Educational Administration: Theory and Practice
2023, 29(2), 444-449
ISSN: 2148-2403
https://kuey.net/

Research Article

The Erotics of Storytelling: Chaucer's Exploration of Sexuality

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Citation: Palak Motsara, (2023), Product Cordial Labeling of Some Graphs, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 29*(2)* 444-449
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v29i2.6983

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In "The Canterbury Tales", Geoffrey Chaucer embraces the *fabliaux* genre, subverting it by broadening its scope of social commentary and incorporating elements of medieval romance. Chaucer's use of symbolism is profound, and his *fabliaux* characters are often more nuanced than those in traditional French *fabliaux*. Chaucer's *fabliaux* are more complicated, addressing darker subjects and ambiguities, often longer and incorporating elements of romances, such as classical allusions, particularly evident in *The Merchant's Tale*.

This paper examines four of Chaucer's *fabliaux* that are both complete and erotic: *The Miller's Tale, The Reeve's Tale, The Merchant's Tale,* and *The Summoner's Tale*. These tales, set in well-known locales, use erotic humor and sexual imagery to provide social commentary and critique traditional romantic conventions.

The Miller's Tale

The *Miller's Tale* follows *The Knight's Tale* as the second Canterbury Tale in Fragment-I and is a reply to it. Both the tales revolve around the two men vying for the same woman. As described in *The General Prologue*, Miller is rude, inebriated and combative. In essence, it asserts that courtly love is absurd. The tale combines the two components typical of sex comedies – a) it involves John, anold man, who naively marries Alison, a young lady who finds a means to cuckold him b) Alison's lover, Nicholas, who despite enjoying the girl, receives his just desserts when his adversary Absolon marks Nicholas on the anus as a prize for fornication. Additionally, it combines genres by blending fabliau and romance components together, albeit the fabliau elements are more prominent. Thus, it focuses more on lust than love. Louise M. Sylvester remarks that *The Miller's Tale* "brings into focus the coexistence of romance... and the fabliau appears to undo the connection, carefully sustained in romance, between love and sexual desire (135).The tale is again different from the conventional *fabliaux* as Michael Delahoyde contend that *The Miller's Tale* includes sympathetic characters, in contrast to French *fabliaux*, especially in Alison. Characters in French *fabliaux* typically serve merely as figures of amusement. Despiteall this, it is blatantly sexual and erotic. Alfred David adds that "sex is frankly presented as the supreme physical pleasure, a natural satisfaction like food and drink" (David 95). He further saysthat Chaucer offers individuals who preserve many facets of human sexuality in *The Miller's Tale* characters. This mindset, which David refers to as "the religion of love," disobeys the Church's sexual prohibitions and invents its own moral justification by "celebrating the joy of life" (David 96).

In *The Miller's Tale,* Chaucer uses the imagery of open windows which were viewed assexual symbols in the Medieval Age and Renaissance Europe. Absolon gets humiliated in the story through an open window. Regarding *The Miller's Tale,* Louise M. Bishop explains:

But the greatest confusion in the Miller's Tale does not just come from flesh; it comes more specifically from holes. Holes show up everywhere in the Tale's details, from architectural holes- windows (1.3694, 1.3708) and doors (1.3432)- to the cat hole John'sservant uses to spy on Nicholas (1.3440-41). Clothes have holes: the win- dows on Absolon's shoes (1.3318), the gores in Alison's apron (1.3237). And bodies have holes: the lovers' kissing mouths (1.3305); Absolon's singing mouth, sweetened with cardamomand licorice (1.3690); Alison's kissed anus (1.3734-5) and Nicholas's burned on are confused: cat holes become peep holes, mouths become anuses and anuses become wounds. The Tale's humor depends on this confusion to direct our attention to the incompleteness of human knowledge and amplify the meaning of the Tale's indecent puns on God's and a wife's 'pryvetee'. (238-289)

Then, Absolon uses the metaphor of food and birds[1] to woo her which is in contrast to the ideals of the courtly love and reflects on Absolon as a sexual predator. The Miller says of him, "I dar wel seyn, if she hadde been a mouse, and he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon". (*The Miller's Tale*,3345-3347). There may be a double

entendre in the metaphor of Alison as the mouse (which might be a metaphor for vagina) and Absolon as the cat, the prey and the predator respectively.

Alison is associated with food in phrases like, “Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth”(3521), “a hoord of apples leyd in hey or heath” (3262), and “a calf folwynge his dame” (3260). Such depictions imply that Alison, like a food item, is something to be consumed. When one considers that traditionally men are the hunters, the idea that Alison is connected with food itemsor that food items are metaphors for sex and that she is viewed as a sex object makes sense (where Absolon is viewed as the hunter). Absolon confuses sex with food in his dreams[2] of Alison which shows he courted her primarily because he was interested in sex. Thus, Chaucer offers various illustrations to demonstrate Absolon’s licentiousness, though he employs the strategies of the ideal knight (courtly love) - singing for her, getting down on knees, giving hergifts; he is unknightly and is a parody of conventional romantic knight.

Alison is characterised in phallic terms despite all the traditional female erotic images (flowers, birds, etc.). She is “Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt/ A brooch she baar upon hirlowe coler/ as brood as is the boos of a bokeler” (3264-3266) which perhaps can be interpretedas a reversal of romance traditions where women are almost always “flower-like” and only themen are martial.

Nicholas is also introduced with sexual symbols. “Ful fetisly ydight with herbes swoote/ and he hymself as sweete as is the roote/ of lycorys or any cetewale”. (*The Miller’s Tale, 3205- 3207).* “Ceteale” is similar to ginger in that it stimulates sex. But Nicholas is more complex than this. He is referred to as “clever Nicholas” (3256, 3462). He is defined as “Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasye/ Was turned for to lerne astrologye/ And koude a certeyn of conclusiouns/ To demen by interrogaciouns” (3191–3194). He is cunning and decietful, “Of deerne love he koude and of solas/ And therto he was sleigh and ful privee/ And lyk a mayden meke for to see”. This slyness is demonstrated when he pretended to be sick to woo Alison. The terminology used in the story serves as further evidence. Robert E Lewis notes that the word *hende* is used to describeNicholas which was “widely used in Middle English romance…the word had a variety of meanings, ranging from ‘near, close by, handy’ its original meaning, to such extended meanings as ‘courteous, gracious, refined gentle’, its most frequent meaning in English Romance, and ‘skilled, clever, crafty’. He adds that “Chaucer plays with all of these meanings” since Nicholas is even “Ready or skillful with the hand, dexterous, a possible transferred meaning” (253).

Lewis’s phrase “transferred meaning” implies that Nicholas is skillful at sexual foreplay. According to The Miller, Nicholas waits for the ideal opportunity to woo Alison, which is usually when John is away and proceeds without any hesitation. The quickness of this sexual attack implies Nicholas is not concerned about Alison’s feelings and that his primary reason topursue her, is lust.

Therefore, the portrayals of Absolon, Alison, and Nicholas have sexual symbolism. Buteach of the characters is unique. Alison is a sex object; Nicholas is a schemer and Absolon is aself-obsessed dandy.

In contrast, there is no sexual imagery in the depictions of John. The main references to him, both by the miller and in John’s reported speech, testify to his religiosity. The Miller thus states, “Fil with this younge wyf to rage and pleye,/ Whil that hir housbonde was at Oseneye” (3273-3274). The Oseneye mentioned here is the Osney Abbey, near Oxford. John’s discourse isfurther peppered with allusions to religion. Thus:

He saugh nat that. But yet, by Seint Thomas,Me reweth
soore of hende Nicholas.
He shal be rated of his studiyng,
If that I may, by Jhesus, hevene king

(*The Miller’s Tale*, 3461–3464)

However, John is also sex-obsessed like Nicholas and Absolon. His stupidity which stands in stark contrast to Nicholas’s intelligence and cunning gives Nicholas the chance to make his sexual advances on Alison. The *fabliau* genre makes it possible to have quick sexual access. Incontrast, sexual access was either impossible or extremely difficult in the mediaeval romances.

There are parallels between *The Knight’s Tale* and *The Miller’s Tale*. Nichola’s love- sickness *in The Miller’s Tale* mirrors Arcite’s in *The Knight’s Tale*. But Nichola’s lovesickness is fake and makes a mockery of Arcite’s lovesickness. The violence in *The Knight’s Tale* followsthe noble tradition which is in contrast to the machinations of characters in *The Miller’s Tale*.

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[1] “What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alison, / My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?(3698-3699)

[2] “My mouth hath icched al this long day/ That is a signe of kissyng atte leeste/ Al nyghtme mette eek I was at a feeste” (*The Miller’s Tale*, 3682-3684).

These comparisons and disparities highlight Chaucer's intent to satirize the romantic conventions. *The Knight's Tale* depicts a lofty but unrealistic love and *The Miller's Tale* portrayslove as it really is. *The Miller's Tale* is a *fabliaux* retelling of *The Knight's Tale*.
The Miller's Tale and *The Reeve's Tale* are commonly linked together as both are *fabliaux* and make use of erotic humour and sexual imagery. The stories, however, are different.Although *The Miller's Tale* is more refined than the French *fabliaux*, it is nevertheless predominantly comical and sexual in nature, fitting into their tradition. *The Reeve's Tale,* on theother hand, is very serious and dark beneath the slapstick, unlike Nicholas, Aleyn and John do not seduce but rape.

The Reeve's Tale

The usage of the mill and grinding of the corn is the most notable sexual metaphor in thetale (Delasanata 271). Also, Baking of the bread has served the same purpose (Rowland 215).
Therefore, *The Reeve's Tale* uses a recurring *double entendre*. Chaucer also combines a horse-sex metaphor with it as horses are linked to male sexuality. As a result, when Bayard (the student's horse) runs away, the wife informs the students "Allas! Youre hors goth to the fen/ With wild mares, as faste as he may go" (4080-4081). The concept of the tale is echoed by
Bayard's pursuit of mares, while the students pursue women. According to John Friedman,

"Chaucer's use of Bayard to open the action of the tale sets the moral tone for what is to followand suggests that the narrative is to deal with the ungoverned passion of man" (11). Therefore,
Bayard's lustful actions anticipate the student's behaviour in the bedroom. Just when the studentschase Bayard (John tells Aleyn to lay down his sword, a phallic symbol, 4085-4086), the miller steals their grain (He half a brusshel of hir flour hath take, /And bad his wyf go knede it in a cake", 4093-4094). Students have, therefore, "lost their oats" in losing their horse (but themanhood is regained as they capture the horse back). Then in the subsequent bedroom scene, theClerk's behaviour is seen as horsey (Friedman 54).

Then, food is also used as a metaphor for sex in *The Reeve's Tale*. In the beginning, Malyne's "thikke" (3973) body and "buttockes brode, and brestes rounde" (3975) show that, despite being a virgin, she can enjoy food and therefore, sex. Ruth Mazo Karras contends that Aleyn and John don't seem to be interested in the women's character or bodies (152). Studentsjust devour them up.

Before the climax of the tale, there is an orgy of feasting and drinking. The cadence ofsexual metaphors – food, drinks, animal behaviour and sexual allusions can be found in lines 4136 to 4159. Malyne begins the lines by leaving to get supplies:

This millere into toun his doghter sende For ale and breed,
and rosted hem a goos,
And boond hire hors, it sholde namoore go loos,And in his
owene chambre hem made a bed, With sheetes and with chalons
faire yspred Noght from his owene bed ten foot or twelve.
His doghter hadde a bed, al by hirselve,
Right in the same chambre by and by
(The Reeve's Tale, 4136–4143)

In these lines, two food items are mentioned by Chaucer – breed and goos, where goos is a sexual symbol – representing femininity and because of the long neck, it also stands for the phallus – something that the protagonists devour. Then, ale, sheets, blankets, bed and horse arethe other blatant sexual symbols that the miller, helplessly, tethers. The orgy resumes after twolines:
Wel hath this millere vernysshed his heed; Ful pale he was for dronken, and nat reed.He yexeth, and he speketh thurgh the nose
As he were on the quakke, or on the pose.

To bedde he goth, and with hym goth his wyf.As any jay she light
was and jolyf,
So was her jolly whistle well wetted.The cradel at
hir beddes feet is set,
To rokken, and to yeve the child to sowke. And whan that
dronken al was in the crowke,
To bedde wente the doghter right anon

(*The Reeve's Tale*, 4149–4159).
This contains references to drinking, bed, uncouth behaviour and expressions of sexual overtones. Therefore, *The Reeve's Tale* surpasses *The Miller's Tale* and *The Knight's Tale* by pairing up sex with violence. In this regard, it is comparable to mediaeval tales and different from them as well in that it employs vulgar imagery

(bread and grinding). Most importantly, it islike, *The Knight's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, as an indictment of male chauvinism in its portrayal of repressed women and heartless men – not just Symkyn, but also the students. In thissense, the tale has a nasty (dark) undercurrent beneath the humour, which serves to show the hypocrisy of Chaucer's era.

The Merchant's Tale

May's description is overloaded with sexual symbols. She is described as "fresshe May" and SueNiebrzydowski notes that, in the Wife of Bath's Prologue Jankyn was described as 'fresshe and gay' "a description that conveys a variety of meanings; fresh, new, vigorous, lusty, joyous, wanton and amorous, any number of which indicate that he brought virility, pleasure and invention in lovemaking" (24). Here, fruits and vegetables can be linked to freshness and especially in the ontext of the pear tree in the garden; eating them might symbolise sexual activity and sexual gratification. This symbolism is carried further when May tells Januarie abouther needs in the garden:

This fresshe May, that is so bright and sheene, Gan for to syke,
and seyde, "Allas, my syde! Now sire," quod she, "for aught that
may bityde,I moste han of the peres that I see,
Or I moot dye, so soore longeth meTo eten of the
smale peres grene.
Help, for hir love that is of hevene queene!I telle yow wel,
a womman in my plit
May han to fruyt so greet an appetit

That she may dyen, but she of it have".

(*The Merchant's Tale,* 2328–2337)

May is referring to her desire for sex. The 'fruyt' May alludes to has a variety of meanings, someof which are erotic. Alcuin Blamires notes the complexity of the 'fruyt' symbol:

The fruit is ostensibly real fruit such as a pregnant woman might crave—so May implies, to her possessive and heir-hungry husband. At the same time, the fruit is either Damyan himself, or Damyan's phallus, or sexual fruition, or the child that might result from sex with Damyan. Again, if we remember that May herself was first projected to be the "fruit" of an old man's wealth, she herself might strike us in another sense as the fruit thatDamyan is about to pluck. (114)

So, May can be seen as a medieval depiction of Eve. She is specifically linked to the huge desirefor food, sex and knowledge. The metaphor of the Garden of Eden is only one aspect of thescene. In the biblical story, Eve simply eats the forbidden fruit because she doesn't need it. May,on the other hand, needs it, she might die if she does not get it.

Januarie employs a lot of sexual iconographies from his era. Thus, he contends when discussing marriage and the age of bride and groom:

I wol noon oold wyf han in no manere. She shal nat
passe twenty yeer, certayn;
Oold fissh and yong flessh wolde I have fayn.Bet is," quod he,
"a pyk than a pykerel,
And bet than old boef is the tendre veel. I wol no
womman thritty yeer of age;
It is but bene-straw and greetforage.

And eek thise olde wydwes, God it woot, They konne so
muchel craft on Wades boot,
So muchel broken harm, whan that hem leste

(*The Merchant's Tale*, 1416– 1425)

Here, the food symbolism is coarse – fish, meat, bean-straw. The coarseness of Januarie's comparison of the ideal bride to veal (young meat) implies that he views women with contempt. "For Januarie, the prospect of marriage to May means an exclusive appropriation of her sexualitythat will maximize his pleasure and guarantee his bloodline" (Blamires 113). Januarie's sexual aspiration shows the dearth of courtly love skills in the knight. This makes the tale into a satire ofcourtly romances as he attempts to become something that he is not. The food symbolism is also present when Januarie stuffs himself with food, alcohol, and aphrodisiacs to enhance the pleasureof his wedding night:

Soone after that, this hastif Januarie
Wolde go to bedde; he wolde no lenger tarye.

He drynketh ypocras, clarree, and vernageof spices hoote
t' encreessen his corage; And many a letuarie hath he ful
fyn,
Swiche as the cursed monk, daun Constantyn,
Hath writen in his book De Coitu
(*The Merchant's Tale*, 1805–1811)

By linking food with sex, and May with meat, implies that Januarie is a sexual glutton who is unable to perform sexually. The references to spices are also crucial as in the medieval era certain spices were prescribed to treat sexual dysfunction and we see in Januarie's description oflovemaking that he is a poor lover.

The garden in which May and Damyan make love can be seen as a metaphor for the Garden of Eden and the pear for the Tree of Knowledge. The pear, here, can be seen as a sexualsymbol and Damyan can be viewed as the forbidden fruit. May, Januarie and Damyan use the garden as a sexual playground where they are more focused on having sex than wooing. As a result, it is a mockery of courtly love.

The sexual comedy in the tale neither focuses exclusively on male sexuality nor it is "misogynist". The tale depicts May as having a female body that is full of appetite and sexual desire. May's decision to reject mediaeval gender norms in favor of her erotic project is unequivocal proof of the sexual individualism among women that is neither created nor governedby the external male sources.

The Knight's Tale

Much like his *fabliaux,* Chaucer also subverts his romantic genre but instead of incorporating fabliaux elements, he achieves this by turning the genre into a critique of chivalryand religious mores rather than a celebration of them.

The Knight's Tale has erotic images that are martial and phallic and imply death, suffering andviolence. This is because the tale is mostly focused on the conflict between Palamon and Arciteand how chivalry causes the nobility to suffer. Chaucer simplifies characters, especially Emily and eliminates the romantic elements to produce a harsher depiction of the knightly estate.

The Knight's Tale employs animal imagery that is martial and noble, such as the boar (3times), wolf (2 times), bear (6 times), lion (9 times), hound (8 times), tiger (2 times), horse (10 times). Similarly, the birds that appear in the tale are also not the symbols of love. For instance,they are the following: dove (1 time), crow (1 time), eagle (2 times), raven (1 time), lark (3 times), kite (1 time) and hawk (1 time). Jennifer LaBurre observes after making this count, that"In this tale, the Knight makes use of twenty-eight types of animals…(that are) indicative of thecourt and are associated with noble status (of Palamon and Arcite)" and the violent nature of their love (9). Corinne Saunders notes that the use of wild beast imagery in the tale depicts "thecomplete abandonment of the lovers to their destructive passions" (456).

Emily's absence from the love affair and the poem itself, both contribute to the rarity of female erotic images (Marten 42). Emily lacks individuality as she is a person with no opinion, actions and feelings of her own and instead stands for the beauty that the chivalric nature desires.Unlike Chaucer's *fabliaux,* there is no direct encounter with her before Palamon and Arcite see her and hardly anybody part is exposed. Emily is introduced as:

That Emelye, that fairer was to sene Than is the lylie
upon his stalke grene,
And fressher than the May with floures newe—
For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,
(*The Knight's Tale*, 1035–1038)

The word flower is used seven times in the tale and twice in the context of Emily and isexplicitly sexual. The lily stalk, in this context, stands for the phallus. Similarly:

She gadereth floures, party white and rede,to make a
subtil gerland for hire hede; And as an aungel hevenysshly
she soong.
The grete tour, that was so thikke and stroong,which of the
castel was the chief dongeoun
Ther as the knyghtes weren in prisoun
(*The Knight's Tale*, 1053–1058)

She is framed in the walled garden and compared to lilies (purity) and roses (eroticism). She is presented as an 'aesthetic object' which is inconsumable (unlike the other female protagonists infabliaux); she is inactive and an automaton, as the Miller puts it.

Despite the tale's appearance of romance, it has no noble elements in it. Chaucer emphasizes this by including structural similarities between *The Knight's Tale* and *The Miller'sTale*. Thus, Chaucer dismantles the façade of romance to expose the ugly side of mediaeval chivalry. Therefore, in the romance tale, the erotic themes are illustrated through voyeurism, martial arts and symbolic violence.

Conclusion

The above discussion outlines the major aspects of Chaucer's erotic poetry which is subversive. He subverts the notions of courtly love and chivalry and distorts the gender roles andhighlights the corruption of the clergy. He exposes the mediaeval tradition of courtly love as violent, obsessive and foolish. The violence is exposed in *The Knight's Tale,* in the fighting scene between Palamon and Arcite in the forest. Both of them are so preoccupied that neither hasthe time to think about Emily's feelings; instead, they violate their knightly oaths. Foolishness isevident in *The Miller's Tale* when Absolon attempts to emulate courtly love but ends up being humiliated by Alison. Chaucer's distortion of gender roles is evident in *The Miller's Tale* in Absolon. He exhibits female characteristics such as squeamishness and a preference for fine clothes. This femininity is displayed in his wooing of Alison, in which he tries to behave like aknight but ends up making a mockery of courtly conventions.

The corruption of clergy is parodied in *The Miller's Tale* where Absolon is a priest and in*The Reeve's Tale* where Malyne's grandfather is a corrupt parson. Chaucer's tales are open to female sexuality and we observe this in the licentiousness of Alison in *The Miller's Tale*.

Alongside this, there are references to a variety of sexual behaviors throughout Chaucer's oeuvre, quite a lot of which require female permission and delight. He makes references to oralsex, sadomasochism, bestiality, and rape in addition to copulation.

Chaucer certainly wasn't the first one to criticize the clergy, represent adulterous womenand mock chivalric codes. However, his criticism is much more nuanced and stronger than the simple *fabliaux* which comes from his innovativeness. His innovativeness is apparent in his useof symbolism – windows and other openings for female pudendum, grains for sex, food, sight, gardens, grinding, animal imagery and phallic symbols. This sexual symbolism added depth to the characters and also helped in setting the tone of the tales. However, Chaucer did not rely completely on the symbols, when necessary, he used graphic details to describe sex. Thus, the grandeur of Chaucer's erotic poetry lies in this. He doesn't use eroticism and sexuality casually but to examine human nature and criticize the mores of the Mediaeval era England.

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