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Fabricating a Fabliau: Façade and Finance in the Shipman's Tale

Rebecca Welzenbach

Of all the bawdy tales, or fabliaux, in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (*CT*), the Shipman's Tale (ShT) tends to alienate the most readers and critics, many of whom find it lifeless and plain compared to other, more colorful tales like the Miller's (MilT), Reeve's (RvT) and Merchant's (MerT) tales. Read as it usually is, as a fabliau that reduces sexual relationships to the level of commerce, the ShT seems flat and lacks a moral standard by which to judge the characters—anticlimactic and amoral, it is neither a tale of "*most solaas*" nor of "*best sentence*." However, Herry Bailey, who judges each story based on these criteria, lauds the tale, and so we must dig deeper than the surface to unearth its moral and entertainment value. I suggest an alternative approach to the straightforward reading of this fabliau: rather than the substance of the tale, the fabliau serves as the form. By telling a story of trade in the familiar guise of a fabliau, which the audience would inevitably associate with deception and adultery, the Shipman takes a stand on the morality of financial exchange, relegating it to the realm of *japing* and *swyving*, which elevates the tale to a level of "*best sentence*" that is absent from the fabliau on its own. Further, the Shipman, by drawing a comparison between merchants and monks who cheat their friends both financially and sexually, all while apparently presenting an honest and just merchant as the hero of his tale, *quytes* the Merchant pilgrim, who represents the class of his biggest business rivals. In this way the tale also acquires a playful aspect of "*most solaas*," and becomes a valuable contribution to the pilgrims' tale-telling contest.

I. The Shipman's Tale: a Critical Castoff

In her chapter on the ShT tale in *The Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, Helen Cooper's first comment on the ShT is to point out the problematic feminine pronouns in the first 15 lines as evidence for the common argument that the tale was originally written for the Wife of Bath (278). Thus, before commencing her analysis, she effectively divorces the tale from its final narrator. She adds that "teller and tale have less connection here than in any other of the *Canterbury Tales*"

(278). The evidence for the tale's original designation for the Wife of Bath is compelling, and seems to satisfy many critics. William Lawrence suggests that Chaucer's placement of the tale with the Shipman was simply an afterthought, even a mistake because "for the moment there was too much joyous writing still to be done, and too many business distractions" (Lawrence, "Chaucer" 68). However, to quote G.L. Kittredge, "'Chaucer always knew what he was about'" (qtd. in Chapman 4). In reading ShT tale we should look further than the conclusion that Chaucer simply dumped the tale with the Shipman for lack of a better place.

It is reasonable to do as Cooper does, explaining the mysterious feminine pronouns in lines such as "He moot us clothe, and he moot us arraye" (ShT 7.12), which refer inclusively to wives as a population, as editorial work left unfinished by Chaucer, perhaps after reassigning the tale from the Wife of Bath. In any case, this supposition makes more sense than Robert L. Chapman's colorful depiction of this section as an opportunity for the Shipman to impersonate a woman, performing this part of the tale "in a piping falsetto" (5). However, when dealing with the reassignment of the ShT, I would not go so far as to say that Chaucer's "full interest was not engaged when he made this shift" (Lawrence, "Chaucer" 68). While the argument for the tale's connection to Alisoun of Bath is convincing, it is a mistake to end the analysis of the tale here, if only for the reason that Chaucer himself did not. It is important to examine this tale in the context it holds today, and not simply assume that, because the tale may have had a former place, its final one holds no meaning.

In order to find substantive meaning in the ShT, it is necessary to look beyond the surface of the fabliau itself. As John Finlayson writes, "[c]riticism which approaches [the tale] as a dramatic story oversimplifies and confesses disappointment" (336). Although Finlayson will ultimately make a different argument than I do, we begin from the same observation: that this tale, as is, reads a bit flat when compared to those that that come before. Rather than tacking another—less entertaining—fabliau on to the string of tales before it, the Shipman takes advantage of the conventions of the well-known genre, using the fabliau as a device to comment on the trickery and immorality inherent in economic exchange. Rather than equating marriage and sex with commodities as is usually

understood, I suggest the opposite: the Shipman uses the fabliau genre as a frame to make a moral comment on financial exchange, or at least on the men who practice it, by tying it to the immoral, deceptive, and selfish themes that readers and audiences expect to find in a fabliau. Therefore, the Shipman's Tale is more complex than merely "as close as any in the Canterbury series to the simple telling of a story" (Cooper 281).

II. Fulfilling Fabliau Conventions: a Bawdy [Tale] is More than the Sum of its Parts

There is no quibbling among scholars that Chaucer treats the ShT differently than any of the other fabliaux in the *CT*. An examination of the differences between this fabliau and other fabliaux such as the MilT, RvT and MerT tales will illustrate that the ShT must be written for an entirely different kind of interpretation. As Peter Nicholson points out in "The Shipman's Tale and the Fabliaux," "[w]hile Chaucer's use of the fabliaux in this poem is evident, it does not follow the pattern of any of his other tales. . . It has none of the accustomed bawdiness of the other fabliaux" (583). This story is stripped to the bare bones. Unlike the other tales, the husband and wife of the Shipman's tale are anonymous and the monk, daun John, has a deliberately generic name. Furthermore, rather than telling of "A rich gnof...he was a carpenter" (MilT 1.388-89), "[a] millere...as any pecok he was proud and gay" (RvT 1.3925-26), or "[a] worthy knyght, that born was of Pavye" (MerT 1.1246) as his main character, the ShT revolves around a merchant. This is relevant for the commercial overtones of the tale, of course, but also because, unlike the other characters' professions, the merchant is the stock social position for the husband to hold in the generic French fabliau (Hellman 188). The monk, who replaces the clerks and apprentices of Chaucer's other fabliaux, is also typical of the original French form. This suggests that Chaucer is drawing attention not to the story of the individuals, but to the conventional positions they hold in the "favorite plot of the deceived husband, the faithless wife, and the demanding lover (here, as often, a cleric)" (Lawrence, "Chaucer" 57). Lawrence and Cooper both attest to the concise, action-packed story, which contrasts with the digressions, interjections and commentary by the tellers of the other fabliaux. This tale is "not impeded, as elsewhere in Chaucer's fabliau tales, by digressions, by citation of learned authorities, or by illustrative

exempla" (Lawrence 57). Once again, this draws the reader's attention from each character's individual actions and directs it toward the inevitable chain of events, the deception and adultery that are essential to a fabliau.

Chaucer's physical descriptions of his characters in the ShT contribute significantly to its overall brevity. In "The Portraits in Chaucer's Fabliaux," Louis Haselmayer inadvertently presents another piece of evidence to support the carefully abstract nature of this particular fabliau, as compared to the others in the *CT*. Louis Haselmayer writes that "[f]or some reason, [Chaucer] did not incorporate any formal descriptions into *The Shipman's Tale*, although the intrigue plot of a merchant, his wife and a priest provided ample opportunity for them" (312). He goes on to describe the lively portraits of the Miller's Alisoun and the Reeve's Symkin, dismissing the ShT completely for its lack of the vivid character portraits that color the other tales (fairly enough, as its lack of portraiture makes it irrelevant to his argument).

The contrast with the other fabliaux is striking. For example, Alisoun, the young wife in the MilT, has approximately 40 lines of description, from her eyebrows, "ful smale ypuled" (1.3245) to her shoes, "laced on her legges hye" (1.3267). The Miller's wife in the RvT, too, has over 25 lines devoted to the description of her history, from her upbringing "yfostred in a nonnerie" (1.3946) to her "somdel smoterlich" reputation (1.3963). The unnamed wife of the ShT, however, is presented in just two lines: "A wyf he hadde of excellent beautee; / And compaignable revelous was she" (7.3-4). The "some reason" for omitting description, which Haselmayer does not care to explore, is consistent with the bare bones structure of the ShT as compared to Chaucer's other fabliaux. Chaucer follows the same formula in each of his bawdy tales: like the ShT, the MilT and the RvT also introduce their "heroines" with reference to the fact that the carpenter or miller "hadde" a "wyf." However, in the ShT, Chaucer stops there. This lack of portraiture, then, is another example of how the ShT ignores its characters as three-dimensional individuals with animated faces and histories in order to maintain them as abstract figures in a formula.

The very factors that so distinctly differentiate the ShT from Chaucer's other reinvented fabliaux place it securely within the standard 13th-century French model for a fabliau.

Lawrence, citing the "characteristic technique of the jongleurs" (56), along with Nicholson (583) and Janette Richardson (303) all explicitly mention that the ShT is the closest of Chaucer's tales to the formulaic French fabliau. John Finlayson and John McGalliard further support this assertion by pointing out characteristics unique to the ShT among Chaucer's fabliaux that correspond to typical characteristics of the French fabliau as summarized by Robert Hellman, Richard O'Gorman, and others. Once again, rather than fleshing out the formula to create a unique story of his own, as in the case of the other fabliaux, Chaucer has pared down the tale to its roots, preserving the historical conventions to the best of his ability. It is these conventions that allow Chaucer, and the Shipman, to create a tale that is easily and without doubt recognized as a fabliau while discussing something else entirely. As Nicholson puts it, "[t]he fabliau offered. . . a set of well-tested conventions of subject and style whose spirit Chaucer could adopt even when he found his specific story material elsewhere"(583).

If Chaucer follows all the rules of the French fabliau model, why do we doubt his full use of the genre in this tale? As many critics and readers have pointed out, although Chaucer does follow fabliau convention, as a bawdy, entertaining tale, the ShT fails to satisfy. Johnston and Owen note that, if the 13th century French fabliau "embrace[s] a multitude of sins, the chief one depicted is lechery" (viii). The ShT certainly fulfills this requirement, however, not so another: that the "grotesque elements are over-emphasized" (xii). While the tellers of MerT and the RvT delight in such graphic vulgarities as ""And sodeynly anon this Damyan / Gan pullen up the smok and in he throng" (MerT 4.2352-53) and "he priketh hard and depe as he were mad" (RvT 1.4231), the ShT describes the sexual exchange between the wife and monk as no more than the (certainly contented) fulfillment of a deal: "And this accord parfourned was in dede. / In myrthe al nyght a bisy lyf they lede" (ShTT 7.317-18). Joseph Bédier's nearly universally attested classic definition of the fabliau, "un conte à rire en vers" (qtd. in Hellman 182), is thus not fulfilled. While Chaucer includes the elements that supposedly make the fabliau entertaining—deception, wordplay, illicit sex—the tale, while certainly ironic in its turns of events, is too flat to be funny.

In short, then, in the ShT, Chaucer creates a tale that stands out from his other fabliaux in very specific ways that tie it

closely to the generic conventions of the French fabliau, while avoiding the real core of the tale—humor and shocking immorality. Chaucer's most striking aberration from either the typical French fabliau or his own other fabliaux is the anti-climactic ending. However, this unconventional ending serves the same end that his slavery to convention serves throughout the tale: elimination of the personal, the humorous and the emotional. Rather than being humiliated, like John of the MilT, or horrified like January of the MerT, this merchant husband is presumably ignorant of the way in which his wife got her hands on the one hundred franks he lends to daun John, and is thus spared any public or private mortification. Unlike in the typical "Lover's Gift Regained" model, which forms an even more universal basis for this tale than the fabliau alone (McGalliard 1), when the husband reports to the wife that the third party (the monk in this case) claims to have returned the borrowed money to the wife, she is embarrassed and without recourse—the final victim of the tale. By contrast, in the ShT the wife truthfully, if boldly, replies to her husband that she has already spent the money on clothing for herself and will repay the debt in sexual favors—and no other way.

Finlayson writes: "In the other fabliaux we laugh at what we know to be immoral...Here, there is no joy of illicit sex, no rampant lust, no pining Absalon or love-sick Damian...Sex may be the commodity of the transaction, but it is almost as abstract as coffee beans on the Chicago commodities exchange" (348). At the end of Chaucer's version of the tale, everyone is satisfied. No one has been humiliated or cheated in a way that is painful or damaging. There is no one to sympathize with, and no one to laugh at. Although it is obvious that the monk is (or perhaps should be) a rather deplorable character, because his deception causes no harm it is difficult to judge him—there is nothing to resent, no one to conspire with. Richardson notes that this is unusual for Chaucer, pointing out that "no one is subjected to the ludicrous humiliation with which Chaucer elsewhere delights in punishing the most deserving of the offenders" (303). By adjusting the end of his story, Chaucer effectively cuts the reader off from connecting with the characters on an individual level.

It is this lack of emotion, of morality, that makes the Shipman's Tale so disappointing as a fabliau. Readers know how to handle the immorality of Chaucer's other fabliaux.

Although the standard fabliau glorifies this ignoble behavior rather than punishing it, the immorality of adultery and deception are clear enough. The ShT, in contrast, is entirely amoral—there is no standard by which to judge the characters, no negative consequences (for anyone) as a result of his or her selfish and deceitful behavior. After the lively imagery and humor of the previous fabliaux, the Shipman's Tale is a bit of a letdown. Its flat, generic quality undercuts both the potential morality and humor of the tale. Read as a straightforward fabliau, then, the ShT is neither a tale of "*best sentence*" nor "*most solaas*"—nor is it, in essence, fabliau, which, according to Hellman, must be funny and must have a moral purpose (182). This is the major clue that the fabliau cannot be the substance of the tale. Rather, while "retaining implicitly and explicitly the fabliau content" (Finalyson 339), Chaucer does something completely new. In itself the tale is a disappointment, so we must conclude, as Richardson does, that "the surface narrative is a mere façade of bawdry" (303) disguising a more subtle topic under the easily recognized (and much beloved) conventions of a tale of trickery and sex.

III. Overturning Conventions: Fabliau as Frame, Monk as Merchant

The real substance of the tale is, as its language makes abundantly clear, the matter of trade—buying, selling and exchanging. The tale opens with juxtaposition between the "chiere and reverence" (7.6) a young and beautiful wife brings to social events and the unfortunate "dispense" (7.5) that she costs the household, and the references to money continue throughout. The wife equates money with sex when she promises to repay her loan from the monk with whatever "plesance and service" (7.191) he desires, an exchange she uses again when she tells her husband to "score [her debt] upon my taille" (7.416). Rather than simply describing the sexual action of the tale in economic terms, as is usually understood, Chaucer does the opposite by using fabliau conventions to put financial exchange and speculation on the level of infidelity and illicit sex. We shall see that, as Richardson puts it, "worked over by an artist like Chaucer, an overt fabliau can set forth a penetrating moral insight" (312).

The doubling in the vocabulary of commodity, referring to both sex and economics, makes clear what will become the crux

of the tale: "as the story moves toward its obvious conclusion, all the conventional roles of the adulterous triangle are completely subsumed beneath the elaborate and serious way in which each plays out his merchant role" (Finalyson 346). Before the action of the tale begins, the Shipman presents middlemen, those who profit from exchange rather than production, as dangerous with the metaphor of the doubtlessly questionable involvement of an outsider in the interaction between husband and wife:

> And if that he noght may, per aventure,
> Or ellis list no swich dispence endure,
> But thynketh it is wasted and ylost,
> Thanne moot another payen for oure cost,
> Or lenne us gold, and that is perilous. (7.15-19)

If the traders at each end of a deal fail to work directly and honestly with one another, as partners in a marriage should, then middlemen, money-exchangers, and lenders will become involved, taking advantage of the situation and, as the Shipman states explicitly, this is "perilous." The most important parallel here is that of the monk and the merchant, for it is the monk and not the merchant who represents that class in this tale. "The two men—one honest, one flagrantly not so—both operate in exactly the same way" (Richardson 306). The Shipman describes the monk as "manly of dispense" (7.43) linking him immediately to the earlier warning about dealing financially with outsiders, and setting him up as the inevitable facilitator (and benefactor) of the exchange to come—willing to spare no "dispense" where the husband is not.

Just as the merchant makes his profit of one thousand franks by taking a cut of the investments he solicits of wealthy men in Paris, not by making or selling anything of substance, the monk ultimately "takes a cut" of the exchange between husband and wife. The wife wants money from her husband to pay for her dress. Ultimately no more than an "opportunist," (McGalliard 4) the monk facilitates the exchange, puts up none of his own money, loses nothing on the deal, and yet he comes out ahead. Like the merchant's successful dealings in Paris, the monk's profit is the reward for his speculation and willingness to take a risk. The monk, described as "a merchant by profession and character" (Nicholson 589), borrows from the merchant on the credit of their friendship—just as the merchant explains men of his kind must: "We may creaunce whil we

have a name" (7.289). Like a merchant, the monk trades on the value of his reputation, his name, and so, like a merchant, the monk must also live with caution and self-consciousness. "An outward show of wealth is part of any wise merchant's business activity," Richardson points out (305), and daun John puts up this front: he never fails to bring gifts with him when he visits the merchant and his wife, and thus, the wife has no doubt that the monk has the resources to lend her the 100 franks she needs. Perhaps the most important parallel to support the relation of monk to merchant is the resemblance between daun John and the Merchant pilgrim, as described in the General Prologue (GP). Like the Merchant, the monk of the tale "wel his wit bisette" (1.279) in order to disguise his actions from both the merchant and his wife. "So estatly was he of his governaunce" (1.281) that "ther wist no wight that he was in dette" (1.280), says pilgrim Geoffrey of the Merchant. The Shipman echoes this after the monk and wife make their exchange: "For noon of them, ne no wight in the toun, / Hath of daun John right no suspicioun" (7.321-22). Both the Merchant and daun John are capable of flying under the radar to protect their own interests.

Through the symbolic portrayal of the economic trader as a lecherous monk in a fabliau, the Shipman is able to express his opinion on economic exchange in no uncertain terms. He interchanges merchants' ability to earn a profit out of nothing with the idea of illicit sex, obtained through trickery and deceit—all of which are implied in this use of the fabliau as a frame for his tale. Making the middleman lover a monk rather than a clerk or soldier may be even more of a sting to merchants who exchange money rather than commodities: like a monk, who should not generate progeny, the merchant who deals solely in financial exchange is unproductive, suggesting that this business is self-serving and greedy, like the monk's empty sexual act. Furthermore, a monk would not pay taxes and would, instead be supported by the state. In the same way, perhaps, the Shipman expresses that the money-exchange merchant is supported by the work of others without contributing to the general good. Reading the tale in this sense, then, the Shipman regains a moral standard by taking an adamant stance on the issue of financial exchange and speculation—and thus, the tale regains value of "*best sentence*."

In addition to providing a clear moral judgment, and therefore a position from which readers can make sense of the

tale, a symbolic, rather than literal, reading of this tale also makes the ShT appropriate and highly relevant to the teller. By disguising his critique of the money trading merchants as a fabliau featuring a successful and dignified merchant, the Shipman is cleverly able to "quyte" the Merchant pilgrim, who represents a class of professional colleagues with whom the Shipman would have to deal with often. This presentation of an obvious merchant who is respectable, which actually criticizes and disparages merchants by aligning them with the dishonest monk, makes the tale entertaining and worthwhile for its "*solaas*" as well as its "*sentence*." In order to appreciate the ShT, then, we must look beyond the unsatisfying fabliau, which, though conventionally correct, fails to fulfill our expectations of "sexual titillation . . ., intellectual and comic stimulation. . ., and moral satisfaction (Finlayson 337). Although a symbolic reading of the ShT may not have been Chaucer's original intention when he may have written the tale for the Wife of Bath, this alternative reading provides depth and meaning for the ShT as readers attempt to make sense of it, not in the context for which it may once have been designated, but in the place it actually holds in the *CT* today.

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