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The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's "Miller's Tale"

Robert E. Lewis

Since the early 1940s, when Laura Hibbard Loomis first showed the extent to which Chaucer was indebted to the English romance tradition,² critics have come to recognize that Chaucer was in fact working in a native English tradition in addition to the continental, and in the past thirty years a number of very good studies of Chaucer's use of the tradition have appeared.³ During the same period there has been renewed interest in the fabliau—an interest that was stimulated in large measure by Per Nykrog's book, *Les Fabliaux*, published in 1957, and that has reached a certain culmination in the last few years with some of those sure indicators of popularity in literary studies: the dissertation topic, the anthology of critical articles, and the Modern Language Association seminar.⁴ In view of the accumulation of information and the new insights into these two subjects now available, it is worth trying to answer two related questions that it would have been impossible, and perhaps laughable, even to ask thirty years ago: Was there an English fabliau tradition before Chaucer, and, if so, was Chaucer indebted to it?

The fabliau, as the name implies, is a French genre that probably developed when traditional, popular, orally transmitted comic stories began to be written down and given the verse form of octosyllabic couplets—perhaps under the influence of the fable, which makes its first appearance in French with Marie de France's *Isopet* (or "Little Aesop"), written in the last third of the twelfth century (probably before 1189).⁵ In fact, the word "fabliau" itself is a northern French

1/I am indebted to E. Talbot Donaldson and Charles Muscatine for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this essay and to audiences at Indiana University and the Universities of Kentucky, Sheffield, and Tennessee for listening and reacting to an oral version. Their comments and reactions have helped me clarify my thinking on the subject, and a number of their suggestions have been incorporated into the essay.

2/See Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Chaucer and the Auchinleck MS: 'Thopas' and 'Guy of Warwick,'" in *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown* (New York, 1940), pp. 111–28, "The Tale of Sir Thopas," in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago, 1941), pp. 486–559, and "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330–1340," *PMLA* 57 (1942): 595–627.

3/For example, Dorothy Everett, "Chaucer's 'Good Ear,'" *Review of English Studies* 23 (1947): 201–8; E. Talbot Donaldson, "Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's Tale," in *English Institute Essays 1950*, ed. A. S. Downer (New York, 1951), pp. 116–40; Margaret Schlauch, "Chaucer's Colloquial English: Its Structural Traits," *PMLA* 67 (1952): 1103–16; Derek Brewer, "The Relationship of Chaucer to the English and European Traditions," in *Chaucer and Chaucerians* (London, 1966), pp. 1–38; and R. W. V. Elliott, *Chaucer's English* (London, 1974). Elizabeth Kirk has a convenient overview in "Chaucer and His English Contemporaries," in *Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. George D. Economou (New York, 1975), esp. pp. 123–27.

4/Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux* (Copenhagen, 1957); reprinted with a "Post-scriptum 1973" (Geneva, 1973). At least thirteen dissertations specifically on the fabliau were written between 1957 and 1972; the anthology of critical articles appeared in 1974 (*The Humor of the Fabliaux*, ed. Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt [Columbia, Mo., 1974]); and two seminars on the fabliau were held at each of the 1975 and 1976 annual meetings of the Modern Language Association. Cooke has recently published *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux* (Columbia, Mo., 1978).

5/See Nykrog, pp. 251–52, and R. C. Johnston and D. D. R. Owen, eds., *Fabliaux* (Oxford, 1957), pp. xv–xviii. The date is from Emanuel J. Mickel, Jr. (*Marie de France* [New York, 1974], pp. 19–20), who follows the conclusions of Sidney Painter ("To Whom Were Dedicated the *Fables* of Marie de France?" *Modern Language Notes* 48 [1933]: 367–69).

diminutive of "fable" (English "fable"), and some two-thirds of the French fabliaux have an explicit moral attached to them, either serious or, as is more often the case, mock serious.⁶ The French genre has a short life, lasting only from the late twelfth century to the 1340s—150 years—but includes, by the latest count, the huge number of 160 separate surviving items, with another 100 if one counts multiple copies.⁷ Like all genres, the fabliau is impossible to define, either concisely or verbosely. The most famous definition is Joseph Bédier's: "contes à rire en vers" ("laughable tales in verse").⁸ A recent one that almost matches Bédier's for brevity is Knud Togeby's: "nouvelle de niveau bas du XIII^e siècle" ("short story of low level from the thirteenth century").⁹ But neither definition can be used without a great deal of amplification and qualification.

Sometimes the definition is given restrictions like "written in France as an independent work between the late twelfth century and the mid-fourteenth century in octosyllabic couplets,"¹⁰ but such restrictions seem unnecessary, and unproductive, for there are fabliaux in languages other than French and from a date after the mid-fourteenth century, and they sometimes appear in collections of tales. In German there are 150 fabliaux written between the early thirteenth century and the sixteenth century; in Dutch there is a fair number, mainly from the fourteenth century; in Italian there is a large number of what probably must be called prose fabliaux in collections of *novelle* written between the late thirteenth century and the mid-sixteenth century, including at least thirty, or three days' worth, in Boccaccio's *Decameron*;¹¹ and in English there are twenty-five to thirty fabliaux or fabliau-like tales written between the late thirteenth century and the end of the fifteenth century, including those by Chaucer.¹² Only two or three of these English fabliaux, however, antedate Chaucer, and this small number has puzzled some critics, especially older ones, who tried to find reasons for it, for example, Albert C. Baugh, writing in 1948: "When we consider that nearly one hundred and fifty specimens of the fabliau are found in Old French, we can only believe that these realistic episodes from everyday life ran counter to the more puritan spirit in England and were less often committed to writing than allowed to die on the lips of minstrels and other purveyors of backstairs entertainment."¹³

6/See Nykrog, pp. 3–7, 248–50; Johnston and Owen, pp. xiii–xv; and T. B. W. Reid, ed., *Twelve Fabliaux* (Manchester, 1958), p. x and n. 1.

7/See Nykrog, pp. 309–24.

8/From Joseph Bédier, *Les Fabliaux* (Paris, 1893), p. 6, with explanation on pp. 6–13.

9/Knud Togeby, "The Nature of the Fabliaux," in Cooke and Honeycutt, eds., p. 8.

10/This is not a quotation from any single author but rather my formulation of restrictions given by various writers on the fabliaux.

11/For information about the German and Dutch fabliaux I am indebted to an unpublished "Introduction to the Fabliaux" by my colleague Stephen L. Wailes; for the Italian tradition see Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson, eds., *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux* (Indianapolis and New York, 1971), pp. 26–27.

12/The number will, of course, vary according to how one defines the genre. On the English fabliau see, in chronological order, Henry Seidel Canby, "The English Fabliau," *PMLA* 21 (1906): 200–214; George H. McKnight, ed., *Middle English Humorous Tales in Verse* (Boston, 1913), pp. xiv–xvii; Rossell Hope Robbins, "The English Fabliau: Before and After Chaucer," *Moderna Språk* 64 (1970): 231–44; and Heinz Bergner, "Das Fabliau in der mittellenglischen Literatur," *Sprachkunst* 3 (1972): 298–312. Many of the post-Chaucerian English fabliaux can be found in W. Carew Hazlitt, *Remains of the Early Popular Poetry of England* (London, 1864–66), vols. 1–3. For the pre-Chaucerian English fabliaux, see notes 34–36 below.

13/Albert C. Baugh, *A Literary History of England* (New York, 1948), p. 199.

Now twenty-five specimens, coming as they do between, say, 1385 and the end of the fifteenth century, seem to me to be a respectable number, especially when one considers that the heyday of the French fabliaux, the thirteenth century, was long past. But I would agree that the existence of only two or three English fabliaux before the late fourteenth century seems puzzling and calls for some sort of cultural explanation. Although there is a little evidence, primarily in Chaucer, that Englishmen and Englishwomen were more prudish than their French counterparts, there is surely a better explanation. As early as the "Cambridge Songs," which were written down in England around 1050 but which go back in some cases to the tenth century, we find at least seven songs that treat fabliau themes, and, as Peter Dronke says, "If they were in French and in octosyllabic couplets, one would not hesitate to add them to the corpus of Old French fabliaux. . . ."¹⁴ Fifteen Latin *comediae* exist from the second half of the twelfth century, a few of which, for example those by Geoffrey of Vinsauf and John of Garland, may be English; these *comediae*, so called not because they are dramas but because they are interlarded "with a good deal of lively dialogue," either parallel the development of the fabliau or are forerunners of it.¹⁵ At least fifteen of Nykrog's 160 fabliaux were circulating in England in the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth centuries;¹⁶ twelve of these may in fact have been written there, for they are in Anglo-Norman, the French dialect used in England, including six proto-fabliaux from the *Isopet* of Marie de France,¹⁷ who wrote in England and who says that she translated her collection from an English version done by King Alfred from Latin.¹⁸ And there are other revealing bits and pieces of information: an English name here, an English proverb there, in French and Latin fabliau-like literature;¹⁹ or some reminiscences of the fabliau genre in the early thirteenth-century "Owl and the Nightingale"; or the existence of fabliau subjects in later English ballads which no doubt reflect a much earlier era;²⁰ or the interesting University of Oxford statute of 1292 warning students not to tell, sing, or listen to "cantilenas sive fabulas de amasiis vel luxuriosis aut ad libidinem sonantibus"

14/Peter Dronke, "The Rise of the Medieval Fabliau: Latin and Vernacular Evidence," *Romanische Forschungen* 85 (1973): 278.

15/See the brief discussion in Benson and Andersson, pp. 206–7.

16/The number is no doubt conservative. It consists only of the seven fabliaux that appear in manuscripts of conclusively English provenance—Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 50 (one: Nykrog, item 25), London, British Library, Harley 2253 (five: Nykrog, items 24, 28, 55, 73, 126), and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 86 (one: Nykrog, item 136); the six proto-fabliaux of Marie de France (Nykrog, items 39, 68, 79, 94, 157, 158) that appear in manuscripts of conclusively English provenance—Cambridge, University Library, Ee.6.11 (four: 25, 44, 45, 57), London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian B. XIV (two: 45, 59), and London, British Library, Harley 978 (all six); and the two Anglo-Norman fabliaux that appear in the non-English Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS français 1593, and the Puy-de-Dôme MS (Nykrog, items 54 and 78, respectively). Harley 2253 also contains the fabliau-like "Gilote et Johane," and see also n. 42 below. For Digby 86, which also contains *Dame Sirith*, *The Fox and the Wolf*, and the *Disciplina Clericalis*, see n. 34 below.

17/See Nykrog, items 24, 25, 28, 54, 73, 78, and, for Marie de France, items 39, 68, 79, 94, 157, 158; see also K. V. Sinclair, "Anglo-Norman Studies: The Last Twenty Years," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 2 (1965): 225–26.

18/See A. Ewert and R. C. Johnston, eds., *Marie de France Fables* (1942; reprint ed., Oxford, 1966), pp. x–xii and, for Marie's own words, 62. See also Nykrog, pp. 16, 251, and 253.

19/R. M. Wilson, *The Lost Literature of Medieval England*, 2d ed. (London, 1970), p. 123.

20/See Walter Morris Hart, "The Fabliau and Popular Literature," *PMLA* 23 (1908): 330–42; and McKnight, ed., p. xiv and n. 3.

("vernacular songs or tales of lovers or of lecheries or of things that smack of lust"),²¹ which must have been fabliau-like tales.

In short, the fabliau spirit was not lacking in England before Chaucer. What was lacking, of course, were fabliaux in English, and a plausible explanation for that lack is suggested by recent work on the audience of the fabliaux. Bédier, writing in 1893 in his book *Les Fabliaux*, which was the standard work on the subject for over sixty years, thought that the fabliaux were a bourgeois genre, intended for the amusement of the new urban middle class in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries in the commercial centers of Picardy and Artois in northern France. Nykrog, by contrast, in a view that has been modified over the years from its first, perhaps overly extreme formulation in 1957, believes that in origin the fabliaux were a courtly and aristocratic genre because they "maintain not only a marked deference toward nobility, but also, what is more significant, a considerable contempt for the middle class, a contempt that grows to hateful and bitter scorn whenever the tale is about a bourgeois who transgresses into the world of the nobles, buys a castle, wants to marry a noble girl, or the like."²² Moreover, there is a great deal of parody or burlesque of courtly literature and conventions, and of the fabliau genre itself, that can only be understood in a courtly milieu. However, a shift took place in "the pattern of literary sociology" during the 150-year period of the French fabliaux: courtly literature reached its "apogee . . . in the period 1160–1230, and a bourgeois literature [rose] around 1200 and became dominant" as the thirteenth century went on—a literature which, "enjoyed by the townspeople in the thirteenth century, is essentially derived partly from the courtly literature of the preceding age and partly from whatever had remained in the writers' minds from their carefree days in and around the schools." In short, Nykrog's view is that in origin the fabliau was an aristocratic genre but that it was adapted to the interests of the rising middle class in the course of the thirteenth century.

Nykrog's view points the way to a plausible explanation for the small number of English fabliaux before Chaucer, for, without getting into the difficult problem of the *listening* audience for the fabliaux—some recent scholarship argues that that audience would have included people of all classes²³—it is fair to say that the actual *reading* of fabliaux would have been done by literate people, and the *writing down* of fabliaux (or indeed any other kind of vernacular literature) in the

21/The Latin is quoted by R. M. Wilson, *Early Middle English Literature*, 3d ed. (London, 1968), p. 235, but for *amasis* (in place of Wilson's *omasis*) and for the context, see his source, the *Libri Cancellarii et Procuratorum*, Rolls Series 50 (1868), 1:60.

22/See the bibliographical data in n. 4 above for the original edition and the 1973 postscript, which contains the revised view; the revised view also appears in his "Courtliness and the Townspeople: The Fabliaux as a Courtly Burlesque," in Cooke and Honeycutt, eds., pp. 59–73, from pp. 63 and 64 of which the quotations in this paragraph are taken. Nykrog's revised view had been influenced to a large extent by Jean Rychner's findings in his *Contribution à l'étude des fabliaux*, 2 vols. (Neuchâtel, 1960). Rychner examined in detail seventeen fabliaux that were preserved in two or more clearly related versions in order to determine how and why the texts changed and concluded that the recast versions were adapted to a more popular audience than the earlier versions (see esp. 1:144–46 for a summary of Rychner's findings; see also Nykrog, "Post-scriptum 1973," pp. 1–3).

23/See, for example, Charles Muscatine ("The Social Background of the Old French Fabliaux," *Genre* 9 [1976]: 1–19), who, in the course of his essay (esp. pp. 2–5 and notes), mentions earlier writers who held a position similar to his own, including Alberto Várvaro in his "I fabliaux e la società" (*Studi mediolatini e volgari* 8 [1960]: 275–99), an article that was influential in Muscatine's thinking.

twelfth and thirteenth centuries would have been an activity patronized by and intended for such people, especially the aristocracy. Until England's loss of Normandy to France in 1204, the feudal aristocracy of England was almost entirely Norman French, and there was a strong Norman-French element among the clergy, especially the higher clergy, and in the monasteries. These are the people, especially the aristocracy, for whom the literature of entertainment was written down, and it would have been in either French or Anglo-Norman. Even after the loss of Normandy and the confiscation by King Philip of France in 1204 and 1205 of "the [French] lands of several great [English] barons . . . and of all those knights who had their abode in England," French still continued to be spoken for the most part by the upper classes at least during the first half of the thirteenth century—a practice that would have been encouraged by Henry III, who reigned during most of the century (1216–72) and whose "tastes and connections" were wholly French—and indeed the great period of Anglo-Norman literature was the thirteenth century. It would not have been until after 1244, when Henry and King Louis of France decreed that no one could hold lands in both England and France, that the nobility and the aristocracy would finally have begun to consider themselves English and would have begun to use English as their first language, and this is confirmed by the fact that English does not borrow French words in large numbers until after 1250.²⁴

We can see this linguistic situation working itself out in one aristocratic literary genre, the romance. We know that the romance, which had its heyday in France in the twelfth century and existed in Anglo-Norman versions in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, did not appear in English versions until near the middle of the thirteenth century, and did not become widespread in English until the fourteenth century,²⁵ and so we are prepared for a parallel development in the fabliau. The first French fabliaux are from the last quarter of the twelfth century; the heyday of the genre is the thirteenth century; we have fabliaux in Anglo-Norman, which were no doubt recited in aristocratic, French-speaking circles in England during the first half of the thirteenth century; and then, as with the romance, approximately 100 years after the beginning of the genre, we find the first English fabliau, *Dame Sirith*, written down in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. In short, instead of being a puzzling situation, the appearance of the English fabliau in the late thirteenth century is precisely what we should expect from the linguistic and literary evidence.

There was, then, an English fabliau tradition before Chaucer's time, but if one were to ask whether Chaucer was himself indebted to it, one's immediate, and quite natural, answer would be no. After all, at least 160 fabliaux written in French have survived from before Chaucer's time but only two or three in English, and

24/For general discussions of these matters of language history, see Rolf Berndt, "The Linguistic Situation in England from the Norman Conquest to the Loss of Normandy (1066–1204)," in *Approaches to English Historical Linguistics*, ed. Roger Lass (New York, 1969), pp. 369–91; and Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 3d ed. (London, 1978), pp. 126–33. The quotations in this paragraph are taken from pp. 128 and 129, respectively, of Baugh and Cable; see their pp. 177–78 for French loanwords.

25/See Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London, 1968), pp. 2–6; and Helaine Newstead, in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500*, vol. 1, *Romances*, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven, Conn., 1967), pp. 11–15.

the French tradition was very important for Chaucer throughout much of his career. Moreover, Chaucer may have been indebted to an oral version of Gautier le Leu's fabliau *La Veuve* for details of character and action in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue";²⁶ "The Reeve's Tale" has a very close analogue—some have even called it a source—in the French fabliau "Le Meunier et les deux clers";²⁷ the closest analogue to "The Summoner's Tale" is a French fabliau "Li Dis de la vescuie a prestre";²⁸ the atmosphere, a French phrase, and French place names in "The Shipman's Tale" seem to indicate that Chaucer may have been working from a French source for that tale;²⁹ Germaine Dempster tried to show some years ago that "The Merchant's Tale" goes back to a now-lost French version of the pear-tree story;³⁰ even "The Miller's Tale" has been said, though on no concrete evidence, to be based on a lost French fabliau.³¹ On the basis of these French analogues, and of French fabliaux in general, it is usually assumed that Chaucer took "the spare, direct, impersonal fabliau" and "enriched" it with, primarily, but among other things, "brilliant characterization" and realistic description.³² Now it is true that characterization and abundant description are not characteristic of the French fabliau. On the other hand, there are a few French fabliaux, "Berengier au lonc cul" and "Le Chevalier qui fist parler les cons," for example, that contain some psychological characterization, and there are a number of details in the French fabliaux, especially of setting, that seem to have no function beyond their general appeal to the author or to his audience.³³ So the suggestion of characterization and the suggestion of abundant realistic description are there in the French fabliaux for Chaucer to see, and if I read critical consensus correctly, what Chaucer does is to take these suggestions, extend them, elaborate on them, and perfect them until they become Chaucerian characterization and Chaucerian realism. But no one has looked at the pre-Chaucerian English fabliaux and the tradition of which they are a part to see if they can shed any light on Chaucer's practice. What one finds, if one does this, is very revealing.

There are three fabliaux or fabliau-like pieces in English before Chaucer—*Dame Sirith*, the first extant English fabliau, from a manuscript written in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, and in fact called a fabliau in its Anglo-Norman

26/See Charles Muscatine, "The Wife of Bath and Gautier's *La Veuve*," *Romance Studies in Memory of Edward Billings Ham*, ed. Urban Tigner Holmes, California State College Publications no. 2 (Hayward, Calif., 1967), pp. 109–14.

27/See W. M. Hart's chapter in Bryan and Dempster, eds., esp. pp. 124–25, and Benson and Andersson, pp. 79–85. See also Glending Olson, "The Reeve's Tale" and "Gombert," *Modern Language Review* 64 (1969): 721–25.

28/See Walter Morris Hart's chapter in Bryan and Dempster, eds., esp. pp. 275–77.

29/See John Webster Spargo's chapter in Bryan and Dempster, eds., esp. p. 439.

30/Germaine Dempster, "On the Source of the Deception Story in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Modern Philology* 34 (1936): 140–51.

31/See, for example, Stith Thompson's chapter in Bryan and Dempster, eds., esp. p. 106.

32/For the critical consensus, see Derek Brewer's chapter, "The Fabliaux," in Beryl Rowland, ed., *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, rev. ed. (Toronto, 1979), pp. 299–306; the quotations here are from Brewer's p. 300. See also Louis A. Haselmayer, "The Portraits in Chaucer's Fabliaux," *Review of English Studies* 14 (1938): 310–14, and, specifically for "The Miller's Tale," Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1957), pp. 223–30.

33/"Berengier" is in Rychner, 2:100–109, or, more conveniently, in Benson and Andersson, pp. 10–25; "Le Chevalier" is in Rychner, 2:38–79, esp. version I. For details of setting that have no function I am indebted to an unpublished paper by Charles Muscatine entitled "The Secular Middle Ages: The Ethos of the Fabliaux."

headnote;³⁴ the fabliau-like beast fable *The Fox and the Wolf*, which appears in the same manuscript;³⁵ and *A Pennyworth of Wit*, a fabliau of the first quarter of the fourteenth century.³⁶ All of these are interesting pieces in their own right, and worth reading and studying as part of a tradition, but the earliest, *Dame Sirith*, both in technique and in language, is the most illuminating of the three for a study of Chaucer's practice in his fabliaux, and particularly as that practice is illustrated in "The Miller's Tale."

Dame Sirith is the old and widely circulated story known as the "Weeping Bitch" story.³⁷ In the English version, which is in a mixture of rhymed couplets and six-line stanzas, a clerk named Wilekin is in love with a merchant's wife named Margery; while the merchant is away at a fair in Boston in Lincolnshire, Wilekin visits Margery, tells her of his love, and asks her to take him as her lover. She rejects him, whereupon, on the advice of a friend, he goes to visit Dame Sirith, who, for a promised reward, agrees to help him gain Margery's love by playing a trick on her. To do this, Sirith first feeds pepper and mustard to her dog, who, for reasons that become clear later, is a bitch, and the dog's eyes begin to run. Sirith then goes, with the dog, to see Margery and feigns great unhappiness to her. When Margery asks why she is unhappy, Sirith explains that she had a daughter who was married to a good husband but who rejected the advances of a clerk during the husband's absence, whereupon the clerk magically changed the daughter into a bitch, and here she is, still crying for not having granted the clerk his will. Margery sees the similarity to her own case, becomes frightened at the possible canine consequences, and asks Sirith to bring Wilekin to her. He arrives, and Margery agrees to be his lover.

The main interest of this fabliau—and the way it differs most from the French fabliaux—is in its use of direct speech and the way in which that direct speech is used for purposes of characterization.³⁸ Of the 450 lines in the poem 397 are direct

34/The headnote is "Ci comence le fabel e la cointise de dame Siriz," as in J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers, eds., *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1968), p. 80. All quotations from *Dame Sirith* are from Bennett and Smithers's edition on pp. 77–95, with line numbers inserted in the text. On the manuscript, Bodleian Library MS Digby 86, see Brian D. H. Miller ("The Early History of Bodleian MS. Digby 86," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 4 [1963]: 23–56), who puts the date between 1272 and 1282 and concludes that the provenance is the diocese of Worcester, where it was copied for a layman.

35/Edited by Bennett and Smithers, pp. 65–76. Five Old French animal tales are in fact called fabliaux by their authors, and James L. Taylor has recently argued that the fabliau genre should include such tales when they "exploit the comic possibilities" of character and situation in the way that fabliaux do (see his "Animal Tales as Fabliaux," *Reading Medieval Studies* 3 [1977]: 63–79). *The Fox and the Wolf* has many details in common with the fabliau genre and involves a trick played by one person on another, which is the narrative core of a fabliau. On its fabliau aspects see Heinz Bergner, "The Fox and the Wolf und die Gattung des Tierepos in der mittelhochdeutschen Literatur," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* n.s. 23 (1973), esp. 278; on its language see McKnight, "The Middle English Vox and Wolf," *PMLA* 23 (1908), esp. 499–500, 509, and *Middle English Humorous Tales in Verse*, pp. lix–lxi.

36/Edited by E. Kölbing, *Englische Studien* 7 (1884): 111–25. *Pennyworth* has parallels in French and German and also appears in a second English version, of the fifteenth century, that has some of the characteristics of a metrical romance. Though not a polished performance, *Pennyworth* in its earlier version has some similarities to *Dame Sirith*: for example, 226, or over half, of its 400 lines are dialogue, some of it quite lively and giving the appearance of being true to life; and there is an interesting change in the character of the merchant's mistress, conveyed by her own words, when she discovers that her lover has lost all of his goods and has killed a man.

37/On the international analogues, see McKnight, ed., pp. xxi–xxxvii; and Nicholai von Kreisler, "Satire in *Dame Sirith* and the *Weeping Bitch*," in *Essays in Honor of Esmond Linworth Marilla*, ed. Thomas Austin Kirby and William John Olive (Baton Rouge, La., 1970), pp. 379–87.

38/This is not to say that the French fabliaux have no direct speech—indeed, some French fabliaux have

speech, and the personalities and the attitudes of the three characters are gradually revealed through that direct speech, so that what were stock characters in the analogues—the amorous clerk, the young wife, and the old bawd—become in this poem developed characters, people who have a three-dimensional quality to them. Margery is the least developed, though we do learn something very revealing about her when she changes her mind so quickly and so easily toward the end of the poem after having held out earlier for a full 120 lines. Wilekin is presented as an amorous young fellow in his first interview with Margery, speaking the high-flown, courtly language of love that one expects from romance, but by the time of his meeting with Sirith we see a change from his earlier apparently noble sentiments to his revelation of his lustful designs on Margery, and by the end these designs are in the open, as he tells Sirith to “‘gange awai / Wile Ich and hoe [that is, Margery] shulen plaie’ ” (437–38). But the author’s *tour de force* is Sirith: when she first meets Wilekin, she seems almost shocked by his lustful purpose and tells him that he is sinful but that she is a holy woman who knows nothing of witchcraft and who spends her days saying the Paternoster and Creed. When he finally says that he will keep secret any help that she can give him, she immediately begins preparing the trick on Margery, and by the end she is acting just like herself, that is, like a procuress, responding to Wilekin, when he tells her to go away and leave him alone with Margery, with these words:

“Goddot, so I wille;
And loke þat þou hire tille
And strek out hire þes.
God ȝeue þe muchel kare
ȝeif þat þou hire spare,
þe wile þou mid hire bes.”
[439–44]

And she concludes the fabliau with these words:

“And wose is onwis
And for non pris
Ne con geten his leuemon,
I shal, for mi mede,
Garen him to spede,
For ful wel I con.”
[445–50]

These dramatic situations in which one character reveals himself through his own words are precisely what we find in Chaucer but seldom find in the French fabliaux in spite of their extensive use of direct speech. The Wife of Bath is the first Chaucerian character who comes to mind, of course, when one thinks of self-revelation (especially in the light of Sirith), perhaps also the Pardoner, or the Reeve in his prologue, but we can see the same thing in miniature within Chaucer’s fabliaux: in “The Miller’s Tale,” for example, in the conversations

more than 60 percent, e.g., *Du Bouchier d’Abeville* by Eustache d’Amiens—but rather that *Dame Sirith* has an exceptional amount (nearly 90 percent) and, as will become apparent in the following discussion, it serves to produce a more dramatic effect than one finds in the French fabliaux. For *Du Bouchier*, see the edition in Benson and Andersson, pp. 282–311; for other French fabliaux with a great deal of direct speech, see Reid, ed., pp. xi–xii.

between Nicholas and Alisoun near the beginning in which they reveal their desires toward each other, between John the carpenter and Nicholas as they plan how to avoid the flood, and between Absolon and Alisoun just before he kisses her; or in "The Reeve's Tale" when Alan and John are exaggerating their country-bumpkinness at the beginning and when they are planning their next moves in bed toward the end; or in "The Summoner's Tale" in the long discourse of Friar John to Thomas. The overall effect of both Chaucer's characters in his fabliaux and the characters in *Dame Sirith* is of a combination of stock character, based on the traditional narrative requirements of the genre, and individual, based on a character's gradual revelation of himself through his own words. Chaucer of course goes further than the author of *Dame Sirith* in his characterization because in addition he lets the Canterbury pilgrims themselves describe characters in their tales—the famous portraits of Alisoun and Absolon are the two obvious ones from "The Miller's Tale"—but the dramatic aspects of Chaucer's method of characterization are already present, at the beginning of the English fabliau tradition, in *Dame Sirith*.

The dramatic aspects of characterization of *Dame Sirith* are undoubtedly due in part to its close connection with the drama itself, for the poem is closely related to—perhaps was a source for—a fragmentary dramatic piece of eighty-four lines entitled *Interludium de Clerico et Puella*, which consists entirely of dialogue, has names in the margins of the manuscript in which it appears, indicating who is doing the speaking ("Clericus," "Puella," and "Mome Elwis"), and was undoubtedly intended to be performed by more than one actor.³⁹ *Dame Sirith* follows the *Interludium* in also indicating who is doing the speaking, this time with letters—"C" for *Clericus* (that is, Wilekin), "U" probably for *Uxor* (that is, Margery), and "F" perhaps for *Femina* (that is, Sirith)—but, by contrast, it has a first-person narrator (for the first twenty-four lines and then for twenty-nine others scattered throughout the poem), and it is usually assumed that the poem was performed by a solo mimic, who would have taken all three parts, probably changing his voice as he did so. Indeed, because of the occasional lack of clear transitions (especially at 278–79), the solo mimic would probably have had to act as well, perhaps in collaboration with a dog.⁴⁰ Thus, in addition to its dramatic method of characterization, the first English fabliau has overt characteristics of the drama in its form and in its relationship to the *Interludium*, and in view of these characteristics it is perhaps more than coincidence that "The Miller's Tale" has so many allusions to and patterns reminiscent of the mystery plays.⁴¹

39/See the edition in Bennett and Smithers, pp. 196–200, from which I quote later on; the *Interludium* appears in only one manuscript, London, British Library, Additional 23986. For the verbal similarities between *Dame Sirith* and the *Interludium*, see Bennett and Smithers, p. 372, and also McKnight, ed., p. xxix, n. 1. There has been some debate about whether *Dame Sirith* or the *Interludium* came first, but I follow Bennett and Smithers (p. 197), who believe that *Dame Sirith* could not be derived from the *Interludium* but that the *Interludium* could be derived from *Dame Sirith* or that both could go back to a "common antecedent version." The interlude is no doubt derived from the Latin *comedia*, and the word *interlude* itself is fairly common in English in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries.

40/See Richard Axton, "Popular Modes in the Earliest Plays," in *Medieval Drama*, ed. Neville Denny, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, no. 16 (London, 1973), pp. 17–18. On the dramatic aspects of both *Dame Sirith* and the *Interludium*, see further, Axton, pp. 14, 16–19, and also Bennett and Smithers, pp. 77–79, 196–97, and McKnight, ed., pp. xxxv–xxxix.

41/On "Chaucer's Use of the Mystery Plays in the *Miller's Tale*," see Kelsie B. Harder in *Modern Language Quarterly* 17 (1956): 193–98; see also Roscoe E. Parker, "'Pilates Voys,'" *Speculum* 25

Even more striking than its dramatic characteristics is the language of *Dame Sirith*, which is suggestive of the language of "The Miller's Tale," both in diction and in syntax. The decidedly noncourtly Wilekin (even his name makes this clear) speaks the courtly language of love that one expects from romance, *but* that one finds also in "The Miller's Tale" used by both Nicholas in his first encounter with Alisoun and Absolon in his paraphrase of the words of the *sponsus* from the "Song of Songs." First, Nicholas:

"Ywis, but if ich have my wille,
For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille.
.
Lemman, love me al atones,
Or I wol dyen, also God me save!"
[3277-81]

after which, as the Miller says, using the same kind of language, Nicholas

gan mercy for to crye.
And spak so faire, and profred him so faste,
That she hir love hym graunted atte laste.
[3288-90]

Now Absolon:

"Now, deere lady, if thy wille be,
I praye yow that ye wole rewe on me.
.
Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!
Wel litel thynken ye upon my wo,
That for youre love I swete there I go."
[3361-62, 3700-3702]

Here are some representative passages spoken by Wilekin in *Dame Sirith*. First, from his first interview with Margery:

"Dame, if hit is þi wille,
Boþ dernelike and stille,
Ich wille þe loue.
.
Swete lemmon, merci!
Same ne vilani
Ne bede I þe non;
Bote derne loue I þe bede."
[85-87, 127-30]

Now from his meeting with Sirith, in which he talks about his love for Margery:

"Bote if hoe wende hire mod
For serewe mon Ich wakese wod
Oþer miselue quelle.
Ich heuede ipout miself to slo.

(1950): 237-44. For larger patterns reminiscent of the mystery plays, see Beryl B. Rowland, "The Play of the *Miller's Tale*: A Game within a Game," *Chaucer Review* 5 (1970): 140-46. All quotations from "The Miller's Tale" in what follows are from F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2d ed. (London, 1957), with line numbers inserted in the text.

.
 Ich hire loue! Hit mot me spille
 Bote Ich gete hire to mi wille."
 [181-84, 233-34]

Some of Margery's responses to Wilekin's advances early in the poem sound a little like Alisoun's responses in "The Miller's Tale" to her two suitors. First to Nicholas, when he says he must have her all at once, she replies:

"I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!
 Why, lat be . . . lat be, Nicholas,
 Or I wol crie 'out, harrow' and 'allas'!
 Do wey youre handes, for youre curteisye!"
 [3284-87]

And then to Absolon, when he trills to her from under the window, she says:

"Go fro the wyndow, Jakke fool . . .
 As help me God, it wol nat be 'com pa me.'
 I love another—and elles I were to blame—
 Wel bet than thee, by Jhesu, Absolon.
 Go forth thy wey, or I wol caste a ston,
 And lat me slepe, a twenty devel wey!"
 [3708-13]

Now here are Margery's words to Wilekin in *Dame Sirith*:

"We, we! oldest þou me a fol?
 So Ich euer mote biden 3ol,
 þou art ounwis!

 Ich were ounseli if Ich lernede
 To be on hore.
 þat ne shal neuere be
 þat I shal don selk falsete,
 On bedde ne on flore.

 So bide Ich euere mete opere drinke,
 Her þou lesest al þi swinke."
 [115-17, 98-102, 133-34]

The language, especially that of the young wife, is even closer in the *Interludium de Clerico et Puella*. First, the Clericus, who speaks the courtly language of love:

"Y may say 'Hay, wayleuay!
 Y luf þe mar þan mi lif;
 þu hates me mar þan gayt dos chnief!
 þat es nouct for mysgilt—
 Certhes, for þi luf ham Hi spilt.
 A! suythe mayden, reu of me
 þat es ty luf hand ay sal be!
 For þe luf of þe moder of efne,
 þu mend þi mode and her my steuene!"
 [18-26]

And now some of the responses of the Puella:

“Do way! By Crist and Leonard,
No wil Y lufe na clerc fayllard,
Ne kep I herbherg clerc in huse no y flore,
Bot his hers ly wituten dore.
Go forth þi way, god sire,
For her hastu losyt al þi wile!

.
By Crist of heuene and Sant Ione,
Clerc of scole ne kep I non,
For many god wymman haf þai don scam.
By Crist, þu michtis haf ben at hame!

.
Go nu, truan! go nu, go!
For mikel canstu of sorw and wo.”

[7–12, 27–30, 35–36]

In a lyric in the famous early fourteenth-century manuscript Harley 2253, usually called “De Clerico et Puella,”⁴² consisting completely of dialogue and no doubt based on a situation similar to that in *Dame Sirith* and the *Interludium*, but with a different ending and no sign of the procuress, we find the Clericus saying, among other courtly sentiments:

“Weylawei! Whi seist þou so? þou rewe on me, þy man!
þou art euer in my þoht in londe wher ich am.
ʒef y deʒe for þi loue, hit is þe mykel sham;
þou lete me lyue ant be þi luf ant þou my suete lemman.”

[13–16]

And the Puella answering:

“Do wey, þou clerc, þou art a fol, wiþ þe bydde y noht chyde;
shalt þou neuer lyue þat day mi loue þat þou shalt byde.

.
Be stille, þou fol, y calle þe riht; cost þou neuer blynnne?”

[9–10, 17]

In all three of these poems on a related fabliau situation much of the humor comes from the juxtaposition of the courtly and artificial language on the one hand (spoken by noncourtly characters) and the colloquial, natural, realistic language, interspersed with fragmentary sentences and proverbial wisdom, on the other. We find the same language, the same juxtaposition of courtly and colloquial, and consequently much the same kind of humor in “The Miller’s Tale.”

It is not a question, however, of finding in *Dame Sirith* or in either of the two Clericus et Puella pieces a specific source for the language of “The Miller’s Tale.”

42/The edition I have used is G. L. Brook, *The Harley Lyrics*, 3d ed. (Manchester, 1964), pp. 62–63, with line numbers inserted in the text. As Arthur K. Moore notes in *The Secular Lyric in Middle English* (Lexington, Ky., 1951), this poem is “not properly to be referred to any well-defined genre, though clearly sharing features with the debate and the *chanson dramatique* . . .” (p. 71); and see also Donaldson, n. 4. In the same note Donaldson comments on the connections between this poem and “The Miller’s Tale,” in a lyric rather than a fabliau context; he notes, however, that “the situation is, of course, a very old one (see *Dame Sirith*), and the Harley lyric may go back remotely to the same source from which Chaucer’s immediate source stems.”

The relationship of the four poems is much more general. E. Talbot Donaldson has argued in his essay on the language of "The Miller's Tale," "Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's Tale," that Chaucer took the popular poetic idiom of love from the English romance and the English lyric and put it into the fabliau context of "The Miller's Tale" in such a way that it "tends to make the tale a parody of the popular romance, rather like *Sir Thopas* in effect, though less exclusively literary," and finally a "parody of all courtly romance, the ideals of which are subjected to the harshly naturalistic criticism of the fabliau."⁴³ Since the publication of Donaldson's essay in 1951 critics have assumed that the parody was Chaucer's own brilliant contribution to "The Miller's Tale," but it is striking that as early as *Dame Sirith*, that is, at the beginning of the English fabliau tradition, we find not only the juxtaposition of courtly and colloquial that I have just noted but also a parody of the language of English romance suggestive of, though naturally not as artistically or as fully developed as, that which we find in "The Miller's Tale."

To take two examples, both well known. First, "hende." In Chaucer's genuine works this word appears thirteen times; in eleven of these it is used as an epithet for Nicholas in "The Miller's Tale"—"Hende Nicholas." As "a conventional epithet of praise,"⁴⁴ the word was widely used in Middle English romance and lyric to describe both heroes and heroines. The word had a variety of meanings, ranging from "Near, close by, handy" (*MED* 4a), its original meaning, to such extended meanings as "courteous, gracious, refined, gentle" (*OED* 4; also *MED* 1a and 2c), its most frequent meaning in English romance, and "Skilled, clever, crafty" (*MED* 3a). In fact, Chaucer plays with all of these meanings in "The Miller's Tale," since Nicholas is by turns "Near, close by, handy," "Skilled, clever, crafty," "courteous, gracious, refined, gentle" (at least as the Miller sees it), and even "Ready or skilful with the hand, dexterous" (*OED* 3; cf. *MED* 3a), a possible transferred meaning. As Donaldson points out on page 181, "It is clear from these usages, as well as from the even more eloquent lack of its

43/E. Talbot Donaldson, "Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's Tale," p. 29; all quotations are taken from the reprint in Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York, 1970), pp. 13–29. Though I disagree with Donaldson about the immediate (though not the ultimate) sources of Chaucer's diction, it will be obvious in what follows that I am indebted to his excellent essay for my analysis of Chaucer's use of "hende" and "derne" in "The Miller's Tale." On "hende," see also Paul E. Beichner, "Chaucer's Hende Nicholas," *Mediaeval Studies* 14 (1952): 151–53. Other useful studies of Chaucer's language in his fabliaux are Haldeen Braddy, "Chaucer's Bilingual Idiom," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 32 (1968): 1–6; and Donald MacDonald, "Proverbs, *Sententiae*, and Exempla in Chaucer's Comic Tales: The Function of Comic Misapplication," *Speculum* 41 (1966): 453–65. Garder Stillwell, in "The Language of Love in Chaucer's Miller's and Reeve's Tales and in the Old French Fabliaux," *Journal of English and German Philology* 54 (1955): 693–99, is certainly correct in pointing out that Old French fabliaux often contain "would-be-elegant love-diction in ironic contexts" (p. 693), but he shows no evidence that Chaucer was indebted to the actual language of the Old French fabliaux for the idiom of "The Miller's Tale."

44/This quotation is the headnote to the fourth meaning for "hende" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), "Pleasant in dealing with others; courteous, gracious; kind, gentle, 'nice.'" I have taken the meanings in what follows from either the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*) or the *OED*, whichever has seemed to me more appropriate. For "hende" I have checked the fifty-eight occurrences listed in Michael J. Preston, *A Concordance to the Middle English Shorter Poem*, pt. 1 (Leeds, 1975) in the anthologies from which he took them, and I find no evidence that the word is *déclassé* in the lyric. It is used primarily in its sense of "gracious, merciful, loving" (of the Virgin; *MED* 2a) or in its sense of "courteous, gracious, refined, gentle," and it appears always to be used seriously, even (in religious poetry) into the fifteenth century.

use in any genuinely courtly context, that for Chaucer 'hende' had become so *déclassé* and shopworn as to be ineligible for employment in serious poetry."

In *Dame Sirith* "hende" is used three times. Early in the poem, when Wilekin addresses Margery, he uses it in the expected sense, especially given his use of the courtly idiom of the romance hero, of "courteous, gracious, refined, gentle"—" 'Certes, dame, þou seist as hende' " (61)—and Margery during the same conversation uses the word in the same sense to describe her husband—" 'Mi louerd is curteis mon and hende, / And mon of pris' " (118–19). So far, so good, just what we expect. But then the narrator, in one of the few passages in which he speaks in his own voice, explains how Wilekin then goes, for a cure for his love-longing, to see "dame Siriz þe hende" (154). There is no reason at this point in the poem to doubt that the word means what it meant earlier—"courteous, gracious, refined, gentle"—but by the end of the poem, as Sirith gradually reveals her true nature, we see the same associations that we see in "The Miller's Tale"—certainly "Skilled, clever, crafty," perhaps "Near, close by, handy," perhaps even "Ready or skilful with the hand, dexterous." "Hende" in the sense of "courteous, gracious, refined, gentle" can therefore be used of Sirith only in an ironic sense, as it is of Nicholas in "The Miller's Tale."

The second example is "derne," a word meaning "secret." The conventions of *fin amour*, at least as poets imagined it, dictated that a love affair had to be kept secret in order to preserve the lady's good name, and that a man had to pine away in secret for a long time in order to be worthy of the lady's love. We see many examples of this convention, often humorous ones, in Chaucer—in the *Parliament of Fowls*, in "The Merchant's Tale," in "The Franklin's Tale," among others. The most common phrase for this convention in English romance and lyric was "derne love" ("secret love"), but "derne" developed some negative characteristics over the years, as the meanings and the citations in the *MED* indicate, and for Chaucer the word must have lost some of its ideal value, for he uses it only three times—all of them in "The Miller's Tale," to describe Nicholas's "device for getting away with adultery."⁴⁵ The devaluation of the word can be seen very clearly in *Dame Sirith*, where it is used once in its adjectival form and once in its adverbial form. Wilekin begins his courtship by telling Margery that he has loved her for many years, and his first request is that he be able to love her both "dernelike" (86, "secretly") and "stille" (86, "silently, without speaking"), not an unreasonable request for a courtly lover to make. But the alert Margery ignores Wilekin's "stille" and hears only "dernelike," and replies that it would be wrong of her to become a whore (97–102)! As the conversation progresses, and Wilekin becomes more insistent, he drops "stille" and says " 'Bote derne loue I þe bede' " (130), to which Margery replies, also more insistently, " 'So bide Ich euere mete oþer drinke, / Her þou lesest al þi swinke' " (133–34), where it is difficult not to hear the same sexual overtones to "swinke" that we hear in "The Reeve's Tale" or in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." Later, in Wilekin's interview with Sirith (especially 232–33), it becomes very clear that, by offering Margery "derne loue," he had in mind the same goal as Nicholas in "The Miller's Tale" had when he described his own "deerne love" for Alisoun (3277–78).

45/Donaldson, p. 20.

It is perhaps foolhardy to try to make a case for an English fabliau tradition on the basis of *Dame Sirith* and two related poems, and certainly the critics who turn to the romance and the lyric as sources for Chaucer's language and for his parodies of courtly diction have a much larger body of material to draw on, but if, as I have tried to show, there must have been an English fabliau tradition before Chaucer and if *Dame Sirith* is representative of that tradition—and I like to think it is because it has a spirit and a dramatic technique that are quite different from the French—then Chaucer had a precedent and a model in the tradition for the diction and the parody that he puts into "The Miller's Tale." Naturally I would not want to argue that *Dame Sirith* is as interesting or as well constructed as "The Miller's Tale," and I would certainly not deny that Chaucer owes a debt to the English romance tradition for a great variety of techniques and details in his works. But for the particular elements in "The Miller's Tale" that I have noted in this essay, I believe the fabliau tradition provides a better precedent and a clearer model than the romance and lyric traditions: the parody of the courtly language of love from the specifically English romance is already there; the juxtaposition of the courtly and the colloquial is present in a way that it almost never is in romance and lyric; we even find the dramatic aspects of characterization that Chaucer later puts to such good use in his fabliaux and in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." The fact that there are so few extant fabliaux in English before Chaucer's time is no reason to say that Chaucer "had to create [the English fabliau] form by and for himself."⁴⁶ Poets, especially medieval ones, rarely did that. We have come to recognize in the past forty years that Chaucer was well read and "well listened" in a number of English genres—the romance, the lyric, the sermon, the proverb—and that he puts them to use in his writings. Because of its influence on the technique and idiom of "The Miller's Tale" and other of Chaucer's fabliaux, I believe the English fabliau should now be added to the list.

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46/As Robbins says in "The English Fabliau," p. 235.