

The canterbury tales essay



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Medieval literature includes a great variety of comic tales, in both prose and verse, and in a variety of more or less distinct genres. For students of Chaucer, the most important comic genre is the fabliau (fabliau is the singular, fabliaux the plural). Chaucer's Miller's tale, Reeve's Tale, Shipman's Tale, Summoner's tale, and the fragmentary Cook's Tale are all fabliaux, and other tales — such as the Merchant's Tale — show traces of the genre: " A fabliau is a brief comic tale in verse, usually scurrilous and often scatological or obscene.

The style is simple, vigorous, and straightforward; the time is the present, and the settings real, familiar places; the characters are ordinary sorts — tradesmen, peasants, priests, students, restless wives; the plots are realistically motivated tricks and ruses. The fabliaux thus present a lively image of everyday life among the middle and lower classes. Yet that representation only seems real; life did not run that high in actual fourteenth-century towns and villages — it never does — and the plots, convincing though they seem, frequently involve incredible degrees of gullibility in the victims and of ingenuity and sexual appetite in the trickster-heroes and -heroines. (The Riverside Chaucer, p. 7.) The fabliaux was, until Chaucer's time, a genre of French literature, in which it flourished in the thirteenth century.

One of the minor problems about Chaucer's fabliaux is why he turned to a genre that had, in effect, been dead for a hundred years. Comic tales were very popular in Chaucer's time, but the more sophisticated were almost always in prose (as in the case of Boccaccio's Decameron). Chaucer had no models in English, and despite the vivid contemporary tone of Chaucer's

fabliaux, they are in some ways his most Gallic works. Perhaps Chaucer was attracted to this genre by its most striking characteristic, its irreverence. This is a common feature of all forms of comedy, but it is a major and almost invariable element in the fabliaux: "The cuckoldings, beatings, and elaborate practical jokes that are the main concern of the fabliaux are distributed in accord with a code of "fabliau justice," which does not always coincide with conventional morality: greed, hypocrisy, and pride are invariably punished, but so too are old age, mere slow-wittedness, and, most frequently, the presumption of a husband, especially an old one, who attempts to guard his wife's chastity.

The heroes and heroines, invariably witty and usually young, are those whom society ordinarily scorns — dispossessed intellectuals (lecherous priests, wayward monks, penniless students), clever peasants, and enthusiastically unchaste wives. Their victims are usually those whom society respects — prosperous merchants, hard-working tradesmen, women foolish enough to try to remain chaste. The fabliau, in short, is delightfully subversive — a light-hearted thumbing of the nose at the dictates of religion, the solid virtues of the citizenry, and the idealistic pretensions of the aristocracy and its courtly literature, which the fabliaux frequently parody, though just as frequently they parody lower-class attempts to adopt courtly behavior." (The Riverside Chaucer, p.

8.) Such parody shows the essentially aristocratic outlook of the writers of the fabliaux; they are merciless upon social climbers (see Guerin's Berenger of the Long Arse). This is not surprising, since the authors of the fabliaux were sometimes courtly writers, such as Jean Bodel, author of number of

romances as well as of the fabliau Gombert and the Two Clerks, and Marie de France, whose fables contain two fabliaux illustrating the trickery of women. One assumes that the same audience that enjoyed Marie's elegant lays of courtly love also enjoyed her fabliaux. Perhaps this is because the early literature of courtly love shared much of the irreverence and scorn for conventional morality that characterizes the fabliaux.

For a defense of such morality, one must turn to such late (fifteenth-century) non-courtly, even anti-courtly works such as *The Wright's Chaste Wife*, which looks at the world of the fabliau from the standpoint of the working classes.