

Gelded ladies and
unsexed peasants:
queering language
and gender in the
fabliaux



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The graphic portrayal of sex and explicit references to its most immediately related organs need hardly be pointed out to even the most careless reader of the fabliaux. Representative episodes are vivid, strange, and even raunchy: man confuses his wife's vagina for a massive anus, a peasant and his wife find themselves covered in genitals from head to toe, and an overbearing wife and mother watches as hidden testicles are removed violently from her body. And yet, the above the scenes are scarcely erotic. Sex in the fabliaux is bizarre and often alienating. Featuring sex and sex organs in strange and unsettling circumstances, graphic depictions in the fabliaux continually subvert expectations of sexual language and obscenity.

At first glance, the fabliaux read as little more than bawdy accounts of the trials and tribulations of heterosexual life and lovemaking. Much of the sex takes place between men and women, and much of the action is rooted in the domestic sphere dominated by man and wife. With this emphasis on marriage and gender roles, the fabliaux lend themselves well to feminist criticism, with much scholarship devoted to the feminist or antifeminist implications of the reactions against the domestic order that often drive the plot of the texts. Somewhat less noted are instances of queerness that appear throughout the fabliaux. Perhaps overlooked because they are often employed as a means of deception to achieve heterosexual consummation, cross dressing and gender bending disguises abound throughout the bawdy tales. Meanwhile, the poems also see genitals themselves misplaced, multiplied, erased, and disembodied, challenging essentialist notions of the relationship between gender and genitalia. Be it through cross dressing or the manipulation of genitalia, queerness in the fabliaux often accompanies

instances of deception, wordplay, and miscommunication, signaling a deconstruction of gender via a deconstruction of language. By setting queerness parallel to a gap between language and reality, queerness in the fabliaux uses the fallibility of language to expose the potential falseness of gender.

Queer or otherwise, sex in the fabliaux is perhaps most famously characterized by explicit language and coarse obscenity. And yet, four letter words and all, the fabliaux are hardly pornographic. As Sarah Mehlado White notes in her exploration of sexual language in the fabliaux, "Despite their physical preoccupations, fabliaux are not necessarily or primarily erotic. They do not appeal to ordinary desires for sexual stimulation and release" (192). While, three decades later, we may take issue intellectually with White's problematic reference to an ill-defined sexual cannon of "ordinary desires," her assessment of the fabliaux as "less an exploration of sexuality per se than an arrangement of genital terms into potent metaphor" still seems to strike at a promising explanation of the confusing tone obscenity takes in fabliau verse. Throughout the rhyming couplets, obscene yet not quite erotic, sex and sex organs occur and appear in bizarre and unusual circumstances that remain bizarre and unusual even at the risk of kink-shaming. Sex in the fabliaux illustrates a wide range of strange and hardly arousing imagery, including an extended sexual metaphor of a squirrel eating nuts and vomiting upon completion, and a peasant covered in head to toe penises at the behest of his wife. Even when taking the broad spectrum of possibilities for sexual attraction, desire, and arousal into account, the downright wacky sexual exploits of the fabliaux hardly seem intended to

cater to the pornographic needs of even the most esoteric fetishes and kink communities. This bizarre quality of sex in the fabliaux results in sex without arousal, obscenity without pornography. It is not simply “ joyous laughter,” as one critic proposes, but rather the subversion of expectations that neutralizes the “ potential pornographic tendencies” of the fabliaux (qtd. in White 190). Queerness in the fabliaux is intended to arouse no more than the poems’ depictions of heterosexual encounters, but rather simply widens the gap between expectations and reality. Images of gender bending and disembodied genitals subvert expectations of gender and sexuality, while, in turn, the presence of carnal obscenity in the absence of eroticism subverts expectations of sexual language.

In a seminal work of fabliaux scholarship, R. Howard Bloch’s *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, Bloch makes much of the treatment of language in the fabliaux, diagnosing much of the humor in the text as a response to the inherent inadequacies of language. In her own analysis of the work, Janet L. Solberg summarizes Bloch’s thesis, ascribing to him the suggestion that the fabliaux “ thematize our unsuccessful attempts to view language as the unproblematic representation of an unproblematic reality” (133). The world of the fabliaux is anything if unproblematic, and tricks and turns of language through deception, miscommunication, and irony show character and reader continuously “ thwarted in his or her expectations that the world, and especially language, will behave in a logical and sensible manner” (qtd. in Solberg 133).

Meanwhile, with queerness and cross dressing abundant, the fabliaux make it clear that sexuality, like the language used to express it, will also refuse to

<https://assignbuster.com/gelded-ladies-and-unsexed-peasants-queering-language-and-gender-in-the-fabliaux/>

“ behave in a logical and sensible manner.” Continuing her discussion of language and deception in the fabliaux, Solberg again points to Bloch, highlighting a connection he draws between literary language and sartorial metaphor. According to Bloch:

The robe of fiction is to some degree always inadequate to the body. It carries the odor of scandal. This scandal is thematized in a variety of ways—as theft,...as perversion,...as transvestism, adultery, trickery, prostitution... Moral dereliction expressed at the thematic level is, moreover, only the most visible sign of the underlying scandal of the fabliaux, which is that of poetry itself. (qtd. in Solberg 133).

While Bloch’s references to queerness are vague and plagued by problematic and outdated diction, his analysis of the representation of language through sartorial imagery and metaphor is useful for analyzing queerness as a function of language in the fabliaux. Cross dressing is not an uncommon feature of the fabliaux, and in both of the following tales, sartorial queering gives license to verbal deception.

I. “ His Wife, the One Who Wears the Pants”: Queerness as Cross Dressing in the Fabliaux

In “ Long Butthole Berengier,” queerness via cross dressing is accompanied, though surprisingly not exposed, by the depiction of actual anatomical and genital difference. In this tale of female-to-male cross dressing, a frustrated wife of noble lineage is given in marriage to a knight of peasant origin in order to settle a debt owed by her father. Aware that his bride holds some degree of contempt for his lazy, decidedly unknighthly tendencies, the new <https://assignbuster.com/gelded-ladies-and-unsexed-peasants-queering-language-and-gender-in-the-fabliaux/>

husband decides to prove his worth by donning armor, riding off into the forest, and, once alone, assaulting his own armor until it bears convincing wounds of noble, knightly contest. Eventually noticing that, though the armor is sufficiently marred, her husband and his horse consistently return unscathed, the wife grows increasingly skeptical of the ruse. Donning her own suit of armor, the wife disguises herself as knight and follows her husband into the woods where she challenges him to a duel. Failing to recognize his wife, the husband is terrified of the knight and instead accepts his counter offer: to avoid a fight to the death, the husband can instead kiss the knight's ass "right on the hole" (19: 226). Bending over and disrobing to receive her due recompense, the wife presents an anatomical display very much at odds with her husband's expectations. However, the husband fails to recognize female genitalia, instead mistaking his wife's vagina for a continuation of the presumably male anus, "the biggest hole I've seen!" (19: 246). Taking yet another opportunity to mock her husband's ignorance, the victorious "knight" tells her husband that her name is Long Butthole Berengier, rendering the husband's anatomical confusion literal and nominal. Having successfully deceived her husband, the woman uses her knowledge of his embarrassment to her advantage, openly cuckolding her husband under the threat of invoking Long Butthole Berengier.

In this fabliau, sartorial queerness is corroborated by anatomical queerness, and while both are eventually cemented by verbal confirmation, none of the three manifestations of the wife's gender bending deception actually reflect reality. As White notes, "the whole tale turns on its explicit genital language and imagery" (188). The fabliau's first queer image comes with the wife's

successful foray into cross dressing. Disguised as a knight, the woman easily fools her husband and passes for the opposite gender. The fabliau takes its challenge to gender essentialism a step further with the husband's inability to recognize female genitalia. So convinced by the sartorial presentation of maleness, the husband cannot recognize blatant anatomical difference even when he is staring it in the face, or rather, the vagina. As Lesley Johnson notes, it is the husband's failure to recognize female genitalia, specifically his wife's, that cements her successful inversion of gender: "The role inversions, tricks, and disguises of Berengier are fused by this equivocal kiss, which is literally at the heart of the narrative and is a fitting symbol too, of the gross reversal in classifications which has taken place" (Johnson 304). Taking a didactic approach to this tale, it can be read as a warning against gender essentialism, as the man ultimately meets his demise at the hands of his own unwavering dependence on traditional presentations of gender. In its illustration of sartorial deception leading to anatomical deception, the fabliau issues a challenge both to sartorial gender norms as well as genital essentialism. As the wife's successful masquerade as Long Butthole Berengier makes clear, not all men have penises.

Finally, in taking the name reflective of her husband's misunderstanding, the wife claims her victory with a flourish, sealing her deception—and her husband's confusion—in verbal reality. With this name, Long Butthole Berengier becomes a reality that outlasts the wife's cross dressing. Conjuring what the husband perceives as a real threat simply by uttering the name, the wife wields Long Butthole Berengier against her husband like a weapon. Although neither the eponymous long butthole nor the knight to whom it

belongs actually exist, their verbal existence is sufficient. First exposing the fallibility of gender, this fabliau goes on to expose the fallibility of the language that seeks to represent it.

Another fabliau, “ The Healer,” reverses the cross dressing motif. However, although this text features a male disguised as a female, it is again the husband who is duped and the wife who emerges victorious. Once again, this fabliau presents a tale of gender bending as a means of deception ultimately ending in adultery. And, once again, the wife’s deception is cemented through her manipulation of language. As Johnson notes, “ The wife flaunts her adultery, but in context this flaunting proves to be as important as the the adultery itself” (301).

The tale begins with a husband’s unsurprisingly ill-fated assertion that “ no woman could outsmart him” (44: 3). In true fabliau form, his challenge soon arrives—completely unbeknownst to him—in the form of a lady doctor summoned by his wife. To the husband’s complete ignorance, this female doctor is actually a man in disguise. The wife and “ doctor” retire to the wife’s bedroom, where she commits adultery with the stranger while her husband waits downstairs, none the wiser. When they emerge, the stranger departs, leaving the wife, “ breathless and sweating,” to give her husband a detailed account the doctor’s treatment (44: 64). “ For us,” Johnson summarizes, “ the wife’s description of the bloodletting is a glorious description of love-making. The lurid account of heavy blows, sweet ointment, and a climactic cure has only one significance for her husband whom we leave appreciating the quality of her treatment” (301). Through double entendre and metaphor, the wife manages to give a graphic account

<https://assignbuster.com/gelded-ladies-and-unsexed-peasants-queering-language-and-gender-in-the-fabliaux/>

of the affair while still leaving her husband entirely in the dark regarding the adultery that has just been committed against him.

Like Johnson, Solberg also points out that the wife's telling of the adultery actually holds as much if not more significance than the act itself. Contrasting the twenty-nine lines devoted to the wife's thinly veiled confession with a mere seven the narrator takes to describe the sexual encounter, Solberg claims that, for the wife, "the real pleasure lies not in the sexual act itself, but in the telling of it" (120). Making specific note of the wife's earnest interjection, "Nor would I lie to you one bit," Solberg emphasizes that "the wife's true pleasure comes in speaking openly to her husband. Given that he completely misses the point of her story, she ultimately fools him not by lying, but by telling the truth" (44: 93, Solberg 121). As in "Long Butthole Berengier," the fabliau rests on the husband's misunderstanding: first his failure to identify cross dressing, and then his failure to decipher his wife's rhetorical ruse. Once again, this fabliau illustrates queerness as a means of deception through cross dressing, which in turn provides opportunity for verbal deception, exposing the fallibility of language—even, as the wife illustrates, quite literal and blatant language. "In fact," Solberg points out, "she has not lied, she has deceived him with rhetorical cleverness, with a paradoxical use of 'truth' dressed in metaphor" (122). With this last idea, Solberg— apparently borrowing Boch's sartorial metaphor of language—makes an interesting suggestion. In the fabliaux, through veiling, metaphor, and deception, language itself cross dresses, too.

II. "The Unsexed Pair:" Disembodied Genitals and the Erasure of Gender

Cross dressing is not the only manifestation of queerness in the fabliaux. The text's famous use of obscenity includes many blatant references to and depictions of genitals. Often, these genitals are disguised, disembodied, erased, or otherwise out of place. Broadly, this depiction of misplaced genitals challenges a primary tenet of gender essentialism which holds that genitalia defines gender and vice versa. Like the interplay between cross dressing and language in the fabliaux, queerness as illustrated in disembodied genitalia also reflects perversions and failures of language, simultaneously deconstructing gender and verbal meaning.

In "Saint Martin's Four Wishes," genitals are both multiplied and subtracted in a series of bizarre images, until the complete—however brief—elimination of genitals in their entirety signifies the erasure of gender. In this fabliau, a peasant and devoted servant of Saint Martin receives four wishes from his idol. Although Saint Martin has warned the peasant to exercise caution, his wife successfully persuades him to let her have the first wish. Expressing dissatisfaction with her husband's "one prick," she wishes him covered head to toe in phallic appendages (62: 128). Her wish granted, penises immediately cover the peasant's body, producing a creature which White cleverly draws as a "phallic porcupine" (194). In retaliation, the peasant wishes a parallel fate on his wife, in answer to which her body is quickly covered in vulvas. The husband uses the third wish to undo the first two, and in the process inadvertently unsexes himself and his wife: The peasant wishes thereupon that all their cunts and pricks were gone, but she was anything but cheered to find her cunt had disappeared, and he, too, had an awful shock to find himself without a cock. (62: 171-176). The peasant must

then use his fourth wish to restore genital normalcy, having effectively wasted all of his wishes.

This fabliau uses a recognizable motif common in tales of wish-making in which the wisher must cautiously tread the imperfect boundary between words and meaning. White notes that in this text, as in other supernatural fabliaux, wish and word are one, “simultaneously realized” (194). However, as the momentary catastrophe of the third wish illustrates, language is fallible, and word is not always a trustworthy signifier. Saint Martin attempts to warn the peasant of this verbal treachery, advising him “above all,” as White emphasizes, “to be careful what he says” (193).

It is no mere coincidence, meanwhile, that semantic confusion strikes in the third wish, the same one that renders the peasant and his wife sexless. This obvious deconstruction of gender quite literally erases it, demolishing the essentialist conception of biological gender by eliminating its very biological signifiers. Just as words cannot be trusted to represent their intended meaning in the peasant’s wish, neither can genitalia essentially represent gender. Like language, gender in the fabliau is fluid, and can be misconstrued, misrepresented, and even erased.

Extraneous genitals make an appearance in “The Gelded Lady” as well. In this fabliau, however, the genitals—in this case, testicles—do not actually belong to the person to whom they are ascribed. Rather, a woman is deceived into believing a pair of bull testicles have been extracted from her body. This fabliau again features a subservient husband dominated by an overbearing wife. Having learned that his wife, out of sheer perverseness,

will override anything he says with a demand for the opposite, the knight easily manipulates his wife's perversity to his advantage by simply expressing the opposite of his true desires. By this method, the knight manages to marry his daughter to a count. While the girl's mother encourages her daughter to follow in her footsteps and disobey her new husband, the daughter is quickly subdued when her attempts to carry out her mother's wishes are met with a severe beating from her husband. Determined to solve this problem at its root, the count pays a visit to his bride's parents, where he tells his mother-in-law that she gets her domineering attitude from hidden testicles on her body. Making two incisions on her thighs, the count pretends to extract two bull testicles from the cuts. Convinced by the ruse, the woman is subdued, behaving as an obedient wife from then on.

This fabliau exposes the fallibility of gender at the wife's expense. Fooled by essentialism linking gender and gendered conceptions of personality and behavior to genitalia, the wife revises her behavior, performing femininity according to accepted gender norms once her "testicles" are "removed." Of course, this is all a ruse, and the story derives its comedic value from the wife's unwitting performance of gender. Ultimately, the fabliau exposes gendered conceptions of personality and behavior as nothing more than a placebo effect.

The first part of this fabliau illustrates a by now familiar manipulation of language. The knight uses language, always plagued by the inevitable gap between signifier and signified, to get what he wants by literally conveying the opposite. In this fabliau, language does not merely fall short of adequate

<https://assignbuster.com/gelded-ladies-and-unsexed-peasants-queering-language-and-gender-in-the-fabliaux/>

representation, but is actually used to represent the opposite of what it seems to signify. For the knight in this fabliau, the mutability of language that so often plagues characters of other fabliaux is actually a gift that he uses to his advantage and his wife's unwitting deception. By the end of the fabliau, this deception has transcended the verbal and manifested physically, with the wife accepting her fictitious testicles as a signifier of gender, and equating their removal with a necessary acceptance of a new, more "feminine" role.

Although the famous graphic depictions of sex and sexuality in the fabliaux are ostensibly heterosexual, often featuring a husband and wife at their center, the texts are rife with queer imagery. Whether through cross dressing or the presence, absence, or misplacement of genitalia, the fabliaux counter traditional and essentialist notions of sex and gender through their exploration of queerness. Running parallel to these confusions, obfuscations, and disguises of gender and sexuality are misunderstandings, miscommunications, and deceptions of language. Language and gender often work in conjunction in the fabliaux, with each exposing the ultimate fallibility of the other. Just as neither clothes nor genitals can reliably signal gender, neither can words reliably represent reality. Characters in the fabliaux alternately deceive and find themselves deceived by the subversion of their expectations of both gender and language. Characters find—or sometimes don't notice—that words don't fit their meanings, just as gender does not always match its performance. When language fails, so does its representation of gender. The deconstruction of gender in the fabliaux

ultimately exposes the fallibility and inadequacy of verbal expression. In the fabliaux, queerness outs language.

Works Cited

“ The Gelded Lady.” The Fabliaux. Translated by Nathaniel E. Dubin, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013, pp. 407-439.

“ The Healer.” The Fabliaux. Translated by Nathaniel E., Dubin, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013, pp. 525-531.

“ Long Butthole Berengier.” The Fabliaux. Translated by Nathaniel E. Dubin, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013, pp. 213-229.

“ Saint Martin’s Four Wishes.” The Fabliaux. Translated by Nathaniel E., Dubin, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013, pp. 885-895.

Lesley Johnson. “ Women on Top: Antifeminism in the Fabliaux?” The Modern Language Review, vol. 78, no. 2, 1983, pp. 298–307. JSTOR.

Solberg, Janet L. “ ‘ Who Was That Masked Man?’: Disguise and Deception in Medieval and Renaissance Comic Literature.” The Stranger in Medieval Society, edited by F. R. P. Akehurst and Stephanie Cain Van D’Elden, NED – New edition ed., vol. 12, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 117–138. JSTOR.

White, Sarah Melhado. “ Sexual Language and Human Conflict in Old French Fabliaux.” Comparative Studies in Society and History, vol. 24, no. 2, 1982, pp. 185– 210. JSTOR.