

Fabliau plotting against romance in Chaucer's 'The Knight's Tale.' - Geoffrey Chaucer

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I

Critics have often discussed the significance of the elements of courtly romance in Chaucer's Reeve's Tale, Miller's Tale, and Merchant's Tale.(1) There has been little interest, however, in the converse relationship, the significance of fabliau elements in Chaucer's writing in other genres. Charles Muscatine, noting that "the bare mechanics of the bringing of Troilus to Criseyde could be constructed from just two fabliaux" (Chaucer 140), asserts that "[r]omance and fabliau must . . . have contributed to details of Pandarus' activity . . ." (141). Donald R. Howard observes that the Pardoner's exemplum "is a fabliau situation in which all three tricksters are tricked by language and Fortune, by each other, and by themselves" (Idea 362). And Nancy H. Owen observes that the Pardoner "becomes the victim of a sexual and scatological jest played on him by . . . the Host" (547), and that, like the victims in Chaucer's fabliaux, the Pardoner is unattractive and is "reduced to a kind of enforced speechlessness" by the jest (548-49); Owen thus refers to the tale's "fabliau framework" (549). Such scattered remarks are typical; as far as I know, nobody has discussed fabliau elements in Chaucer's non-fabliau texts at any length.

Even Peggy Knapp, whose reading of the Canterbury Tales focuses on the "contest" among social and generic "discourses" both among and within the individual tales, does not mention fabliau among the genres - epic, romance, "aristocratic chronicle," and Boethian *consolatio* - she sees contesting the generic space of the Knight's Tale (28-31). Although the ideologies associated with these genres are not completely consonant with one another - if they were, they could not embody Knapp's "social contest" - they are all mainly conservative, supporting existing power structures; in Knapp's reading, what "revolutionary" implications (31) the Knight's Tale has are made possible by the tale's "instances of local detail and homely colloquialism" (20) - departures from the elevated style appropriate to "authoritative" genres. Knapp ingeniously reads these departures in the traditional "dramatic" mode of criticism of the Tales: the departures are "a rhetorical ploy" on the part of the narrator, the Knight, an "effort to connect his authoritative account of noble life with the ordinary life of his fellow pilgrims . . ." (20). Any "revolutionary" effect the tale has is thus an unintended by-product of the Knight's ploy. I wish here to propose an idea that may be more in keeping with Knapp's own general critical orientation, which she says derives from Bakhtin and Foucault (2-6): that fabliau too participates in the generic contest in the Knight's Tale, contributing to the tale's "revolutionary" implications.

Perhaps one reason that critics have overlooked such a reading has been the difficulty of seeing how non-fabliau texts might "allude" to fabliau, how they might evoke the complex of ideas and expectations usually associated with fabliau. To allude to fabliau in mainly non-fabliau texts would require features that could have functioned as clear generic signals of fabliau. Courtly romance abounds in such distinctive features, from the level of diction up to that of theme. E. Talbot Donaldson's discussion of the word "hende" in the Miller's Tale shows how a single word can serve as a generic signal of courtly romance in a fabliau ("Idiom" 16ff.). And even if the Miller's Tale were not juxtaposed with and dramatically related to the Knight's Tale, a reader with minimal familiarity with courtly love poetry would recognize conventions of that genre when Nicholas protests that he will "spille" of deerne love" if Alison does not grant him her "love" (3277-81). Other easily recognizable generic features of courtly romance that figure in Chaucer's fabliaux include the formal *effictio*, which is the background against which we must read the descriptions of Malyn in the Reeve's Tale (Rowland 210) and of the main characters in the Miller's Tale, and the *aubade*, which is parodied in both the Reeve's Tale and the Merchant's Tale.

It is harder to identify equally clear generic signals of fabliau. Joseph Bedier defined fabliaux as "des contes a rire en vers" (39) - funny short tales in verse. While humor, concision, and verse may together distinguish fabliau from other medieval genres, they are insufficiently distinctive features to be used separately to allude to fabliau in non-fabliau contexts: *exempla*, for example, were also

short tales, and, as Knud Togeby points out, almost all twelfth- and thirteenth-century literature was in verse (7). In *The Old French Fabliaux*, Muscatine at first suggests that, in keeping with Bedier's identification of fabliaux as short tales, concern with "plot" is a regular feature of the fabliau - then shows that a number of fabliaux handle plot clumsily or completely neglect it (47-55). Perhaps Muscatine's evidence does not so much establish that plot was an unimportant feature of fabliau as that it was badly handled in specific cases. But even granting that careful plotting was characteristic of fabliau, that feature does not distinguish fabliau from many other medieval genres; the tight construction of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, certainly does not function as an allusion to fabliau. If fabliau is to be defined in terms of plot structure, the definition must be more specific.

Muscatine also identifies several interrelated "stylistic" features of fabliau: a "plain, realistic style" (55), "colloquial diction" (59), and concrete, particular imagery (59-65). In his earlier *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, however, Muscatine treats all of these features as characteristic of a medieval "naturalistic" style, a category that includes, but is not limited to, the fabliau; thus, none of these stylistic features could function in a non-fabliau text as a generic signal of fabliau.

Some of the stereotypical motifs of fabliau - for example, obscenity and characteristic stock characters, especially in stock situations like "the triangle of the dull-witted or jealous husband, the sensual wife, and the lecherous priest or clever clerk" (Muscatine, *Chaucer* 61) - come closer to being the clear generic signals we seek. And, in fact, Chaucer does sometimes use fabliau motifs in this way. It is mainly because of such motifs that Nancy Owen speaks of the *Pardoner's Tale's* "fabliau framework"; and although Muscatine sees the hidden door and the ruse of the invitation to dinner in the *Troilus* as devices borrowed from specific fabliaux, they can also be seen as instances of a common fabliau motif: deception in the service of seduction. However, as far as I know Chaucer is not directly obscene except in texts generally identified as fabliaux, nor does he often use stock fabliau characters outside of his fabliaux. (No doubt some of his pilgrim storytellers have fabliau ancestors.) Triangles do figure in some of Chaucer's non-fabliau texts: *Troilus*, the *Franklin's Tale*, the *Knight's Tale*, and the *Manciple's Tale*. However, the *Manciple's Tale* is itself sometimes identified as a fabliau, and the triangles in the other three texts are already a feature of the dominant genre in their generic pedigree, courtly romance.

Sexual triangles figure in both courtly romance and fabliau largely because of the historical relationship between the two genres, a relationship that would make it particularly difficult to allude to fabliau in courtly romance. Per Nykrog argues that the fabliau was "essentially derived partly from the courtly literature of the preceding age [most fabliaux were written in the thirteenth century] and partly from whatever had remained in the writers' minds from their carefree days in and around the schools" (64). If Nykrog is correct in seeing the fabliau as an essentially reactive genre, mirroring - sometimes parodically and sometimes at the expense of the medieval "middle class" - courtly romance, then one would expect it to be difficult to allude to fabliau in a romance. Such features of the fabliau as the sexual triangle may themselves allude to courtly romance; how, then, could such features, reinserted into courtly romance, allude to fabliau?

Is there some feature of fabliau that would be perceptible as a generic signal of fabliau in courtly romances, and that occurs in a number of Chaucer's non-fabliau works? What requirements would such a feature have to fulfill? The "dominant" is a term the Russian Formalists used to refer to the component of an aesthetic system - whether the entire system of arts at a given point in time, or that of literature, or of a single genre, or of the system of a single text - that "rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the entire structure" (Jakobson 82). If this conception is a formalist troping on Marxist imagery, then the dominant of a genre would be the "base" that organizes the "superstructure" of genre conventions. If fabliau has such a dominant, then it might function as a clear generic signal. Muscatine's discussion in *The Old French Fabliau* suggests that he would identify the dominant of fabliau as the "fabliau ethos," "a sort of hedonistic materialism" (73). As a candidate for the "dominant" of the fabliau genre or as a simple generic signal of fabliau in non-fabliau contexts, "hedonistic materialism" is open to the same objection as some of the other features of fabliau Muscatine mentions: as his own discussion in *Chaucer and the French Tradition* shows, "hedonistic materialism" is not unique to the fabliau, rather being an aspect of the broader category of "naturalism."

Togeby argues that the fact that fabliau humor survives, and may even be sharpened by, summary shows that "the humor is attached

to the structure itself" rather than to "the way in which the story is told" (13). Structuralist narratological terminology is useful here: what Togeby calls "the structure itself" - a narrative's events and existents, which summary largely preserves - the Russian Formalists called "fabula," and narratologists like Gerard Genette and Seymour Chatman have called "histoire," or "story"; "the way in which the story is told" the Forrealists called "syuzhet," and the narratologists have called "discours," or "narrative discourse." Roy Percy has worked out a description of the typical fabliau story structure that may identify the dominant, if not of the entire genre (he analyzes only thirteen of the old French fabliaux in this article), then at least of "Chaucerian" fabliau. J. A. Burrow points out that the "collection" format "of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales throws the characteristics of the different genres into bold relief" (77); I would add that this format also permits Chaucer to establish his own idiolects of established genres, his personal versions of genres whose norms readers come to recognize because they occur repeatedly within the collection. The Tales include more instances of "Chaucerian fabliau" than of any other genre: Burrows identifies six "fabliau-tellers": the Miller, the Reeve, the Cook, the Merchant, the Shipman, and the Summoner (79). Thus, Chaucer has ample opportunity to establish the norms of his idiolect of fabliau. The juxtaposition of and dramatic relationship between the Knight's Tale and the Miller's Tale should perhaps even be read as historical criticism: Chaucer recapitulates within his dramatic frame what Nykrog sees as fabliau's historical genesis: criticism of courtly romance. Chaucerian fabliau fits Percy's description of fabliau at least as well as the old French fabliaux do. And whether Chaucer's reader learns the feature Percy identifies by reading Chaucer or by reading old French fabliaux or both, such a reader might well be sensitized to the presence of the feature in nonfabliau works.

For Percy, the most important feature of the old French fabliaux is that they are stories whose central events are misinterpretations of ambiguous signs by "dupes" who are unaware of their ambiguity. These misinterpretations are often, but not always, encouraged by "dupers" who are at least aware of the signs' ambiguity, and who may also be responsible for presenting the ambiguous signs to the dupes. These misinterpretations always lead to reversals of fortune ("peripetias"),⁽²⁾ with an improvement in the fortunes of any dupers, and a decline in the fortunes of the dupes. The dupes also come to realize the ambiguity of the signs (there is an "anagnorisis"). Finally, according to Percy, "audience sympathy in the fabliaux is always solicited for the duper figure . . . so that all fabliaux end 'happily,' and impart something of the comic enjoyment of witnessing the triumph over adversity of a favored, sympathetic figure" (362). Percy uses "sympathy" as a literary critical term of art here, to refer to the fabliau reader's tendency to evaluate events according to whether or not they favor the duper; however, "sympathy" in common usage also includes the idea of understanding of and pity for a person's positive misfortune, a response that the reader of a fabliau need not have toward the duper, although it may figure in the reader's readiness to assume the duper's interests as the main criteria for evaluating events. For example, the reader of the Miller's Tale is unlikely to feel "sympathy" in its ordinary sense for Nicholas, the duper figure in the tale's most developed fabliau episode. Nicholas becomes the dupe in the episode of the hot coulter, of course; "sympathy" in the ordinary sense would interfere with our enjoyment of this episode. And by this point a number of circumstances have made us less sympathetic - in both senses - to Nicholas and more sympathetic to Absolon: the success of Nicholas's duping of John; Absolon's misfortune as Alison's dupe; Absolon's new sober purposefulness in pursuing his revenge; and Nicholas's fall into foolish excess when he again attempts to prove his cleverness by topping Alison. We can avoid the unwanted affective connotations of "sympathy" by substituting a term coined by Chatman (190): the fabliau reader must be induced to evaluate events from the duper's "interest point of view." Thus, a number of the tale's features induce the reader of the Miller's Tale to adopt Nicholas's interest point of view: the positive aspects of Nicholas's characterization (his youth, learning, cleverness, and healthy, direct sexuality); his attractiveness in comparison to other characters (John is a senex amans, and Absolon is an exhibitionistic, narcissistic fool); his adherence to the values of cleverness and "hedonistic materialism;" which are normative in the tale and the genre; and Chaucer's narrative strategies (for example, the simple fact that Nicholas is the first character described at any length helps to establish his as the normative interest point of view).

Percy's notation, like much structuralist writing, seems to promise a scientificity that few literary scholars will now believe in. Nevertheless, it is a convenient shorthand and has heuristic value, shifting attention from local detail to larger structures. Now that we are all poststructuralists, perhaps we can use some structuralist tools safely, without mistaking the approach for objective science.

Pearcy points out that in the fabliau episodes he examines, a potentially ambiguous "sign" or "message," which may be a linguistic utterance or may be some physical object or event, is presented by one story agent, the "Sender" ("S") to another agent, the "Receiver" ("R"). Pearcy does not cite A. J. Greimas, but Pearcy's grammar of fabliau seems closely related to Greimas's "actantial" narrative grammar, which analyzes all stories in terms of relationships among six functional roles or "actants": the Sender, the Receiver, the Subject, the Object, the Helper, and the Opponent. The category of "actant" is more abstract than that of "character"; two or more characters in the "surface structure" of narrative can jointly represent a single actant in the "deep structure," and a single character can represent more than one actant at once or at different points in the course of a story. It will be convenient to think of Pearcy's Sender and Receiver as categories as abstract as Greimas's actants.

The potentially ambiguous message that passes between the Sender and the Receiver refers to some item of exchange ("x"). According to one possible interpretation of the message, x belongs ("x[element of]" - "x is an element of") to the category of items ("A") whose exchange would be favorable to the Sender but unfavorable to the Receiver("x [element of] A(s[right arrow])")(3); according to the other possible interpretation, x belongs to the category of items ("B") whose exchange would be favorable to the Receiver but unfavorable to the Sender ("x [element of] B(s[left arrow]r)"). Or the potential ambiguity can be between an interpretation that places x in the class of items whose exchange would be favorable to both Sender and Receiver ("x[element of]A(s[equilibrium]r)") and an interpretation that places x in the class of items whose exchange would be unfavorable to both agents("x[element of]B(s[in equilibrium]r)"). Either S or R, or both S and R, or neither S nor R, may be aware of the message's ambiguity ("x[element of]K([A+B][less than]K") - that is, "x belongs to some category K, such that both categories A and B belong to K"). When neither S nor R is aware of the message's ambiguity, some outside agency ("O") enters the fabliau to enlighten them about the ambiguity that has led to their misunderstanding. When both S and R are aware of the message's potential ambiguity, O (in this situation usually "society at large," which for Pearcy includes the reader) is not aware of the message's ambiguity. In every case, the character or characters who are initially aware of the potential ambiguity of the message use their superior knowledge to dupe society at large or the characters who are not aware of the message's ambiguity (Pearcy 363-70).

Pearcy discovers six distinct story structures in the sample of fabliaux he analyzes (367, 369):

1. [Mathematical Expression Omitted]
2. [Mathematical Expression Omitted]
3. [Mathematical Expression Omitted]
4. [Mathematical Expression Omitted]
5. [Mathematical Expression Omitted]
6. [Mathematical Expression Omitted]

("S[center dot]" means "Sender interprets the message as indicating that...", "SR[center dot]" means "Both Sender and Receiver interpret the message as indicating that . . ." and so on.)

Notice that every structure but (6) ends with an evident discovery, or anagnorisis; that is, the agent (or, in the case of [5], combination of agents) that has been ignorant of the message's ambiguity comes to recognize that ambiguity. (6) is the formula of fabliaux in which both the Sender and the Receiver recognize the ambiguity of their message, which they interpret in a way favorable to themselves, but unfavorable to society at large; society gives the message the reverse interpretation. In this case, according to Pearcy, "it is the audience, as tacit supporters of the conventional moral and social standards of behavior, who experience anagnorisis in witnessing those standards circumvented and mocked" (371).

To demonstrate the notation, I will apply it to the Summoner's Tale, one of Chaucer's simpler fabliaux. The ambiguous message in the

main episode is Thomas's promise to Friar John to give him "somewhat" if the Friar will agree to share it equally with the other members of his convent (2129-36). Thomas, the Sender, recognizes his message's ambiguity ("S[center dot] x[element of]K([A+B])[less than]K"). The Friar, the Receiver, interprets the message as referring to some item whose exchange will favor him, but not the Sender ("R[center dot]x[element of] B(s[left arrow]-r)"). Thomas chooses to interpret the "somewhat" as a fart, an item whose exchange will benefit him in that it will allow him to humiliate the Friar, who has been taking advantage of him, but will not benefit the Friar ("S[center dot]x[element of]Z(s[right arrow]r)"). Finally, there is an anagnorisis: Friar John comes to recognize the ambiguity of the original message ("R[center dot]x[element of]K([A+B])[less than]K"). Here is the entire story structure of the tale's main episode in Percy's notation:

[Mathematical Expression Omitted]

This is a type I fabliau structure; one old French fabliau with this structure that Percy discusses is "La veschie a pretre," in which a dying priest bequeaths to a house of Jacobin friars "something for which he would not accept a thousand marks," which turns out to be his bladder (Percy 363).

Before this main fabliau episode of the tale, Friar John scolds Thomas for dividing his contributions among several convents: "What is a ferthyng worth parted in twelve? / Lo, ech thyng that is oned in himselve / Is moore strong than whan it is toscatered" (1967-69). Thomas, the Receiver at this point, evidently recognizes the ambiguity of "ferthyng"; his later fart is thus an interpretation of an ambiguous message the Friar has unknowingly sent, as well as an interpretation of Thomas's own promise of "somewhat." Here is the structure of this episode:

[Mathematical Expression Omitted]

This is a type 3 fabliau plot structure, except that the Sender, Friar John, characteristically does not apparently recognize that the fart is an interpretation of his own ambiguous message; the reader ("O") experiences the anagnorisis here. Chaucer also emphasizes the dominant by giving the story of Thomas's joke (as told by its victim, Friar John, who badly misjudges the story's effect - another failure to recognize a message's potential ambiguity) an appreciative fictional audience: the lord, lady, and their court. Moreover, Jankyn's solution to the problem of carrying out Thomas's injunction to share the fart equally is funny because it exploits the ambiguity of that injunction, taking it literally rather than as an insult. At the same time Jankyn surreptitiously repeats the insult, so even his solution is a "message" with two meanings. Finally, Thomas's deception is payback for the Friar's long presentation of deceptive signs of his own sanctity; Thomas has seen his contributions as an exchange advantageous to himself because Friar John's virtue has supposedly made his prayers for Thomas particularly effective.

Exploitation of ambiguous signs is a particularly salient feature of all of Chaucer's fabliaux, where the ambiguous signs and misinterpretations proliferate and the response to a deception is often another deception. The "Merchant's Tale," though rhetorically one of Chaucer's most elaborate tales, is the simplest of his fabliaux in terms of its story structure, but even in this tale there is a kind of doubling of the deception, with Mayus duping Januarie and Proserpyne outwitting Pluto. In this respect Chaucer's version is more elaborate than the closest known analogues, which have divine participants, God and Saint Peter, but no contest between them - o doubling of the wife's deception of her husband (Bryan and Dempster 333-56). And Chaucer further emphasizes this feature by making the deception the climax, quickly concluding the tale, and having Harry Bailley interpret the tale as about women's "sleightes and subtilitees," which they employ "sely men for to deceyve" (2421-2425). Misinterpretations of ambiguous signs proliferate most spectacularly in the Miller's Tale: Nicholas elaborately dupes John; in a spirit of emulation, Alisoun dupes Absolon; Absolon tries to "quyte" Alisoun by duping her into trying to dupe him again in the same way; Nicholas tries to top Alison's deception and gets the scalding in the "toute" Absolon intends for her; John misinterprets Nicholas's cry for "water!" and injures himself; and Nicholas and his brother clerks willfully misinterpret John's behavior as signifying madness.

Responding to such emphasis on the theme of misinterpretation in the old French fabliaux, R. Howard Bioch's book-length study *The*

Scandal of the Fabliaux portrays fabliau as a proto-poststructuralist genre, one that deconstructs more conspicuously than other medieval genres the notion of "proper" meaning. He observes of representative fabliaux that their "subject . . . is the nature of poetry itself" (19); that they "portray a universe in which language seems to have lost purchase on the world"; that "literary language (and indeed all language) [is] insufficient, less capable of expressing a perceived reality exterior to it than of covering up an absence . . ." (25); that the imagery of "dismemberment" in many of them "thematizes the capacity of language for multiple meaning, a certain fragmentation of linguistic sense, in terms of the specific body part whose loss signifies castration" (73). Similarly, Knapp sees the Miller's Tale as linguistically subversive.

It is of course possible, and perhaps interesting, to read Chaucer's fabliaux in this way, but they are funnier if read as assuming that every sign has a definite proper meaning in its given context, though a proper meaning that is subject to accidental or willful distortion. There is little humor in the defeat of competent, well-meaning interpreters by a supposed essential ambiguity of signs. The misinterpretation of a sign in a fabliau must be seen as a perversion of proper meaning for it to be funny: Chaucer's fabliaux portray weak interpreters who fail because they are stupid and misunderstand context (John heating Nicholas call for "Water!" and concluding that the second Flood has begun), and powerful interpreters who introduce ambiguity into essentially unambiguous messages for their own benefit. (Similar stock figures in today's popular culture include confidence tricksters, lawyers, and, for a smaller audience, academic literary critics, except that, since they are seen as privileged and aligned with rather than opposed to official power, lawyers and academics don't elicit the same audience sympathy as fabliau dupers and con artists.)

The idea that language fundamentally shapes and is shaped by the organization of society is part of the orthodoxy of today's academic literary criticism, as is that idea's corollary: that a text can't be fundamentally subversive of society unless it is also fundamentally subversive of linguistic convention. Perhaps because they accept these ideas, and accurately note the socially subversive effects of fabliaux, critics like Bloch and Knapp conclude that fabliaux must be linguistically subversive. Bloch says that the jongleur in the fabliau "Le Roy d'Angleterre et le jongleur d'Ely," who deflects the king's questions about his origins, identity, and destination by pretending to misunderstand them and by giving tautologous, uninformative replies, "is aware that 'sense' and 'good sense' (sen and saver) are the conditions of the courtly and noble life and that madness or a lack of sense is - beyond any overtly radical social gesture - a condition of poetry, if not of all linguistic expression" (16).

But isn't it rather that the fabliaux claim "good sense" for themselves largely by treating the language of courtly romance as itself perversely nonsensical (employing the common device of creating a sense of verisimilitude by revealing the conventionality of other texts)? The idealizing figurative language of courtly romance can be seen as a forced introduction of ambiguity into essentially unambiguous "signs": women are described as goddesses, sexual desire as divine worship, frustrated sexual desire as fatal, dawn as a conscious enemy of love (in the aubade), inherited wealth and power as intrinsic "gentillesse" - all conventions parodied, as many readers have noticed, in Chaucer's fabliaux. If the fabliau duper's use of interpretive force often seems admirably subversive of established order, perhaps it is because the interpretive force involved in the idealizing language of courtly romance can be seen as oppressive, in support of the established order. One effect of courtly romance was surely to help naturalize the dominance of the nobility by idealizing their human passions, to suggest that they should be in charge because they were naturally better people. We will see that the idealizing language of courtly romance in the Knight's Tale is indeed momentarily desublimated in one of two fabliau "interludes" in the tale.

II

Theseus's observations on the folly of lovers in general, and on the particular folly of Palamon and Arcite, who have fought until they are ankle-deep in blood over a woman who "woot namoore of al this hoote fare, / By God, than woot a cokkow or an hare" (1808-10) are reminiscent of fabliau in their recognition of the irrational and animal aspects of human nature. And the lament of the Athenian women when Arcite dies ("Why woldestow be deed . . . And haddest gold ynough, and Emelye?" [2835-36]) is as direct an expression as there is in Chaucer of the "hedonistic materialism" (as Muscatine calls it) characteristic of fabliau. But having common townswomen express the idea so baldly, in a predominantly aristocratic, idealizing, romance context, may cut more against the

hedonistic materialism than against the romance idealism. Indeed, to state an idea so directly in fiction is always to invite critical scrutiny. Indirect methods of conveying ideas, like irony and the use of symbolic imagery, are less likely to provoke a questioning response because the reader, having had to do more interpretive work to formulate the idea, has more of a sense of personal responsibility for it, and because it would take additional interpretive work to read the irony or symbolic imagery itself "ironically."

Story is the way of conveying theme that is least vulnerable to critical reader scrutiny. Not invulnerable, of course - particularly not when storytelling is itself insistently thematized, as in the *Canterbury Tales*. But I think that readers are more likely to accept that "that's simply what happened" than they are to accept a narrator's direct or indirect suggestion that "this is what it means." Of course story, in abstraction from narrative discourse, is thematically ambiguous, but a recognizable type of story, if consistently narrated in ways that bring out a certain general pattern of significance or "ethos" - as fabliau stories are typically narrated in ways that suggest "hedonistic materialism" - may come to connote that pattern of significance even out of its usual narrative context. And such connotations, arising automatically in readers' minds, may seem like the "natural" significance of these events, rather than a narrator or author's imposed interpretation.

Thus, characteristic fabliau story-structures, besides alluding to fabliau more clearly than other features of the genre, may "import" characteristic fabliau significance into a romance like the *Knight's Tale* in a form more likely to suggest criticism of the romance ethos (rather than suggesting the crude inadequacy of the fabliau ethos, as the Athenian women's lament does). Dieter Mehl points out that "the elegant sophism proposed by Saturn," which permits him to grant the letter of both Arcite and Palamon's requests, "has the neatness of a comic denouement" (160). In fact, this episode has one of the characteristic fabliau plot structures Percy discusses. As we have already noted, interpretation is unavoidable in applying his scheme: there is more than one reasonable way to translate this episode of the story into his notation. However, most readers would probably agree that Arcite is the Sender of a potentially ambiguous message "x," his prayer for "victory"; he does not recognize that it is ambiguous in that, although in context a request for "victory" clearly implicates (H. Paul Grice's term [Grice 24]) a request for Emily, it does not logically imply that request. Venus and Mars's positive replies are also ambiguous messages, but, like Percy, I will simplify by calling the original source of a sign - and not any characters who may repeat it - the "Sender." To further simplify the episode, Mars, Venus, and Saturn may be regarded as a single actant, the Receiver, since they divide among them the Receiver's functions of reception (Venus and Mars) and interpretation (Saturn).

Understood as the Sender interprets it, his message refers to an "object," Emily, whose exchange will be favorable to the Sender but unfavorable to the corporate Receiver, since this interpretation requires either that Venus or Mars break a promise to a votary, or that they argue endlessly. Saturn, the interpreting aspect of the Receiver, recognizes that the request for "victory" can be interpreted in a way unfavorable to the Sender, since he will not get what he really wants (Emily), but favorable to the Receiver, permitting both Venus and Mars to keep the letter of their promises to Palamon and Arcite. Saturn's overliteral interpretation depends on substituting the rules of logical implication for those of ordinary conversational implicature, the basic strategy employed by devils, genii, and other mischievous or malevolent beings in tales about hasty wishes. Such stories, like some fabliaux, thematize the difference between the rules of ordinary language and those of formal logic, and the power that comes from understanding that difference. We are not told whether Arcite experiences an anagnorisis, coming to realize the ambiguity of his prayer, but readers do. Here is the structure of the episode in Percy's notation:

[Mathematical Expression Omitted]

Except for the absence of a clearly marked anagnorisis (suggested by the parentheses around the last term in the sequence), this is the same structure Percy sees in the first episode of the fabliau *L'Esvesque qui benei lo con* (366), in which a "pretresse" (the priest's "wife") enables the priest to evade the spirit of the Bishop's commands against drinking wine, eating goose, and sleeping on a mattress by showing the priest that the commands are ambiguous, logically open to interpretations that permit indulgence in these luxuries. The contrast between this tale and the parallel *Knight's Tale* episode emphasizes one reason the latter does not have a comic effect. In *L'Esvesque* a relatively powerful authority figure is duped, so that there is a reversal of fortunes, a true peripety: it is a tale,

to use the language of the Knight's response to the Monk's Tale, of both a minor "fal" from "welthe and ese" and its "contrarie," a minor rise from "povre estaat" to "prosperitee" (2772-77). And this peripety is pleasing because we adopt the priest's interest point of view, rather than the powerful, oppressive Bishop's. In the Knight's Tale, in contrast, the duper, Saturn, is already far more powerful than the dupe, Arcite, so that the trick only confirms the existing order, rather than leading to a reversal. Further, little in the tale encourages us to adopt the gods' interest point of view: Jupiter is ineffectual and the others mostly sinister. It is the humans whose fortunes matter most to us, so we take little pleasure in Saturn's clever use of interpretive force.

Features besides Saturn's willful misreading of a message encourage reading the intervention of the gods as a fabliau interlude. The Knight says that

the pale Saturnus the colde, That knew so manye of adventures olde, Foond in his olde experience an art That he full soone hath plesed every part. As sooth is seyde, elde hath greet avantage; In elde is bothe wysdom and usage; Men may the olde atrenne and nought atrede. (2443-49)

I have mentioned Muscatine's observation that Pandarus's machinations to bring Troilus and Criseyde together are like those of a typical fabliau plotter. Saturn resembles Pandarus in that both are characterized as possessing practical wisdom based on mature experience, which both employ in plotting to bring two illicit lovers into accord by means of deception. In fact, the love affair between Venus and Mars is more like a typical fabliau situation than Troilus and Criseyde's love affair: Venus and Mars occupy two corners of a conventional comic love triangle, with Vulcan at the third corner, that of unsuitable husband (traditionally, because he is lame and has an unaristocratic occupation, rather than because he is too old), while Troilus and Criseyde are kept apart by psychological and social forces rather than by a jealous husband. Chaucer reminds us of the story when Arcite prays to Mars for victory:

For thilke peyne and thilke hoote fir In which thow whilom brendest for desir, Whan that thow usedest the beautee Of faire, yonge, fressbe Venus free, And haddest hire in armes at thy wille - Although thee ones on a tyme mysfille, Whan Vulcanus hadde caught thee in his las, And foond thee liggynge by his wyf, allas! (2383-90)

As Richard L. Hoffman points out, arguing that both Arcite and Mars should be seen as "deceived by lechery into becoming irrational milites amoris" (98), Chaucer would of course have thought of Ovid's story of the triangle and the Duenna's retelling of the story in the Roman de la Rose (96), comic treatments of the relationship more consonant than Boccaccio's with the spirit of fabliau. Informed of the affair by the Sun, Vulcan fashions an invisibly fine brass net and uses it to capture Venus and Mars together in bed, dragging them before the other gods to expose their affair. Vulcan is more successful than the typical jealous fabliau husband, in that he succeeds in exposing the lovers,⁽⁴⁾ but in typical fabliau fashion he thereby exposes himself to ridicule. Ovid says that "some one, / Not the least humorous of the gods in Heaven, / Prayed that some day he might be overtaken / By such disgrace himself" (87), and the Duenna further emphasizes how Vulcan's trick leads to his own humiliation:

two thousand marks Had Vulcan given not to have revealed To common knowledge what the lovers did, for when the pair he thus exposed to shame Perceived that everybody knew their case They afterward performed with open doors The acts that they kept secret formerly And then the gods the tale told far and wide Until it was well known throughout the heavens. As things grew worse and worse, Vulcan in rage Perceived that he could find no remedy (Roman de la Rose 295)

The Duenna also interprets the tale as showing that lovers should be physically attractive and approximate social equals, values common to both fabliau and courtly romance:

Yet 'twas no wonder that she gave herself To Mars, for Vulcan was so foul and black - Face, hands, and throat - with charcoal from his forge That he could not by Venus be beloved, However much he claimed her as his wife. (Roman de la Rose 289)

And she goes on to argue at length that our natural inclination towards sexual freedom justifies infidelity (289-95), espousing the "hedonistic materialism" that Muscatine attributes to the fabliaux, among other medieval texts.

Critics have been unable to reach a broad consensus about whether or not Palamon and Arcite's characters and actions differ sufficiently to justify Palamon's "reward" and Arcite's "punishment." Lately, critics have tended more to see the cousins as morally equivalent and the resolution as thus in itself morally arbitrary, though perhaps illustrative of the inscrutable workings of a Boethian Providence. If it nevertheless feels appropriate, that appropriateness may be more a matter of structural symmetry than of morality, because the episode that begins the conflict that Saturn resolves can itself be seen as a fabliau interlude, one with the same abstract structure. Taken together, these two key episodes constitute a "biter bit" story. Derek Pearsall approaches such a reading in arguing that Chaucer, in adapting Boccaccio's story, changed the character who first sees Emily from Arcite to Palamon in order to justify Arcite's death:

. . . Arcite's fate is his own responsibility, since it was Palamon who saw Emelye first and Arcite who deliberately denied, with a barrage of false arguments, Palamon's prior claim and explicit, formal assertion of that claim . . . [I]t is Arcite who is made responsible for the first release of disorder through ungoverned impulse because it is Arcite who dies. (135)

Palamon and then Arcite see Emily in the garden outside their prison window and fall in love with her. When Palamon sees Emily, he "blanches" and cries out, "'A!' / As though he stongen were unto the herte" (1078-79). Arcite assumes that Palamon is lamenting their imprisonment in Theseus's jail, and encourages Palamon to endure it bravely; Palamon corrects Arcite's misapprehension in the conventional language of courtly romance:

I was hurt right now thurghout myn ye Into myn herte, that wol my bane be. The fairnesse of that lady that I see Yond in the gardyn romen to and fro Is cause of al my cryng and my wo. I noot wher she be womman or goddesse, But Venus is it soothly, as I gesse. (1096-1102)

Palamon falls on his knees and prays to this "goddesse" to free them or in some other way show "compassion" to their "lynage" (1.1103-11). Arcite now sees Emily, and is with "hit beaute hurte . . . so" that he too falls in love with her:

The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly Of hire that rometh in the yonder place; And but I have hit mercy and hir grace, That I may seen hire atte leeste weye, I nam but deed; ther his namoore to seye. (1118-22)

Arcite's lament is as conventionally courtly as Palamon's, echoing or echoed by the first section of Chaucer's courtly "Triple Roundel;" Merciles Beaute:

Your yen [two wol slee me sodenly; I may the beautee of hem not sustene, So woundeth it thourghout my herte keene].

And but your word wol helen hastily My hertes wounde while that hit is grene, Your yen two wol slee me sodenly . . . (11-13; 4-6)

The cousins quarrel: Palamon asserts that Arcite is bound "as a knyght" to help him, since Palamon was the first to see and fall in love with Emily, and confided his love in Arcite. Arcite's reply both desublimates the courtly love language the cousins have been using - much as the Miller's use of "hende" does in his fabliau reply to the Knight's romance - and reinterprets Palamon's apparently earlier declaration of love for Emily as really favoring the priority of Arcite's claim: "'Thou woost nat yet now / Wheither she be a womman or goddesse! / Thyn is affecioun of hoolynesse, / And myn is love as to a creature...'" (1156-59). By interpreting Palamon's conventional declaration too literally, as Saturn later interprets Arcite's prayer for "victory" too literally, Arcite momentarily reveals the artificiality of the language of courtly love: he emphasizes the distance between the "creature" to which the message really refers and the goddess to which it pretends to refer. (Similarly, the Miller's Tale rubs Absolon's nose in the reality that he has concealed from himself in the language of courtly love.) The structure of this episode, in Percy's notation, is

[Mathematical Expression Omitted]

the same as that of the later fabliau interlude. The allusion to fabliau here is fainter, because in addition to the fact that here too we are given little encouragement to adopt the would-be duper's interest point of view, Arcite's misinterpretation does not succeed, so

there is no peripety.

Even so, the fact that there are two parallel fabliau interludes reinforces the discursive presence of fabliau in the tale, by giving the tale the kind of "biter bit" structure that occurs in most Chaucerian fabliaux - for example, in the Knight's Tale's companion-piece, the Miller's Tale. In the first fabliau interlude, Arcite tries to exploit the potential ambiguity of Palamon's declaration of love for Emily, to Palamon's disadvantage; in the second fabliau interlude, Saturn exploits the potential ambiguity of Arcite's prayer to Mars, to Arcite's disadvantage. And both Arcite and Saturn misinterpret the Senders' messages by taking them too literally. Although it might be objected that too much textual activity intervenes between the two interludes for them to be perceived as structurally connected, they are emphasized by their occurrence at the two key points in the tale's overall story structure: the main conflict begins when Palamon and Arcite both fall in love with Emily, and is resolved when Saturn intervenes. The two interludes are also connected by references to Saturn: when Palamon cries out upon seeing Emily for the first time, Arcite tells him, "Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee. / Som wikke aspect or disposicioun / Of Saturne, by sore constellacioun, / Hath yeven us this..." (1086-89), foreshadowing Saturn's later intervention.

In adapting the Teseide, Chaucer changed these episodes in ways that bring them closer to fabliau and to each other. In Boccaccio's version there is no legalistic argument over whether Arcites or Palaemon has seen her first (Arcites does in the Teseide). In fact, their first sight of Emilia unites them. When Arcites sees Emilia, he says "to himself: 'She is from paradise,'" and he calls to his cousin, "'O Palaemon, come and see. Venus has truly come down here. . . . I believe for certain that it will please you to see the angelic beauty down there which has descended to us from the sovereign heights.'" Palaemon readily agrees with Arcites that "Surely, this is Cytherea," and both go on to agree that they see Cupid in her "beautiful immortal eyes;" each claiming to have been wounded by one of Cupid's arrows. "So the two new lovers talked in this fashion and each spoke words of comfort to the other. They did not know if this girl was a goddess of the holy kingdoms come to dwell on earth, or a lady of this world..." (79-82). Even the narrator falls in with this way of referring to Emilia, telling us that Palaemon "went to the window together with Arcires, and both in silence, to watch the goddess:" To be sure, Boccaccio treats this idealization of Emilia ironically, characterizing this "goddess" as a "child," and explaining that after realizing that she is being watched she continues her walks in the garden because of "vanity;" her pleasure in being admired. But this is a sophisticated irony, one that takes it as understood that this way of speaking is only a literary convention, not a delusion requiring desublimation. And when the exiled and disguised Arcites and the escaped Palaemon meet in the grove and do finally argue over Emilia, neither attempts any interpretive cleverness; each simply asserts that friendship requires the other to give up the right to love Emilia (the joke is that neither of them sees that his cousin's argument is the same as his own, and equally valid) (126-27).

As for the disagreement between Venus and Mars in the Teseide, it is settled within a single verse, behind the scenes, and without the intervention of Saturn, the character in the Knight's Tale who most closely resembles a typical fabliau character:

When the words of Palaemon had been heard, therefore, the goddess [Venus] went immediately where she was summoned, for then divergent things were heard in the sacred dwelling and a new dispute was born in heaven between Venus and Mars. Yet with masterly skill, a way was found between them to satisfy the petitions of both parties. (179)

We are not encouraged to imagine the situation concretely. Indeed, at this point Boccaccio's gods are less characters in their own right than allegorical representations of human passions, as is suggested for example when Palaemon's personified prayer rises to Venus's temple, where it ("she," in translation) sees and interacts with a variety of conventional allegorical figures, including "Madonna Peace," "Patience," and "Opulence," before being admitted to an audience with Venus herself (178-79). In the Knight's Tale, on the other hand, the dispute between Venus and Mars and the speech in which Saturn promises to settle it occupy more than forty lines (2438-78). The Knight's direct narration of the gods' "strif" (2438) is about as abstract as Boccaccio's, but the gods and their strife are made to seem more real by Jupiter's futile peace-making attempts, and both Venus and Saturn's reality are established by Saturn's speech, which is addressed to his "deere doghter Venus" (2453), whom he twice asks to stop weeping (2470, 78). Thus, in Chaucer the episode is more fully realized and more naturalistic in its portrayal of the "gods" and their conflict than in Boccaccio, features

consistent with reading it as a fabliau interlude.

When Boccaccio does realize Venus and Mars somewhat as characters, they address each other with dignified courtly delicacy as they execute their plan for satisfying both Arcita's and Palaemon's prayers. Venus says,

"You have answered Arcite's prayer well, for as you see, he is victorious; now it rests with me to fulfill Palaemon's, since, as you observe, he is sad because he has lost." Mars, become gentle, said to her, "What you say is true, dear; now do whatever gives you perfect pleasure." (241)

In Chaucer, on the other hand, when Arcite has defeated Palamon, Venus throws another tantrum, and Saturn again placates his spoiled granddaughter:

What kan now faire Venus doon above? What seith she now? What dooth this queene of love, But wepeth so, for wantynge of hir wille, Til that hit teeres in the lystes fille? She seyde, "I am ashamed, doutelees." Saturnus seyde, "Doghter, hoold thy pees! Mars hath his wille, his knyght hath al his boone, And, by myn heed, thow shalt been esed soone." (2663-70)

As F. Anne Payne says, Chaucer's gods

are actual gods with Roman names, have a dramatic objectivity equivalent to the other characters [sic], and are a part of a traditional mythological system to which the Knight pays no attention. Saturn, instead of uttering the words of a Golden Age god, berates the assembly with an account of the evil he presides over. Jupiter, instead of acting as the awesome controller of all things, is the harried, unsuccessful ruler trying to keep peace in the family. (222)

III

The structural symmetry between the fabliau interludes at the complication and the crisis of the Knight's Tale perhaps compensates for the absence of a clear moral justification for the story's outcome. How else might recognizing allusion to the fabliau genre in the Knight's Tale affect our reading of the tale?

Most readers today do not read the tale as simply affirming the ethos of courtly romance. As we have seen, Knapp, for example, thinks the Knight inadvertently undermines his own conservative ideology when he adopts aspects of the language of other pilgrims as a "rhetorical ploy." And Howard suggests that "Chaucer is satirizing . . . the knightly mentality, including its literary tastes, and that he is satirizing it with delicate irony - is satirizing something for which he had respect" ("Tale" 65). Howard focuses on moments when Chaucer overrides the voice of the Knight and "permits some of [the tale's] most dramatic moments to collapse into moments of irony, even into farce or 'camp'" (64). The two episodes on which this paper has focused are among the tale's "most dramatic moments," and fabliau is a kind of "farce": evidently seeing the episodes as "fabliau interludes" is consistent with a reading like Howard's. He sees the activities of the gods as

a mirror-image of the plot itself: the planets are gods, and therefore a super-race of nobles - a ruling class which rules the ruling class. . . . But the celestial plot is scarcely idealized - the gods bicker and dicker like humans, each has a vested interest, they form alliances, and the outcome depends on power (and seniority) rather than on right. (66-67)

To add that the outcome also depends on the power of clever misinterpretation, and that the "celestial plot" is in fact a fabliau plot, carrying connotations of the reductive, naturalistic, skeptical attitude typical of fabliau, reinforces our sense that the tale questions the idealizing image of the earthly ruling class typical of romance.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank William Nelles for his patience and his many useful suggestions for this article.

- 2 The Aristotelian terms Percy uses are convenient, though anachronistic and laden with potentially misleading associations.
- 3 Due to technical limitations on our printing process, we have had to slightly modify Percy's arrow notation. I apologize for these changes, which do not, however, sacrifice any of the information the notation originally carried.
- 4 In the Old French fabliau *Des Tresces*, by contrast, the suspicious husband's attempt to catch his wife and her lover in the act ends in the husband's being badly beaten and thoroughly convinced of his wife's fidelity.

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