

# Toward a Theoretical and Analytical Framework for the Study of Sexual Humour in Chaucerian Fabliaux

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**Abstract**—The present study offers an examination of laughter in comic texts from a range of fabliau in *The Canterbury Tales*, framing them within discussions of medieval views of eroticism that draw from religion, medicine, philosophy, and literature. These texts feature males and females who laugh and make jokes in sexual themes and plots which involve deception and sexual misbehaviour. First, the article explores medieval attitudes toward laughter in religious, medical treatises and literature. It then discusses a number of predominant themes in *the Reeve's Tale*, *the Miller's Tale*, *the Merchant's Tale* and *the Shipman's Tale* in the context of Chaucer's *the Canterbury Tales* to try to tease out how these particular themes may have worked to bring erotic pleasure to the reader of the comic texts. The comic themes discussed in this article are briefly cuckoldry, culinary humour, exposure of the genitals and farting. These subjects and how they are represented are very different from modern erotic representations. They are based both on a different understanding of the body and on a different social and cultural landscape, and their complexity resists simple interpretations about misogyny or functionality that are suggested by feminist perspectives on sexual humour. All quotations from *the Canterbury Tales* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

**Index Terms**—sexual humour, fabliau, medieval eroticism, *the Canterbury Tales*

## I. INTRODUCTION: INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND TO MEDIEVAL EROTIC HUMOUR

The origins of comedy have been located in ancient fertility rituals, with the word itself deriving from the Greek *Komos*, a festive procession (Gray, 1994, p. 29). This early association of sex with laughter is one which has continued through different types of writing from the classical world, and which persists in Chaucer's writings during the Middle Ages. The origins of much of comic writings in these earlier classical and medieval sexual themes can be traced quite clearly. It should be noted, however, that these works of literature offer a model for the writing of sexual themes which does not isolate the sexual from all other matters, and most particularly, does not separate it from the comic.

Plato's *Laws* contained a discussion of the distinction between good-natured and ill-natured jests, with the latter seen as a form of aggression. He saw derisive laughter as justified only when used as a means of discouraging folly and vice. His *Philebus* had remarked on the fact that comedy invites the audience to laugh at the defects of characters on stage. Similarly, people can laugh at the defects or misfortunes of their friends: this shows the element of malice in all such laughter.

Aristotle made only brief references to comedy in his *Poetics*. While tragedy was said to show the actions of exceptional and superior beings, comedy was concerned with inferior characters who display defect or error, or else ugliness, which could be either physical or moral. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he made a distinction between the humour of educated, well-bred persons and that of the vulgar populace, and advocated restraint in humour on the grounds of propriety, and in order to avoid causing offence. It also carried a warning against the socially harmful effects of the satire of individuals such as that seen in old comedy.

Medieval writers did more than merely transmit the thoughts of classical authors about laughter. They carried out their own enquiries into the nature of the phenomenon and its moral implications. Allen (2007) points out that while medieval theologians thought of laughter as a distinctive feature of the human being in general, they still connected it with the original sin and the doors by which sin sneaks in; she argues:

Despite laughter's distinction, many medieval theologians identified it as the mark of original sin, claiming that Christ himself never laughed, or if he did, it was at the harrowing of hell, when he liberated the souls of virtuous heathen who lived before him; but this registers triumph rather than amusement (p. 149).

Saint Augustine found that there are some feelings, namely sexual aggression and hostility, are likely to be alleviated by laughter. He deplored humour based on the fact that it often involves deception and distortion of reality. It was regarded by Augustine as one of the daily regular sins (Lamberigts, 2000, p. 186).

While the medieval Church did not hesitate to criticise all kinds of humour which do not allow for the possibility of an intellectual or spiritual pleasure, it surprisingly acknowledged humour which articulates the relationship between earthly and divine pleasure that “The Church initially condemned all laughter, but subsequently moved in the direction of regulating it, of distinguishing between good and bad laughter” (Palmer, 1994, p. 44).

In his discussion of the virtue of wittiness, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) argues that laughter is clearly sinful if it takes place in inappropriate circumstances. Thomas also supports these conclusions by arguing that to laugh at certain moments and in certain places would be unfitting and even insulting. Laughter, according to Thomas, should be avoided in situations which demand a serious and meditative atmosphere. Thomas is well aware that to laugh is “to let yourself go”; so that laughter should be abandoned while being with certain persons and in situations of serious nature. This is clearly the way we follow, Thomas believes, to avoid “losing the balance of one's mind altogether” (II-II, Q.168, A.2). In this respect, and in his largest group of his sermons for women, Guibert of Tournai (1200-c. 1280) points out that women, virgins in particular, should not laugh in the house of God that:

Two of these [sermons] discuss the need for chastity . . . one discusses the value of literacy and basic medical knowledge, and warns girls against laughing in church, three discuss the perils of make-up and of the interest in fashion and perfume, one covers preparation for marriage, and one the dangers of wealth (Swanson, 1990, p. 344).

Thomas Aquinas's discussion of laughter was prominent in the late Middle Ages where loud laughter, crude jokes, gambling and flirting were some of the vices associated with drinking alcohol and bad eating habits (Adamson, 2004, p. 156). Medieval theoretical thinking about eroticism and about comedy has followed a similar path whereby both are usually defined as belonging to the same literary world. In this relationship of coexistence, the pleasures of both comedy and of eroticism are located in the physical body, providing relief and release. While the physically cathartic effect of the laughter produced by comedy gives a temporary release from physical tension and the realities of life, eroticism provides emotional and intellectual relief from the physical tensions of bodily desire (Rodway, 1975, p. 17). Perfetti (2003) states that:

Physicians and some church writers, however, welcomed laughter in moderation for its power to restore the spirits and to enliven otherwise dull sermons. Writers who valued laughter emphasized the importance of moderation, influenced both by Arab writers on laughter and the medical understanding of the body as composed of four humors that should be kept in balance (p. 450).

In late Medieval Ages, laughter was medically associated with bodily fluids in general and, therefore, considered important in preserving the vital juices that keep man alive. It was believed that man can expel “gross humors from their bodies by means of laughter, belly laughter and, if the laugh is hard enough, a fart” (Allen, 2007, p. 94). Early modern medical texts provide about laughter coexist love and intimacy. Rather than dismiss laughter as simply a moral sin, medical texts recommend laughter and smiles to cure various family disorders and problems. Women's laughter is welcomed by men if it enhances the pleasure she gives him, this is echoed in Robert Burton (1621–38) comments in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*;

a good wife . . . should be as a looking-glasse, to represent her husband's face and passion: If he be pleasant, she should be marry: if hee laugh, she should smile; if hee looke sad, shee should participate of his sorrow, and beare a part with him, and so they should continue in mutual love one towards another (Iii, p. 53).

Therefore, laughter is encouraged if it increases the pleasure and discouraged if it diminishes it. Women with bad teeth were advised to avoid excessive laughter lest they disfigure the naturally feminine beauty of their pleasing faces (Perfetti, 2003, p. 8).

While both men and women were urged to be moderate in their behaviour, women were naturally associated with laughter that “women generally laugh more often and more easily than men, and fat people more than skinny people. For fat people and women engender much good blood, from which comes much oil, if one takes care of oneself, in peace and tranquillity of mind” (Joubert, 1980, p. 104). In the sexual domain, then, the medieval ethics project women as a kind of free-roaming sexual being who can use humorous as well as sexual gestures to seduce and trick men. Women who laugh and talk too much were commonly assumed to be ready to serve as whores whenever the occasion presented itself since “The greatest attention, especially in comic traditions, was paid to their speech and their sexuality: women were held to be equally incontinent with secrets and with sex” (Sanok, 2009, p. 55). Therefore, in his discussion of the ideal bride, Guibert de Tournai (1200-1284) wrote:

She should not go out to shows, she should bow her neck, lower her eyebrows, close her eyes, abstain from laughing, restrain her tongue, hold her anger in check, walk in a seemly manner, and keep her good name secure—let there be nothing in her to offend others, so that a good house may be known from its lintel” (D'Avray, 2001, p. 308).

This is echoed in Christine de Pizan's (1380) words; she says:

She never will be coy, but will speak well-considered words, soft and rather low-pitched, uttered with a pleasant face and without excessive motion of the hands or body, nor facial grimaces. She will avoid excessive or uncalled-for laughter. . . . Her humor also will be discreet (p. 92).

Since both the comic and eroticism are related to the physicality of the body, sexual humour is placed in opposition to the high art of tragedy where the mind occupies a higher plane. In a western culture in which things of the body are

placed in a binary oppositional relationship to things of the mind, it is not surprising that these two artistic or literary forms have been consigned to the lower end of the art.

## II. BAWDY TALES IN THE MIDDLE AGES: THE MEDIEVAL FABLIAUX

Despite this wealth of texts discouraging laughter, a rich body of medieval literature represents women and men laughing loudly. The most immediately distinctive feature of medieval fabliaux, whatever its particular format or purpose, is its unexpectedly humorous and erotic character. The combination of comic and erotic reading practices in such genres allows for new possibilities of behaviour in the ambiguously condemnatory passages of satiric or scandalous writings. Medieval fabliaux were designed to provide amusing interludes, intended to help audiences to endure edifying but lengthy serious tragedy and to counter the possible melancholic or depressive effects of this form of literature. In order to fulfil such a restorative function, fabliaux had to avoid any didacticism or moralising, apart from frequently allowing the audience the satisfaction of seeing the villain soundly beaten at the end. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC-43 BC) states that the use of humour was advocated to keep the attention of the audience pointing out that “For, just as a loathing and distaste for food is relieved by some morsel with a bit of tang, or appeased by a sweet, so a mind wearied by listening is strengthened by astonishment or refreshed by laughter” (Book 1. Chapter 17, p. 25). Yet, that humour of the fabliaux was never value-free tool; it functioned in the light of the traditionally perceived relationship between amusement (*delectare*) and didacticism (*docere*). The relationship may not necessarily be one of intentional cause and effect, since a comic mode always functions by expressing the worldview and the values shared by speaker and audience, even when no didacticism is apparent.

Humour plays a fundamental role in negotiations the different understanding of social control and code that in the Middle Ages, for instance, “Humorous ballads taught men and women to take their gender roles within marriage seriously” (Foyster, 1993, p. 18). They stand for a pre-institutional kind of cultural and political resistance based on viewing things from the “other” perspective and a mode of disagreement. Such actions are in some sense “licensed” as jest, but they also thrive on mental agility, moral flexibility, and a variety of perspectives open always to possibilities from the unusual to the bizarre. Humorous scenes of fabliaux are induced to express messages that might be unacceptable if stated seriously. For instance, representations of erotic desire in heterosexual relationships in medieval fabliaux—which continue to reverberate within popular comic fiction up to the present day—suggest that laughter breaks up cultural constructions of heterosexuality, providing a different kind of space and a wide range of imaginative possibilities that enable us to consider gender norms that are ingrained in the cultural imaginary. Within the fabliaux, therefore, writers have recourse to the element of comic and so are able to represent in their fictions desires that are outside the law that “In a world where a woman’s body is hedged around with restriction, the fabliaux provide a fantasy space where it is allowed free play, where her body functions are splendidly, supercalifragilistically excessive” (Allen, 2007, p. 59).

Yet, we should not blindly make the easy assumption that the genre was used freely to play with taboos that come from all directions. Despite the liberal stance that medieval humour takes toward sexual themes, humour on the subject of homosexuality is markedly restricted. Homosexuality is thus not a general topic of interest in the fabliaux. The overwhelming majority of common themes of fabliaux were heterosexual.

Our discussion of the coexistence of the comic and eroticism in fabliau is not only concerned with their cultural functions but also with the class of their respective audiences. It is in the nature of medieval humour that it is not complete until grasped and digested by the audience. Such humour was also not the province of men alone, but was equally available to both men and women, whether in public spaces or in private gatherings in a domestic setting. We are told that, in *the Reeve’s Prologue*, everyone was laughing at *the Miller’s Tale*:

Whan folk haddelaughen at this nycecas  
Of Absolon and hende Nicholas,  
Diverse folk diversely they seyde,  
But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde.  
Ne at this tale I saugh no man hymgreve,  
But it wereoonly Osewold the Reve (*The Reeve’s Prologue*, 3855- 3860).

It is clear that the audience of such fabliaux, both the inclusive and exclusive, would not have failed to laugh on such occasions. This suggests that humour is not confined to what we may term gender-specific or class-specific audience that “Chaucer seems to claim, in the case of *the Miller’s Tale*, that laughter unifies all classes: nobody but the irascible Reeve is offended by the story, and he is annoyed not because of the smutty bits but on behalf of aggrieved carpenters” (Davenport, 2001, p. 254). Medieval humour, Chaucer’s in particular, can be seen as contentious because, laughter is always the laughter of a group, and thus inclusive and exclusive at the same time. Comic scenes will therefore be considered in the light and concept of the field of cultural production, with humour directed at audiences varied in terms of class, gender and religious beliefs. This is perhaps the main cultural function of fabliaux; a genre which was seen as primarily recreational for all classes of audience.

Contrary to traditional histories, which present fabliaux as sites of male jesting, we expect both male and female to enjoy and understand “the logic of a comic genre, just as the lord and lady at the end of *the Summoner’s Tale* receive with amused equanimity the friar’s scandalized report of the churl’s fart: a cherl hath doon a cherlesdede” (TST, 2206).

Most medieval fabliaux, however, pay attention to both women's participation in erotic humour and their responses to it, though paying attention to women's resistance to and rebuttal of patriarchal control, rather than to their possibilities for sexual pleasure. For example, images of the disobedient wife as shrew which infuse medieval fabliaux may indicate at once the popularity of this figure as a warning sign to women in society against adopting similar behaviour. Perfetti (2003) reminds us that medieval humorous texts do not usually let their audience forget about their own gender where "Female characters claim to speak on behalf of all women or directly speak to fellow women in the audience" (p. 23). She also argues that:

When a woman outwits her husband, a man in the audience can laugh because he judges himself to be superior to the man who has let a woman usurp his authority or because he recognizes that his own fears about his masculine role are not his alone. Women, observing what the heroine gets away with, release, through their laughter, the frustrations built up by the limitations they experience but cannot express so directly (Perfetti, 2003, p. 25).

The comic erotic discourse is not conceived of as the exclusively male one characteristic of fabliaux in the Middle Ages but as a provocative, exciting exchange between male and female.

It is always wrong to identify fabliaux historically with the social world which they portray. The case might be, as Hopkins (2010) states, that "The lower classes would simply be amused at the content of the tales, while the upper classes could laugh at the lower classes" (p. 3). Reading in the Middle Ages was a kind of performance. Members of the household would frequently read texts aloud to small groups of friends as a social event. In the scene where Pandarus visits Criseyde in Chaucer's *Troilus*, the occurrence is described as follows:

Whan he was come un-to his neces place,  
 `Wher is my lady?' to hir folk seydehe;  
 And they him tolde; and he forth in gan pace,  
 And fond, two othere ladyes sete and she,  
 With-inne a paved parlour; and they three  
 Herden a mayden reden hem the geste  
 Of the Sege of Thebes, whyl hem leste.  
 Quod Pandarus, `Madame, God yow see,  
 With al your book and al the companye!' (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 78- 86).

This public audience of ladies and gentlemen suggests the complex mixture of audience that:

Far from being identified with ignorance, poverty, lack of sophistication, with bards or with minstrels, public reading was a common practice among upper-middle- and upper-class elite audiences of both France and England until and (in modulated form) beyond the very end of the Middle Ages (Coleman, 1996, p. xii).

Like romances, therefore, there is no direct evidence within fabliaux texts to suggest that they were written for specific audience. Arguably, while fabliaux appear to function within a different universe of ideas and, therefore, target different audience, we discover when we look more closely that the relationship between fabliau and romance is clearly intertwined. The coexistence of fabliaux and romance in the same manuscript beside each other suggests that for medieval audience the romances and the fabliaux were not placed in opposition to each other, but were rather part and parcel of the same kind of writing and for the same kind of audience; Cooper (1991) declares that:

The fabliau is not a bourgeois phenomenon. The French examples are commonly found in manuscripts alongside romances, and fabliaux were written by poets notable for more courtly forms. It seems, indeed, to have been at least in part an aristocratic form that mocked middle- or low-class pretensions, or lack of them (p. 91).

While medieval romances provide representations of heterosexuality in a courtly context, the fabliaux present a sensationalised view of marriage and the pursuit of sensory pleasure intended to portray abuse comically in order to reach a wider audience.

Erotic humour based on bodily functions is a dominant feature of Chaucer's fabliaux scenes, and it is often presented metaphorically or in concealed details. Medieval comic theory recognised the link between the comic and bodily exposure and indiscipline. For instance, while medieval people viewed the body and its "private parts" as natural, the involuntary or inappropriate exposure of these parts invariably causes laughter. We should interpret the humour in *the Canterbury Tales* in the context of the medieval understanding of humour, which viewed jokes and circumstances that made people laugh as a way to alleviate tension and temporarily lose their fear of authority. We should not place the huge comic element of the medieval literature we discuss here in opposition to its function as eroticism.

### III. WITTY ADULTEROUS AFFAIR IN *THE MILLER'S TALE*

Medieval fabliau is surely meant to be comic, but it is meant to be erotic as well. Laughter itself, as Chaucer affirms, suggests a form of freedom, a freedom that unifies people. Chaucer produces comical stories of great variety that innovate, improve, and reconfigure his world. Chaucer's comic characters usually disagree with their social, financial and gender-specific circumstances. In fabliaux, Chaucer goes into expressing how moral ideals conflict with numerous emotional or social or impulses that pull away from those ideals. Through unusual mental and physical adaptability, the comic characters attempt to innovate and improve on these bewildering circumstances with a vision for future success.

It takes a special creativity to absorb and counter the various complications offered to the comic characters. The most immediately distinctive feature of fabliaux in *the Canterbury Tales*, whatever its particular format or purpose, is this unexpectedly pervasively humorous character. In the tales, Chaucer deploys humour in its descriptions of and allusions to the body and sex. A short excerpt from *the Miller's Tale* demonstrates neatly the centrality of humour to the sexual narrative in this period:

Ther was the revel and the melodye;  
And thuslyth Alison and Nicholas,  
In bysynesse of myrthe and of solas (*The Miller's Tale*, 3652- 3654),

And

And unto Nicholas she seydestille,  
"Now hust, and thou shalt laughen al thy fille" (*The Miller's Tale*, 3721- 3722).

The evocation of Alison's sexual joke vividly illustrates that this was a culture in which humour and sex were regarded as fundamentally entwined, as the sexual joke Alison is about to do can be imagined as tickling that caused them to laugh to death. This literature reflects a society and a culture in which the physical states of laughter and sexual arousal, far from being seen as incompatible, are, as illustrated by the text above, interdependent. This association between humour and eroticism is clearly noted early in the tale. As we have seen in her description, Alison, like the Wife of Bath, spends her time playing and gaming (Therto she koudeskippes and make game/ As any kyde or calf folwyng his dame). Her idleness nourishes her "bad" habits and ability of self-delight, laughing, gaming and making jokes and fun of the others. Her laughing and joking in this sense are liberating devices from the stress and fear of her husband's jealousy and control. Through the tale, Alison is seen as the creator of the comic spirit, as able to expose male weaknesses and transcend her private misery so as to take a broader view of existence. We might also read Alison and her indulgence in gaming as satirical portrait of the woman whose dependence upon men's attention makes her willing to compromise every moral value and to adopt every form of nonsense for the sake of that attention. We should notice that to Alison, sticking her hole out of the window to get a kiss from Absolon, is a pleasantly erotic novelty she is ready to take in order to cherish and cheer Nicolas, as well as herself. Laurent Joubert's medical treatise on laughter links between the comic and bodily exposure, pointing out that although the "private parts" are natural, their involuntary or inappropriate exposure invariably causes laughter, a fact which was exploited by some seventeenth century painters (Screech & Calder, 1970, p. 216). Equally importantly, we should notice that in his quest for an erotic union with Alison, Nicolas's flirtation entangles game plan which raises the dialogue to a higher erotic pitch and allow them to engage in a closer intimacy than would otherwise be allowable. Alison quickly becomes a participant in the erotic games of Nicolas, especially after Nicolas ensures her that he is a good gamer;

"Nay, therof care thee nocht," quod Nicholas.

"A clerk haddelitherlybiset his whyle,  
But if he koude a carpenter bigyle."

And thus they been accorded and ysworn

To wayte a tyme, as I have told biforn (*The Miller's Tale*, 3298- 3302).

Nicolas is not the only one who manages to spot Alison's playfulness. Absolon always recognises Alison as a creature of animal energy, potentially bound up with sensuality and availability. He misses no chance to flirt with her and eventually to catch her;

I darwelseyn, if she hadde been a mous,

And I the cat, he wolde hire hente anon (*The Miller's Tale*, 3346- 3347).

The comic role of both Absolon and Nicolas, whose comments about Alison do not only signify Alison's potentially erotic nature, but also add greatly to the freshness and comic vigour of the tale; is significant. Nicolas's search for sexual love is comic, rather than romantic, a fact which highlights the way in which love is explicitly associated with the body and exposure of the genitals. A similarly comic and pathetic quest for love is shown by Absolon, by presenting and likening that which is desirable to animal and food images. They comically reflect repressed desires for sexual excess. Alison's hole has facial characteristics; her pubic hair stands for a "beard". This representation of Alison's hole as a face is referred to several times in the tale, highlighting a need to characterise sex as humorous. It is the female posterior, and first of all, that Nicolas favours in his first meeting with Alison; the descriptions of Nicolas catching Alison and again the imagery used to evoke it is visually comic. Again, it is Alison's bottom that Absolon at the end of his sexual quest kiss, although he asks for Alison's mouth. At the same time, these facial images inject the eroticised body with a humorous dose of Chaucerian comedy.

Rather than laughing from a distance, Nicolas and Absolon engage in a joking exchange, which is set up in the tale by Alison, as an emblem of the gaming lovers and objects of laughter. The young males of the tale, Nicolas and Absolon, are both lovers in pursuit for a woman; only their amorousness drives them to act comically; their erotic passions are therefore appropriately figured through comic acts. By sticking his butt out of the window to get a kiss from Absolon, Nicolas is not constructing a realm of exclusively male humorous fantasy from which female sexual agency and laughter are excluded. This moment in the narrative cues a response of laughter in the inclusive as well as exclusive audience and enacts the laughing through Nicolas, who effectively transforms the story's comic sense into a source of open laughter. We should notice that the lines which tell about Nicolas taking part in Alison game, going to

piss and farting imply sexual intimacy. The depictions of bodily functions in *the Miller's Tale* vary in the reactions they provoke, between erotic humour and disgust; the narrative perspective mediates the effect. Bodily gases in the Middle Ages can be a sign of sexual energy and intimacy and comically desirable in erotic context. Nicolas's fart in this light is made to carry erotic, tragic and comic weight at the same time.

The fruitfulness of the fart is entirely literal. Far from being a deterrent to passion, farts are a sign of potent virility, and would-be fathers could do a lot worse than to eat plenty of chickpeas, recommends Constantine the African, for they nourish semen, generate wind [*ventositas*], and possess both warmth and moisture (Allen, 2007, p. 68).

The humour of the scene allows the erotic fart to become something manageable, something we can inspect and express; they become an area of expression that is licensed to explore aspects of life that are contradictory and distressing.

The crowd's laughter at the end of the tale can be seen as a 'social gesture' which calls for the correction of unacceptable, because unnatural, behaviour. The wronged January deserves the shame of a cuckold's horns because he was assumed to have given too little correction to Alison, leaving her too much to her own devices. The laughter is not necessarily correct or fair, but it is nonetheless generated by judgement: it is the faults of others that make us laugh.

#### IV. CHAUCER'S HUMOROUS CUCKOLD IN *THE MERCHANT'S TALE*

Like *the Miller's Tale*, *the Merchant's Tale* presents sexual desire as both comic and erotic in its effects. Both May and Alison share a comparable inadequate sexual relationship with their husbands that, even today, rarely fails to provoke laughter from their audiences. Two diametrically opposite comic figures are present in this medieval comedy: the old January and the comic scapegoat; the young Damian who is absurdly interested in young May.

While the body of Damyan in *the Merchant's Tale* can be dangerously erotic; the male body in the same tale can be a source of great comic, as the figure of January reveals. In the comic depiction of January, who leaves his young wife sexually unsatisfied, who drinks spiced claret to heighten his desire because of his uncertainty or anxiety over his male sexual functioning and who rubs his dogfish skin against May's face instead of penetrating her, the tale is explicit about male sexual inadequacy and female sexual disappointment. January's old body is not the only thing used here comically to signify his sexual inadequacy, his name which can be associated with the coldest month of the year signal a weak and cold male body in a standard "woman on top" theme. Medieval audience were familiar with the discussion of Gilbertus Anglicus, the physician to King John of England in 1207, of the causes and cures of sexual impotence. Gilbertus suggested that impotence can be caused by either physical problems such as defects in various organs, or an excess of hot or cold humours (Getz, 1998, p. 39).

January's blindness is used here to dramatize the humorous element of the tale. Just as Absolon's inability to see in the dark figures in the "hole-kissing" scene squarely manages to keep him in the territory of erotic desire, in the form of a comic of disgust that inflects both the intimate contact with Alison's desirable body and her disgusting hairy "hole", January's blindness flattens out his erotic potential, transforming him into an ironic, parodic and satirical figure within the context of marriage. The modern reader might thus hesitate to describe January's blindness as comic. So it makes more sense to contextualize January's blindness and the humour it generates within the modern understanding of the body, which holds that every bodily deformity was a result of sin. Fossier (2010) says:

And a person whom illness or fate has made blind inspires our compassion and receives our aid. In the Middle Ages, he inspired laughter. The calamity of blindness was taken as a just divine punishment, and the "miracles" that restored sight only happened to innocent children or virtuous hermits. The confusion of the blind was an excellent source of humor (p. 52).

We should keep in mind that January, we are told, is sinful; his familiarity with lewed books from which he got his "lewedwordes", and probably his frequent engagement in erotic activities with May do not represent procreative sex *per se*. January's blindness as well as old age are thus necessary to cast him as the perfect object of the intended laughter in this tales.

The sexual passions of May's body will of course retain centre stage. She is, after all, a wife. One could say generally that while the text here mainly deals with the masculine perspective of sexuality; the physical experience of the female is described as one of physical satisfaction and pleasure, although this is obviously implied. May's response assuredly bears out the message that she enjoyed sex with Damyan and that she will have more sexual contacts with him again and again. If we examine May's statements thoroughly, we should notice that it conveys, very skilfully, her own perspectives on sex.

The first part of her response is meant to defend herself; an attempt to escape her punishment and retreat into January's world.

And she answerde, "Sire, what eyleth yow?  
Have pacience and resoun in youre mynde!  
I have yow holpe on botheyoureyenblynde.  
Up peril of my soule, I shal natlyen,  
As me was taught, to heele with youreeyen,  
Was no thyng bet, to make yow to see,

Thanstrugle with a man upon a tree (*The Merchant's Tale*, 2368–2374).

May here tries to explain to January that she is using the best medical advice to cure his blindness. Struggling with a man over a tree, she states, will help her husband to see again.

"Ye sire," quod she, "ye may wene as yow lest.

But, sire, a man that waketh out of his sleep,

He may natsodeynlywel taken keep

Upon a thyng, ne seen it parfitly,

Til that he be adawedverraily.

Right so a man that longe hath blyndybe,

Ne may natsodeynly so welyse,

First whan his sighte is newe come ageyn,

As he that hath a day or two yseyn (*The Merchant's Tale*, 2396–2404).

Since the cure has no immediate effect, January, May explains, imagines Damyan's penetration of her over the tree. At this point, January's certainty and anger falter, and May is granted immunity from suspicion. In the second part of her response, May warns January that the cure might need time to be complete, so he should be careful and not let his sight deceive him again.

#### V. CHAUCER'S FUNNY RAPE IN *THE REEVE'S TALE*

The comic images function above all to vitiate the violent elements, not merely because they are horrifying, but because they interfere with the arousal of erotic responses and comic effects in the audience. The comic in fabliaux paradoxically hide the horrors that the tales are intended to deliver. Despite the rampage with which *the Reeve's Tale* closes, it is more comic than tragic. With his body wounded, his bones broken, and his limbs have no strength; the miller incorporates a wide range of comedic responses to his body. The scene suggests that there is something quite humorous about the dangerous body of the miller that "His dangerous violence is made ridiculous when he goes down to the crucial blow in the final melee, struck on his bald pate with a stick wielded by his own wife..." (Pearsall, 1985, p. 187). One of the immediate responses is that the miller clearly deserves what he gets; the cook, laughing loudly, highlights the medieval view that the erotic comic detracts from the violent and therefore mitigates its effect.

The Cook of Londoun, whil the Reve spak,

For joye him thoughte, he clawed him on the bak.

"Ha! ha!" quod he, "for Cristepassoun,

This miller hadde a sharp conclusioun

Upon his argument of herbergage (*The Cook's Prologue*, 4325- 4329).

Moreover, the reeve's wise words "Hym thar natwenewel that yvededooth" (4320) mask the pain of the bodily violence the miller receives, and so the episode is still comic. These responses drain *the Reeve's Tale* of its violent force, transforming the tale from an exercise of violence to a comic demonstration of the physical body. Fabliau that involves the body nearly always has an element of violence, and this observation is as true of the violence of the battlefield and gallows as it is of domestic sphere. Not all the violence that the body elicits, however, is as humorous as that in *the Reeve's Tale*. Nonetheless, what can be said with certainty is that the violence against bodies that fabliaux describe, sometimes to celebrate sensual pleasure, more often to laugh at, is surprisingly amusing. For instance, the audience of *the Reeve's Tale*, who have been always aware of Alan's intention to revenge from the miller by ravishing his daughter, comically misguided to expect a kind of sexual encounter between Alan and Malynein which eroticism and laughter would have no place. Suddenly, the text explodes the potential eroticism of the account of the couple having intimate sex "And shortly for to seyn, they were aton". By highlighting the erotic domination, the story loses its dark violent side. The account of how Alan, in bed at last with Malyne, joyfully make love to her till the morning is remarkable not only for showing that the dangerous potential of violence is coupled with private passions in such a way as to produce humour, but also for suggesting that the genre never had difficulties accommodating the theme of eroticism.

Chaucer's configuration of the Malyne's body is erotically amusing, a site of both sexual enjoyment and body nourishment. Repeated comic and erotic gestures verbally link the two feasts together. In both, the food is eaten, and both feature young delicious meat. The first meal is a formal state dinner, cooked and served publicly to the guests. The second meal is a darker version of the same meal, in which the male sexual desire is unmasked and originated in a violent system of vengeance. Both feasts explore the limits of the state-as-body metaphor familiar from classical and medieval fabliaux. The second nightly feast in which Malyne and her mother were consumed is imbued with measures of moral disgust and physical delight as the description of bodily reaction states. Representations of both feasts confirm the centrality of bodily functions in the fabliaux, but while these are often depicted as comic, medieval audience of such images could not have failed to see that such actions were invariably shown as consequences of moral corruption and loss of social discipline. Violence shrinks almost to its vanishing point in *the Reeve's Tale*, but it does not fully disappear. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the tale marks a point of collapse where the violent eroticism and comic eroticism become so intertwined, they cannot be extricated.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Chaucer employed a wide variety of comic techniques to incite laughter and sexual amusement at what might seem to a modern reader to be an unlikely subject for a joke. In *the Reeve's Tale*, *the Miller's Tale*, *the Merchant's Tale* and *the Shipman's Tale*, literary discourses of eroticism and corporeality are thematised through the pleasure of humour and laughter. They sometimes overlap. The erotic appeal of Alison, May, Malyn and Merchant's wife goes beyond the visual and associate them figuratively with food and animal imagery which emphasizes their carnality. These *Tales* reflect a culture in which the physical states of laughter and sexual arousal, far from being seen as incompatible, are, as illustrated by the textual analysis above, interdependent. The coexistence of the comic and eroticism recurs implicitly and explicitly several times in the quests for love in these *Tales*. The beloveds are usually presented and likened to desirable food and "delicious" animal images. The depictions of bodily functions, of males and females, also vary in the reactions they provoke, between eroticism and comic; the narrative perspective mediates the effect. The humour allows eroticism to become something manageable, something the audience can inspect and express; they become an area of expression that is licensed to explore aspects of life that are contradictory and distressing.

The actual depiction of erotic and comic sexual encounters in these tales is of both sexes provides a context ripe for more sexual stories to be created and circulated. The prevalence of sexual humour in the tales whether consumed by an elite court readership, educated "middling sort", or semi-literate "popular" audience, reflects a culture which had a materially different understanding of the body. The comic here is not just about mocking and debasing: it is also pleasurable, titillating and erotic.

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