

Ben Parsons, University of Leicester

‘No Laughing Matter: Fraud, the Fabliau and Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale’

From the point of view of genre, the Franklin’s Tale is one of Chaucer’s most puzzling texts. It not only presents an Italian novella as a Breton lai, but splices further material from chronicles, saints’ lives and classical and patristic literature into its overall form. This paper aims to deepen the Tale’s complexity by noting the presence of a further, unremarked genre in the text, that of the fabliau. In particular, it pays close attention to the figure of the magician, arguing that this character and his tacitly rationalised sorcery are designed to evoke the rascally *clerics escoliers* of the French texts, whose trickery often has comparable methods and results. The wider implications for interpreting the poem in light of these allusions are also considered.

Address: Dr Ben Parsons
School of English
University of Leicester
Leicester, UK
LE1 7RH

Email: bp62@le.ac.uk

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Of all the questions which surround the Franklin's Tale, one of Chaucer's most wilfully cryptic texts, among the most complex is the issue of its genre. In the words of Tony Davenport (2004, p.33), Chaucer's 'drawing attention to genre' in the Prologue of the Tale seems less designed to 'offer a helpful pigeonhole to the reader' and more 'to point to the variety of literary forms' they must grapple with. In terms of its actual content, the form of the Tale is straightforward enough. Since the work of Rajna (1903) in the first decade of the twentieth century, and the restatement of his conclusions by Lowes (1918), Havely (1980), Wallace (1985) and Battles (1999), it has been widely accepted that Chaucer borrowed the story from the fourth of the Love Questions posed by Boccaccio in *Il Filocolo*. Although a small number of commentators have regarded *Decameron* 10.5 as an alternative source, most notably McGrady (1977) and Taylor (2000), these voices are still in the minority. Yet despite drawing the story from an Italian novella, Chaucer obscures its provenance, performing what Germaine Dempster calls 'one of his little impostures' (1932, p.62). He instead assigns it to a different tradition altogether, presenting it as an example of a lay 'olde gentil Breitous...rymeyed in hir firste Briton tonge' (V.709–711).¹ In other words, there is a puzzling disparity between the stated and actual genre of the Tale, as Chaucer 'chose to rework Boccaccio's prose conte as a Breton lai', despite the fact that there is 'no hint of an association with this literary form in Boccaccio's text' (Percy 2009, p.167).

The interpretive problems this creates are further exacerbated by Chaucer's refusal to stay within the lines of his chosen genre. As readers have noted from the medieval annotators onwards, Chaucer draws a variety of further sources into the Tale, freely adding patristic, classical, hagiographic, and historiographic material to it. His most obvious debts are to Jerome and Geoffrey of Monmouth, who supplied Dorigen's 'pleyne' with its 'woful maydens' and the Tale's characters with their names (V.1376), but there are also possible nods to Ovid and the legend of the Northumbrian saint Baldred (Reisner and Reisner 1979). None of these ancillary texts fits very comfortably with the form adopted by the poem: as Jamie C. Fumo offers, the net result is a 'striking classicization of the genre of romance', although one that is not without its 'awkward and incongruent' aspects (2004, p.623). To complicate matters still further, even the impersonation of a lay is itself eccentric, a point

¹ All references to *The Canterbury Tales* and other works by Chaucer are taken from Benson 2008. All subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

made at least as far back as W.M Hart (1909, p.210). The Tale is ‘in all important ways an anomaly’ when compared to other surviving lays (Beston 1974, p.320), as its material, its themes, and even its meter are not consistent with other examples of the form. It is the ‘only one in decasyllabic couplets’ for instance (Harrington 1988, p.73), and its overall focus on marital ethics and infusion of ‘literary form with philosophical ambiguities’ is at least unusual (Collette 1992, pp.408–409). In sum, as Bonnie Wheeler notes, the Tale might be a ‘poem with a label that conveys a rare Chaucerian generic signal’, but ‘generic expectations are both met and complicated’ throughout, not least of all by its ‘explicit theological, political, and philosophical posturings’ (1993, p.97).

The purpose of the present essay is not to offer a possible solution to this confusion, but to add a further dimension to it. It aims to highlight the intrusion into the Tale of a further and perhaps surprising tradition, that of the fabliau. As this paper will hopefully make clear, Chaucer permits several elements from the fabliau to make their way into the Tale, continuing his experiments with the form found in the Merchant’s Tale and the first fragment. The implications of this admixture for interpreting the poem as a whole will also be considered.

Locating overlaps between the Franklin’s Tale and the fabliaux is in fact nothing new, as a small amount of commentary has already hinted at this possibility. For instance, Erik Hertog and Scott Vaszily have both acknowledged that the ‘triangular’ plot of the Tale (Hertog 1991, p.160), with its focus on ‘a girl with two lovers’, sets up a ‘web of links’ that connects it with the Miller’s and Merchant’s Tales (Vaszily 1977, p.525). This idea is taken slightly further by Helen Cooper (1983, p.227), who posits the Merchant’s Tale as a key to understanding the marital crisis of Dorigen and Arveragus, stating that ‘the Franklin’s Tale picks up closely from the Merchant’s’ in a number of common motifs and themes, ‘so that they become variations on a series of connecting themes...episodes, conventions, images, and ideas are mirrored or distorted’. A different but comparable tack is pursued by Glenn Burger (2003, p.113), who sees the Franklin’s Tale as a culmination of the ‘masochistic contract’ and ‘disorganization of sexed and gendered social relationships’ evident in the misadventures of Nicholas and January. Robert Edwards (2002, pp.9–10) also sees traces of the fabliau in the Tale, as a darker current lurking behind the genteel surface: ‘in the tales of married love recounted by the Clerk and Franklin, fabliau is the alternative story that always threatens to be told if their narrative resolutions falter’. In short, a number of critics have already

suspected that the Tale might at least run parallel to the fabliau, inserting it amongst Chaucer's own contributions to the form in order to trigger its latent complexities. However, what has been less widely noted are the echoes of fabliau convention within the boundaries of the text itself. In effect, the comparisons and contrasts these scholars highlight also take place inside the Tale, as it invites fabliau topoi into its own framework, and generates ironies and ambiguities out of the resulting interplay between fabliau and romantic convention.

The presence of these elements becomes apparent when two of Chaucer's most significant additions to Boccaccio are considered: the replacement of the garden in winter with the submergence of the 'blakke rokes', and the substitution of Boccaccio's elderly rustic Tebano with 'the book-learned, university-trained clerk-magician of Orleans' (Lucas 1995, p.23). This new figure and his craft have provoked a broad range of responses. Early readers tended to take the narrator's description of his 'jogelrye' and 'supersticious cursednesse' at face value (V.1265, 1272). For instance, an anonymous contributor to the *Westminster Review* in 1864 describes his 'spells' as 'a very innocent magic' (p. 30), while Shakespeare seems to have regarded them as 'potent art', if Prospero is indeed modelled on the clerk, as Thompson (1975), Hillman (1983), Simons (1985) and Knopp (2004) aver. However, towards the middle of the twentieth century critics began to reconsider the role of the clerk, and the nature of the 'illusions' he apparently performs. In particular, they began to doubt whether they qualify as magic at all.

One episode relevant to this question is the demonstration of the clerk's skills in lines 1189–1204. Here, the clerk shows Aurelius and his brother 'forestes, parkes of wilde deer' and 'knyghtes justyng in a playn', all without leaving his study, or being 'remoeved...out of the hous'. This apparent accomplishment was addressed at length by Laura Hibbard Loomis in a landmark essay of 1958. Loomis compared the 'sighte merveillous' created by the clerk to contemporary court entertainments, and especially to the revels staged at Paris in 1378 and 1389. These took the form of detailed indoor spectacles, re-enacting the First Crusade and siege of Troy respectively. They were apparently complete with siege-engines, armed knights, moving mechanical ships capable of containing actors, and replicas of cities. What connects Chaucer's description of these productions is not only their outward form, but the term he uses to describe the clerk's profession: as Aurelius' brother states, he ranks among the 'subtile tregetours', who 'withinne an halle large/ Have maad come in a water and a barge' (V.1143–1144). As Loomis points out, this is a term with a very specific meaning, as

it is usually applied to the ‘actors, craftsmen, *artisans mecaniques*’ who ‘enacted roles in this royal *entremes*’ and ‘made or moved its large stage properties about’ (p. 245). More to the point, they ‘were certainly not magicians’, but ‘produced spectacular results’ simply by theatrical means (p. 255). Calling the clerk a ‘tregetour’, in other words, suggests that he is not a ‘manipulator of perception’ or ‘master illusionist’ at all (Battles 2002, p.251), but merely a manipulator of elaborate stage-sets and machinery. These findings have been reiterated and extended by Anthony Luengo and Mary Flowers Braswell, who agree that the clerk is merely performing ‘stage magic’ involving ‘actors and mechanical figures’ (Luengo 1978, p.1), adding that ‘Chaucer’s audience would have recognised the “automates” for what they were’ since such diversions were ‘an integral part of late medieval culture’ (Braswell 1985, p.110). Even the clap of ‘his hands two’ which dispels ‘al oure revel’ (V.1203–1204) has been taken to reinforce this possibility, since the gesture seems to be a ‘signal to his assistant to finish’ (Hodgson 1960, p.96). The visions generated by the clerk, in sum, seem to be the result of stage-craft and dramatic performance. Overall they conform to the description of such ‘craft’ in the Squire’s Tale, ‘an apparence ymaad...As jogelours pleyen at thise feestes grete’ (V.218–219).

The central feat in the Tale, the final disappearance of the rocks from the coast of Brittany, has also invited similar suspicion. Despite its deceptively elaborate description, the mechanics of this trick seem to be fairly prosaic at root. A clue here is the lengthy account of the preparations before ‘it semed that alle the rokkes were aweye’ (V.1296). In a passage that runs for some thirty–six lines, the clerk consults his ‘tables Tolletanes’, draws up their ‘rootes’, ‘argumentz’ and ‘centris’, and pays particular attention to ‘the moones mansioun’ and ‘the arisyng of his moone weel’ (V.1273–1289). Again, this sequence has provoked strong disagreement amongst critics. There is considerable uncertainty about how seriously it should be taken, with some commentators arguing that it reflects an actual horoscope, if not Chaucer’s own (Olson, Laird and Lytle 2000), and others considering it deliberately irrelevant or inaccurate, either to stress the Franklin’s ‘ignorance’ (Lumiansky 1955, p.186) or the magician’s use of ‘specialised jargon’ (Fyler 2002, p.357). Nevertheless, what has been clear since the work of D.W. Robertson (1962, p.276) is that the ‘operacioun’ outlined here is concerned simply with astrological calculation, and not with the ‘hethen’ black magic that is reported. It does of course superficially resemble magical practices: numerous medieval authorities, such as Moses Maimonides in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, state that enchantment is ‘dependent for its performance on a certain time’, and that one must observe the

‘conjunction of sun and moon, and...position of the stars’ when carrying it out (Maimonides 1952, pp.332–333). As a matter of fact J.S.P. Tatlock (1914, p.21), the first critic to consider the astrology of the Tale in detail, saw its treatment in exactly these terms, claiming that the clerk is ‘foretelling’ when best to work his ‘feats of magic’. However, what is largely absent from the Franklin’s account is any ritual or incantation that might actually cause the rocks to vanish. The description ends on an amusingly bathetic note, as the elaborate and extensive preparations are rounded off with a curt summary:

For whiche no lenger maked he delays,
But thurgh his magik, for a wyke of tweye,
It semed that alle the rokkes were aweye. (V.1294–1296)

The vagueness and brevity of ‘his magik’, which follows some thirty lines of ‘observaunces’ and ‘equacions’, only serves to shift emphasis away from the supposed spell and towards the calculations that precede it. The suggestion is, in effect, that these are the significant portion of the ‘myracle’, what makes it efficacious, not any action undertaken by the clerk. As Angela Lucas puts it, ‘we have been prepared for magic...and now we are faced with the description of an astrologer at work’ (1983, p.10). The clerk then has done little but predict an unusually high tide. He is exploiting the long-established connection between lunar and tidal movements, a link well-known to the Middle Ages, as it was to Donne a few centuries later, in his plea ‘moon/ draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere’ (‘A Valediction: of Weeping’, ll. 19–20). Ultimately, what we are left with is another ‘myracle’ that is emphatically non-magical. In the words of Marijane Osborn (2002, p.201), we are merely given ‘the illusion of an illusion’ here, as the clerk simply forecasts a sudden rise of the sea-level, rather than contriving ‘an apparence a clerk may make’ (V.1157).

So, as these details and critical discussions make clear, everything that the text describes as ‘foly’ and ‘illusioun’ is concurrently, if implicitly, presented in more rational, less fantastic terms. The operations the clerk performs might require intelligence to work or understand, but not necessarily any occult power. In Cara Hersh’s summary, ‘Chaucer creates ambiguity as to the nature of the magic while at the same time providing sufficient information to perceptive readers to indicate the forces that are actually at work’ (2008, p.430). Other details in the text only reinforce this point. The fact that the clerk is specifically associated with Orléans, for example, underscores his experience with astrology and theatrical spectacle. As James Royster (1926) pointed out some decades ago, Orléans was widely regarded as a centre

of astronomical study, and had some connection with intricate stage magic as well. According to Royster, and to Jacqueline de Weever (1996) after him, Chaucer's reference to 'Colle tregetour' in the *House of Fame*, and his ability to create 'a wind-melle/ under a walsh-note shale...upon a table of sycamour' (1278–1281), alludes to the actual figure 'Colin T', an English conjuror resident in Orléans in the 1390s. The origin of the clerk therefore emphasises once again that he is well-versed in conjuring tricks, but not actual conjuration. However, what makes this all the more significant is that a number of critics have taken the next logical step, and seen the clerk as wilfully dishonest and deceitful as well. In this reading, he is not merely a clever manipulator of appearances, but actively manipulative, seeking to cheat Aurelius and his brother by passing off a natural occurrence as an illusion. He has been so condemned by Chauncey Wood (1966, p.706), who regards him as 'a confidence man' playing out 'an elaborate series of actions designed to impress his victims'; by Wolfgang Rudat (1984, p.457), for whom he is a malicious figure who 'does not even pretend to be performing a "gentil dede"' and seeks 'to punish and humiliate the squire—almost-turned-beggar'; by Alan Gaylord (1964, p.350), who sees him charging 'an exorbitant fee for what were more than slightly shady dealings', and capitalising on an 'absurd' bargain that should not be honoured in the first place; and by W. Bryant Bachman (1977, p.55), who aligns him with 'the consequences of the sin of presumption' against the virtuous patience of Arveragus. More recently Edward Foster and David Carey have branded him a 'shady character' whose crafts are 'associated with ignorance, fraud, or deviance' (2002, p.12), while V.A. Kolve calls him 'a shrewd businessman, demanding a ruinous price', adding that his stunts 'border on blasphemy' as well as duplicity (2009, pp.173–174, 192). In other words, the clerk's activities can not only be seen as 'trickery', to use Peter Brown's term (2007, p.315), but he himself can be regarded as a trickster. He seems to prey on the desperation of Aurelius, and take credit for an inevitable, natural phenomenon, deviously exploiting his superior knowledge of astrology to do so.

This reading would of course entail that Chaucer departed quite radically from his sources. Both of Boccaccio's versions offer the magician as a perfectly credible candidate for 'più liberale', treating him as noble rather than underhanded (Boccaccio 1976, p.91). In the *Filocolo* the poor Tebano is in fact named most generous by Menedo, the narrator of the story, while the less conclusive ending of the *Decameron* still makes clear that his benevolence is at least considered by the hearers: 'It would take far too long to recount in full the various discussions that now took place among the ladies as to whether Gilberto or

Messer Ansaldo or the magician had displayed the greater liberality' (Boccaccio 2003, 762). Indeed, Bernard Huppé is among a number of commentators who see this moral carrying over into the Franklin's Tale itself, as 'the clerk alone is in a position to act generously...he relinquishes what he has rightfully earned, and does so for no personal gain' (1967, p.174). Gertrude White has also written in his defence against 'ingenious' readings that would label him 'a crook' (1974, pp.454–462), as has David Seaman (1991, p.53). Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that Chaucer's revisions are in fact designed to make the clerk appear rather less admirable than his Italian counterparts. The terms in which Chaucer conceives the figure often seem to be selected largely for their negative associations. The central designation of 'tregetour', for instance, is interesting, since it is a heavily loaded term in medieval English. Among Chaucer's contemporaries it carries clear undertones of deceit, presumption, and even heterodoxy. Often 'tregetour' is shorthand for a seductive falsehood that is nothing short of diabolical, a type of knowledge that draws away from truth, with little validity of its own.² Thus Gower compares the 'sleyhtes of a tregetour' to the 'falssemblant' of envy (*Confessio Amantis*, II.1873–1876), and Richard Rolle places 'tregettours' among the retinue of the Antichrist, along with other forms of 'false enchauntours...whar–thurgh he sal decayve þe men' (1863, p.115). Along the same lines, the author of the *Assembly of Gods* (c.1480) ranks 'tregetours, tryphelers, feyners of tales' among 'symonyaks' in the army of Vice (l. 685), while Lydgate inserts 'Jon Rikelle, some tyme tregetowre' into his version of the *Dance of Death* (c.1425), only to underscore the futile arrogance of Rikelle's 'legerdemeyn': 'dethe shortli...is not deceyued/ be noon illusiouns' (l. 513).³ Chaucer's own *House of Fame* treats these figures with comparable disdain, as 'Colle tregetour' is not only included amongst actively heretical figures such as Elymas and 'Symon Magus', but his achievements are described as 'an uncouth thyng' (1278). As Joyce Lionarons notes (1994, pp. 384–386), the tregetoures and their 'mechanical' magic are surrounded by connotations of 'danger' and 'deceit', as their craft is repeatedly interpreted as false 'control over the natural world'. Given the connotations that surround this term, it is difficult not to see an undertow at work in the Franklin's Tale, drawing the clerk towards notions of untrustworthiness.

These meanings resonate further in the lexis of the Tale. One telling example is the first

² See the entry in the *MED* (T.8), which defines 'tregetour' as 'one who practices black magic, a sorcerer...a heretic' 'a deceiver, charlatan', as well as 'an entertainer, a sleight-of-hand artist, a juggler, an illusionist, etc'. William Sayers' recent commentary on the term (2009, p.346) takes its deceptive implications even further, associating it with 'two key terms in Old French, *tresjeter* and *trebuchier*, "to throw over" and "to cast down", respectively, but also "to delude" and "to trip up"'.
³ On Jon Rikelle, see Appleford 2008.

adjective that is applied to the clerk and his profession, the word ‘lykerous’ (V.1119). Throughout his work Chaucer often uses this word to evoke greed of all kinds, from the Wife of Bath’s ‘likerous mouth’ to the ‘likerous lust’ lacking in Griselda, or the ‘likerous talent’ the Pardoner imputes to gluttons (III.466, IV.214, VI.540).⁴ Although the following line makes clear that the term merely pertains to the enquiring nature of clerks, who are ‘lykerous/ To reden artes that been curious’, the playful enjambment serves to foreground the word itself, pulling it out of this innocent context and allowing its immediate sense to come into play. A further loaded term is ‘subtil’, which is used repeatedly to describe the clerk and his talents: the magician is a ‘subtil clerk’ for pitying the lovesick squire, and ‘kalkules’ his star-charts ‘ful subtilly’, while Aurelius’ brother speaks of ‘subtile tregetoures pleye’ (V.1261, 1284, 1141). Not only do the *MED* and *OED* place ‘insidiously sly, treacherously cunning’ among the range of meanings that this word conveys, but in the context of clerkly craft it gains a peculiar significance. It recalls the Miller’s ‘hende Nicholas’, who is also called ‘ful subtil and ful queynte’ by Chaucer: the word even gains predatory connotations from this link, since Nicholas receives this designation when catching Alisoun ‘by the queynte’ (I.3275–3276). In fact given that both Nicholas and the clerk perform similar actions, one cooking up ‘a phony prophecy for a second Noah’s flood’ and the other ‘predicting a high tide but...not really making the rocks disappear’ (Bowers 2010, p.119), the word perhaps connects them even more closely, hinting that the clerk’s own ‘observaunces’ are as bogus and self-serving as those of his fellow student, since the same vocabulary can be applied to each.

These suggestions are only compounded by the conduct of the clerk himself. In the first place, Chaucer makes clear that he is fully aware of what Aurelius expects from him. Their first meeting is accompanied by a show of this knowledge, as he exclaims ‘I knowe...the cause of youre comyng’, and ‘tolde hem al that was in hire entente’ (V.1174–1176). It is therefore difficult to defend his actions as dispassionate professionalism in the vein of Huppé. He is evidently conscious that his clients wish to draw a woman away from her husband, and may even know that the brothers are conspiring to create a phantasm rather than physically ‘remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon’, as Dorigen actually requests (V.992). To make matters worse, his behaviour throughout can be compared to the tactics of another crooked salesman on the road to Canterbury. His demonstration in the study, ending as it does with

⁴ See also Ross 1972, p.150.

the tantalising image of Aurelius' 'lady on a daunce/ On which hymself he daunced, as hym thoughte', at least partly resembles the Pardoner's strategies at the end of his Tale (V.1201–1202). The final image of Dorigen and Aurelius dancing is comparable to the Pardoner's statement 'now, goode men, God foryeve yow youre trespass...myn hooly pardoun may yow alle warice' (VI.904–906). Josipovici's account of the Pardoner's manoeuvres drives home the similarity here: both performances suddenly 'twist' away from an objective account into an 'inevitable application to the present', offering a narrative which flips around at its conclusion to envelope the listener; both seek to 'warm the hearts' of their audience, showing them how 'goodness' may be obtained, offering a vision in which desire and image converge; and both ultimately compel the observer to 'reach into their pockets', requesting money from them (1971, p.92). The visions shown in the study thus seem meticulously orchestrated to manipulate their viewer, exciting and exploiting his longing. The illusion is not a neutral display of 'sciences' but a sales-pitch, carefully tailored to appeal to its target. As Richard Osberg writes (2001, pp.214–215), the clerk 'holds the mirror up in which Aurelius can see himself reflected, but it is a mirror that prettifies', flattering and seducing the squire.

Perhaps the most damning hint, however, occurs at the end of the Tale, when the clerk's claim to 'freedom' is implicitly undermined. Although Timothy Flake has argued that the clerk undergoes 'a change of heart' in response to the show of 'trouthe' he witnesses, and that this causes him to renounce the thousand pounds (1996, p.226), the line that follows this gesture only undercuts his 'gentillesse'. The clerk states quite bluntly that his host 'has ypayed wel for my vitaille' (V.1618): therefore, far from passing over any payment, the clerk has in fact already been rewarded for his services. Furthermore, since he lodges with Aurelius during the season of 'Nowel', a period which pointedly includes 'bugle horns' of 'wyn' and 'brawen of the tusked swyn', he has clearly been entertained quite lavishly: in fact, the text stresses that Aurelius 'in al that evere he kan/ Dooth to this maister chiere and reverence' (V.1253–1257). The clerk thus stands in direct contrast to Tebano of the *Filoloco*, whose 'miseria della povertà' is emphasised by Menedo. Far from suffering the miseries of poverty, he has dined copiously at his client's expense. In fact, throughout the Tale a link is repeatedly forged between the clerk and appetite. When he first meets Aurelius, he ensures that he is fed before staging any demonstration, lacking 'no vitaille that myghte hem plese' (V.1186, 1189). Likewise, once his 'sighte merveillous' is finished, he shifts from art to more physical concerns: no sooner is the spectacle dispelled than he summons a servant and pedantically berates him, demanding 'Is redy oure soper?/ Almoost an houre it is, I undertake,/ Sith I yow

bad oure soper for to make' (V.1210–1212). Chaucer is therefore careful to stress the materialism and sensuousness of the clerk throughout the poem. By the end of the text, he has received a reward commensurate with his appetites.

To summarise all that has been said so far, there are three salient details that emerge from the 'myracles' Chaucer presents in the Tale. Firstly, the magic itself is tacitly rationalised; secondly, its performer is a dishonest clerk; thirdly, its practitioner manages to extort a feast from his host. All three of these details are of course additions to the story Chaucer inherited, since they do not occur in Boccaccio. In fact Boccaccio's elderly magician Tebano lives a life of almost saintly asceticism, subsisting in the wilderness in rough clothing on a diet of wild plants. Furthermore, although the moon is also central to his operations, as Diana is among the deities he invokes, this only heightens the supernatural character of his sorcery: Diana sends him an enchanted chariot, which carries him around the world in search of herbs and other materials (Beidler 1998, p.113). The sceptical view of magic is also foreign to the lay, the genre Chaucer is ostensibly following. While this tradition has proven difficult to classify in exact terms, as Elizabeth Archibald (2000) in particular has stressed, most critical assessments do emphasise the importance of magic within the form. The summaries of Hume (1972), Finlayson (1985), Donovan (1969, p.66), Treharne (2004, p.436) and others all include 'use of magic' or 'some supernatural element' as key characteristics; likewise, medieval definitions, such as the brief overview that precedes the *Lai de Frain* and *Sir Orfeo*, observe that 'mani ther beth of fairy' (Rumble 1965, p.81). Indeed, Andrew Joynes has argued that these elements are integral to the political projects of the earliest lays, as the Angevin expansion of 'power and influence in the Celtic lands of Wales, Ireland and Brittany' is replayed in the texts' assimilation of Celtic tropes and ideas (2001, p.180). There is therefore little place in the lay for the Franklin's 'use of natural rather than fairy magic' (Lynch, 2002, p.88). Overall, the incredulous treatment of magic and the fraudulent magician are extraneous elements to the Tale, since they do not stem from Chaucer's source or from his chosen genre.

However, one discourse which repeatedly brings these themes into conjunction is the fabliau. All three of these details occur regularly in the surviving fabliaux, to the extent that they almost attain the level of generic requirements. In the first place, the naturalistic explanation of magic is a recurrent feature of the texts. As is consistent with the 'materialist ethos' Muscatine identifies at their heart (1999, p.166), the fabliaux show a marked tendency to

interpret supernatural events along earthly lines. As Richard Kieckhefer states, ‘most magical trickery...in the fabliaux worked in natural ways...the powers in question were occult in only a crude sense: the magician knew them full well, but tried to keep them hidden from the victims’ (2000, p.93). In many of the extant texts an easily explained phenomenon is either mistaken for sorcery or spectral activity, or else deliberately passed off as the result of enchantment. Hence in ‘Du chevalier qui recovra l’amor de sa dame’ (Noomen and Van den Boogaard, 1983–1998, VII: 252), the knight of the title regains the love of his lady by posing as a ghost and entering the bedchamber of her husband. Once here, he persuades the husband to convince his wife to swear fealty to him, implying that this will secure his release from purgatory: ‘Sire, je sui en mout grant poine,/ Ne ja mais jor n’en istra m’ame/ De ci a tant que cele dame,/ Qui o vos gist, pardoné m’ait,/ Se il li plaist’ (‘Sir, I am in very great pain, never will my soul be free, until that woman who lies there with you wishes to forgive me, if it pleases her’). A similar if more macabre event is at the centre of the four versions of ‘Le Sacristain’. In these stories a monk is murdered by the husband of the woman he has tried to seduce, and his corpse is repeatedly hidden, discovered, and ‘murdered’ again by its panicked finder. The cadaver is generally taken for a vengeful phantom: this is especially true at the end of the narrative, when it is ‘lierons a’la’sele/ Et vne lance souz l’aisselle’ (‘tied to a saddle with a lance beneath its armpit’), and sent galloping into the kitchens of its former priory, causing the monks to barricade themselves into their cells crying ‘hareu hareu’ (ibid., VII.131). Again, what appears to be a ghostly visitation to the characters is revealed to be the result of purely human activity.

Beyond this reification of supernatural beings, the rituals used to control occult forces are also treated in materialistic terms. In ‘Les Trois Aveugles De Compiègne’, for instance, a student extorts a night’s lodging by engineering confusion between an innkeeper and a priest, drawing on the supernatural in the process: he tells the innkeeper that the priest has agreed to pay for his lodgings, while at the same time telling the priest that the man is suffering from ‘vne cruel maladie’, a form of madness that requires exorcism (ibid., II.170). A further example is provided by ‘La pucele qui voloit voler’ (ibid., VI.162), in which a clerk sexually exploits the titular ‘maiden who wished to fly’ while carrying out a procedure alleged to grant her this ability. Claiming to know the necessary enchantments he first kisses her lips, telling her ‘fet on dont bec en tel maniere’ (‘in this manner your beak will be made’), before instructing her ‘Oil tornez vos par darriere/ Car la queue vos enferai’ (‘now turn your behind towards me, so I can thrust in your tail’). Predictably, the *pucele* discovers some months later

that she is pregnant. Norris Lacy lists several more of these ‘outlandish plots’, including ‘corpses returning to “haunt” someone...a claim that a woman was impregnated by a snowflake, a magic ring that produces instant and enduring erections’: all of these instances of ‘magic’ are also merely pretences and charades, instruments by which the credulous are cheated (1993, p.121). There is not even any point at which the texts allow their audience to believe that the phenomena might be authentically paranormal. Unlike modern ghost stories or detective novels, the texts do not confront the reader with mysteries that are resolved in their dénouement: all are quite clear from the outset that their phantoms and illusions are merely the result of credulity on the one hand and deliberate fraud on the other. As Brian Levy writes, whenever the fabliau evoke otherworldly forces, they are treated entirely as myths for cheating the simple-minded: ‘the point...is that in each case there is an only too-rational explanation, and the fabliau’s audience, knowing the character to be deceived by human agency, can appreciate the extra dramatic irony’ (2000, p.177).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is usually clerks, ‘the erotic heroes in fabliau plots’ (Muscatine 1999, p.164), who are given the power to wield magic for these ends. Their overall ability ‘to exploit their special skills for personal gain or aggrandizement’ extends to the utilisation of the occult (Arathoon 1986, p.345). This can be witnessed in the central episode of ‘Un Chivalier et sa dama et un clerk’ (Noomen and Van den Boogaard, 1983–1998, X.135). Here a clerk diagnoses himself as suffering from a ‘maladie’ that can only be cured by an arcane ingredient: the ‘bon oyl’ of a knight’s lady, which must be delivered to him in his bedchamber. The conversation between the lady and the clerk, before they inevitably engage in coitus, emphasises how the supposedly superior knowledge of clerks allows these plots to function. The lady protests that ‘Ne sui phisicienne ne prestre/ Ke sache pocion doner/ Ou vostre maladie oster’ (‘I am not a doctor or a priest who would know how to give a potion to relieve your malady’): only a clerk would have access to such information, so she must take him at his word. In fact, this theme and figure are sufficiently widespread to make their way into the otherwise scant English fabliau tradition.⁵ Of the two English fabliaux that predate Chaucer, *Dame Sirith* (c.1272) involves a dog being fed ‘mustart’ to start its ‘heie renning’ before being passed off as a victim of clerkly ‘wiche’, while the fragmentary *Interludium de Clerico et Puella* (c.1300) seems to be moving in a similar direction before it breaks off: it also features a ‘clerc fallyard’ consulting an older woman in order to gain the favour of a

⁵ See Canby 1906, Lewis 1982, Cooke, Whiteford and Mohr 1993, Busby 1995 and 1982.

maiden who ‘hates me mar than gayt dos chnief’ (Bennett and Smithers 1968, pp.17–26, 196–200). A number of the post-Chaucerian fabliaux also follow this course (Goodall 1982, p.10). Thus in the ‘Friars of Berwick’ (c.1490) two friars stage a hoax exorcism in order that a third might leave his hiding-place in his lover’s house (Jack 1982). They disguise the cornered friar as ‘Hurlybass’, a ‘foule fiende...in gray habite, in liknes of a freir’, and then proceed to ‘coniur’ him forth and cast him out of the house, so that he may flee in safety (Furrow 1985, p.358). Although the characters are in regular rather than minor orders, the text still associates their scheme with the world of clerks and universities: Friar Robert, the instigator of the plot, emphasises that he acquired his ‘science, nigromansy, or airt’ while a student ‘bezond þe sey in Pareiss’ (ibid., pp.346–347). Time and again, therefore, clerk-figures use feigned magic to gull less well-informed characters, exploiting their esoteric knowledge in order to do so. Magic becomes just one of many ways in which fabliau clerks ‘supply their wants, in terms of food, sex and entertainment, by dint of their wits’ (Hines 1993, p.26).

As for the third detail noted in the Franklin’s Tale, the feast is also a staple of fabliau narratives, featuring heavily as recompense for a well-executed trick. Food is in fact second only to sex as a reward for a successful ruse in the texts. As Sarah Gordon states (2007, p.103), there is a deep-seated connection between food and the peculiar comedy of the fabliaux, as ‘lavish feasts and modest suppers alike are the scene for many of the habitual fabliau crimes’. Hence in ‘L’Oue au Chapelain’ (Noomen and Van den Boogaard, 1983–1998, VIII.145), a clerk consumes a goose intended for a priest and his mistress and covers his tracks by fabricating a miracle, climbing on to the altar and anointing the mouth of the crucifix with fat: ‘J s’en monta desus l’autel/ Au crucefiz a’oint la bouche’. The central trick of ‘Les Perdris’ likewise brings its perpetrator a copious meal. The partridges of the title are first eaten by the wife of a *vilain*, who then frightens a priest away from her house, telling him that her husband ‘vous voudra trenchier/ Les coilles si’il vous peut tenir’ (‘wishes to trim from you your testicles if you remain with him’). She then points out the fleeing figure to her husband, and tells him that he stole the two birds (ibid., IV.12). There are numerous further examples: in Eustache d’Amiens’ ‘Bouchier d’Abbeville’ (ibid., III. 244–232), a butcher steals a sheep from a priest and then agrees to eat it with him in exchange for bed and board, while Jean Bodel’s ‘Barat et Haimet’ features a peasant who steals a side of bacon from two ‘freres germeins’, posing as the ghost of their hanged father (ibid., II.35). The great value placed on food by the fabliaux, which Bakhtin dubs a ‘prandial libertinism’ (1984, p.297),

means that the texts often feature food as a trophy.

Chaucer's modifications to the *Filocolo* story therefore steer the narrative towards the fabliau. By replacing the honourable and uncanny Tebano with a shifty *clerc escolier* who is handsomely repaid with 'vitaille', Chaucer seems to be evoking fabliau conventions. The revisions Chaucer makes are at least reminiscent of the fabliau treatment of magic, clerks and food, as a trick performed by a clerk is implicitly identified as a hoax to generate 'chere and reverence', along the same lines that many fabliaux follow. Alongside these details, however, there are further reasons to link the Franklin's Tale with this tradition. The fact that the clerk performs his trick in a region distant from his home also recalls the fabliaux, since in the texts 'clerks tend to be travellers, temporary incomers to the towns where they study or just stay', as John Hines observes (1993, p.26). The fact that he exposes a braggart, highlighting the hollowness of Aurelius' reckless cry 'fy on a thousand pound', also resembles the French poems (V.1227): numerous fabliaux, such as 'De la Saineresse' and Guérin's 'Berangier au long Cul', also include episodes in which boastful characters are outwitted and humiliated (Pearcy 2007, pp.126–127). What is more, there can be little doubt that Chaucer was familiar with these motifs. His own fabliaux clearly reveal knowledge of this type of plot. Two cases in point are the Merchant's and Miller's Tales (Beidler 2005). The first follows the general outline of the Middle Dutch *Heile van Beersele* (Kruyskamp 1957, p.111), with its bogus prophecy that 'god die werelt soude doemen/ Beide met watre en de met viere' ('God will judge the world both with water and with fire'), while the second echoes Garin's 'Le Prestre qui abevete', with its *tius* or 'spyhole' that creates the 'illusion' that a peasant's wife *foutissiés* with a priest (Noomen and Van den Boogaard, 1983–1998, VIII.309). At any rate, the core revisions Chaucer made to Boccaccio seems to hint at the fabliau, importing several key themes from the tradition. Although the magician is not quite the gleeful, libidinous opportunist found in the French texts, and his presence is probably not designed to provoke the 'rire' traditionally associated with fabliaux (Bédier 1925, p.37), he still carries sufficient traces of the genre to evoke it. Chaucer's play with genres in this Tale, as he transplants various disparate forms into the lay framework, leads him draw on elements from the French comic texts as well as hagiographies and patristic tracts.

All of this raises the obvious question of exactly why Chaucer should allow components from the fabliau to enter into the Franklin's Tale, and what effects these elements were designed to produce. When considering this issue, several possible explanations suggest themselves. In

the first place, the intrusion of fabliau themes might serve to complement the general treatment of marriage in the poem. In particular, it reinforces the sense of danger that the events of the text present to the union of Arveragus and Dorigen. Their bond is of course characterised by its unusual foundation, as it offers a uniquely ‘utopian vision of companionate marriage’ (Harding 2003, p.176). Prior to the marriage, the two agree to enter into a state of mutual ‘humblesse’ and ‘obeysaunce’: they form a kind of equilibrium between the contradictory values of matrimony and *fin amor*, ‘yoking private passion and public domesticity’ (Wheeler 1993, p.92). Their hope is that each code will effectively cancel the other out, in order that neither ‘sholde...take no maistrie’ over the other (V.794). In Kittredge’s enduring definition (1912, p.467), their ‘accord’ tries to make ‘love...consistent with marriage’, turning ‘mutual love and forbearance’ into ‘guiding principles’. All of this is stands in stark contrast to the fabliau’s notion of marriage. If anything, fabliaux seem to regard wedlock as something like a perpetual battleground. This point of view is often literalised in scenes of open domestic violence, such as the protracted duel for a pair of *braies* or ‘breeches’ which occurs in ‘Sire Hain et Dame Anuieuse’. Here marriage is presented wholly in terms of competitive aggression:

Hains fiert sa fame en mi les denz
 Tel cop que la bouche dedenz
 Li a tout emplie de sanc
 Tien ore dist sire hains anc,
 Je cuit que ie t’ai bien atainte (Noomen and Van den Boogaard, 1983–1998, II.11)

(‘Hains gave his wife such a smack in the middle of her teeth that the inside of her mouth filled up entirely with blood. Look already, declared Hains, I see I have beaten you well’).

Even the fabliaux which do not feature scenes of open brutality still see wedlock as an ongoing contest, in which each spouse must work to outwit, belittle and cheat the other. Hence in ‘Le Prestre et la dame’ (ibid., VIII.88), a woman manages to cavort with her lover while both are lying on top of her husband, thereby winning a victory over him: the text ends by gloating ‘Molt set feme de renardie,/ Quant en tel maniere servi/ Son bon seignor par son ami’ (‘thus this fox-like woman in such a manner served her good husband with her companion’). Likewise ‘De la Saineresse’ (ibid., IV.311) features a wife who smuggles in her

lover by disguising him as a doctor, and further disgraces her husband by ‘confessing’ to the liaison in terms he fails to understand: she tells him how ‘l’oingnement isoit d’un tuiel,/ Et si descendoit d’un forel/ D’une pel mout noire et hideuse’ (‘the ointment issued from a long tube, and this extended from a lambskin with a covering most black and hideous’). In either case, as Lisa Perfetti notes, the objective is to defeat the spouse as fully as possible: ‘the husband is not only bested in being cuckolded...proving him wrong becomes pleasure for her in the very fact that he does not know the joke has been played on him’ (2003, p.119). The fabliaux therefore see matrimony in terms that are radically distinct from those of Arveragus and Dorigen. For these texts, it is not an accord reached by two partners after careful negotiation, but an ongoing and often ruthless conflict; nor is it predicated on a single ruling ideal, drawn up before the wedding itself, but is a fluid process, in which financial, domestic and sexual power is perpetually negotiable. As Marie Thérèse puts it (1984, p.342), ‘l’égalité des droits’ would be ‘un danger public’ in the world of the fabliau: as a consequence, the primary means for spouses to interact is ‘la ruse’ or ‘cunning’, ‘une arme bien trop redoutable’.

It therefore makes sense for Chaucer to represent the agency that upsets Dorigen’s meticulously balanced arrangement by linking him with the fabliau. The discourse which the clerk of Orléans embodies is a direct affront to the carefully ordered, equitable union at the centre of the text, just as his intervention on behalf of Aurelius threatens to collapse the coupling itself. Furthermore, if David Aers (1980, pp.166–167) and Jill Mann (1982, p.139) are right in stating that the entire point of the text is to bring about a ‘wretched collapse’ of this naïve arrangement, forcing it to confront the hard realities of ‘unacceptable egotism’, ‘internalized traditional assumptions’ and ‘power and the surrender of power’, then the presence of fabliau discourse gains a further dimension. With its systemic contempt for any sense of marital equilibrium, and its hostility to the elevated ideals of ‘honour and fidelity’ Arveragus proclaims (Schulz 2003, p.105), the fabliau would be the natural genre to provide this harsh corrective.

But alongside these considerations, a more significant point is also revealed by the intrusion of the fabliau into the Franklin’s performance. By quietly identifying one of the contenders for ‘most fre’ with a distinct genre, and one with its own particular behavioural code, a further dimension is added to the Franklin’s *demande*. In effect, the question posed at the end of the piece becomes a choice between different ideological frameworks, compelling the

reader to consider the different sets of values that its genres presuppose. By including a self-interested sensualist, a figure for whom trickery is a legitimate means of meeting one's needs, Chaucer turns Boccaccio's *questione d'amore* into a question about comparative ethics. The decision involves choosing between a devious fabliau clerk, and the more conventionally romantic squire or knight. The issue of who is most generous therefore becomes conflated with a choice between particular modes of behaviour. What the reader is being asked to judge is not merely a set of characters who have conducted themselves in particular ways, but representatives of specific codes, those of the literary traditions in which they are rooted. This in itself implies a further, more difficult question. It raises the problem of how this judgement is to be made in the first place. If the characters are attached to distinct sets of values, then it becomes difficult to find a common criterion by which they can in fact be evaluated. The problem of how to establish which is most selfless gives way to how followers of different values are to be appraised at all, what standards can be evoked in a plurality of distinct systems. Boccaccio's straightforward question is purposefully deepened and confused by the addition of the clerk.

What makes this all the more significant is that it mirrors a pattern that recurs throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, both in terms of its overall dynamic and the techniques by which it is achieved. Like the *Tales* as a whole, the Franklin's Tale provokes larger questions about discontinuities in practices, values, ideas, and how these may be reconciled. It mirrors the 'discontinuous form' (Johnson 1982, p.209), 'breaks and contrasts' (Curtis 1986, p.129) and 'variety and conflict' that occur throughout the text (Benson 1986, p.21). However, the Franklin's Tale also presses home an issue which is only hinted at in the framework that surrounds it: with its terminal question, it asks how in the midst of multiple, dissimilar, often contesting discourses a set of universal standards might be located. Most importantly, it carries out this process by drawing together disparate literary traditions, using the differences between literary forms to highlight disparities between ideologies. By grafting an element of the fabliau into the lay, in sum, Chaucer turns a tale of generosity into a miniature version of the *Canterbury Tales* itself. The Franklin's unanswered question becomes one about establishing universal values, an issue that is perhaps not resolved until the Parson takes his turn in the tale-telling game, transcending the disparate 'structures and metastructures' with his 'guide to the Christian life which every Christian must lead' (Howard 1976, p.316).

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