenter's house Absolon knocked at the window again and begged for one more kiss.²⁴

Nicholas decided that Alison's trick was very good that he would try the same thing. So he presented his naked bottom out of the window to be kissed. When Absolon called for Alison to speak to him, Nicholas expelled gas which, as Chaucer said, was like a stroke of thunder. It almost knocked poor, dainty Absolon off his feet, but recovering rapidly, Absolon applied the red-hot poker to Nicholas's arse. Nicholas shouted "Help! water! water! Harrow, for God's heart!" (TCT, 169). The carpenter was startled from his sleep and thought that the flood had come. With an axe, he cut the ropes which held his boat to the ceiling of the house. Down he crashed. Alison and Nicholas shouted for help. The neighbours rushed to the house. Nicholas told them of the carpenter's preparation for a flood. All laughed at his craziness, and none would help him for they considered him mad. And to conclude it all, the carpenter received a broken arm from the fall and his precious wife was "screwed" (TCT, 70) by another man.²⁵ It is widely believed that in the end of a fabliau, there is often a kind of rough justice that is divided to the characters— the "foolish and gullible" are punished, and the "trickster figure" ... is also penalized, often for taking the joke too far. "This is a motif called the trickster tricked," common to many fabliaux.²⁶

3. Conclusion

Now, it is obvious, throughout exposing the plot of the Miller's Tale briefly, that it is a short story that comprises all the ingredients of a fabliau. To recapitulate, it is a funny poetic tale. It contains sex and trickery. It is obscene but satirical. Also, it has dialogue and its language is low. Its main characters, a sexy young wife, her stupid old husband, and her clever young lover, are all from the middle class. V. A. Colve points out that the Miller's Tale "represents the fabliau" in its typical characteristics.²⁷ Ruud describes the Miller's Tale as "the particularly widely admired" fabliau that Chaucer has ever written.²⁸ M. H. Abrams describes it as "one of the best fabliaux" that have been written.²⁹ J. B. Trapp observes that the Miller's Tale "is a perfectly judged fabliau"³⁰ while Andrew states that what Chaucer wrote in the Miller's Tale is a typical example of a fabliau.³¹

Notes

1. To read more about *The Canterbury Tales*, kindly see: J.E. Luebering (ed), *English Literature from the Old English Period through the Renaissance* (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2011) p. 100.
2. All further quotations from Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* will be made to Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, translated by Peter Tuttle, edited by Robert W. Hanning (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006). Henceforth, it will be marked by (TCT) followed by page number. This quotation is found in page 167.
3. Grant L. Voth, *History of World Literature* (NP: The Teaching Company, 2007) p. 40.
4. Jay Ruud, *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature* (New York: Facts On File, 2006) pp. 223-4.
5. Malcolm Andrew, *The Palgrave Literary Dictionary of Chaucer* (New York: Palgrave Malcolm Ltd., 2006) p. 102.
6. Luebering, 53.
7. Cynthia C. Werthamer, *Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (New Jersey: World Library, Inc., 1993) p. 63
8. Gillian Rudd, *The Complete Critical Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Routledge, 2001) p. 72.
9. Ruud.
10. Luebering.
11. Bruce Nicoll, *Cliffs Notes on Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Nebraska: Cliffs Notes, Inc., 1964) p. 16.
12. Voth.
13. Wethamer, p. 64.
14. Nicoll, p. 17
15. Ibid.
16. Ruud.
17. Wethamer.
18. Ibid.
19. Ruud.
20. Nicoll.
21. Robert E. Lewis, "The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's Miller's Tale" in *Modern Philology* 79, no. 3 [Feb., 1982]: 241-5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/437149> (accessed April 12, 2011).
22. Nicoll.
23. Ruud.
24. Wethamer, p. 65.
25. Nicoll, pp. 17-8.
26. Ruud.
27. V.A. Colve, "Chaucer's Fabliaux" in *Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008) p. 79.
28. Ruud, 446.
29. M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle, 1999) p. 87.
30. J.B. Trapp, "Medieval English Literature" in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, edited by F. Kermode and J. Hollander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 15.
31. Andrew.

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"حكاية الطحان" لجيفري تشوسر: حكاية مجون هزلية

الخلاصة

تعتبر حكايات كانتربري التي ألفها جيفري تشوسر من أشهر المؤلفات الأدبية الانكليزية في حقبة العصور الوسطى ، وهي عبارة عن مجموعة حكايات رائعة يرويها بتدبر مجموعة متنوعة من الانكليز رجالاً ونساءً لبعضهم البعض خلال ذهابهم لزيارة قبر القسيس توماس بيكيت في كندراية كانتربري.

من المؤسف ان تشوسر توفي سنة 1400 ولم يستطع اكمال الكتاب الذي اقتصر فقط على استهلال و 24 حكاية كل لها طولها ، والحكاية التي ستناقشها هذه الورقة ، وهي ثاني حكاية في الكتاب ، هي حكاية الطحان حيث سيتم دراستها على كونها حكاية مجون هزلية من حيث النوع الادبي.