

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: **“THE BESTE GAME OF ALLE”: ELEMENTS OF THE FABLIAU**

IN CHAUCER’S KNIGHT’S TALE

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Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale, the first of the Canterbury Tales, has long been considered to be a courtly romance by a consensus of critics and readers. The tale, however, evades such categorization and possesses elements that are often associated with the fabliau, a genre that emerged in France during the mid-twelfth century. Fabliaux are often comic in nature, presenting lower-to-middle-class characters involved in sexual love triangles, heated rivalries, and ribald mishaps that often celebrate the ingenuity of the individual. Upon first consideration, the fabliau appears to have very little in common with the romance, a genre that features tales that are often devoted to antiquity, the concept of courtly love, and the sacred group identity of knights and nobility. In actuality, the writers of fabliau gained much of their inspiration from romantic literature and counted the aristocracy as members of their audiences. In Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, the relationship of the Miller’s Tale to the Knight’s Tale is a perfect example of a fabliau that receives its structure and inspiration from a romance.

The Knight's Tale exhibits elements that are parallel to those of the fabliau. Mary Jane Stearns Schenck, in her study of Old French fabliaux, identifies nine structural elements characteristic of the fabliau: *arrival, departure, interrogation, communication, deception, misdeed, recognition, retaliation, and resolution*. Each of these elements also appears in the Knight's Tale. In addition to structural elements, the content of the Knight's Tale links it to the fabliau, especially to the Miller's Tale. The Miller is inspired by the rivalry between Palamon and Arcite as well as by particular attitudes expressed in the Knight's language. Such elements of the fabliau make the Knight's Tale Chaucer's "beste game of alle."

“THE BESTE GAME OF ALLE”:
ELEMENTS OF THE FABLIAU IN CHAUCER’S KNIGHT’S TALE

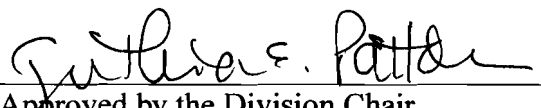
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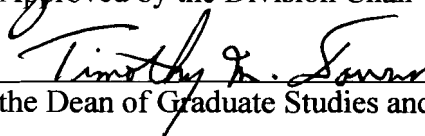
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I wish to dedicate my thesis to the memory of my grandmother, Opal Sieger (July 25, 1906 – April 2, 2001), who provided me with much love and support as I pursued my education.

PREFACE

“THE GAME IS WEL BIGONNE . . . ”

Whan that the Knyght had thus his tale ytoold,

In al the route nas ther yong ne oold

That he ne seyde it was a noble storie [. . .] (3109-11)

The pilgrims on the road to Canterbury cannot deny that the Knight's Tale is a fitting beginning to their storytelling competition. The thoughtfully abbreviated and ordered story of Theseus, Arcite, Palamon, and Emelye only enhances the Knight's image of "chivalrie / Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie" (45-6). However, this apparently well-mannered tale, with which, the Host declares, "the game is wel bigonne" (3117), manages to spark the Miller's interest. In the midst of a drunken state, the Miller suddenly revives himself so that he may "quite" the Knight's Tale, a tale the churl really has no business to follow. His interruption of the appropriate sequence of storytellers makes pilgrims and readers alike consider how the Knight's Tale inspires the likes of the Miller. Modern readers are apt to wonder how "a noble storie" and a "cherles tale" suddenly develop an inextricable relationship in the context of Geoffrey Chaucer's work.

Medieval artists and writers such as Chaucer did not subject their work to the divisions of genre that modern critics and audiences have come to utilize. Instead, art of the Middle Ages conflated the serious and comic, secular and spiritual, humorous and tragic, and various styles and themes. This particular phenomenon, as Ernst R. Curtius

discusses, can be traced back to the writings of Homer where “the base and the heroic (Thersites and Achilles) stand side by side. Nestor is treated with delicate humor. Hephaestus’ surprising Ares and Aphrodite is a farce in which the gods take part. The comic and the tragic enter the epic style” (417). In the medieval epic or romance, comedy may also play a role alongside seriousness. The Knight, narrator of Chaucer’s shortened version of Boccaccio’s Teseida, must keep his audience listening, and his efforts to do this require him to include what Curtius would call “comic interludes” (429). Such “comic” style reveals itself in the theme, structure, language, and imagery of the Knight’s Tale; combined, these elements fuel the inspiration of the Miller who produces a fabliau out of romance.

A majority of medieval tales, Knud Togeby asserts, is “predominantly comical” (8), and many such works are not epics or romances. Many are fabliaux. In his 1957 work, Les Fabliaux, Per Nykrog notes that the thirteenth-century fabliau was “written in the meter of courtly romance and intended to be read aloud in private social gatherings [. . .]” (63); he believes that fabliaux were dependent upon the established conventions of courtly literature. In Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, the Miller’s Tale not only parodies but also is dependent upon the Knight’s Tale for its own comic effect. The Knight’s Tale, like its own predecessors, maintains a combination of the serious and the absurd, revealing “that a comic element had always been part of the stock of medieval epic and was not first introduced by corrupt minstrels” (Curtius 431).

Although many nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars have worked vigorously to invent titles and definitions for all modes of literature, identifying pools of

texts and pinning particular terms to particular works, medieval literature constantly manages to defy these conventions. In evidence of this, Chaucer's Knight's Tale evades categorization. Originally defined as a medieval epic or romance, the tale also possesses elements of the fabliau genre. With such a tale to mark the beginning of Chaucer's work, the game is indeed "wel bigonne."

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INTRODUCTION

“THE BESTE GAME OF ALLE”

In the second part of Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale, long after the main characters of Palamon and Arcite have fallen in love with the fair Emelye, Theseus and his entourage are hunting a deer in a grove near Athens. Certainly, the hunters do not expect to encounter “a wood leon,” “a crueel tigre,” or any “wilde bores” during their pursuit (1656-58). Nevertheless, in a combination of shocked anger and reprimand, Theseus suddenly confronts the blood-spattered knights who are fighting like animals for the possession of Emelye. After his initial condemnation of the knights has been softened by the cries of the women, Theseus’s mood suddenly shifts. He begins to see the human folly in Palamon and Arcite’s situation, and he indicates this in the following passage:

But this is yet the beste game of alle,
That she for whom they han this jolitee
Kan hem therfore as mucche thank as me.
She woot namoore of al this hootte fare,
By God, than woot a cokkow or an hare! (1806-10)

Theseus is uncertain where to stand in his dealings with these two men. He wants to sentence them to death, but he changes his mind as he reveals this joke, this “game,” to the company. The duel is a grave situation for the two knights, complicated by the issue of masculine identity and each one’s desire for the “boon” that is Emelye. However, it is as though Theseus must suppress his own hearty laughter about their futile competition.

Theseus’s immediate difficulty in understanding the triangle of Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye mirrors the reader’s. It has nearly become a universal consensus that one

should read the Knight's Tale as a courtly romance, and few have questioned its being placed in this category. Yet even though the Knight's Tale is more than suitable for an educated, aristocratic audience and includes other romance characteristics such as allusions to antiquity, the presence of mythical figures, supernatural events, and pageantry, it still becomes difficult to label. The Knight may indeed tell a tale fit for royalty, yet his audience is a motley band of pilgrims. As later becomes apparent, the Miller becomes very interested in the story of Palamon and Arcite, and his "quiting" tale compels one to believe that Chaucer had intentions other than romantic for the Knight's Tale. Also, few stories in the romance genre emphasize male rivalry in the way that the Knight's Tale does, and the intense competition between Palamon and Arcite disturbs the reading of this tale as courtly romance. On the subject of Palamon and Arcite's rivalry, Jerome Mandel reveals that

in none of the texts that we all recognize as the principal examples of courtly love do we find a similar rivalry. Nowhere in the stories of Tristan, of Lancelot, Erec, Yvain, Cligés, Parzifal, Troilus, Sir Orfeo, King Horn, Havelock, Aucassin, or of Malory's many lovers is courtly love defined or characterized as a rivalry between two lovers for a lady. That tends to be a characteristic of fabliaux. (285)

Mandel's statement raises an important question about the Knight's Tale: Does it contain elements of fabliau? In this story of Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye, Chaucer's intention may have been to present a romance that reveals obvious as well as subtle parallels to fabliau. In its emphasis on male rivalry, the Knight's Tale anticipates the fabliaux that follow and even sets the stage for the Miller's parody. Such a reading of the

tale, however, has only to do with content, and it is also important for one to consider the many structural similarities between the Knight's Tale and the fabliau genre. By using a method created by Vladimir Propp in his work Morphology of the Folktale and adapted to the Old French fabliau by Mary Jane Stearns Schenck, one can see that nine elements of the fabliau are present in the Knight's Tale. Therefore, a structural analysis of the fabliau in the Knight's Tale also becomes possible.

It becomes difficult to place either the Knight's Tale or the Miller's Tale in one genre or another. However, most of the critics who discuss the conventions of courtly romance in the Miller's Tale seem hesitant to examine the characteristics of fabliau in the Knight's Tale. As Scott Vaszily observes, no critic has examined fabliau elements in any of Chaucer's non-fabliau texts (523). This lack of criticism may have resulted because the Miller's Tale and the Reeve's Tale, two of Chaucer's most infamous and bawdy fabliaux, immediately follow the Knight's Tale; therefore, the possibilities seem more remote because of the extreme contrast between this particular romance and the two fabliaux that follow. The Miller's Tale and Reeve's Tale mimic and mock the concept of courtly love by featuring explicitly sexual interactions among characters. The humor is coarse, obscene, and even violent. These tales not only emphasize human sexuality but go a step further to explore man's animal nature and competitive spirit, the latter present even in the very "quitings" of the Miller and Reeve. It is not correct, however, to assume that these notorious fabliaux are accurate representations of an entire genre.

FABLIAUX, OR THE HISTORY OF A “GAME”

The fabliau began to emerge in the mid-twelfth century with the works of Jean Bodel whose Roman de Renart, as Jürgen Beyer points out, first mentions the fabliau by name in its opening lines:

Seigneurs, oï avez maint conte
Que maint conterre vous raconte,
Conment Paris ravi Elaine,
Le mal qu’il en ot et la paine;
De Tristan dont la Chievre fist,
Qui assez bellement en dist,
Et fabliaus et chancon de geste.¹

By the end of the twelfth century, eight fabliaux by Bodel established the genre and “were considered worthy of being set down on costly parchment” (Beyer 16). The term *fabliau*, a Picardism of northern France where most fabliaux were produced, originates from the Old French term *fable*. The *fable*, according to Raymond Eichmann, “can be an instructional *exemplum*, the raw material of a tale, or a fictionalized, untrue tale” (1). However, in illustration of the medieval disregard for exact genres, words such as “*dit* (a humorous narrative, lacking action), *aventure*, *conte*, *exemple*, and *fable*” describe works that are also labeled fabliaux (1). Also, as John Hines observes, it is important to note the similarity *fabliau* has to the Latin *fabula*, the latter term being connected to Aesop’s Fables (2). In scholarship on the fabliau, most have maintained that the corpus is small in number: Joseph Bédier identifies one hundred and forty-seven fabliaux; Per Nykrog, one hundred and sixty; and Mary Jane Stearns Schenck, one hundred and thirty (Eichmann v).

Hines claims that there are one hundred and twenty-seven Old French fabliaux, stating that the word *fabliau* exists “as a label in roughly half of this group of texts” (1). The tales themselves are quite short, averaging between 300-400 lines apiece (Eichmann vi). The fabliau’s comic nature, however, is its most recognizable feature, and above all, the tale’s purpose is to entertain.

In his 1893 work Les fabliaux, Joseph Bédier defined the fabliau as a “*conte à rire en vers*,” which I would translate as “a comical tale in verse” or, as Karl D. Uitti glosses it in The Dictionary of the Middle Ages, “a metrical tale to make people laugh” (“Fabliau and Comic Tale”). Bédier established a precise division between the literary interests of the lower and the aristocratic classes in the Middle Ages:

The fabliaux are [. . .] the poetry of the little people. Down to earth realism, a merry and ironic conception of life, all the distinctive traits of the fabliau [. . .] show likewise the features of the bourgeois. On the other hand, the worship of woman, dreams of fairyland, idealism, all the traits that distinguished the lyric poetry and the romances of the Round Table, also mark out the features of the knightly class.

(Qtd. in Muscatine, “The Fabliaux” 168)

Bédier’s assumption that only the lower social class enjoyed and understood fabliaux was not countered until 1957 when Per Nykrog contended that the fabliaux, in actuality, had reached other medieval audiences. “A close study of the texts,” Nykrog argues, “does not bear out any hypothesis that makes a sharp distinction between even the highest courts and the milieu of the townspeople in general” (64). (Nykrog notes that certain fabliau writers had, in fact, “Royal Highnesses” within their audiences.) Members of the

aristocracy enjoyed fabliaux because the content and language of such tales were completely opposed to that of the romance, paradoxically making an understanding of romance necessary for the understanding of fabliau. Uitti provides a clear metaphor representing the opposition of these two genres: “Fabliaux are thus the reverse side of the courtly coin” (“Fabliau and Comic Tale”). This metaphor also represents the view of Nykrog, who explains that “this literature, enjoyed by the townspeople in the thirteenth century, is essentially derived partly from the courtly literature of the preceding age” (64), and “to understand [the fabliaux] well it is necessary to consider them a sort of courtly genre” (qtd. in Muscatine, “The Fabliaux” 168). Nykrog’s statements make it evident to scholars and readers that the fabliaux contain characters, plot devices, and styles that owe their existence to the genre of romance.

There are many connections that exist between the fabliau and the courtly romance, one of the most important being the way in which the writers of fabliaux utilize the language and metaphors of romance for comic effect or parody. Clearly, in the present considerations, the Miller’s Tale is a primary example of the comic use of romantic literature. Nykrog believes that fabliaux, on occasion, present details that only a “cultivated” medieval audience would have understood; the same details were “utterly wasted” on readers of a lower class (64). As an example of this, Nykrog cites *Le Fevre de Creil*, a fabliau that includes a quotation from Chrétien de Troyes that, in the original text, is a description of Enide: “*Moult estoit la pucele gente / Car tote it ot mise s’antante / Nature qui fete l’avoit,*” or in Nykrog’s translation, “The maiden was very lovely, for Nature, who had made her, had put all its attention into it” (65). In the fabliau, however, the lines “*Qui moult ert de bele feture / Quar toute I ot mise sa cure / Nature*

qui formé l'avoit [. . .]” refer to the penis of an apprentice (64-5). Nykrog also discusses how Jean Bodel provides comic allusions to Chrétien, and these references are present for the benefit of aristocratic audiences who would have been familiar with Chrétien and other authors of romance (65). In addition, those who read vast amounts of romantic literature were not safe from ridicule: Nykrog explains that metaphors and terms from romance appear in the language of the young, often female “victims” in the fabliaux (69). The interrelationship between the genres of romance and fabliaux, as well as the audiences they shared, reveals that Bédier’s distinctions about social class and the fabliau are not accurate.

In addition to Nykrog, other scholars have reconsidered Bédier’s definition. Knud Togeby observes that “*contes à rire en vers*” can refer to many tales that are not actually called fabliaux. Claiming that “*à rire*” implies a distinction of the style rather than the humor of a tale, he suggests a new definition: “*nouvelle de niveau bas du XIII^e siècle*” or “a thirteenth-century short story of low level or style” (8; my trans.) This restructuring of Bédier’s definition, in Togeby’s opinion, more clearly distinguishes fabliaux, tales often peopled with the working classes, from stories such as *Lai du cort mantel* (“Tale of the Short Mantle”) that present aristocratic characters in humorous, socially competitive situations. Thomas D. Cooke, like Togeby, believes that the heart of Bédier’s definition lies in what is meant by the phrase “*à rire*.” The fabliau is, by nature, a comic tale, but “the exact nature of that comedy and its various manifestations” is difficult to determine (12-13). According to Cooke, the “ideal” fabliau is characterized by a comic climax that “comes as a surprise” and is “artistically fitting and appropriate” (16,13). Cooke does not intend to catalog all fabliaux by this one feature; instead, he explains that the comic

climax is “their most distinctive characteristic” (109). Stemming from Bédier’s work, Togeby and Cooke attempt to restructure assumptions about style and comedy in the fabliau.

Others have discussed the realism and the content of the fabliaux. D. W. Robertson, Jr., in his Preface to Chaucer, states that the “obscenity” present in the fabliaux is “a characteristic which modern readers are likely to confuse with ‘realism’” (206). In contrast, Charles Muscatine believes that the fabliaux do present “the realism of comedy” with characters that, although types, are “from the audience’s own world” (“The Fabliaux” 165-66). Muscatine also acknowledges that medieval audiences may not have considered the fabliaux – an “after dinner” genre concerned with food, sex, money, and “*engin* (wit, cleverness)” – to be “obscene,” in the modern sense (164,166). Rather, Muscatine describes the fabliaux as being “materialistic” and “hedonistic;” these two characteristics combine to present content that is “naturalistic” but rarely vulgar (166). An Old French fabliau or Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale was likely read or recited to mixed company without the censorship of possibly obscene passages or words. In a time that was, as Muscatine states, “relatively free of linguistic taboos,” it is probable that bourgeois and aristocratic audiences would have found the content of fabliaux humorous, outrageous, but rarely, if ever, offensive (“The (Re)Invention” 176).

The fabliaux, recognized by general audiences for their presentation of comic situations, include various motifs and actions that make them promising areas for structural analysis. One of the primary works on structuralism, Vladimir Propp’s 1928 study of Russian fairy tales, Morphology of the Folktale, reveals strong possibilities for structural analysis of fabliaux. In his work, Propp identifies and defines approximately

thirty actions or “functions” that are present in folktale texts. These functions, although performed by the “dramatis personae” of the tale, are not, in Propp’s view, dependent upon “the personage who carries out the function” (20-21). Therefore, instead of naming a function *the hero* or *the villain*, Propp creates a tag that is an action, such as *complicity* or *villainy*. Naturally, each one has significance to the action of the story. Through identifying the functions in a given text, a structural analyst using Propp’s theory can trace how the form affects the thematic content and action. For example, I would argue that in an structural analysis of Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale, Propp’s functions are present in the text, one of the few English fabliaux. The function of *villainy*, according to Propp, occurs when a “villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family” (30). It is carried out by Nicholas who dupes John the carpenter into believing that he will escape a great flood by remaining in a kneading trough suspended from “the roof ful hye” (3563). Nicholas’s *villainy* is the primary injury enacted upon one character by another, yet Absolon’s “iren hoot” vengeance upon Nicholas also fulfills the function. In this triangle of men, *complicity*, or the victim’s submission to “deception” (30), occurs when John believes Nicholas’s flood prophecy and when Nicholas returns to the window at Absolon’s entreaty, underestimating the parish clerk’s potential for violence. These two functions, present in Chaucer’s fabliau, take the forms of various actions performed by various characters. By showing the link between structure and content, Propp’s Morphology can be applied to countless texts, including novels, plays, and films (Dundes xiv).

Because there is a lack of formal, structural criticism concerning the fabliau, Mary Jane Stearns Schenck has utilized and adapted Propp’s work to offer such a study.

Drawing inspiration from Propp's method, Schenck has studied sixty-six "self-proclaimed" Old French fabliaux, and from her analysis, she identifies nine functions in the action of the tales. These functions, according to Schenck, become the major "components" of a fabliau, and there is no specific character that must enact a specific function. Schenck also claims, "there is no static sequence of functions in the fabliau" ("Functions and Roles in the Fabliau" 33). The nine functions she presents are "arrival, departure, interrogation, communication, deception, misdeed, recognition, retaliation, and resolution" (The Fabliaux 40).

Although Schenck's work deals with Old French fabliaux, it is highly likely that Chaucer's fabliaux feature these same functions. Chaucer was immensely influenced by French styles, becoming, with the exception of the anonymous author of "Dame Sirith," the only English writer of fabliaux.² French literature influences the content and structure of his fabliaux, or as Muscatine states, "[Chaucer's] style is most compendiously and clearly described as stemming from the traditions originated and propagated, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in France" (Chaucer and the French Tradition 5). Benson and Andersson, among others, have determined that Chaucer knew many Old French fabliaux (10). A classic motif such as the "misdirected kiss," present in the tale *De Berangier au Lonc Cul* ("Bérenger of the Long Arse"), appears in Chaucer's Miller's Tale. The Reeve's Tale, however, has French predecessors that exist as actual tales: Jean Bodel's *De Gombert et des II clers* (1190-1194) and the anonymous *Le Meunier et les II clers*, or "The Miller and the Two Clerks" (Benson and Andersson 79). (Schenck includes and analyzes these two French fabliaux in her structural study.) Certainly, Chaucer's dependence upon French sources was not limited to the fabliaux; his reading and study of

Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun as well as Chrétien de Troyes also contributed to his production of the Canterbury Tales. By applying to Chaucer's work the assertion that the fabliaux, as Nykrog states, are "derived partly from courtly literature" (64) and by applying also the structural model of nine functions that Schenck employs, one discovers that Chaucer's Miller's Tale finds its point of origin – as well as its inspiration – in the Knight's Tale.

RIVALRY TO *RESOLUTION*: FUNCTIONS OF THE FABLIAU IN THE KNIGHT'S TALE

In a scene of epic triumph and hierarchical oppression, the Knight's Tale opens with the return of Theseus to his court:

Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,
And in his tyme swich a conquerour
That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.
Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne;
What with his wysdom and his chivalrie,
He conquered al the regne of Femenye [. . .]. (861-66)

Theseus's recent exploit in Femenye is what gives him reason to arrive in Athens with such fanfare; however, what make the tale's introduction important is not Theseus's adventure but his arrival, his immediate presence on the scene. The narrator-Knight, in fact, readily admits that there is not enough time to relate the account of Theseus's defeat of the Amazons and subsequent capture of sisters Ypolita and Emelye. Instead, as Chaucer's Knight states, Theseus the man – the “duc,” “lord,” “governour,” and “conquerour” – is given prominence over the specific battle: “And thus with victorie and with melodye, / Lete I this noble duc to Attenes ryde, / And al his hoost in armes hym bisyde” (872-4). In Schenck's model, the first two functions are *arrival* and *departure*. She states that *arrival* can refer to “an outsider arriving or a non-outsider returning,” and the function tends to initiate the action of the tale (The Fabliaux 43). In the Knight's Tale, the character of Theseus fulfills the role of a non-outsider who is returning from Amazonomachy with his captives Ypolita and Emelye. Chaucer, whose narrator-Knight

suggests that Theseus's notoriety is "as olde stories tellen us" (859), assumes (correctly) that his audience is familiar with the character of Theseus, a figure who appears in countless accounts of classical mythology and interpretive tradition. Therefore, Theseus is a character that needs no explanation.

However, two characters that do need explanation are Arcite and Palamon; they are the outsiders whose *arrival* is brought about by force. Theseus departs for Thebes, defeats Creon, and returns with Arcite and Palamon as his prisoners. This series of arrivals and departures, as well as Arcite and Palamon's presences, initiates the central action of the narrative. Arcite and Palamon are variables, unknown to the audience and other characters at the tale's beginning; the two knights have the potential to alter, create, or dominate the story's content. When Arcite and Palamon see Emelye in the garden, the primary device of the tale – the love triangle – is thrown into motion. Soon, Arcite and Palamon are in competition with one another, threatening the stable house of Theseus with their rivalry.³

The rivalry between Palamon and Arcite is clearly the tale's main emphasis and becomes the tale's primary element of fabliau. John Hines supports this notion of the fabliau's presence when he states, "It would certainly be wrong to deny, or to dismiss as too crude, the fabliau's sardonic reflection upon the absurd aspects of Palamon and Arcite's passion for the unknowing and largely indifferent Emelye and its destructive consequences [. . .]" (150). The tale presents a descent from the sacred group identity, present in such chivalric romances as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and The Alliterative Morte Arthure, to the rebellious individual identity that appears in a fabliau like Chaucer's Miller's Tale. At Palamon and Arcite's first appearance in the tale, the

narrator-Knight describes them as being cousins in blood as well as brothers in chivalry. In fact, they are nearly indistinguishable from one another. Lee Patterson has observed that knights in the Middle Ages accepted, without question, the chivalric construct of group identity. Men who entered the profession of knighthood were conditioned to think and act as one (176). In addition, Susan Crane explains the concept of self in chivalric romance as being “significantly an aspect of the community” (27). Although the relationships among knights, kings, and followers differ in various histories or romances, Crane stresses these “interdependent identities” as being “integral to the notion of the romance hero” (28-29). The Knight’s Tale provides a literal depiction of these particular notions of group identity and interdependence when, after Theseus’s battle against Thebes, the pillagers discover Arcite and Palamon in one big heap of dead bodies. The description of the knights “liggyng by and by / Both in oon armes” (1011-12) makes it unclear where Palamon ends and Arcite begins, becoming a metaphor for the bonds of brotherhood inherent in chivalry. The two knights are inextricably linked to one another, and as Crane illustrates, the Knight’s Tale “decenter(s) the position of hero by doubling the characters in that position” (29). However, Patterson explains that the narrator’s description also links Palamon and Arcite’s predicament with the Scopes-Grosvenor trial of 1385. The dispute concerned two of King Richard’s knights who discovered that they possessed the same coat of arms (180). “Such an embarrassment naturally ignited rivalry,” Patterson notes, because “the coexistence of identical arms subverted the autonomy and sovereignty of the family and hence of the individual who derived his identity from it” (183). Unlike King Richard’s knights, Palamon and Arcite’s competition is not provoked by their coat of arms but by a woman.

Before Emelye, Palamon and Arcite, governed by group identity, had no need to discuss or question their bond of brotherhood. Palamon, however, is quick to remind Arcite of their oath after the two knights have spied Emelye in the garden:

“It nere,” quod he, “to thee no greet honour
For to be fals, ne for to be traitour
To me, that am thy cosyn and thy brother
Ysworn ful depe, and ech of us til oother [. . .]” (1129-32)

Emelye’s appearance creates a division between the two men, providing the reason for each of them to pursue and gain individuality through the means of heterosexual love. Through their reactions and speech, the men’s separate natures become clearer. Palamon mistakes Emelye for a goddess – “I noot wher she be womman or goddesse, / But Venus it is soothly, as I gesse” (1101-02) – and drops to his knees in prayer, revealing fervent piety toward love. Arcite, in contrast, conveys an earthly, realistic love for Emelye. He reveals Palamon’s error and explains the first difference between the two of them: “Thyn is affeccoun of hoolynesse, / And myn is love as to a creature” (1158-59). The drawing of this distinction initiates the competition for Emelye between the two males, and structurally, the scene between the two knights exhibits characteristics of the *fabliau*.

In Schenck’s model, the third function, *interrogation*, is a character’s way of obtaining information about a situation. According to Schenck, “It is a straightforward and usually guileless investigation into a specific environment where the character needs to be provided with an answer or an object signifying that he is to proceed” (The Fabliaux 47). When Palamon sees Emelye in the garden near their prison and cries aloud “as though he stongen were unto to the herte” (1079), his actions initiate *interrogation* in the

narrative. His outburst prompts Arcite's concerned questions: "Cosyn myn, what eyleth thee, / That art so pale and deedly on to see? / Why cridestow? Who hath thee doon offence?" (1081-83). Assuming that Palamon's condition has been brought on by their imprisonment, Arcite urges him to accept Fortune's edict. Arcite believes that through a simple *interrogation* into Palamon's behavior he has diagnosed and solved the problem at hand. But he is incorrect; as Palamon informs him, the trouble is all about a lady:

The fairnesse of that lady that I see
Yond in the gardyn romen to and fro
Is cause of al my cryng and my wo. (1098-1100)

Falling to his knees after this speech, Palamon prays to Venus and reveals that he is easily deceived by first appearances. Both *interrogations* by the knights lead to incorrect assumptions: Arcite believes that Palamon is depressed because of their confinement and Palamon mistakes Emelye for a goddess. However, Palamon is the more faulty of the two; his inability to see Emelye for what she really is marks him as more gullible than Arcite. Arcite even claims that Palamon's mistake disqualifies him from having rights to Emelye's love: "Thou woost nat yet now / Wheither she be a womman or goddess!" (1156-57). In a traditional fabliau, an error such as Palamon's would mark him as the victim of whatever scheme a villain might concoct. Instead, Arcite provides him with the truth in what Schenck identifies as the fourth function of fabliau, *communication*. *Communication* occurs between the two knights when Palamon reminds Arcite of their vows of chivalry, but in contrast to Palamon's unifying statement, Arcite observes the primary difference between the two: Palamon loves a goddess while Arcite loves a woman. Although Palamon attempts to maintain a sense of brotherhood

between himself and his cousin, Arcite rebels against this brotherhood by drawing the harsh distinction between their individual identities. Arcite also denies the importance of the bond between him and Palamon, claiming that the law of love is stronger than the law that binds brothers in arms:

Love is a gretter lawe, by my pan,
Than may be yeve to any erthely man;
And therefore positif lawe and swich decree
Is broken al day for love in ech degree. (1165-68)

Through his actions of *communication*, Arcite possesses the role of *instigator* and, eventually, *duper*.⁴ By clarifying the key differences between the knights and disavowing his pledge to Palamon, Arcite proclaims his desire to compete for Emelye, becoming the *instigator* of the competition.

When the two knights see Emelye, the ideals of chivalry splinter, and each knight begins excessively to model one side of chivalry. These two sides of chivalry are the courtly lover and the enforcer of justice. Palamon is the exaggerated courtly lover crying “A!” at the sight of a “goddess,” and Arcite views justice as a matter of who loved the woman first. However, the connection of the men to Emelye is actually less important in the Knight’s Tale than the newfound rivalry. The knights begin to display the animalistic natures that eventually lead them to their battle in the forest. In their competition, they reveal similarities to the characters in a traditional fabliau triangle. As Nykrog states, “One face of the triangle (woman-lover) is sublime, the other (woman-husband) comic. The third face (lover-husband) is cruel, tragic, or dramatic; it is rarely important in the fabliau, but when it occurs, it results in violence and even bloodshed” (70). Although

neither Palamon nor Arcite fills the literal role of lover or husband of Emelye at this point, they begin to circle one another with suspicion, fear, and challenge.

The men may be deathly serious in their competition for Emelye, but the fabliau spirit of the Knight's Tale does not lie solely in the violence they inflict on one another but also in Chaucer's reformation and complication of the triangle of participants. Generally speaking, the triangle of characters in a fabliau presents a doddering husband who is easily duped, or cuckolded, by his young wife and her lover. Naturally, this triangle, or a variation of it, is present in tales other than fabliaux – one need look no further than the story of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere, or that of Mark, Tristan, and Iseult to see such a structure. However, Chaucer recasts the triangle in the Knight's Tale by presenting Emelye as the one who is ignorant of the actions of the other two. In fact, Theseus, in his assessment of Palamon and Arcite's fight, declares that Emelye knows "namoore" of the men than a "cokkow" would (1809-10), and the allusion to this bird – in fact, the very sound of its name – is also an allusion to the cuckold. If Emelye, in some fashion, occupies the role of a cuckold because of her ignorance of the actions of the other two in the triangle, then Palamon and Arcite's rivalry may also be perceived as a partnership in which both participants are attempting to dupe Emelye. Perhaps he who wins Emelye is essentially more capable of duping her into loving him. Her ignorance of the situation must be preserved so that she will not discover their unlawful acts. These possibilities in the triangle of the Knight's Tale lead to the question of whether or not those who participate in chaotic violence, if discovered by one who should not witness it, might suffer similar repercussions as those discovered in adulterous unions. Apparently, they should, in some respect; Theseus wants to sentence the men to death when he

discovers them. However, the speech of women, including Emelye, acts as an intercession for the knights and saves them even though the men's behaviors warrant punishment. In comparison to the fabliaux where a woman and her lover form a partnership to prevent her husband from knowing about her infidelity, the Knight's Tale presents Palamon and Arcite, men who fight like animals and keep all knowledge of their actions from reaching Emelye. When they are discovered in the grove, however, the attempt by Theseus to punish them is overruled by the women. Often in a fabliau such as the Miller's Tale, an initial punishment is the result – for example, Nicholas finds his end in a hot colter – but by the tale's conclusion, a reader assumes that the actions of the adulterous couple will continue. In the Knight's Tale, Palamon and Arcite are not only allowed to keep fighting, but by Theseus's rules, they are allowed to do so by legal decree. The knights' secretive duel in the grove foreshadows the theme of the entire fragment of tales, and as Emily Jensen observes, this “motif” of male rivalry connects romance to fabliau: All the tales of Fragment A “focus on men competing with each other in the age-old situation in which a woman is the apparent or, at least, the ‘eligible’ object of their ‘stryf’” (321).

There can be no doubt that Emelye is the goal, in one form or another, for both men. Palamon sees her as a personification of his allegiance to Venus; Arcite hopes to win her as the prize that accompanies victory. In effect, each man hopes to prove himself through the use of the woman, as often happens in both medieval romance and fabliau. The woman, as Joan Ferrante asserts, becomes a symbol. Furthermore, Ferrante continues, “Love can provide a man with a new and nobler identity and inspire him to great deeds in the service of others, or it can cause a madness that cuts him off from his

world and drives him into exile or death” (65). While Palamon and Arcite receive new, separate identities from their reactions to Emelye, they also become crazy and foolish. Brooke Bergan claims, “They are like children fighting over a toy. And they do not grow up” (6).

By the time Palamon and Arcite meet in the forest, much has happened to the psychological state of each knight. Arcite has spent time in exile after being released from Theseus’s prison by Perotheus’s request. Banished from Athens, he retreats to Thebes, where he endures physical suffering for Emelye’s love. However, after Mercury appears to him in a dream and bids him to return to Athens, Arcite dons a disguise:

And right anon he chaunged his array,
And cladde hym as a povre laborer,
And al allone, save oonly a squier
That knew his privetee and al his cas,
Which was disgised povrely as he was
To Atthenes is he goon the nexte way. (1408-13)

His physical appearance has changed so much that he is able to work as a servant in Theseus’s court. It is with this action that Arcite fulfills the fifth function of the fabliau: *deception*. According to Schenck’s catalog, *deception* can include: a) lying or fabricating a story; b) hiding; c) disguising or substituting; d) cheating; e) playing on words; and f) using magic (The Fabliaux 49). Disguised by the drastic physical changes of his weak, lovesick body, Arcite becomes Philostrate and enters Theseus’s service for three years. Although he does not inflict any harm or cruel trickery while in Theseus’s house, he does manage to disobey Theseus’s ruling of banishment and hide among his courtiers. By

maintaining this pretense of false identity, Arcite is able to observe and remain near Emelye, and although he does not act upon his feelings for her, the tension and mischief of the fabliau are present in this episode.

During this time, Palamon, assuming that Arcite is still in Thebes, has only envy for his cousin, as, ironically, Arcite had for him. Locked in prison, Palamon believes that Arcite will assemble an army and attack Theseus. Each believes his manhood or masculine individuality threatened by whatever the other might do. In fact, the loss of masculine identity for either man would be more troubling than the loss of Emelye because she is merely the catalyst for the battle, just as any prize or reward might be. She is the variable in the equation; only the preservation of the knights' masculine natures is the constant. Susan Crane asserts that masculinity is defined in its opposition to femininity, or masculine identity is formed "by alienating from it the traits assigned to femininity" such as "timidity, passivity, and pity" (19). When Palamon and Arcite profess their love for Emelye, they simultaneously establish their own identities in contrast to her feminine role. Crane claims that heterosexual love and courtship is then appropriated into the language and experience of masculinity: Arcite and Palamon describe love and their ensuing rivalry by using metaphors of combat and weaponry (50-51). Arcite states: "Love hath his firy dart so brennyngly / Ystiked thurgh my trewe, careful herte / That shapen was my deeth erst than my sherte" (1564-66), and when Palamon hears Arcite's words, he "thoughte that thurgh his herte / He felte a coold sword sodeynliche glyde [. . .]" (1574-75). The knights translate the first feelings of love into the terminology of warfare, clarifying for themselves the masculine rivalry in which they now participate. Although they have more clearly defined their maleness in opposition to

Emelye, Palamon and Arcite remain unable to define their masculinity in opposition to one another. The rivalry and enmity that develops between them is not only expected but also necessary if either knight wants to discover his own individuality. As becomes evident, the rivalry develops into a pursuit of male identity, and their actions in competition for this (and Emelye) lead to chaos, disorder, and confusion.

The fifth and sixth functions of the fabliau, *deception* and *misdeed*, are perhaps the most important to the structure of the tale because they mark what tends to be the defining characteristic of a fabliau: unlawful or chaotic behavior. In the Knight's Tale, the *misdeed* is not the result of one knight's action only; rather, both participate in the action that constitutes this function. Schenck defines the *misdeed* "as a hostile action by one character against another that violates societal norms or personal ethics"; it is the climax of the fabliau (The Fabliaux 53). When Arcite and Palamon meet in the forest, their resulting duel is the *misdeed* within the Knight's Tale. They both become animals, falling victim to their weaknesses of jealousy and pride:

Thou myghtest wene that this Palamon

In his fightyng were a wood leon,

And as a crueel tigre was Arcite;

As wilde bores gonne they to smyte,

That frothen whit as foom for ire wood.

Up to the ancle foghte they in hir blood. (1655-60)

When Theseus discovers the two fighting, "withouten juge or oother officere" (1712), he wants to sentence them both to death. They have disobeyed the laws of Theseus's hierarchy. Theseus, in his acknowledgment of the knights' true identities and

predicament, fulfills the seventh function of the fabliau, *recognition* of the *misdeed*. But it is the women who speak in behalf of Arcite and Palamon, urging Theseus to reconsider his hasty verdict. After his change of heart, Theseus scoffs at the knights' situation, claiming that their battle is nothing more than folly or a "game" (1806). Therefore, the *misdeed* of Arcite and Palamon's duel and Theseus's *recognition* of it do not end the narrative, as is the case in many fabliaux, but instead mark a transition into the latter half of the tale's action.

Each knight's serious pursuit of male individuality through the competition for Emelye is overshadowed by one remaining fact: even in opposition, Palamon and Arcite are still indistinguishable. They have become animals, but who is who? Chaucer's Knight first describes Arcite as a lion when the cousins meet in the grove (1598); however, when the two come together the following day for their bloody fight, Palamon becomes the "wood leon" and Arcite the "cruel tigre" (1656-57). These descriptions remain the same when Palamon and Arcite participate in Theseus's tournament:

Ther nas no tygre in the vale of Galgopheye,
Whan that hir whelp is stole whan it is lite,
So cruel on the hunte as is Arcite
For jelous herte upon this Palamon.
Ne in Belmarye ther nys no fel leon,
That hunted is, or for his hunger wood,
Ne of his praye desireth so the blood,
As Palamon to sleen his foo Arcite. (2626-33)

Palamon and Arcite may each be associated with a different beast, but the distinction is minimal. In the grove or at the tournament, they are still two animals of the same family.

The Knight's descriptions of Palamon and Arcite reveal that it is impossible for either man to establish an identity apart from the other. Still, they must fight for Emelye because the one who possesses her also gains distinction and identity in his own eyes or in those of the community.

The tournament fulfills one of the final two functions in Schenck's model, *retaliation*. At this point in the tale, the roles of victim and villain are not given to any specific character. In fact, just as Palamon and Arcite trade roles in terms of animal imagery, Schenck claims that the cycle of *retaliation*, with participants switching between the roles of victim and villain, "can continue *ad nauseam*" ("Functions and Roles in the Fabliau" 28). This cycle is not limited to Palamon and Arcite – it also extends to all of their knights and into the community. Peter H. Elbow describes the milieu of the tournament:

Physically it is no longer a fight between two men in a virgin grove but a tournament of two hundred knights in a large and elaborate architectural structure – before an audience of thousands. All society now takes part: the competitors constitute a polarization of fighting men the world over; the best workers, craftsmen, and artists of the kingdom have made the lists; and the tournament is a major public ritual in which the interest and sympathy of even the "communes" is enlisted. (97-98)

With the exceptions of Palamon's Lygurge and Arcite's Emetreus, all the men are anonymous as they form interlocking circles of animalistic violence. As in the Knight's

first description of Palamon and Arcite “liggyng by and by,” the audience has no way of identifying where any of these two hundred knights begins or ends:

He thurgh the thikkeste of the throng gan threste;
Ther stomben steedes stronge, and doun gooth al,
He rolleth under foot as dooth a bal;
He foyneth on his feet with his tronchoun,
And he hym hurtleth with his hors adoun;
He thurgh the body is hurt and sithen ytake,
Maugree his head, and broght unto the stake;
As forward was, right there he moste abyde.
Another lad is on that other syde. (2612-20)

This tournament is a courtly equivalent of fabliau competition where countless males of inconsequential identities duel for the possession of a female. Emily Jensen notes, “This study of gender and gender relations in Fragment A reveals the archetypal sexual triangle, regardless of the number of participants involved, with males pitted against each other and females serving as the apparent object of the male struggle” (325).

The last two functions of the fabliau, *retaliation* and *resolution*, do not appear in all fabliau texts and are difficult to analyze within the Knight’s Tale. However, while the clearest example of *retaliation* in the Knight’s Tale is the tournament scene involving Palamon, Arcite, and their men, the final *resolution* in the fabliau often involves “eliminating the source of [this] conflict” (Schenck, “Functions and Roles of the Fabliau” 28). Schenck claims that thirty fabliaux from her original study feature “judicial

scenes' [. . .] at the end of a story that require a 'judgment' whether in the form of a verdict from a judge, a decision from other characters in the tale, or a response from the audience" ("Orality" 63-4). In the case of Palamon and Arcite, their tournament ends with Arcite receiving what he prayed for – martial victory. Saturn, pacifying Mars, grants this initial success to Arcite, and then makes it so that Venus will also be appeased in the case of her knight Palamon. After a Fury erupts from the ground and mortally maims Arcite, the knight's eventual death allows Palamon to become husband to Emelye through Theseus's final judgment. The assembly of deities appears to have the most control over the outcome of Theseus's tournament, and the results of their intervention are interpreted by Theseus to be acts of Fortune. Following Schenck's discussion of resolution, a deity, as a character in the tale, ultimately makes a decision, and Theseus vocalizes the rationalization of this decision to the community of Athens. In the Knight's Tale, the audience even has the opportunity to consider a verdict when the narrator-Knight poses the "*demande d'amour*" at the end of the first part: "Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamon?" (1348).

The Knight's question seems to point toward a resolution that will be judicial. Traugott Lawler avers, "[Theseus's] intention is to transform an isolated and unlawful vendetta into a legitimate communal ritual, to return Palamon and Arcite to the community, to impose a centripetal force on their quarrel [. . .]. From the tournament a single winner will emerge (or so Theseus thinks)" (18). However, even under Theseus's rules and order, the tournament and its result are still chaotic. Like a fabliau, the event, although justified by the narrator's assurance that all are gathered for the love of chivalry, remains a mess of anonymous men engaged in physical violence, and at the battle's end,

both Palamon and Arcite manage to receive what they request. Under Theseus's terms, there is no "single winner." In each of the thirty fabliaux Schenck examines, she notes that an act of physical violence is the *resolution* ("Orality" 68). This situation marks the ending of the Knight's Tale as well. In a statement that can be applied equally to the Knight's Tale and the fabliau, Schenck observes, "justice in the fabliaux is often a communal activity, more public spectacle than the pursuit of any objective truth or the rights of an individual" (72).

Schenck's model seeks primarily to analyze the structure of the fabliaux, but the functions in the model, when applied to a romance that possesses elements of fabliau, also affect the content of the text. The nine functions emphasize particular actions that are relevant to the content and influence the characters or are performed by the characters.

The functions of fabliau in the Knight's Tale include the following: 1) the series of *arrivals* and *departures* at the beginning of the tale; 2) Arcite and Palamon's *interrogation* of and *communication* with each other regarding Emelye; 3) Arcite's *deception* of disguise; 4) both knights' participation in the *misdeed* and Theseus's *recognition* of the *misdeed* as a disruption of his hierarchy; 5) the continuous cycle of *retaliation*; and 6) the violent, uneasy *resolution*. The presence of these functions in the Knight's Tale displays its possession of fabliau characteristics in structure and in content.

Schenck, utilizing Vladimir Propp's earlier work, states that "by revealing the basic narrative structure of these tales, functional analysis demonstrates that the term fabliau does refer to a specific type of story: it is not just a funny short story" ("Functions and Roles in the Fabliau" 29). Therefore, in an examination of the functions in the Knight's Tale, the "*conte a rire en vers*" remains an insufficient definition for a genre of tales that

has its first appearance in courtly romance. Chaucer's Miller's Tale is a clear representation of a fabliau inspired by the Knight's not-always-so-knightly Tale.

INSPIRING THE MILLER: THE NARRATOR-KNIGHT'S LANGUAGE & ATTITUDES

Scholars of romance may be inclined to concur with John Finlayson who identifies one of the primary features of romance to be “its formalism of language, gesture, and story – what might be considered its deliberate exclusion of naturalism” (130). The Knight’s Tale, which includes language, imagery, and attitudes that stray from formality toward naturalism, does not entirely exhibit this feature. Chaucer’s Knight uses language in the form of proverbs or terms that may show why it is an appropriate tale to precede the Miller’s Tale. The Miller, who can hardly sit on his horse and shows a penchant for drink, vulgar speech, and “harlotrie” (3121, 3184), is perhaps that pilgrim least likely to identify with the Knight’s Tale. However, in Chaucer’s plan, he is the pilgrim who will follow the Knight in the storytelling sequence. The ridiculous rivalry between Palamon and Arcite in the Knight’s Tale certainly anticipates the Miller’s fabliau of Nicholas, Absolon, and Alisoun. In addition, the Miller borrows the language from the Knight that he recognizes, or that possesses variant connotations and meanings, and distorts it in order to produce a fabliau. Also, the Knight’s views about the role of the female are alarmingly similar to those of the Miller. The drunken Miller manages to “quit” the Knight’s Tale with relative ease because the Knight has paved the way, allowing the Miller an easy path toward parody.

At the beginning of the Knight’s Tale, as Theseus is making his grand return to Athens, the Knight utilizes the rhetorical device of *occupatio* to hasten the story’s movement:

But al that thyng I moot as now forbere.

I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere,

And wayke been the oxen in my plough.

The remenant of the tale is long ynough. (885-88)

These lines, with their references to the milieu and tools of the land-working classes, indicate how the Knight's Tale is, as Muscatine says, "sprinkled with rural familiarity"

("The Canterbury Tales" 4). Throughout the tale, the narrator uses language that

introduces into the tale a rusticity that is attentive to the natural world and its inhabitants.

During the scene of Arcite's Maying, for example, the Knight issues a bit of advice in the form of a proverb:

But sooth is seyde, go sithen many yeres,

That "feeld hath eyen and the wode hath eres."

It is ful fair a man to bere hym evene,

For al day meeteth men at unset stevene. (1521-24)

This proverb, with language rooted in the early tradition of animism, displays a natural world (or more appropriately, an unnatural world) where fields watch and woods listen.

These images provide an appropriate introduction to the scene of Palamon and Arcite's

undisciplined fight as animals in the grove, initiating the theme of male competition that

the Miller adopts and that continues throughout Fragment A. According to Natalie Davis,

the use of such proverbs by knights and peasants alike was not uncommon during the

Middle Ages, especially in France. Most proverbs had "a genuinely rural or 'common'

origin" with "metaphors (that) drew upon subjects familiar to countryfolk – oxen, horses,

dogs, grains, fallow fields – and were sometimes coarse or ribald" (231). Although Davis

suggests that the nobility may have revised some of the language or subjects of the proverbs, she also explains that the use of rustic speech by knights in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries was a way to distance themselves from the clergy. Knights were not offended “by the frank references to bodily orifices and processes found in the common sayings” (232). According to Davis, knights devised some proverbs that were probably even considered “indelicate” to later audiences (231-32).

Another way in which the Knight inspires the Miller is through the Mayings of Emelye and Arcite. These scenes, in which Emelye and Arcite celebrate the rites of May, provide overt allusions to fertility and sexuality that would have appealed to the earthy likes of the Miller. The Knight describes Emelye and her Maying in the following passage:

Till it fil ones, in a morwe of May,
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 hir hewe,
I noot which was the fyner of hem two –
Er it were day, as was hir wone to do,
She was arisen and al redy dight,
For May wole have no slogardie anyght.
The sesoun priketh every gentil herte,
And maketh it out of his slep to sterte,
And seith, “Arys, and do thyn observaunce.”

This maked Emelye have remembraunce

To doon honour to May, and for to ryse. (1034-47)

Although the month of May is traditionally connected with new love, a wanton spirit lurks in this setting. Elaine Tuttle Hansen suggests that even though Emelye's wakefulness and activities reveal that she is a perfect romance heroine, the scene in the garden has other connotations (221). The Knight's description of Emelye includes details of her gathering flowers, "party white and rede" (1053), and her ritual connects her to the "Flower and Leaf" cults that existed during the Middle Ages. As Lorraine Stock observes, the Knight even describes Emelye explicitly as one of the flowers she gathers (209). It is the goddess Flora, whom the "Flower" cults worshiped because of her representation of fertility and physical love, who in fact influences Emelye's Maying rather than Diana, the goddess with whom Emelye associates herself later in the poem. In another scene in the tale, Emelye appears in Theseus's hunting party "clothed al in grene" (1686), and although the color green, by itself, can represent growth and fertility, even devilry, it was also the color worn by Flora's worshipers. As Stock reminds us, Chaucer's Knight also reveals that the statue of Diana in the temple is "in gaude grene" (2079) (210-11). Therefore, in the character of Emelye, Stock argues, Chaucer "conflates aspects of the two antithetical goddesses, Flora and Diana" (210).

The cults of Flora perpetuated the notion of May as a lusty month; Natalie Zemon Davis states, "Generally, May – Flora's month in Roman times – was thought to be a period in which women were powerful, their desires at their most immoderate" ("Women on Top" 141). This belief appears to be present in the description of Emelye's Maying. However, Arcite's rites of spring are even more anticipatory of a fabliau:

And for to doon his observaunce to May,
 Remembrynge on the poynt of his desir,
 He on a courser, startlynge as the fir,
 Is riden into the feeldes hym to pleye,
 Out of the court, were it a myle or tweye.
 And to the grove of which that I yow tolde
 By aventure his way he gan to holde
 To maken him a gerland of the greves,
 Were it of wodebynde or hawethorn leves,
 And loude he song ayeyn the sonne shene:
 “May, with alle thy floures and thy grene,
 Welcome be thou, faire, fresshe May,
 In hope that I som grene gete may.” (1500-12)

The full implication of Arcite’s song (1510-12) becomes clear later in the tale when Emelye is described as wearing her green apparel (1686). In the context of Arcite’s Maying, the word “grene” points more specifically to the flowers and garlands that he weaves; however, Stock asserts that Chaucer may be toying with the apparent ambiguities in Arcite’s song (215). The blunt language of “som grene gete may” is far from the poetic words we would expect from Arcite because he simply wants the “grene” he gets to be Emelye. His motivation is neither courtly nor innocent, and his concentration upon “som grene” only reinforces his role as the worldly knight whose love for Emelye is “as to a creature” (1159). Characterizing Emelye as someone or something “grene,” Arcite’s truthful yet somewhat vulgar phrase suggests that he is not a romantic hero but rather a

fabliau *duper*. Through the characterization, folkloric connotations, and language present in the Mayings of Emelye and Arcite, the Knight's Tale provides the Miller with much material with which he can experiment in a ribald fashion. Also, the Miller may also find the inspiration for his fabliau in the Knight's awkward narration of Emelye's temple scene.

In the Maying scene, the Knight tries desperately to place Emelye in a catalog of courtly terms and descriptions. She is, for example, fairer than the lily and fresher than May flowers. This is his valiant effort to obscure her identity as an unmarried Amazon in Theseus's court, but he does not quite succeed. When Emelye arrives at the temple to pray to Diana, the Knight is no longer able to categorize her in the way he wants. He fails when he mentions that Emelye has just come from a bath, a detail that should have been minor if not omitted entirely. However, he continues:

But hou she dide hir ryte I dar nat telle,
But it be any thing in general;
And yet it were a game to heeren al.
To hym that meneth wel it were no charge;
But it is good a man been at his large. (2284-88)

It is clear that the Knight, who "identifies the exotic with the feminine," finds it difficult to recount Emelye's ritual because it is mysterious and far from the masculine world he knows (Crane 145-46). The Knight is transformed from an orderly narrator to an embarrassed teller whose challenge increases as he tries to erase the image of Emelye's naked body while simultaneously implanting it further into his listeners' minds. In effect, his attempted censorship of the image only causes more interest in it, and as Timothy

O'Brien notes, the Knight's effort to suppress any "voyeuristic amusement" only succeeds in providing it, especially for the Miller (161). The Miller, a man who presumably takes pleasure in imagining any "unknightly" details that the Knight may choose to leave out, hears in this passage the potential for explicit praise of the female body. I would also argue that the Knight's brief note of "it were a game to heeren al" is a sufficient provocation to the Miller's natural, not necessarily obscene, sensibilities. In his tale, when the Miller provides an earthy, no-holds-barred description of Alisoun, he seems to savor the physical details that the Knight does not dare include about Emelye's bathing ritual.

In Emelye's prayer to Diana appears another element that involves language and helps to set the stage for the Miller's Tale. The narrator-Knight presents the term "queynte" and toys with it in the following passage:

The fires brenne upon the auter cleere,
Whil Emelye was thus in hir preyere.
But sodeynly she saugh a sighte queynte,
For right anon oon of the fyres queynte
And quyked agayn, and after that anon
That oother fyr was queynt and al agon;
And as it queynte it made a whistelynge,
As doon this wet brondes in hir brennynge [. . .]. (2331-38)

In this description of Diana's response to Emelye's prayer for chastity, the fires are representations of the fates of Palamon and Arcite at the tournament. Larry D. Benson shows "queynt(e)" as initially meaning "curious" (2333), but in lines 2334 and 2336-37,

he glosses it as “went out” or “extinguished.” However, the additional connotation for the word “queynte” as “sexual favors” and the Middle English Dictionary’s even more direct “women’s external organs” cannot be ignored, even though Benson is adamant in his claim that no pun on the word exists in this passage. He states: “The word *queynte* does not carry an obscene meaning. It can be part of a pun only if it is used in a context, like that in *The Miller’s Tale*, in which the obscene word is invoked, and there is nothing in this context to invoke that word” (“‘Queynte’ Punnings” 46). While I would argue that no obscene or humorous pun exists in this passage, I would argue, along with Tim O’Brien and Susan Crane, that there is a context for possible reinterpretation of the word. The very repetition of the word is suspect, especially when in relation to other uses of “queynte” in the tale. The first use of this word appears, by coincidence, in the depiction of Arcite’s Maying.

Whan that Arcite hadde romed al his fille,
 And songen al the roundel lustily,
 Into a studie he fil sodeynly,
 As doon thise loveres in hir queynte geres,
 Now in the crope, now down in the breres [. . .]. (1528-32)

In this instance, Benson glosses “queynte geres” as “strange manners,” but the phrase is surely a sexual reference. Therefore, when the Knight describes Diana’s response to Emelye, the term “queynte” evokes this other, sex-related meaning, a meaning that is the very opposite of Emelye’s desire for sexual purity. The term gathers the attention of the Miller who uses the word to his own advantage in the lines “As clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte; / And prively he caughte hire by the queynte [. . .]” (3275-76). O’Brien

believes that “the Miller builds his tale from this one word; it is his inspiration” (160). He also claims that the Knight’s earlier “slippage” in the narration of Emelye’s bathing scene “establishes a context in which it is difficult not to see the repetition of ‘queynte’ thirty lines later as sexually suggestive and gender confining” (159,161). According to Crane, the repetition of “queynte” also evokes its sexual connotation. Although she concurs with Benson that an explicit context is not obvious in the passage, she elegantly surmises, “such referents do not always behave so politely as to sit still until expressly invited to come forward” (177). In the passage in the Knight’s Tale, “queynte” may not possess overt humor or punning, but the repetition of the word as well as the Knight’s nervousness about the female body provide a sexual, physical reference that the Miller utilizes in his own tale.

Because it appears four times in eight lines, one cannot deny the emphasis on “queynte,” and the Miller must have been attentive to this repetition. John Hines observes, “the Knight’s Tale *conversely* seems to anticipate the exploitation of various senses of the homonym ‘queynt’ in the following fabliaux” (141; emphasis added). The use of this term in the Knight’s Tale and the Miller’s Tale hints at an alarming conclusion about these tellers: knight and churl may have the same understandings and beliefs about women because “queynte” possesses similar connotations and denotations in both tales. As Hansen argues, “A certain common ground between men of different classes is available and necessary, it seems, to the formation of their gender identity and their literary voices, and Emily and Alisoun together represent [. . .] a kind of shared terrain” (209). The Knight’s and Miller’s views about women – or more specifically, Emelye and Alisoun – are quite similar in several ways. Both tellers, for example, create scenes and

descriptions that present female sexuality as uncontrollable or even dangerous. This idea, more often present in fabliaux, exists in the Knight's Tale, where there is potential danger in Emelye because she is from Femenye. As an Amazon, she has no knowledge or understanding of courtship and marriage, and her desire to remain chaste is expressed in her prayer to Diana. Emelye makes this promise, but as a young woman, she represents, especially to the narrator-Knight and to Theseus, a volatile, sexual "other" who has acted as the catalyst for Palamon and Arcite's battle. In Theseus's hierarchical world, Hansen observes, a female who is "symbolically threatening to the bonds that unify and identify aristocratic men must be contained by marriage" (220). Emelye may care not at all about Palamon or Arcite, but because the two of them have fallen in love with her, she is the one who poses the threat against order and communal bonds. The woman in most fabliau triangles exhibits an "excessive female sexuality," as Hansen argues, and while Emelye may in fact desire chastity more than sex, it is the male characters (and the male teller) who have the control and who deem her as dangerous. In accordance with Schenck's model, Emelye may fulfill a function in the tale of sexual presence that surpasses the importance of any individuality or identity she may possess.

In the same way, the character of Alisoun in the Miller's Tale functions as an example of unbounded sexuality even though she is married or "contained." Although she escapes injury in the conclusion of the tale, it becomes clear that the Miller's beliefs about the female echo the Knight's; Alisoun, like Emelye, threatens masculine identity while simultaneously, as Crane would suggest, assisting to define it through opposition. In Alisoun's case, her unabashed nature in the scene of the "misdirected kiss" causes her to be treated with disgust by the Miller and especially by Absolon. The Miller, as Hansen

observes, reveals revulsion for female sexuality when he describes the infamous “misdirected kiss,” referring to Alisoun’s “hole” (3732). Because the Miller does not make it clear as to what “hole” Absolon kisses, Hansen claims that the narration of the incident “effects the conventional association or conflation of (female) genital and anal functions, of women’s sex (or sex with a woman) and dirt, decay, and dissolution” (227).

When Absolon realizes the truth of his encounter, he is enraged enough to plot physical harm against Alisoun because her body as “dirt” has contaminated him as well as shamed him. As in Emelye’s case, Alisoun seems to become a function that represents a negative (although attractive) sexuality that dangerously distracts the men in both tales. Through these episodes, it becomes clear that the Knight and the Miller accept the belief that females should be placed in marriage or contained in some way so that they do not contaminate or humiliate the men in the tales. These tellers are on the same stage, yet it is the Knight who has initiated this view in the framework of the Canterbury Tales with Emelye, “a symbol of the noble man’s desires,” as Muscatine calls her, but also, like Alisoun, a Floran representation of unbounded sexuality. The Knight’s attitudes toward women, combined with his departures into coarse, naturalistic language or experimentation with terms of questionable connotation and passages of nervous narration, link the tale to the Miller’s Tale, allowing the former tale to become an appropriate springboard into, if not inspiration for, the latter one.

CONCLUSION

ENDGAME

In response to the tendency of the Knight's Tale to angle toward the absurd, Alfred David pinpoints the sources of its humor:

It is impossible to read with a straight face the quarrel between Palamon and Arcite over which of them loved Emelye first. When her angelic beauty gives rise to the technicality of whether Palamon first adored her as a goddess or as a woman, the idealization of the courtly style is taken so literally that we can no longer be serious about it. The common people excitedly debating about who will win the tournament as though it were any sporting event give a comic and realistic turn to the whole proceedings [. . .]. And what are we to make of Venus the "queene of love" breaking into tears like a thwarted child [. . .]? (86-87)

David's observations encapsulate a comic nature in the Knight's Tale that is neither overtly humorous nor subtle in its tone. Although we may believe – or be duped into believing – that Palamon and Arcite's predicament is the serious subject of romance or epic, closer attention to the functions of scenes and characters as well as to the language and attitudes of the narrator reveals ridiculous, naturalistic actions by characters who, like all of the Canterbury pilgrims, are adaptations and literary extensions of real human beings.

Naturally, the Knight's Tale is not all a game – it manages to present to the pilgrims a model of storytelling and chivalry. However, when the Miller's Tale follows the Knight's Tale, gathering its material from it, the sequence becomes a perfect example

of Nykrog's theory in which a fabliau is described as being "derived from the courtly." Chaucer's fabliau, like those by the French, features the nine functions that Schenck outlines in her study, and these functions, when applied to the Knight's Tale, also connect romance to fabliau in thematic as well as structural ways. The Knight's Tale also possesses elements that are similar to those in the Miller's Tale, primarily in the description and narration about the sexuality of the female catalyst in each tale. Although it may seem less complicated simply to label the Knight's Tale as one type of literature and the Miller's Tale as another, John Hines reminds us, "The Knight's Tale is altogether too complex and ambivalent a work of literature to sit happily and satisfactorily in any simple contrast with the tales that follow it" (143). Evidently, as readers of Chaucer's Knight's Tale, we must remain alert to the functions and elements of the fabliau in the Knight's Tale, or in the end, the joke may be on us.

END NOTES

¹ Jürgen Beyer translates these lines: “Lords, you have heard many a tale recounted by many a storyteller: how Paris kidnapped Helen and of the pain and sorrow he experienced; the story of Tristan told so beautifully by La Chièvre; *fabliaux* and *chansons de geste*” (16). There is some debate as to whether or not the term is *fabliau* or *fable*. Beyer’s source for the passage is the Martin edition, but Knud Togeby points out that the Cange version reads “*et fables et chansons de geste*” (11). The similarity of the two terms, however, makes Bodel’s Roman de Renart a fairly accurate point of origin for the genre.

² Thomas D. Cooke states, “[Chaucer’s] enthusiasm for the *fabliaux* is even more unusual since there is scant evidence that other English writers took much interest in them; although no definitive canon of English *fabliaux* has been established, estimates of the number outside Chaucer’s vary from a mere handful to some two dozen” (170).

³ Schenck’s definition of the house as the main setting for the *fabliau* is not so much an emphasis on domesticity as it is an explanation of an “ordered world.” Therefore, *arrivals* and *departures* disrupt this order and allow the action to occur (“Functions and Roles in the *Fabliau*” 25).

⁴ Schenck defines the term *duper* as “the arch-villain (who) carries out the *deception* and the *misdeed*” (The Fabliaux 74).

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"THE BESTE GAME OFALLE":
ELEMENTS OF THE FABLIAU IN
CHAUCEER'S KNIGHT'S TALE

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