CHAUCER’S SCATOLOGICAL ART IN THREE FABLIAUX

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Chaucer's fabliaux, particularly *The Miller's Tale, The Merchant's Tale*, and *The Summoner's Tale*, combine the crude humor associated with the genre with features of “higher” genres, most notably the courtly romance tradition (for the first two tales), and the homiletic and scholarly debate traditions (for the last tale). The marriage of the scatology present in fabliaux with the characteristics of literary art is Chaucer's unique achievement and differentiates his tales from their analogues. This marriage occurs when characters of one class arrogate the types of discourse usually associated with another class. As a result of this discourse switching, the balancing of art and scatology in these three tales blurs the distinction between crudity and sophistication and makes the tales scatological art.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. CHAUCER’S COURTLY PEASANTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. CHAUCER’S CHURLISH NOBLES</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. FLATULENCE AND SERMONIZING: CHAUCER’S BLENDING OF GRIT AND GRACE</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

While Chaucer worked with a well-established genre in forming The Miller’s Tale, The Merchant’s Tale, and The Summoner’s Tale, his fabliaux differ from the analogues in that they display a distinctive concern with artfulness.\(^1\) The authors of the analogues display a more studied concern with what would usually separate works of literary art from amusing tales perhaps told at a medieval tavern. Although the fabliau as a literary form originated among the aristocracy, the “peasant humor” usually present in them seems to have been the only reason for their existence: to entertain, be enjoyed, and scandalize, perhaps. Chaucer’s genius appears in the way he mingled the prerequisite crude humor of the fabliau with other genres, mainly by mixing the types of language of romances and sermons with the language characteristic of the fabliau.

Some previous scholarship on Chaucer’s fabliaux regards this mixture of high and low genres as one that almost makes these tales non-literary. This trend can be observed just from perusing, for instance, the title of Peter Beidler’s article on The Miller’s Tale: “Art and Scatology in the Miller’s Tale.” The separation inherent in the minds of some

\(^1\) For the purposes of this thesis, I will define fabliau according to Charles Muscatine’s definition: a “short, humorous verse tale” often involving sex and trickery (58).
scholars who wrote on the subject stands evident here: Beidler and Haldeen Braddy regard the two categories of art and scatology as nearly, if not totally, mutually exclusive—no art with crudity such as that present in this tale can exist, or if it can, it lowers the respectability and quality of the art (90-91; 128). I contend that conceiving of literature in such a narrow fashion—as either art or scatology—excessively limits an appreciation of Chaucer’s fabliaux. Scholars such as Beidler also ignore the aesthetic unity of Chaucer’s works: the crudities found in Chaucer’s fabliaux heighten awareness of the other genres present, and his use of these “higher” genres lampoons the works upon which he draws while at the same time honoring them.

On the other hand, some scholars have attempted to prove that Chaucer’s fabliaux are didactic, and for that reason artful. However, scholars would struggle to find moral relevance in the three tales. Rather than proving the tales artful because of their didacticism, I wish to prove that the commingling of characteristics of high literary works with fabliau humor makes Chaucer’s fabliaux artful. Chaucer invigorated the literary conventions of his day by combining often-used genres such as the courtly romance, the fabliau, and the sermon,\(^2\) by including expected elements of one genre with the elements of other genres, and by mixing the type of language expected in one genre with the language expected in another. This mix of styles and genres results in humorous events: in *The Merchant’s Tale*, the dirty old man January sings his bored, lascivious young wife an aubade, an element of the courtly romance, and in *The Miller’s Tale*, the silly young

\(^2\) Although Chaucer never actually wrote a full-fledged sermon, Friar John in *The Summoner’s Tale* preaches part of one. Also, the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath in their prologues speak in ways reminiscent of sermons.
fop Absolon uses lines from the Song of Songs for a woman already in bed with another man. The language of fin’ amor issuing from the mouths of middle- and lower-class people highlights Chaucer’s mixture of genres, as does the mock university debate among the upper class in The Summoner’s Tale. Thus, the well-established genres such as the sermon and “courtly” romance enrich the equally well-established fabliau genre, and this new combination produced by Chaucer in fact enhances the entertaining features cultivated in the fabliaux. When, for instance, the characters who speak the language of the courtly romance or of the sermon are rewarded with farting, as are the Friar in The Summoner’s Tale and Absolon in The Miller’s Tale, the “higher” genres enrich the native humor of the fabliaux, in part because of the appropriateness of these two characters’ long-windedness being rewarded with another sort of windiness.
CHAPTER II

CHAUCER’S COURTLY PEASANTS

One of Chaucer’s most harshly censured and widely admired tales, The Miller’s Tale, blends elements of aristocratic love with features of crude, sublunary love. This odd mixture calls attention to what the tale attempts to accomplish. It employs courtly love language in order to ridicule the characters in it who speak and act in identifiably courtly ways.\(^1\) The ridiculing occurs by way of Chaucer’s mixing of the genres of the fabliau and the courtly romance, by Chaucer’s giving to middle class characters the language of courtly love when what they want is immediate gratification of their sexual desires.\(^2\)

The Miller’s Tale succeeds The Knight’s Tale, and, where the first tale is concerned with courtly, ideal loving associated with the romance tradition, the tale told by the Miller departs from a “polite,” aristocratic narrative of love. Chaucer’s Miller’s

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\(^1\) For this point, I am indebted to E. T. Donaldson’s seminal work on The Miller’s Tale, as well as to the studies of Peter Beidler, Alfred David, Paul Olson, James Wimsatt, and Edmund Reiss.

\(^2\) Since the courtly love genre will prove so important to my contentions here, I shall define what I mean by “courtly” love. With this formula, I mean to suggest the high style; fanciful modes of address; traditional romance features such as the *locus amoenus* and *hortus conclusus* (the “pleasing place” and “enclosed garden,” respectively); the “compleynt”; and the aubade, among other features, that appear in Chaucer’s earlier, French-influenced works (e.g., *The Book of the Duchess*, his partial translation of *The Romaunt of the Rose*, etc.). Thus, along with most critics, I prefer E. T. Donaldson’s definition of courtly love (i.e., *fin’amor*, or fine loving) to C. S. Lewis’s four features of courtly love (humility, courtesy, adultery, and the religion of love).
narrative lampoons the Knight’s courtly tale and introduces the Miller’s characteristic irreverence for the traditional romance and romantic love. Thus, Chaucer’s inclusion of scatological elements like Absolon’s butt osculation, farting, and Nicholas’s branding works toward the larger purpose of parodying *The Knight’s Tale* and its version of romance. Such raw elements do not mark this tale as inferior artwork, nor are they present in the tale merely to entertain and to fill space. The coarse features of *The Miller’s Tale* do not detract from the tale’s artfulness, but purposefully add to the literary features Chaucer’s tale has.

I shall take up the issue of the aesthetic qualities of *The Miller’s Tale* first by comparing it to the existent analogues. The tale’s analogues possess most of the basic plot features that *The Miller’s Tale* does but lack Chaucer’s elegant plot, dialogue, and characterization. In a Flemish analogue to the tale, a prostitute replaces the promiscuous Alison and attempts to conduct three business transactions with three different men in one day. The antics following her attempt to accommodate all three resemble Robyn’s tale in that one of the lovers (a priest) predicts the second flood, an unsuccessful third lover kisses someone’s rump (here, the successful lover’s), and the rump-kisser returns to

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3 This view of *The Miller’s Tale* as a parody of courtly values is held by most critics, who note Nicholas and Absolon’s use of courtly language. Most useful to my study were the studies of Gardiner Stillwell, Kevin Kiernan, Louis Haselmeyer, and Alfred David.

4 Peter Beidler, Edmund Reiss, and E. T. Donaldson (in “Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller’s Tale) judge the tale as artful but not highly artful because of these various features of “coarseness.”

5 Stith Thompson’s “The Miller’s Tale” in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* is the source for my points on *The Miller’s Tale*’s analogues.
brand the rump-barer with a hot iron. After being branded, the priest cries for water, and the other lover—who was visiting the prostitute before the priest and who had to be stowed away quickly in a conveniently-hanging trough in the rafters when the priest came—cuts the trough loose, believing the priest’s foretold flood has come, and hurts himself in the fall. This analogue offers the three motifs—the misdirected kiss, the second flood, and the branding—that Chaucer’s tale contains. The other analogues vary in the combination of motifs they have, but most analogues do not combine all three (Thompson 107, 112, 118). Also, none of the analogues places the words of a courtly romance lover in the mouths of their characters. Thus, Chaucer’s genre mixing in *The Miller’s Tale* is unique and independent of the analogues.

A comparison of the serious, courtly *The Knight’s Tale* to *The Miller’s Tale* and their sets of lovers will reveal Chaucer’s parody of romance in the tale set in Oxford and will reveal the artfulness of that parody. In *The Knight’s Tale*, Emelye, Palamon, and Arcite represent the more conventional group of lovers, while Alison, Nicholas, and Absolon in *The Miller’s Tale* represent the group upon which Chaucer exercises his experimental, disrespectful, playful treatment of the romance tradition. The Knight’s lovers speak the accepted phrases, obey the format for pursuing love in a court, and undertake the usual tasks, risks, suffering, and hardships required of lovers in the tradition associated with *fin’amor*. Both of the men are masculine, chivalric men and the woman is a feminine woman (as befits a medieval romance), versus the Miller’s trio, in which one of the men is decidedly girlish and the woman is aggressive and has some of the qualities customarily assigned to men. Alison actively pursues a romantic
entanglement with Nicholas, asserts her preference for “hende” Nicholas over Absolon to the moonstruck young man himself, and impulsively plays a prank (which men would usually do) when she sticks her posterior out her bedroom window for Absolon to kiss.\(^6\) Thus, the Miller’s love triangle reverses some of the characteristics of the other lovers’ triangle, making Alison manly and overbearing, instead of simply a representation of feminine beauty who allows herself to be wooed (like Emelye), making Nicholas concerned only with sex, instead of concerned somewhat with wooing, and making Absolon concerned only with the wooing, instead of healthily concerned with both the wooing and its eventual result. Thus, Chaucer cleverly inverts *The Knight’s Tale*’s tendency toward good manners, courtly loving, and more customary social roles, opting for artful obscenity.

In keeping with Chaucer’s use of artful obscenity, *The Miller’s Tale* contains other rhetorical features of high romances such as the blazon, but more specifically, the *effictio*. This traditional way of describing beautiful heroines was used by many writers over several centuries and was a sort of shorthand that allowed writers “to produce a surface impression of elaborate and decorative brilliance” (Haselmeyer 310). This rhetorical flourish was part of most medieval writers’ repertoire, and according to Geoffrey of Vinsauf (whom Chaucer cites as a master rhetorician in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*), must move in its description of the heroine from the top of the head, to the mid-section (politely skipping over the genitals), to the feet, dwelling on no one body part an

\(^6\) In the ten notable analogues of the tale, the woman with multiple lovers never extends her backside out the window to be kissed; her male lovers do (Thompson 110, 116, 119, 122).
inordinate amount of time (Kiernan 1-2). The effictio was usually “a rigid catalogue of physical features” (Haselmeyer 310), and Chaucer was not the first writer who circumvented the established guidelines for this rhetorical strategy to focus readers’ attention on a certain feature of the woman described (Kiernan 2). However, Chaucer was one of the few medieval writers to employ the effictio in fabliaux, in a mock courtly context (Muscatine 256-57). Alison’s description begins with her midsection, enwrapped with “[a] ceynt [. . .] barred al of silk” (3235), proceeds up to her head, clothed with a “white voluper” (3241), and then journeys back down to her midsection, where “a purs of lether” hangs (3250). This effictio begins and ends with Alison’s waist area, which suggests that her chief assets are her loins, a very appropriate suggestion for this tale (Kiernan 15-16). Also notably absent is the notatio, the other half of the blazon. The notatio usually delineates the lady’s inner virtues, which supposedly correspond to her outward beauty described by the effictio. Since the Miller skips this portion of the rhetorical feature, he implies that Alison has few commendable moral features; instead, her value is in her physical attributes, which is another appropriate suggestion for this tale. Therefore, Chaucer uses the effictio to lampoon the romance genre in this tale. These additions to the fabliau genre from the romance genre identify the pains Chaucer undertook to enrich his sources (Stillwell 699).

Chaucer employs words that commonly occur in popular medieval romances, wittily and artfully using fabliau humor to treat the courtly love tradition in reductio ad absurdum fashion. In his article “The Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller’s Tale,”

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7 The edition of Chaucer’s works I use throughout this thesis is Larry Benson’s Riverside Chaucer.
Donaldson notes that Chaucer uses words in the tale from the repertoire of the time’s romances, words he uses sparingly in the rest of his works; Donaldson muses that these words “are therefore to be suspected of carrying a rather special sort of weight” (“Idiom” 28). The epithet that Chaucer attaches to Nicholas (“hende”) comes from popular Middle English poetry, where authors often use the word to describe “almost every hero and heroine,” and where it means “under the general sense ‘nice’” (34). Whereas the word “is used eleven times with Nicholas, [it] appears only twice elsewhere,” and in those two places the word is not applied to the more savory characters (34). By applying such a word to Nicholas, a carnal, immoral young man, Chaucer demeans the context in which it was originally used: to describe respectable romance protagonists. As Donaldson notes, when Chaucer uses the word, he means “hende” in the sense of nearness at hand (proximity to Alison, the reason for which he succeeds in his amours and Absolon does not) (35-36), as Chaucer so blithely states: “Alwey the nye slye / Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth” (3391-92). His niceness does not set Nicholas apart from his rival for Alison’s love; Chaucer implies that Nicholas is not much different from Absolon (save in intellect) and that Alison does not select her men so very carefully; in fact, it suggests that she is rather unselective. Through his placement of this rather clichéd word “hende” in a context differing from its conventional uses, Chaucer tacitly and humorously makes these suggestions, while poking fun at the works that seriously use the word. In Middle English and Old French romances, the goal of the young heroes or heroines “and end of courtly love was sexual consummation, however idealized it may have been made to appear” (Donaldson, “Idiom” 33). The Miller’s Tale makes no bones about proceeding to
This feature of the medieval romances, skipping most of the formalities and niceties, the wooing and gentlemanly speeches, cutting to the “swyving.” Chaucer constructs this fabliau and others to “[show his] reduction of the worn-out ideal, expressed by the worn-out phrase [or sentences], to its lowest common denominator of sexuality” (40). However, *The Miller’s Tale* does not contain the “lowest common denominator of sexuality” but rather, I would contend, shows just how close the popular romances were to this denominator of sexuality in the first place; Chaucer’s tale thus reveals that traditional, popular romances unnecessarily conceal the sex that the suitors will later attain, concealing the deed of “kynde” with high rhetoric just as beautiful sepulchers conceal dead men’s bones.

Like his epithet “hende,” Nicholas as a character mocks the courtly romance genre, since he approaches Alison in the guise of a courtly lover at first. Once John the carpenter leaves town on business, Nicholas initiates a relationship with Alison with these words and actions:

> And prively he caughte hire by the queynte,
> And seyde, “Ywis, but if ich have my wille,
> For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille.”
> And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones,
> And seyde, “Lemman, love me al atones,
> Or I wol dyen, also God me save!” (3276-81)

Nicholas uses the terminology and florid rhetoric of courtly lovers here and claims that he will “spille” (die) without Alison’s love and that he has loved Alison in a “deerne”
(secret) way. However, Nicholas grabs Alison’s pudendum right before speaking these words, belying his words about romantic, courtly love, making plain his desire above all else for sex with Alison. The vocabulary here of courtly love (excepting Nicholas’s lewd actions) could be taken directly from the preceding *Knight’s Tale*, since “Nicholas is one with Palamon and Arcite in threatening to die for love” (Stillwell 694). However, Nicholas is unlike the Knight’s two characters in that he “speed[s] to his goal with most un-courtly directness and speed” (695-96). Chaucer skips the part in the romance when the lover suffers for his beloved and attempts to prove his loyalty in order to show his worthiness to be his beloved’s paramour. After Nicholas makes his love for Alison known to her, Alison rebuffs him only once, and soon she capitulates and responds favorably to his advances: “Nicholas gan mercy for to crye, / And spak so faire, and profred him so faste, / [. . .] she hir love hym granted” (3288-90). Also, Chaucer neglects to give many particulars about this interchange, which underscores the rapidity with which this episode happens. Nicholas apparently knew before he risked caressing Alison that she would not need much persuasion to be his lover.\(^8\) Thus, Chaucer’s placing high-flown love language in Nicholas’s mouth when Nicholas, a clever clerk and not a nobleman, does not need to speak so loquaciously or eloquently to win his lady adds to the other parodic elements present in Chaucer’s tale.

Chaucer’s other ironic uses of the courtly love tradition’s conventions include his description of Abislon in a way usually reserved for romance heroines. In the Miller’s

\(^8\) Charles Muscatine states that, where Abislon pays “misguided attention to the ideal” romance method of loving, believing that this method is best for attracting Alison’s interest, Nicholas perceives that Alison’s “animal” spirits and qualities and her youth predispose her to a more direct mode of courtship (230).
fabliau, and in the rest of Chaucer’s works, Absolon is “the only character [. . .] to be associated with the adjective ‘lovely’” (Donaldson, “Idiom” 39). Chaucer also gives the foppish young man gray eyes, which “[should] remind us of the Prioress, as well as of countless other medieval heroines and [. . .] heroes, though not [heroes] in Chaucer, who reserves gray eyes for ladies” (39). The fact that Absolon’s eyes are as “greye as goos”—an incongruous simile, since most romance heroines’ eyes are as grey as glass—emphasizes that Absolon is ridiculous and effeminate as a lover. Absolon, like Alison, is given an effictio, which is another element of description usually reserved for romance heroines:

Crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon,
And strouted as a fanne large and brode;
Ful streight and evene lay his joly shode.
His rode was reed, his eyen greye as goos.
With Poules wyndow corven on his shoos,
In hoses rede he wente fetisly. (3314-19)

Thus, Chaucer makes one of the young lovers even more effeminate than the woman whose love he seeks.

Absolon’s extravagant use of language almost guarantees him his failure: he adheres to courtly, idealistic loving, whilst his rival and his sweetheart adhere to sensual, physical loving. Absolon most often and most verbosely spouts the courtly love language in the tale. He addresses Alison at her window:

What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alison,
My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?

Awaketh, lemmyn, and speketh to me!

Wel litel thynken ye upon my wo,

That for youre love I swete there I go.

No wonder is thogh that I swelte and swete;

I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.

Ywis, lemmyn, I have swich love-longynge

That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge.

I may nat ete na moore than a mayde. (3698-707)

Absolon utters all of these fine sentiments outside Alison’s window while she lies in bed after sex with Nicholas. Some of these sentiments appear in other works of Chaucer’s that treat courtly love and are usually identified as integral parts of the Ovidian love trauma, but their context here makes them ridiculous. 9 Also, the hodgepodge language Absolon uses here—his more child-like formulas (he longs like “a lamb after the tete”) and his gross formulas (“I swelte and swete”), which are not really the type of language a lover in a true romance would use—denotes this take on courtly love as purely Chaucer’s own and as a parody of courtly love. Charles Muscatine states that “[t]he French lover

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9 By Ovidian love trauma, I mean the set reactions to love or the set signs by which a lover may be recognized in most works of the fin’amor tradition (an example of these signs and reactions can be seen in “Merciles Beaute,” when the speaker deems he may die for lack of his lady’s love and bewails her deficiency of “pitee”). Also relevant is the fact that, here and in The Merchant’s Tale, there is an echo of the Song of Songs; these echoes’ placement renders them ridiculous and parodies the love lyrics or other works that seriously use them, as well as parodying the characters in Chaucer’s works who use them. For further discussion of the Song of Songs element, see the chapter below on The Merchant’s Tale.
‘rometh’ perhaps, but he does not ‘swelte and swete,’ nor does he catch up on his sleep before a sleepless night,” as Absolon does (228). If Absolon, a feckless lover who parodies the courtly lover, were as clever and as near to hand to Alison as Nicholas had been before this episode, then he could have avoided the whole making-advances process and could have jumped into her bed as easily as his rival. The placement of Absolon’s introductory portrait right after Nicholas’s direct “courtly” courting of Alison (that is, Nicholas’s courting her by grabbing her “queynte”) establishes Nicholas as a foil to Absolon; it shows Absolon to be a man of futile words and dramas compared to Nicholas, who is a man of decisive action and few, efficacious words. Because of Absolon’s squeamishness and his concern with appearing to be a lover, Chaucer may imply that Absolon would no more wish to engage in sex with Alison than he wishes to kiss her arse later. Absolon is too effeminate for “love paramours,” preferring instead the never-ending chase of an attractive woman. Also, the relevance of the small detail Chaucer’s Miller gives about Absolon’s role as Herod in the mystery plays is that Absolon is a character who, like Herod in these plays, rants: a character who would hardly be an apt lover. Thus, the feminine Absolon personifies and parodies the courtly lover, since the courtly lover might prefer to stand outside his lady’s window (when he could be in her bed) and ramble on about his devotion to her and since the lover who would use such fanciful language probably loves himself and his verbal ingenuity more than his lady.10

10 E. T. Donaldson points out how the Miller tells us that Absolon has long locks (3314) and that he likes to preen himself before making his amorous rounds (3689), both signs of a certain amount of daintiness and vanity in the Middle Ages, of a certain
Absolon betrays how clearly he sees himself as a courtly lover, indeed as a lord of sorts, during another window scene (Stillwell 695). During this window scene, Alison decides upon a stratagem to make Absolon stop declaiming to her while she tries to sleep the sleep of the exhausted after an all-night sexual encounter. Directly before Absolon kisses what he thinks will be her lips at first, Absolon announces to the night that he is “a lord at alle degrees; / For after this [he] hope[s] ther cometh moore” (3724-25). However, nothing more comes to Absolon except a gritty kiss on Alison’s backside, though he expected (possibly feared) that his love affair with Alison would proceed beyond this first token of his success as a lover, a proper kiss (Stillwell 695). Thus, Absolon as a character “most elaborately caricature[s]” the romance tradition (Muscatine 227).

In the introductions and descriptions of each character, the Miller adumbrates what comes later in his tale, giving warning that his tale will not be what many would consider polite. When Robyn describes Alison, he says, “[b]ut of hir song, it was as loude and yerne / As any swalwe sittynge on a berne” (3257-58); this simile sounds curious at first but makes sense within the tale’s context, as Robyn reveals later on. In Chaucer’s time, the Miller’s listeners would have thought of the bird’s “association with sexual appetite” and lechery or wantonness and perhaps would have expected a tale of the timbre which develops (Andrew 356). The detailed introductory description of Absolon, in which Chaucer’s Miller describes him as “somdeel squamous / Of fartyng, and of speche daungorous” (3337-38), intensifies the affront to his sensibilities at the end, as Peter Beidler points out (98). Nicholas, intent on performing a churlish deed, sticks his amount of femininity (“Idiom” 38). Alfred David also agrees that Absolon “has gazed into the well of Narcissus and fallen in love with his own image as a courtly lover” (97).
behind out the bedroom window and “leet fle a fart / As greet as it had been a thunder-dent” that nearly blinds the poor squeamish church clerk (3806-07). What initially looks like a mundane detail too small for readers to notice helps to unify the tale aesthetically (Beidler 97-98). Despite what might seem pointless gruesomeness and hilarity in Absolon’s kiss, the kiss causes the dandyish church employee’s “hoote love [. . . to be] coold and all yqueynt,” and he “[o]f paramours [. . .] sette nat a kers, / For he was heeled of his maladie” (3754, 3756-57). This disease metaphor for Absolon’s affected love for Alison proves for Edward Schweitzer that “Absolon suffers from ‘the loveris maladye / Of Hereos’” and that Chaucer has good reason for curing the elegant young man in such sidesplitting fashion (223). Physicians in Chaucer’s time, in fact, would have recommended that a person like Absolon who has false notions about love should be “shock[ed] [. . .] with the physical reality of sex in order to destroy the idealized fantasy by which he is obsessed,” a treatment that will give the deluded person “a sensible demonstration of the vileness of the object in which he has sought all delight” (227-28). Absolon certainly realizes the unwholesomeness of Alison’s backside, and although episodes like these might at first seem coarse, Chaucer does not subject readers to gratuitous coarse humor but includes such details purposefully. Therefore, Chaucer builds details such as Absolon’s delicacy into his tale that later help connect the tale’s parts together. Nearly all the details of the character descriptions define each character’s personality and are essential to the tale’s artistic effect.

Nicholas’s fart links the different styles present in the tale. After having kissed Alison’s “naked ers / Ful savourly” during the first bower window episode, Absolon
returns with a hot iron and more courtly love language on his lips for his ladylove: “Spek, sweete bryd, I noot nat where thou art” (3734-35, 3805). Absolon does not, however, receive a sweet speech in return:

This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart

As greet as it had been a thonder-dent,

That with the strook [Absolon] was almost yblent. (3806-08)

Absolon, who had been planning to brand Alison’s hinder-parts if she stuck them out the window again, now brands Nicholas, who cries in pain for water (3810-15). This cry for water then prompts John the carpenter, thinking that Nicholas’s foretold deluge is imminent, to cut down the tub in which he had slept the night, whereupon he falls to the floor and breaks his arm (3818, 3829). Therefore, the fart and the subsequent branding bind together the three motifs of The Miller’s Tale—the misplaced kiss, the branding, and the second flood. Also, the fart signifies the clash of the fabliau style and the courtly romance, ending Absolon’s attempts to speak and act like a courtier in a romance.

11 Peter Beidler, Thomas Hatton, and Paul Olson all make the claim, in various ways, that the fart in The Miller’s Tale punishes Absolon in a way exactly suited for him: since he is so squeamish, likes pleasant odors, and worries excessively about his toilette, the sensory affront of the fart punishes him for paying more attention to the temporal than to the sempiternal; all three critics assume that Absolon is a clergyman, and thus that the brimstone-like odor of a fart foreshadows this wicked clergyman’s punishment in hell (94-97; 74-75; 230-34). However, Absolon is not a clergyman, merely a layman clerk, an assistant to the clerics in his church. Also, although Chaucer does make the fart particularly offensive and foul to Absolon because the clerk is so dandyish, I do not think that Chaucer intended to give Absolon a foretaste of hell, as these three critics argue. The Miller narrates Nicholas and Alison’s fornication, another sinful event, without passing moral judgment upon the two, and in fact, emphasizes the enjoyment they gain from their sin. The only serious moral lessons I can detect in the tale are these, which the Miller teaches genuinely but facetiously: a person should watch what he kisses and should avoid hanging his bare buttocks out a window or any other aperture. Both of these lessons lack
the moral probity some critics find in the tale. With Douglas Gray, author of the explanatory notes section for *The Miller’s Tale*, I agree that these attempts to find morals in the tale are “absurdly earnest” and not supported by the text well enough (3718-22 n).
CHAPTER III
CHAUCER’S CHURLISH NOBLES

*The Miller’s Tale*, what Alfred David calls “the comedy of innocence” (90), contrasts with *The Merchant’s Tale* because its teller, Robyn the Miller, keeps some faith in humanity and lightheartedly narrates the adulterous love scenes and the absurd actions of his characters. Charles Muscatine, in his book *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, identifies *The Miller’s Tale* as the antitype of *The Merchant’s Tale* and says that Robyn’s tale is “broad comedy” while the Merchant’s is “bitter satire” (9). What courtly love language the tale’s characters use is not ironic like the Merchant’s use of this language is, when for instance, January echoes the Song of Songs in his address to his wife (who, unbeknownst to him, intends to cuckold him shortly) (Wimsatt 66). While Nicholas does speak to Alison as if she were a noblewoman and as if he were a noble suitor, and while Nicholas’s grabbing Alison’s “bele chose” might not seem to be the most appropriate follow-up to such an address, Robyn the Miller does not snipe at his characters in the way the derisive Merchant does.

*The Merchant’s Tale*, as Alfred David says, is the product of a misanthropic, pessimistic, misogynistic narrator, if *The Merchant’s Prologue* and the Merchant are
taken as the proper prologue and teller for the tale (170). The unrelenting irony of the tale, the constant juxtapositions of beautiful details with obscene and ugly ones, and the unadulterated lewdness (as well as Chaucer’s “lewednesse”—that is, silliness) and immorality of the characters have been taken by critics as the undeniable features of a tale a person like the Merchant would tell, a person who has lost his faith in humanity and his respect for the marriage sacraments. In “The Effect of the Merchant’s Tale,” Donaldson asserts that “the ugly constantly casts its shadow over the beautiful or, conversely, the seemingly beautiful ultimately reveals itself to be as ugly, in its own way, as that with which it is juxtaposed” (Speaking 34). In fact, in the extremely dark view the narrator takes of the human race, “[t]he narrator’s (and narrative’s) bitterness is such that it goes beyond the inevitable anti-Platonism of the selfish disillusioned romanticist [presumably the Merchant] almost to a complete denial of the possibility of any human value” (34). This Merchant’s seeming rejection of humanity’s capacity for good contributes to his formation of “one of the most savagely obscene, angrily embittered, pessimistic, and unsmiling tales in our language” (Holman 243). The tale, an exercise in irony for the Merchant, treats the theme of love, courtly or lustful, as sarcastically as the rest of human life.

1 Alfred David and E. T. Donaldson note some scholars’ questioning the validity of viewing the Merchant as the proper teller for his tale. Those who do view the tale and teller as suited for each other, as these two critics do, construe the Merchant’s remarks about marriage and the young wife whom he recently married as evidence that he is something of a misogynist.

2 E. T. Donaldson (in Speaking of Chaucer), Alfred David, Margaret Schlauch, and Hugh Holman concur in construing the tale as decidedly dark and pessimistic.
Chaucer’s *The Merchant’s Tale* carries on the concern with sex and trickery begun by *The Miller’s Tale*, again focusing on the (mis)adventures of another *senex amans* and his young, attractive wife. Where *The Miller’s Tale* involves commoners affecting the language of noblemen in romances but still behaving like churls, *The Merchant’s Tale* involves two noblemen behaving like churls and a nobleman’s wife (who is originally a commoner) attempting to behave like a noblewoman, but still behaving churlishly. As in *The Miller’s Tale*, genre miscegenation occurs when courtly love language typically found in romances joins with fabliau grit, such as the everyday grunginess of bodily functions.3

Looking at the analogues for Chaucer’s tale and at how Chaucer picks and chooses his subject matter reveals evidence of his genre mixing. For *The Merchant’s Tale* as well, Chaucer probably drew upon works already in existence, but he built into his tale fully realized characters and elements such as the *hortus conclusus*, the aubade, and, as in *The Miller’s Tale*, courtly love language, elements usually found in his works that do not mock courtly love (such as *The Knight’s Tale*). *The Merchant’s Tale* represents a composite of three different story motifs but is unique in combining these motifs. Chaucer appears to have used Deschamps’s incomplete poem *Miroir de Mariage* for the first motif, the marriage of January and the contrary advice he receives prior to his

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3 Alfred David suggests that Chaucer’s mixture of styles in the tale, “[t]he coupling of obscenity with poetic art,” is one reason the tale encompasses so much obscenity, as if to incorporate even more aristocratic subject matter and to debase it even more than *The Miller’s Tale* already did (172).
As in Chaucer’s tale, an elderly man hears arguments for marriage from false friends and against marriage from a true friend. In The Merchant’s Tale, the false friend is Placebo, while the true friend is Justinus. Chaucer’s version contains echoes and borrowed passages from Deschamps, but Chaucer fleshes out the elderly man in the character of January and adds depth to the tale by adding the disillusioned, misogynistic Merchant as narrator of the tale. For the second motif, Chaucer’s source is Boccaccio’s Ameto, in which a young nymph bewails her marriage to a man similar to Chaucer’s January: steeped in age and physically repulsive (with a rough beard, dewlap, and age-shrunken neck, as well as a sexual appetite like January’s). The nymph also seeks and finds a younger lover without her husband’s knowledge (339-40). Chaucer’s third story motif, the blind husband and the fruit tree story, has numerous analogues in many European languages. In most versions of the story, there is a blind husband cuckolded by his young, attractive wife and a young man in a fruit tree; while the wife commits adultery over her husband’s head, either the husband’s sight is restored by two deities who observe what his wife is doing or the husband hears rustling above his head and suspects what is happening and then calls upon a deity to restore his sight, which is promptly done. After the now-seeing husband rebukes his wife for her deed, the wife quickly retorts that she committed adultery in order to restore his sight; the husband then believes and thanks his wife and apologizes for reprimanding her (341-56). Versus the analogues, Chaucer’s tale builds up to and explains the fruit tree episode better, uses

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4 My source for all of the following observations concerning the tale’s analogues is Germain Dempster’s “The Merchant’s Tale” in Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales.
dialogue and other features from courtly romance, and uses irony. Also, no analogue has
the garden description, the quarrel of the married gods, and fabliau grossness of
Chaucer’s tale, nor does any analogue link the three story motifs.

In this tale, the aristocrat-concerned courtly romance genre meets the middle
class-concerned fabliau. The marriage in the tale is an objective correlative: January is
old, May young; he is a knight, she of the middle class; he symbolizes winter, she spring
and summer; his physical appearance disgusts, hers entices. The occasion of the unlikely
couple’s marriage is an event in which “tendre youthe hath wedded stoupyng age”
(1738). January and May’s marriage, a union of opposites, emphasizes Chaucer’s
marriage of genres, also. Nowhere is the contrast between the married couple more
apparent than the morning after their consummation of the marriage. While May lies in
bed, the picture of youth and beauty, January’s slack neck-skin and bristly beard stubble
repel. Indeed, the marriage of ugliness and beauty resembles the marriage of Venus to
Vulcan, of love and beauty to misshapen hideousness.

Most notable is the character January, who is aged, a knight, and a lover. He
provides the main source of the tale’s scatology and shows the amalgamation of genres.
Until January turns sixty years old, he has never married, nor has he wanted a married
life, preferring instead until this point to have “folwed ay his bodily delyt / On wommen,
ther as was his appetyt” (1249-50). Although January has used women to feed his sexual
appetite, he has imagined himself a courtly lover his whole life, eschewing long-term
relationships and always following his desires. While from the beginning of the tale the
Merchant identifies January as a knight, the Merchant does not abide long on the
chivalrous aspects that would have secured the *senex amans* his knighthood in the first place. Such heroic exploits as are in Chrétien de Troyes’ Arthurian romances have no place in this tale, nor would a sixty-year-old hero be able to perform many feats of strength. Thus, the Merchant perhaps wishes to call up associations of the immoral, lustful, and amorous aristocratic court whenever he calls his protagonist a knight; the elderly knight possesses these negative qualities of the court in abundance. Comparing his ideal wife to meat, January avows that “bet than old boef is the tendre veel,” so he will have “no womman thritty yeer of age” (1420-21). With this comparison, January shows his lustful interest in a youthful wife and also the type of marriage he envisions: one in which he derives most of the benefits. However, the belief and the intention January supplies here—his believing himself still capable of performing in the bedroom and his seriously intending to seek marriage with a woman more than thirty years younger—seem doubly ridiculous, considering his age. Therefore, January represents the admixture of genres in the tale, the fabliau and the romance, since he embodies physical and moral repulsiveness and the “qualities” of lovers. Lovers’ qualities even in traditional courtly romances can be as morally repulsive as physical ugliness is visually repulsive, since these qualities sometimes lead to sexual sin. However, both January’s attempts to be amorous—his attempts to love and have sex with May—and his physical appearance are repugnant.

Before he decides to marry, January has lived a life of sexual and moral licentiousness, and in his marriage to May, he still retains these unsavory characteristics. As a knight and a member of the aristocracy, January owns some property: both a garden
and the “paleys” in which he and May reside (1712). Not long after resolving to marry, January divulges to his friends what is probably the main reason for his decision to exchange vows with a woman. He tells his friends that “[y]et were me levere houndes had me eten / Than that myn heritage sholde falle / In straunge hand” (1438-40). January marries so that he may produce an heir to inherit his worldly goods and lands, but first and foremost, January thinks about the sex that will produce this heir for him: “[o]ld fissh and yong flessh would I have fayn” (1418). Therefore, January marries so that his material possessions may be maintained and so that his carnal desires may be slaked: the basest, least courtly reasons for marrying. January’s carnal desires, which are, without a dosage of aphrodisiacs, more bluster than fact, show the senescent knight’s lack of the skills courtly lovers need for amours. His constant striving to be exactly what he is not—a young, handsome, fashionable lover on the order of Chrétien de Troyes’ Gawain—reveals how this tale parodies courtly romances.

Chaucer’s selection of details to communicate January’s unattractiveness effectively marks the elderly knight as the antithesis of the typical courtly lover. January’s face, newly shaven and bristly, is “[l]yk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere” (1825). As Teresa Tavormina notes on this line, the newly married January tries to put on the trappings of a young bridegroom by shaving, since “[o]lder men at this time generally wore beards” (Benson 1825 n). He fancies that he may approach youth again

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5 Michael Calabrese, in “May Devoid of All Delight: January, the Merchant’s Tale, and the Romance of the Rose,” maintains that this is the main motivating factor behind January’s marriage to May (267).
and satisfy his young wife by seeming young, but he only may imagine he can do this, since his true age betrays itself in such manifestations as his prickly stubble.

January’s sexual prowess also reveals that he is an antitype of the young lover. As full of swagger as any seventeen-year-old male, January boasts of his virility to his friends/advisers: he claims that “[he] feele[s] [his] lymes stark and suffisaunt / To do al that a man bilongeth to” and that “[he] feele[s] [. . .] nowhere hoor but on [his] heed” (1458-59, 1464). Similarly, during the couple’s nuptials, January eagerly anticipates the coming night and the consummation of his marriage to May but thinks to himself as he gazes, ensorcelled, on his beautiful bride that “[he is] agast ye [his bride May] shul it nat susteene” (1760). While the lover in a courtly romance also would not doubt himself, as far as his sexual ability, January betrays that he does indeed doubt his ability by consuming vast quantities of aphrodisiacs in preparation for his marriage night. January echoes his earlier braggadocio when he speaks to his wife May in their chamber:

```plaintext
Ther nys no werkman, whatsoeuer he be,
That may bothe werke wel and hastily;
This wol be doon at leyser parfitly.
It is no fors how longe that we playe. (1832-35)
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Even though January has imbibed cartloads of aphrodisiacs to compensate for his age-dulled sexual appetite and thus shown how much faith he places in his sexual ability, he here makes the claim to May that their lovemaking will last a long time and that he will not rush. However, the sexagenarian “sex bomb” January does not deliver on his bluster, and May “preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene” the morning after (1854).
Chaucer also parodies the aubade, a love song sung by a departing lover to his beloved the morning after a sexual encounter, by having January sing one. January’s singing an aubade highlights his age. He croaks and flirts with his lovely wife the morning after their marriage night, serenading her, attempting to behave as a fashionable young lover would with his lady. The mockery of love that is January and May’s marriage is echoed in the mockery of an aubade that is the elderly satyr’s song to his wife: January “chaunteth [. . .] and craketh,” attempting to sing but failing miserably because of the age-roughened timbre of his vocal cords (1850). The sixty-year-old knight’s “slakke skyn aboute his nekke” calls attention to the years January’s throat has weathered as well as to the quality of the sounds emitted from it, for while he sings, his dewlap “shaketh” (1849). Even before this serenade, on the eve of his wedding night, January expresses sentiments commonly found in aubades: “Now wolde God that it were woxen nyght, / And that the nyght wolde lasten everemo” (1762-63). Also, directly after the sex that pleases May so ill, January voices another sentiment often found in love lyrics and aubades: “My reste wol I take; / Now day is come, I may no lenger wake” (1855-56). Lovers’ aubades often decry the return of the sun, which brings an end to their amours, but January echoes their declamations here for another reason. January, exhausted, is not as young as he once was: “And doun he leyde his heed and sleep til pryme” (1857). Chaucer thus undercuts January’s skills as a lover, showing how January must be about to pass out from exhaustion after the night he tells May will be so long.

6 In the article “January’s ‘Aube,’” R. E. Kaske cites this passage in his comparison of traditional aubades with what he calls Chaucer’s “skeleton-aube” (3).
January again expresses his love and devotion to May in highly poetic terms, echoing the Song of Songs, when he calls her into the garden he owns, and Chaucer again parodies the works that would use the convention seriously. January summons May in this way:

Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free!
The turtles voys is herd, my dowve sweete;
The wynter is goon with alle his reynes weete.
Com forth now, with thyne eyen columbyn!
How fairer been thy breestes than is wyn!
The garden is enclosed al aboute;
Com forth, my white spouse! Out of doute
Thou hast me wounded in myn herte, O wyf!
No spot of thee ne knew I al my lyf.
Com forth, and lat us taken oure disport;
I chees thee for my wyf and my confort. (2138-48)

The triple summons here (“Com forth”) identifies this passage as one modeled on the Song of Songs, and as Wimsatt notes, “could be used almost word-for-word as a reading or response in the liturgy of the Assumption, being made up of sentiments entirely

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7 James Wimsatt goes through numerous medieval poems that use language from the Song of Songs and compares them to Chaucer’s uses of this book of the Bible in his fabliaux.
suitable for Christ on his coming to take Mary to Heaven” (85). However, several of January’s lines here change what, to medieval minds, would have been the sentiments’ hieratic nature so that they fit with the turpitude May and January evince throughout the rest of the tale. Near the end of this oration, January, as if to win May’s respect and love anew, says that “[n]o spot of thee ne knew [he] al [his] lyf.” January could hardly know his wife well (except in the Biblical sense) by this time: he has married May only recently and picked her for his spouse mainly because of her looks and age. If January did know his wife well and was not literally and figuratively blind by this point in the tale, then he most definitely could find a “spot” in her character (e.g., her intent to cuckold him!).

Also, January says that May “hast [him] wounded in [his] herte.” The Song of Songs does not contain this line, which sounds more like courtly love language than language that could be interpreted allegorically. Thus, as for the aubade, Chaucer assembles this love language from the Song of Songs to parody various extant love lyrics or romances (but not the Song of Songs itself) that used these lines seriously for banal, earthly amours and to satirize his dissipated characters, whose relationship is nowhere close to being like the ideal marriage represented in the Song of Songs.

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8 Charles Muscatine has also noted that the tale contains this biblical language (236). In The Miller’s Tale as well, Absolon echoes the Song of Songs in his “compleynt” to Alison (the “hony-comb” speech in lines 3698-3707). It is also notable, as Wimsatt says, that during the Middle Ages the Song of Songs was interpreted anagogically as symbolizing the holy relationship between the Christian Church or the individual soul or the Blessed Virgin (the Bride) and Christ (the Bridegroom) (66-67).

9 In Speaking of Chaucer, Donaldson argues that the Merchant’s parody of the Song of Songs is in keeping with the rest of the tale’s tone. Donaldson says that the Song of Songs “represented the ideal of marriage” and that, because of the Merchant’s ironic use of it, the Merchant “wholly destroys its value as an ideal ever to be obtained by human beings” (44).
Similar to her old, ugly, libidinous husband, May as a character contributes to the mixing of genres in the tale. May embodies physical beauty and suggests her namesake month: “she was lyk the brighte morwe of May, / Fulfild of alle beautee and plesaunce” (1748-49). This description of May as a beautiful woman sounds like one of any number of romance heroines’ descriptions, including Emelye in *The Knight’s Tale*, lacking only the “eyen greye as glass” and an *effictio*. Also, in countenance, “Queen Ester looked nevere with swich an ye / On Assuere, so meke a look hath she [May]” (1744-45). Thus, May appears to be as beautiful as a romance heroine and also to be like a biblical queen. However, May, as her love-stricken betrothed tells his friends, is “of small degree; / Suffiseth hym [January] hir yowthe and hir beautee” (1625-26). This “heroine” of the tale is of humble, middle-class origins. Before January marries May, January “feffed [May] in his lond” (1698); thus, either to reassure May or at May’s insistence, January ensures that May will own his property after his death. This hurry to endow May with lands and so with status emphasizes the fact that she comes to January without any prospects or property and suggests that May, acutely aware of this fact, works to remedy it as soon as she can, like the Wife of Bath with her three old husbands. May is not a typical romance heroine, not one we would expect to marry a nobleman, nor a character whom readers would expect to have “gentlesse.” She is a middle-class woman in a noblewoman’s clothing. Using a line from *The Knight’s Tale*, Chaucer plays up May’s humble origins, noting that, after she reads Damyan’s letter in the privy, she takes his suffering for her love to heart, for “pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!” (1986). May, however, is not

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10 Michael Calabrese also notes this promise of January’s (273).
“gentil” (i.e., noble), which is what Chaucer points out with this ironical line. May acts not out of pity for Damyan but out of a desire “to doon hym ese” (1981), and most likely out of a desire to gain the satisfaction she was not receiving from her old husband in the bedroom (Levy, “Gentilesse” 313).

May and Damyan’s love affair also adds to the parodic effect of the tale created by January’s antics as a “lover” and May’s gentilesse. While May and Damyan’s love affair meets the adultery requirement of C. S. Lewis’s definition of courtly loving, their love affair centers primarily on giving sexual easement to each other, though their sexual union does not occur nearly until the tale’s end. May and Damyan’s love affair is only courtly in the sense that Chaucer couches Damyan’s addresses to May in the language of courtly love, satirically connecting his tale with the courtly romance genre. Amid the merrymaking after January and May’s marriage ceremony, Damyan languishes in jealousy of his lord: “He was so ravysshed on his lady May / That for the verray peyne he was ny wood” (1774-75). This part of the tale parallels Chaucer’s earlier works such as *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Knight’s Tale*, or the poem “Merciles Beaute” in which the beauty of the woman to whom the lover is attracted pierces the lover’s eyes and captures his heart, rendering him the thrall of love.¹¹ Damyan succumbs to May’s beauty, resolving to attempt to woo his own lord’s wife. The relationship proceeds at first much as one would in a courtly romance, complete with Damyan’s writing a “compleynte” to May (1881), communicating to her his “love” for her. While indeed most loves begin

¹¹ Charles Muscatine argues that, as opposed to *The Miller’s Tale*, in which the use of courtly love conventions is “innocent [. . . and] harmlessly misplaced,” *The Merchant’s Tale*’s use of the conventions conveys exactly the opposite: that January, May, and Damyan are perverse and anything but innocent (231).
with a lover’s being smitten by his beloved’s beauty, Chaucer’s addition to the courtly romance manifests itself in May’s immediate acquiescence to Damyan’s advances. Since May is not of the nobility and is not “gentil” in any sense of the word, Chaucer ironically attributes her readiness to cuckold her husband to her nobility, to her “gentil herte.” Damyan and May’s relationship is outside the bounds of courtly love, the pastime of “gentils,” even though Chaucer uses language from the repertoire of courtly love to describe the adulterous affair. What most notably sets May and Damyan’s tryst apart from Chaucer’s serious courtly works are the facts that May has already entered the bonds of matrimony and that Damyan has already entered the bonds of fealty to his lord, January. Also, truly suitable to a relationship begun by a letter read in the romantic ambiance of a privy, the acme of May and Damyan’s romance occurs when May joins Damyan in January’s garden’s pear tree. Damyan makes the most of the opportunity, while blind January, expecting May to climb down soon laded with pears, waits below: “sodenly anon this Damyan Gan pullen up the smok [of May], and in he throng” (2352-53). Thus, the purely physical and fleeting easement the adulterers gain constitutes the high point of their relationship and must be prematurely ended when Pluto restores January’s sight.

The part of a courtly love relationship typically left out of the story appears in its most physical and stark terms in Chaucer’s tale, with the barest, ugliest, and lowliest fabliau features of the tale coinciding with the part of a romance typically the most allegorized, stylized, and strikingly described—the union of the lover’s aspirated, ideal sentiments (his wooing and “compleynte”) with physical love, typically consummated in
a beautiful pleasance. However, Chaucer’s tale is not obscene for obscenity’s sake; rather, what glossing over or treating mockingly the most courtly features of courtly love does is to emphasize that these types of courtly love affairs have an air of unreality about them, that real love (or real lust, in May and Damyan’s case) does not proceed in ideal ways.\footnote{Hugh Holman and Margaret Schlauch note this in the tale.}

The locale in which Damyan and May briefly engage in sex, the \textit{hortus conclusus}, usually a given in the courtly love tradition, functions ironically also in this tale. The typical elements of the \textit{hortus conclusus} are present in the tale, as well as an overt connection to the work that was seminal for Chaucer and in which a \textit{hortus conclusus} figures largely, the \textit{Romance of the Rose}:

\begin{quote}
He [January] made a gardyn, walled all with stoon; 
So faire a gardyn woot I nowher noon. 
For, out of doute, I verraily suppose 
That he that wroot the Romance of the Rose 
Ne koude of it the beautee wel devyse; 
Ne Priapus ne myghte nat suffise, 
Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle 
The beautee of the gardyn and the welle 
That stood under a laurer alwey grene. (2029-37)
\end{quote}
The mention of the god Priapus (a deity usually represented with a huge phallus) prefigures the significance of the garden and what happens within it, since even before Damyan and May commit adultery, Chaucer’s Merchant establishes that January’s garden is another place where perverse and obscene acts occur, giving the usually paradisaical garden a more comical and more obscene relevance in the tale.¹³ January and May visit this garden the elderly knight owns for disport, but not for the type of pleasant dalliance lovers might usually seek in such a place:

And whan [January] wolde paye his wyf hir dette
In somer seson, thider [to the garden] wold he go,
And May his wyf, and no wight but they two;
And thynges whiche that were nat doon abedde,
He in the gardyn parfourned hem and spedde. (2048-52)

The enclosed garden functions in this tale as January’s aphrodisiac and as an extension of the bedroom in which May and January’s gross sexual acts take place, since the aged knight allows no person but the wife young enough to be his daughter to go there, and only when accompanied by him. Thus, Chaucer presages the gross and immoral uses to which Damyan and May will also put the pleasance. Treating the garden as January, Damyan, and May’s own sexual playground calls attention to the original enclosed garden, in which loves were forged that would usually involve more than the animal

¹³ Michael Calabrese notes that the mention of the god Priapus labels the garden as a place of perversions, in the tale’s context (278). Also, when Priapus appears in The Parliament of Fowls, he is a frustrated lover figure, which is significant because January is an impotent old man and because Damyan will be frustrated in his copulating with May when January’s sight is restored.
sexuality of these characters. Also, this new use of the pleasance comments upon the
dreamlike qualities of the romances and love lyrics that influenced Chaucer and
comments upon the sublimated, ideal qualities of the loves which were grown there;
Chaucer ridicules these works, after a fashion, reducing them to absurdity with artful yet
obscene parody.¹⁴ Thus, lovers in romances or love lyrics, Chaucer suggests, are more
likely to be like Absolon in *The Miller’s Tale*, feminine and in love with wooing more
than the sex the wooing ostensibly will result in, or like Damyan and May, concerned
more with the sex than with any wooing. Chaucer’s parody employs very physical love to
show the artificiality of such gardens of delight as the one in the *Romance of the Rose*,
even though Chaucer’s tale’s garden is as nonexistent as the other gardens. Thus,
Chaucer also galvanizes and calls into question the courtly tradition’s version of love
with his new use of the *hortus conclusus*.

¹⁴ Margaret Schlauch and Hugh Holman both study the ways in which *The
Merchant’s Tale* comments sarcastically upon the value of *fin’amor*. Schlauch reflects
that this tale tends “to criticise [the courtly tradition’s] artificiality and to substitute a
common sense point of view” with parody (205).
CHAPTER IV

FLATULENCE AND SERMONIZING: CHAUCER’S BLENDING OF GRIT AND GRACE

Although devoid of courtly love language, *The Summoner’s Tale* adheres to the fabliau genre and also evidences Chaucer’s genre mixing, containing the high style of Friar John’s impromptu sermon delivered to Thomas, the mock high style of the academic debate on *impossibilia*, and the low style of the fabliau when the burgher Thomas bequeatheth the grasping Friar his flatulence. The motif of the fart, which an unexpected turn in *The Summoner’s Tale* introduces, also links this tale with the fart in *The Miller’s Tale*, because both expulsions of hot air cut through and ridicule the styles of portions of the tales preceding them, signaling that these two tales are indeed fabliaux (if anyone had been unable to discern this fact before!). The flatus in both tales also functions as a plot unifier for Chaucer and aids his stringing together of different sources to form a coherent and humorous whole. While the fart at the end of *The Miller’s Tale* strips Absolon of his dandyish pretensions to be a courtly lover and provides the church employee with added motive to brand his rival Nicholas’s behind, the fart in *The Summoner’s Tale* rewards the avaricious, pushy Friar with the hot air of which he is so full, as he demonstrates in his sermon to Thomas. Thus, *The Summoner’s Tale* employs the artful style mixing that *The Miller’s Tale* and *The Merchant’s Tale* do.
The Summoner’s Tale’s analogues also clarify the ways in which Chaucer binds the raw material of works that influenced him into literary art. The main analogue to the tale is *Li Dis de le vescie à prestre* (*The Tale of the Priest’s Bladder*).\(^1\) In *Li Dis de le vescie à prestre*, a thirteenth-century fabliau, a sick parish priest who has made a bequest of all his belongings to his parish members must fend off the griping of two Jacobin Friars attempting to wrench a donation from him for their order. Having already bestowed upon his parish members all his belongings, the priest tells the two friars that he has nothing left to give, but they insistently pester him, angering the priest in the process. The two friars, once convinced that the priest speaks the truth, request that he cancel some of the bequests to his parish members in order to give them some of his property and request him to provide them with a good meal, which they came to his house expecting. Also as in *The Summoner’s Tale*, the two friars praise their spartan mode of living in an effort to wring something out of the priest. Eventually, the priest promises the friars a jewel, which he will reveal and give to them the next day in the presence of their whole chapter. After feasting on credit because of their expecting a grand gift, the whole chapter arrives in the priest’s house the next day, and the priest promptly informs them that he will make them the gift of his bladder, after which revelation, the friars are extremely irate (Hart 275-86). Thus, Chaucer’s tale contains the basic fabliau elements of this story: the greedy friars, the sick man, the promise of a gift to be given to the whole chapter, and the ire of the friars after learning the nature of the gift.

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1 William Morris Hart’s “The Summoner’s Tale” in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* is my source for the following observations on *The Summoner’s Tale*’s analogues.
However, Chaucer’s tale enriches this fabliau source by mixing it with *exempla* from sermons and with mock scholarly debate.² These *exempla* appear in *The Summoner’s Tale* almost exactly as they do in Seneca’s *De Ira*, save that Chaucer places them in the sermon on wrath Friar John delivers to Thomas and adds the Friar’s interpretation of the exempla. In the portion of Seneca’s work used, a judge (Gnaeus Piso, though unnamed in Chaucer) condemns the three soldiers to death, King Cambyses kills the child of his servant, and King Cyrus diverts the river for the causes Chaucer’s Friar tells about (Hart 286-87). In Chaucer’s version, however, the sermon the Friar delivers is entirely appropriate for the tale and the sermonizer because the Friar is guilty of the very sins he preaches against. As for the mock scholarly debate at the end of the tale concerning the best way to divide Thomas’s fart among the chapter of friars, no known analogues or sources exist. The addition of this portion of the tale works with the Friar’s sermon to create dramatic unity,³ since the debate on fart division shows how the Friar merits his gift of hot air and since the subject of the debate—the fart—also reminds readers that the tale is a fabliau. Thus, Chaucer’s additions to his source materials produce a tale highly appropriate for the teller’s (the Summoner’s) purpose of requiting the pilgrimage Friar for his *Friar’s Tale* and for Chaucer’s fabliau genre mixing such as that of *The Miller’s Tale* and *The Merchant’s Tale*.

² According to D. L. D’Avray, an *exemplum* (plural *exempla*) is a striking, brief anecdote used in a sermon and intended “to hold the attention” of the congregation (66). These brief stories illustrated the abstract points the preacher wished to make about sins, morals, doctrines, etc. (252). Often, these *exempla* were available to preachers in collections so as to aid them in putting together sermons (66-67).

³ I will treat this dramatic unity of the tale at more length below.
The dramatic situation that Chaucer has created in *The Summoner’s Tale’s*, with the Friar and the Summoner squaring off for a tale-telling battle, comprises another *sui generis* feature of the tale and unifies the three different motifs within the tale. The tale’s Friar resembles the Friar of the *General Prologue* in his rhetorical skill, his ability to extract money or goods from whomever he pleases, and his charm with women.\(^4\) Thus, the initial portrait of the Friar gives an accurate picture of the Friar encountered in *The Summoner’s Tale*:

> In alle the ordres foure is noon that kan  
> So muchel of daliaunce and fair langage.  
> He hadde maad ful many a mariaige  
> Of yonge wommen at his owene cost. [. . .]  
> He was the beste beggere in his hous; [. . .]  
> For though a wydwe hadde noght a sho,  
> So pleasant was his “*In principio,*”  
> Yet wolde he have a ferthyng, er he wente.  
> His purchas was wel bettre than his rente.  
> And rage he koude, as it were right a whelp. (210-13, 252-57)

\(^4\) Although Charles Muscatine and E. T. Donaldson argue that the relationships between the tales and their tellers and between the *General Prologue* portraits and the pilgrims are at best tenuous (172; *Speaking* 11), I would suggest that the framework Chaucer has created for this tale, a pugnacious tale-telling bout, requires some attention in order to appreciate the aesthetic unity of the tale. Bernard S. Levy also believes that the *General Prologue* Friar resembles the Friar in *The Summoner’s Tale* (“Biblical” 59).
Because he is the pilgrimage Friar’s rival, Chaucer’s Summoner amplifies these qualities, making more obvious that the Friar is an immoral swindler. Not long after entering Thomas’s house, Friar John quickly kisses and lasciviously hugs Thomas’s wife: he “hire embraceth in his armes narwe, / And kiste hire sweete, and chirketh as a sparwe / With his lyppes” (1803-05). This suggestion of the Friar’s lechery recalls the implication in the *General Prologue* portrait that his “daliaunce” with young women is amorous and not spiritual. The Summoner also portrays the Friar as a glutton (Birney 210). When Thomas’s wife asks what sort of meal the Friar would like to eat, he asks for a chicken liver, bread, and a roasted pig’s head (1839-41); the pig’s head and the chicken liver are both delicacies and not cheap (Birney 209). After placing such a tall dinner order, the Friar demurely claims that he is “a man of litel sustenaunce” because praying and fasting have destroyed his appetite (1844-47). Therefore, the Friar, comfortable in Thomas’s domicile, betrays that long religious service and fasting have diminished his sybarite’s appetite in no way; if anything, they have increased it. When the wife voices what is perhaps her anger at the Friar for not knowing of her son’s death, the Friar in the tale

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5 William Pantin notes that the friars’ vow of mendicancy created much controversy among their fellow non-mendicant clergymen and among laymen; many accused friars of the faults the *General Prologue* Friar has, including a tendency to give lax penance and to administer to rich men while avoiding the poor (123-26, 159-61). Interestingly, as Pantin has noted, the friars revived preaching in medieval England because of their ascetic lifestyle, their roving over the countryside of their districts to preach, and their being university-educated—which many parish clerics were not at this time in England (3, 14, 29). It is thus significant that the Friar in the tale has attained a master’s degree in divinity (2185-86).

6 The *Middle English Dictionary* lists “sexual union” as one of the possible definitions of “daliaunce.” The comparison of the Friar to a sparrow also recalls the Miller’s comparison of Alison to a swallow; people in the Middle Ages held both birds to be lecherous (Andrew 356; Birney 209).
shows the other fault of his that the Summoner identifies: the Friar’s negligence in attending to his charges’ spiritual needs (1295-97). The Friar turns an accusation and question about his worth as a shepherd of his spiritual flock into a long encomium of his order’s holiness and dedication to a life befitting their holiness, all in a bid to gain a donation from Thomas and his wife (Birney 208-09). The Friar turns around the wife’s veiled accusation that he is a deficient shepherd, bragging that he and his order saw the couple’s child’s “deeth [. . .] by revelacioun” and that his order and he already know the child is in heaven (1854-58). In fact, the couple’s child, the Friar says, is already safe in heaven by dint of his order’s effective prayers:

[W]e mendynantz [the Friar and his order], we sely freres,

Been wedded to poverte and continence,

To charite, humblesse, and abstinence,

To persecuicoun for rightwisnesse,

To wepynge, misericorde, and clennesse.

And therefore may ye se that oure preyeres [. . .]

Been to the hye God moore acceptable

Than youres, with youre feestes at the table. (1906-11, 1913-14)

Ironically, the Friar intends to feast very well with Thomas and his wife shortly, which fact shows him as a hypocrite and idle boaster. Also, his slipperiness makes the Friar like a dissembling politician answering journalists’ questions: he avoids directly answering a question he does not like. Chaucer’s Summoner builds the character of the Friar in his tale so as to embody the faults and vices of the pilgrimage Friar.
The disquisition on wrath the Friar gives that was enjoined by Thomas’s wife also shows the Friar’s resemblance to his General Prologue counterpart and sets up the proud Friar John for a fall. The Friar uses little scripture in his sermon on wrath, as he informs Thomas:

> But herkne, Thomas, what I shal seyn.
> I ne have no text of it, as I suppose,
> But I shal fynde it in a maner glose. (1918-20)

The Friar cites only three passages of scripture concerning wrath in his sermon but mostly appears to be glossing, fabricating interpretations not explicitly supported by the Bible, just as he says. The Friar cites Ecclesiasticus 4.35 and 3.93 and Proverbs 22.24-25: the first passage warns against being like a lion at home, the second against the dangers of anger, which subtly creeps into a person’s bosom, and the third against being friends with a wrathful person. The three scripture passages have little to do with the perils of irascible lords, which is what the Friar mainly discusses in his sermon. The Friar mostly uses the three exempla from Seneca’s De Ira, all of which concern men in positions of power. The Friar loosely applies these exempla concerning lords to Thomas:

> Beth ware, therfore, with lordes how ye pleye.
> Syngeth Placebo and ‘I shal, if I can,’
> But if it be unto a povre man.
> To a povre man men sholde his vices telle,
> But nat to a lord, thogh he sholde go to helle. (2074-78)

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7 Significantly, according to _A Chaucer Glossary_, another definition of “glose” is “specious interpretation.”
Rather than focusing on Thomas’s situation and how Thomas’s anger could injure his spiritual life, the mendacious mendicant digresses on the subject of lords’ anger, which has little or nothing to do with the theme of anger as it applies to Thomas. The Friar’s rhetorical glibness is such that he twists a sermon on wrath into a completely different frame of reference. The Friar enjoys the sound of his own voice and would rather inject extraneous but interesting stories into his sermon than keep to its proper message (Birney 212). Thus, the Friar’s “sermon” resembles actual sermons in its use of exempla but parodies sermons by providing exempla that are completely irrelevant to his sermon’s audience, to whom he should be preaching about the spiritual dangers of anger and applying relevant exempla in order to drive his points home. The Friar makes obvious the true reason for the ad hoc sermon he gives near the sermon’s end: he wishes for a monetary gift from Thomas (at least “a ferthyng,” just like the General Prologue Friar), and he thinks himself more likely to receive it if he obeys the wife’s injunction to preach. Thus, the Friar exemplifies a windbag. He endlessly and inaccurately sermonizes on the subject of anger, since the exempla he uses do not relate to Thomas or to anger.\footnote{Earle Birney, Bernard Levy, and Alan Levitan all note the Friar’s empty long-windedness in the sermon and, as a result, the fittingness of Thomas’s gift (212; “Biblical” 50; 242). Birney also notes the Friar’s shift of focus in the sermon (214). In addition, the Friar’s sermon style resembles the Wife of Bath’s in its misinterpretation and reinterpretation of scripture.} He concerns himself not with the spiritual well-being of his flock but with the lucre they can provide him, and in this way as well, the Friar’s sermon parodies nobler sermons. The expulsion of hot air that is the Friar’s sermon thus deserves a return of hot air, which
Thomas provides. Therefore, this inclusion of a boorish element after the sermon’s finale meshes with Chaucer’s genre mixtures in other tales.

Thomas’s gift to the homily-pitching Friar joins the plot together more seamlessly in another fashion as well, since the Friar, enraged at his disgrace at a churl’s hands, commits the very sin he preached against to Thomas immediately before. After the Friar exhorts Thomas to confess and be shriven for the sin of anger and Thomas refuses, the undaunted Friar continues to beg for a donation for his righteous convent to cover their debt for stone that was used to build their cloister. Since the Friar realizes he can get no bribe from Thomas for a lenient penance, he changes tack and begs openly. Thomas, incensed after listening to the Friar’s endless chattering about sin, donations, and the convent’s holiness, finally agrees: “somewhat shal I yive / Unto youre hooly covent while I live,” on the condition “[t]hat every frere have also muche as oother” (2129-30, 2134). Thomas, taking to heart the Friar’s claim that “a ferthyng [. . .] parted in twelve” is not worth much, gives the Friar a farting instead:

And whan this sike man felte this frere
About his tuwel grope there and heere,
Amydde his hand he leet the frere a fart;
Ther nys no capul, drawynge in a cart,
That myghte have lete a fart of swich a soun. (2145-51)

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9 That the Friar expects a bribe can be deduced from his comment that Thomas “shalt [him] fynde as just as is a squyre” (2090).

10 Earle Birney claims that the Friar’s mention of “a ferthyng” is what gives Thomas the idea for the Friar’s gift (213).
Upon receiving his unwholesome gift, the Friar “up stirte as dooth a wood leoun” and leaves Thomas’s house “with a ful angry cheere,” grinding his teeth and looking like “a wilde boor” (2152, 2156-61). The Friar now is the very picture of the vice he expended so much breath denouncing to Thomas.\(^{11}\) Besides being the most appropriate reward for the Friar’s “drasty” and drafty preaching, the fart here unifies the tale also in the way that it reveals the Friar’s hypocrisy; if he were truly the most holy member of the most holy convent in all of England as he claims and presents himself to be, the Friar no doubt could forbear this indignity and avoid the sin that he only lately finished warning Thomas about. However, Friar John is only the most seasoned and brazen beggar of his convent, not the most holy, as his reaction shows. Thus, this revelation of the Friar’s hypocrisy in this tale suggests further parallels between him and the General Prologue Friar.\(^{12}\) Also, the fart provides the impetus for the action after the events in Thomas’s house: the tale’s final motif, the mock scholarly debate.

The solution for the apparently insoluble problem of dividing Thomas’s fart evenly among thirteen friars also demonstrates Chaucer’s mixing the fabliau genre with other types of discourse, particularly the mock-seriousness of the squire Jankyn’s

\(^{11}\) Earle Birney notes that, in line 1989, the Friar admonishes Thomas “[w]ithinne thyn hous ne be thou no leon” (216); Bernard Levy also notes the irony of the Friar’s response (“Biblical” 45-46, 50).

\(^{12}\) Penn Szitty argues that the Friar’s reaction to the gift, balanced with his foregoing sermon, identifies the Friar as the type of the false apostle, since the Friar claims apostolic status for himself and his convent (19-21, 30-40). Szitty also suggests that Chaucer’s identifying the mendicant Friar with the false apostle type would make perfect sense, in light of the controversy ongoing in Chaucer’s time about the biblical basis of the mendicants’ beliefs (40-42). William Pantin catalogs the ongoing anti-fraternal debates, many of them occurring in the fourteenth century (123-26).
“scholarly” suggestion for dissecting Thomas’s fart. As angry as any of the lords he speaks of in his sermon’s exempla, the Friar stalks from Thomas’s house to the hall of the lord of the village in which Thomas lives. So angry is the Friar that, when he arrives before the lord, “[u]nnethes myghte the frere speke a word” (2168). The Friar soon recovers his native bombast and informs the lord of the “odious [and odorous] meschief” he has received at Thomas’s hands (2190). The gift of the fart maddens the Friar more because of its nature than because of the disgrace he suffered:

I shal disclaundre hym over al ther I speke,  
This false blasphemour that charged me  
To parte that wol nat departed be  
To every man yliche, with meschaunce! (2212-15)

After the lord and his retinue learn of Thomas’s gift, the farcical nature of the tale intensifies, since the lord, his wife, and his squire Jankyn seriously consider how to divide the gift. The lord in particular remarks to himself upon Thomas’s wittiness in devising the gift:

How hadde this cherl ymaginacioun  
To shewe swich a probleme to the frere?  
Never erst er now herde I of swich mateere.  
I trowe the devel putte it in his mynde.

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13 Penn Szittya and Bernard Levy argue that the Friar’s inability to speak signifies his lack of the Holy Spirit’s gift of tongues (27; “Biblical” 56), the significance of which I will treat with more attention below.

14 Bernard Levy notes this point as well (“Biblical” 50-51).
In ars-metrike shal there no man fynde,
Biforn this day, of swich a question. (2218-23)

Thus, the lord and his court immediately forget about punishing Thomas for his foul gift and about sympathizing with the Friar and are captivated instead by Thomas’s diabolical cleverness. The lord voices his thoughts, saying that “[fart division] is an impossible, it may nat be” (2231). In the lord’s thoughts and speech, the vocabulary of scholarly debate surfaces in the words “impossible” and “ars-metrike.” *Impossibilium* were a central feature of university education in the Middle Ages; they were “a class of exercises” consisting of unsolvable problems or problems that go against common sense (Pearcy 322-23). Scholars, in order to show their familiarity with what logic is not and to show their argumentative skills, would attempt to prove these nonsensical problems with “paralogical arguments” (323). Hence, the squire Jankyn’s following solution to the problem of dividing Thomas’s fart is identifiably an example of one of these sophistical arguments.\(^1\) A rude jettisoning of air is taken up in scholarly debate, juxtaposing coarseness and polish.\(^2\) Also, members of the upper class—the lord, his wife, and

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\(^1\) Timothy O’Brien also notes that the lord and squire approach the fart problem “as if [they] were scholar[s] of Oxford’s Merton College trying to solve a physical problem according to logical and mathematical rules,” the “impossible” being the “logical” side of the equation, the “ars-metrike” the mathematical (22). Also, “ars-metrika” is undeniably a pun, since the lord’s squire debates how to measure and divide an effluent of the arse and since “ars” and arse are so close in Middle English pronunciation (Birney 217; Baum 231).

\(^2\) As Alan Levitan and Bernard Levy claim, the ingenuity of Jankyn’s solution to the problem also makes an argument for the artfulness of even this portion of the tale. Jankyn’s proposal for the fart to be meted out to the convent of friars by the means of a twelve-spoke cartwheel parodies the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Christian iconography commonly depicts the Holy Spirit descending like tongues of flame or like a
especially the squire—use the language of university debate when the university-educated Friar has been rendered speechless by Thomas’s gift, the fart, the subject of the mock debate. This mock debate and its subject cause a mixing of styles, a putting of the language of one class into the mouths of another class, in whose mouths the language of the Friar and the Friar himself are rendered ridiculous. Therefore, the fart in *The Summoner’s Tale* contributes to the tale’s overall aesthetic unity, working as a nexus of sorts for the three different styles of the tale—the fabliau, the sermon, and the scholarly debate.

The fart in *The Summoner’s Tale* and *The Miller’s Tale*, the objective correlative of the fabliau genre in these tales, functions to unify aesthetically the plots and to transition the plot from one style to another. In *The Merchant’s Tale* and in the other two tales, genre mixing occurs when members of one class arrogate the language of another class, whether the language of mock university debate or of courtly love, and this mixture parodies the original contexts in which such language appears while at the same time heightening the style of the fabliau genre. Thus, contrary to claims like E. T. Donaldson’s that *The Miller’s Tale* is “Chaucer’s worst ribaldry” and contrary to similar claims about *The Summoner’s Tale* (“Idiom” 32), I contend that even Chaucer’s bawdry contributes to the artistic unity and value of these three tales, and I agree with Earle Birney that these crude features add typical Chaucerian “subtleties” (205).

dove, with twelve or thirteen “spokes” radiating outward to the disciples from the center the Holy Spirit inhabits. Thus, Chaucer’s fabliau fart division draws upon very artful depictions of Pentecost (Levitan 236, 240-43; Levy, “Biblical” 52-55).
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Chaucer’s work must be understood and analyzed within the context of his times. In an age when even a clergymen did not cavil at speaking about the physical act of sex in a sermon (Birney 205), Chaucer’s fabliaux were not considered prurient or in bad taste. While Chaucer’s tales definitely contain many crude elements that modern readers would not expect in literary works, the three fabliaux I have discussed are very literary and well constructed as far as style and character development go. Even the odd bawdy elements—such as farting, sexual intercourse, and grossness in general—that might seem to have no significance (other than that they belong in the genre) carry added signification in Chaucer’s fabliaux. Also, these crude elements often provide a justification within the three tales for the appearance of language typically associated with one class of people in a context in which it does not usually appear, and the new context of this language in the fabliaux mocks the original, non-fabliau context, intensifies the humor present in the fabliau, and raises the style of the fabliau genre. Therefore, no scholar can tease out, say, the fart in The Summoner’s Tale and claim that Chaucer erred in including bodily functions in his literary art, since even this fart melds the different styles of the tale, provides humor, and paradoxically raises the style.
Consequently, no expurgated version of *The Canterbury Tales* can capture their richness, vulgarity, and dramatic and aesthetic unity.
WORKS CITED


