HOUSEHOLD

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The Economics of Justice in Chaucer's Miller's and Reeve's Tales

THE *CANTERBURY TALES* articulates, as R.A. Shoaf has put it, "the sphere of economics, the marketplace, [as] the space where community, mutual and just exchange, is most visibly and strenuously tested."[1] It is the largest possible sense of 'economics' which Shoaf invokes, including the domestic, political and, ultimately, celestial.[2] At the most basic or literal economic level, the Reeve's Tale raises issues of fair market exchange most obviously; in its story of a fraudulent Miller, a transaction gone wrong, and a doubtful compensation procured, it foregrounds the typical fabliau obsession with sex and money.[3] The fabliau, of all genres, appears most strongly *not* to raise the question of ethics. While fabliaux do not raise the question in terms of representations of ethical subjectivities (it seems beside the point to regard Alison or Alan as either in possession of or lacking a conscience, for example) or ethical outcomes, in their emphasis on a commercial world of barter and sordid sexual commodification there is a parodic paradigm

[1] *Chaucer, Dante and the Currency of the Word* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1983) 167–68.

[2] The economic metaphors of *The Canterbury Tales* have been examined extensively by Shoaf; see also Patricia Eberle, "Commercial Language and the Commercial Outlook in the *General Prologue*," *Chaucer Review* 18 (1983): 161–74; on the celestial economy of redemption, see Linda Georgianna, "Love so Dearly Bought: The Terms of Redemption in *The Canterbury Tales*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990): 85–116.

[3] On the relation of the fabliau to the rise of money economy, see Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 285.

of the Aristotlean ethics of exchange which provided the dominant secular theory of justice in the Middle Ages. Medieval secular ethics is underwritten by fundamental categories of correct economic activity: equitable exchange and proportional distribution. As Od Langholm stresses, medieval theoretical economics is entirely a branch of ethics, considered under the topic of justice where justice is, according to the classical dictum, to give each one his due.[4]

It is the question of exchange which is my first item of enquiry, and I deal with the Reeve's Tale first for the clarity with which it raises this issue; but commodity exchange is complicated even there by the economics of the marriage exchange and the issue which it raises of the value of women. The Miller's Tale enacts an intense competition for a 'valuable' desirable woman and thus reflects in some depth on the question of 'home economics' and, I will argue, on the value of different kinds of male labour. The Miller's and Reeve's Tales raise issues of economic exchange, commercial transaction, and intense competition for resources; both invoke the problematics of hoarding and spending, literally as hoarding of goods, and figuratively as sexual jealousy (hoarding) and licentiousness (spending). The literary economy of the whole *Canterbury Tales* emerges in the prologues in another structure, that of the *quiting* of tales. The tales I consider here are themselves explicitly formulated as exchange; the tellers *quyte* one another, they *pay back*; they are engaged from the initial contract of tale-telling in a structure of debt, of owing something to the general company—"biheste is dette," as the Man of Law says (II.41).[5] The notion of *quiting* is structured by an equivocation between two kinds of debt, between paying up and paying back, between rendering one's due (just exchange) and retaliation/retribution. The Reeve *quites* the Miller with his tale, and his tale is also about retaliation. The scholastic arguments about commensurability in just exchange here emerge ethically as revenge; that is, it is the corollary of the notion that one good might be exchanged for another that, equally, one ill might be exchanged for another. But while these tales establish rivalry and competition as the economic paradigm which

[4] *Price and Value in the Aristotelean Tradition* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1979) 12–13.

[5] Chaucer quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson et al., 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

drives the characters, strict equity in exchange is not the issue which the stories work out in the end. There is an insufficiency to the paradigm in two ways. First, the 'market' which establishes commodity exchange and the value of women and labour is based on a presumption of scarcity, but the tales themselves show this restricted economy as supplemented and bolstered by appeals to a general economy of plenty, in Georges Bataille's terms. Secondly, the logic governing exchanges which the protagonists of the tales attempt to establish or subvert is not the primary logic of the narratives; their vying to pay each other back is superseded by a plot structure which distributes rewards and punishments (mainly punishments). That is, I will argue that issues of what Aritstotle calls rectificatory or commutative justice (here figured as revenge) are superseded by distributive justice, the allotment of rewards and punishments which is here accomplished by plot mechanism and is therefore a type of 'poetic justice.' Distributive justice is driven not by the value of goods, but proceeds in respect to the value of persons; 'poetic justice' delivers that which is symbolically appropriate in respect to persons and occurs at the level of *the* plot which undoes the plots of the protagonists. Reception of the tales is indeed governed by *enjoyment* of the punishments for stupidity and cupidity which they mete out; the neatness of distributive outcomes is one of the chief satisfactions of the plots. Thus the audience is involved in an ethical economy of enjoying retaliation and punishment. But not everyone is punished; the workings of distributive poetic justice in these tales result in the creation of an extraordinary surplus value: feminine sexual pleasure. While the men enact their aggressive and rivalrous competition for goods and are caught in the snare of the plot, the women escape retribution and, apparently, enjoy themselves.

Economy, etymologically, means 'household management,' and this is the sense of the word best known to the Middle Ages. The pseudo-Aristotelian *Livre de Yconomique*, for example, translated and glossed by Nicholas Oresme (c. 1370), concerns the disposition of the household, and more particularly, marital relations.[6]

[6] *Le Livre de Yconomique*, ed. and trans. Albert Douglas Menut, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* ns47pt.5 (1957): 783–833. Oresme's text is a translation and a commentary; subsequent citations will indicate which by a *t* (text) or *g* (gloss).

While the medieval sense plainly includes the affairs of the Miller's Tale (and a great many other *Canterbury Tales*, for that matter), it is not my aim entirely to plead a special sense of the word but rather to argue for the validity of an interpretation of economics which includes the household dynamic and the marital contract. In any case, the 'economy' of the household in the *Livre* shades inevitably into concerns about money management, for the household *is* primarily an economic unit, concerned with the gender division of labour, security of possessions, labour relations, and the management of a profitable estate.[7] Oresme sees the place of the *Livre de Yconomique* in the Aristotelian canon as an intermediate stage between the *Nichomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* (807g); while the first deals with individuals, and the latter with the state, plainly the intermediate social organization, the family, is omitted and deserves a separate book. Oresme wrote parallel translations and commentaries on the *Ethics* and *Politics*, the texts which were the basis for secular medieval economic theory (in the modern sense), in addition to a text, *De Moneta*, a corpus which marks him as a proto-economist, in the modern sense.[8] The home economics of Chaucer's fabliaux are then recognizably a part of the question of community ethics, which also includes commerce.

I will formulate the key economic questions in relation to two exemplary passages, one from the Reeve's Tale, one from the Miller's, before moving to a more substantive discussion of the texts. In the Reeve's Tale, as Alan the clerk contemplates his grievance against the Miller in the night, he justifies his plan for revenge thus:

> Som esement has lawe yshapen us,
> For, John, ther is a lawe that says thus:
> That gif a man in a point be agreved,
> That in another he sal be releved. (1.4179–82)

[7] Menut notes that a work such as *Le Livre du chevalier de la Tour-Landry pour l'enseignement de ses filles* (*Livre* 786), which would now be described as a conduct book, is an 'economic' text in the medieval sense. Aimed at an aristocratic class, it contains no financial or estate management advice, thus reflecting its class ideology; it does, however, establish by what cultural capital a woman is made valuable for that class.

[8] See Langholm's *Price and Value* on the importance of Oresme and his master John Buridan.

Alan is here invoking a legal argument, as Paul Olson has shown.[9] That argument is in turn derived from Aristotelian thought about just exchange, in particular the issue of commensurability, the method by which one thing can be equated with another for purposes of exchange; here, stolen flour is to be replaced or compensated for by stolen sexual intercourse. Equitable exchange is a part of rectificatory (or commutative) justice; as Aristotle has it, this is the kind of justice "which plays a rectifying part in the transactions between man and man."[10] The discussion of justice comes, famously, from chapter 5 of the *Nichomachean Ethics*. Commensurability establishes unlike things as equivalent; as Jill Mann writes, "Since men need to exchange objects of different kinds for their mutual benefit, the kind of exchange which cements the bonds of human society is not a matter of identical return ... but of maintaining a *porportionate* equivalence between non-identical things."[11] Ultimately, the medium for establishing porportionate equity is money, for money erases difference in the service of exchangeability. The scandal of this fabliau (and many others) turns on exactly this erasure of difference, on the proposition that a sexual encounter *is* commensurate with a cake of wheat, and the implication that sex is a commodity—the 'relief' that Alan gets for his wrong is a bawdy pun. This substitution is a scandal not least because it erases a different economy which has been established around Malyne, that of her inheritance, dowry and marriage prospects. But it is not simply the case that sex is reductively treated as a commodity, for in this transaction it is not only commodities, or even primarily commodities that are being exchanged; while a just exchange depends on a contract or agreement between buyers,[12] here because just reciprocity has already been perverted, the rectificatory justice exacted by Alan is of what Aristotle calls an "involuntary" kind: "clandestine, such as theft, adultery, poisoning."[13] Alan's appro-

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[9] "The *Reeve's Tale*: Chaucer's *Measure for Measure*," *Studies in Philology* 59 (1962): 1–17.

[10] *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1925) 111.

[11] "Price and Value in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Essays in Criticism* 36 (1986): 298.

[12] Langholm, *The Aristotelian Analysis of Usury* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1984) 33–36.

[13] *Ethics* 111–12.

priation of the Miller's daughter is held by him to be just inasmuch as it puts right the Miller's fraud, but also because on an affective level, it returns to him the humiliation and ire he delivered. That is, 'commodities' are here cathected by the libidinal economy of revenge.

Olson's analysis demonstrates the many levels on which the tale expresses the practices of retribution as exchange of commensurables, of like for like, beginning in the Reeve's Prologue where the principle guiding the teller is "leveful is with force force of-showve" (I.3912). He sets the Reeve's remarks about the "balke" in the Miller's eye in the context of judgement in their source, the sermon on the Mount: "for with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again, and with what judgment you judge, ye shall be judged" (Matt. 6.1–4). While plainly this is not the only model of justice (and not the one Christ is establishing), it is that which pertains to the Aristotelian thinking on exchange in rectificatory justice. While Olson argues that the Reeve's "technique is to disguise revenge as justice,"[14] many of his examples urge the view that justice *is* a kind of revenge. Certainly the critical satisfaction in the punishments meted out in the comic tales in itself demonstrates a support for this view of justice.

The events of the Miller's Tale have less explicitly to do with commercial exchange, and more to do with home economics, beginning with the Miller's Prologue's suggestions about sexual abundance, which is my second quotation:

> An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
> Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.
> So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
> Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere. (I.3163–66)[15]

In other words, crudely, if he's getting enough, why should he concern himself with the surplus that he cannot use? While most of the commentary on this passage has focussed on the sexual pun in

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[14] "Chaucer's *Measure for Measure*" 1.

[15] Oresme's text provides an interesting analogue to this passage; a husband, he writes "should not concern himself particularly with his wife's dress or with her secrets or with things generally within the house"; "Il ne doit pas ... soy entremettre des aournemants de sa femme ne de ses secrés" (*Livre* 828g).

pryvetee, the term more interesting for my purposes is *foyson*. The word means plenty, or bounty, etymologically from the old French *foison* and the Latin *fundere* (pp *fusion-em*,) a pouring, or outpouring; it is used in the Man of Law's tale of the miracle of the loaves and fishes (II.505). Its senses, according to the *OED* and *MED* include abundance, plentiful crops, human vigour, and nourishing power, particularly that of food. Lee Patterson reads these lines as founding his claim that the Miller's Tale exemplifies "peasant consciousness": the understanding of one who sees "the natural fitness of things and knows when he has (and when he has had) enough."[16] But the moralizing tone of his interpretation of peasant consciousness as outside the hoarding economies of bourgeois consciousness is impaired by his omission of the lines about *pryvetee* and hence the obscene pun; God's *foyson* is found in the wife's sexual parts. Female sexuality is in abundance—the husband can have not just enough, but *plenty*, and there will still be some left over, a remnant, which need not be accounted for in the marriage economy. The anti-feminist canard about female insatiability is lurking here; but even the *Livre de Yconomique* allows a more proper kind of surplus value to feminine sexuality. "Nature granted carnal pleasure to the animals only for the purpose of reproduction; but it accorded the human species this pleasure not only for reproduction of its kind but also to enhance and maintain friendship between man and woman."[17] The claim is further established not in relation to the "human species" but particularly to the human female, who, unlike animals, seeks sexual union when pregnant. That is, female sexual desire exceeds the needs of production or reproduction and emerges as the surplus value of "friendship." That the friendship of female sexual abundance might be expressed to someone other than her husband is a proposition worked out by the Miller's Tale.

These two key texts show contrasting economic pictures, the former a "restricted" and the latter a "general" economy, as these terms are established by the work of Georges Bataille. He

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[16] "'No Man His Reson Herde': Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380–1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 129.

[17] *Livre* 813*t*.

writes:

> Human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation, and consumption must be divided into two distinct parts. The first, reducible part is represented by the use of the minimum necessary for the conservation of life.... The second part is represented by so-called unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity.... Now it is necessary to reserve the word *expenditure* for the designation of these unproductive forms.

The general economy establishes the "principle of loss," which is "contrary to the economic principle of balanced accounts."[18] While unconditional expenditure and loss is the *social* form of the general economy, a human activity, it testifies to a cosmic surplus: "On the surface of the globe, for *living matter in general*, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance. The choice is limited to how the wealth is to be squandered."[19] In social practices which involve sexual excess and expenditure, Bataille finds a logic which contradicts the restricted economy's logic of scarcity, need, jealousy and competition.[20] As Scott Shershow summarizes Bataille's thinking:

> a restricted economy assumes that the central economic issue is *scarcity*. Such an economy therefore emphasizes production, operates by means of exchange and circulation, and does so in the expectation of profit or return. A general economy, by contrast, and quite counterintuitively, assumes that the central economic issue is *surplus*.

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[18] "The Notion of Expenditure," *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 169.

[19] Bataille, "The Meaning of the General Economy," *Reader* 185.

[20] Bataille has a sympathetic reader in Jacques Derrida; more sceptical treatments include Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988) 135–49, and Jürgen Habermas, "The French Path to Postmodernity: Bataille between Eroticism and General Economics," *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) 167–90.

> Such an economy therefore emphasizes consumption, operates by means of gifts, sacrifices, and reckless expenditure.[21]

While both these tales, unlike the Miller's Prologue, focus on the competitive practices of the restricted economy, on retribution, on revenge as a form of 'paying back,' I will argue that this extreme form of restricted economy is subtended by what might be thought of as leakage from the general economy, one that hints that the rivalrous competition for resources is blind to a fundamental excess to the calculation, and that this excess is figured most strongly as female sexual enjoyment, as indeed it is in the Miller's Prologue.

An economy of surplus, for the Middle Ages, is that of the lost Eden, which has been replaced by scarcity, work and the rule of husbands over wives; it also emerges theologically as the concept of grace, with its strong presumption of an absolute plenty, *foyson*. Its ultimate figuration in the Miller's Tale is found in the *absent* moral of the story of Noah's flood—exactly that God has already liberated the world from the ultimate 'restricted economy' of retaliation and retribution. In a secular mode the general economy emerges as carnival and misrule, figured in the mythical land of Cockaigne where the geese fly ready-cooked. The primary figure of *foyson* is Nature, as absolute abundance, as agricultural production, as human and animal fecundity and free reproduction.[22] (Alison is figuratively associated with the abundance and free productivity of nature—of animal and vegetable life, a point to which I shall return.) In the economy of *The Canterbury Tales*, insofar as it recounts a journey beginning in the burgeoning and blooming of spring and travelling towards grace in the shrine of the martyr, insofar then as the pilgrimage is itself a sacrifice, the logic of the theological general economy sustains the endeavour. If the restricted economy emerges in the structure of the *quiting* of tales, on another level the ludic possibilities of pilgrimage, its status as holiday and freedom from work, its opportunities for licence, seem to come from the general economy.

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[21] "Of Sinking: Marxism and the 'General' Economy," *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001): 469.

[22] For nature as a gift-giver and her garden as a locus of permanent abundance, see Alan of Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, trans. James Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1973) Book I. While nature figures the kind of cosmic

Bataille's formulations of the general economy, outside calculation, commodification and exchange, are readily assimilable to an aristocratic culture, especially as he refers to the freedoms from the interest in exchange as an attribute of "sovereign man." The aristocrat gives, the bourgeois barters. The question of the "bourgeois" nature of the fabliau has coursed through all modern commentary since Bédier; the fabliau presents itself as obsessed with money, with the subversion of rules for sexual and commodity exchange, usually conflated, and thus with the restricted economy. Its characters, of whatever class, are grasping and niggardly, looking for advantage in the expectation of profit, a characterization of bourgeois behaviour which Bataille would have emphatically shared.[23] The role of scarcity, hallmark of the restricted economy, is paramount in medieval *secular* economics, for in the Aristotelian tradition, as summed up in the magisterial work of Langholm, while money is an index of value, the real source of value is in need: 'indigentia,' indigency, lack.[24] Lack and neediness fuel the intense competetitiveness of the fabliau. But even here something always escapes from the rough equity of getting what one has coming. In the Reeve's Tale, for example, when the clerks perceive themselves as having lost their flour, they decide at first to concede—and celebrating their loss, they lay on a goose dinner for all. Where does the money come from? Is the lost wheat worth even as much as a goose dinner? The ghost economy of abundance, which recurs on the margins of stories purportedly about commensurability in exchange and getting one's just deserts, is associated most strongly

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abundance which Bataille sees as backing the general economy, in the Middle Ages Nature is seen as insufficient (mainly because of the mutability of her products). Nature, for Alan, is in a hierarchy of economies; source of apparent fecundity, she is in fact part of a restricted economy which needs to be supplemented by a cosmology of plenty, the divine.

[23] See Ad Putter, "Gift and Commodity in *Sir Amadace*," *Review of English Studies* 51 (2000): 371–94, for an account of a text which valorizes the eponymous aristocrat as spending all that he has, with no expectation of return, beyond 'bourgeois' concerns for his own economic future.

[24] Langholm writes, "money as an institutional value measure derives from a natural one"—which medieval Latin commentators rendered 'indigentia,' conceived of primarily as 'need' but with understandings shading over to include senses much like 'demand': "the production and marketing determinants of the exchange rates of commodities" (*Price and Value* 16).

with feminine sexual pleasure, which is what does not 'divide through' in the narrative equation enacted here: while the two clerks' pleasure with the Miller's daughter and wife is their equitable settlement of what the Miller owes them (the tit-for-tat of the restricted economy), the women's pleasure is pure surplus to the tale. "So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yoore" (Reeve's Tale I.4230) describes the Miller's wife's pleasure; while John's pleasure is his payment for the stolen flour, hers is gratuitous. The figuration of the surplus is most clear in the return of the cake of wheaten flour to the clerks at the end of the tale; Malyne's rather pathetic gratitude for pleasure emerges as gift. It emerges moreover in the context of 'courtly' language between the lovers, albeit in a parodic register. The gift of the flour subverts the theory of just exchange as comically adumbrated in the tale, for, though Alan at least gets a beating, in the end the clerks get *everything*, the sex they stole in compensation for their stolen flour, *and* the flour.[25] But their victory is achieved not by their own wiles, but through 'sovereign' female gift. In the Millers's Tale, the distribution of punishments for folly and cupidity is more even-handed. Absalom is punished with what might be called a wound in primary narcissism, Nicholas for pride in his own superiority in cleverness to other people, John for foolishly hoarding his own wife. But Alison escapes the reckoning, enjoying both her obscene joke and her sexuality without retaliation. The *foyson* of female sexuality is plainly the ludic eruption of the general economy in the restricted.

The hallmark of the restricted economy is jealousy. One sense of 'jealous' here is that of rivalrous vindictiveness towards another; this is the mode represented by the clerks in both tales as they

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[25] Sheila Delaney, "Clerks and Quiting in *The Reeve's Tale*: Social Structure as a Source of Irony," *Medieval Literary Poetics* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990) 105. Delaney argues that the clerk's winnings furthermore subvert the logic of *quiting* which the tales foreground, in that while the carpenter and miller tellers compete in the economics of narration, it is really clerks who are the victors in their tales: "The Miller's and Reeve's tales do not assert the superiority of millers and carpenters respectively; they only confirm the superiority of clerks to both." It is certainly a typical feature of fabliaux that scheming and sharp practice are a kind of blindness—while a character obsesses over a proposed dilemma, someone else makes off with the goods; thus the Miller and Reeve are themselves involved in a meta-fabliau.

attempt to purloin what the tradesmen own. The sense more clearly brought forward in relation to the tradesmen is that of being vigilant in guarding, watchful and suspicious. Jealousy is there the affective mode of scarcity and hoarding, of *indigentia*. It is the effect in the subject of the denial of the general economy of *foyson*, and its typical narrative situation is the old husband with a young wife: "Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage / For she was wylde and yong, and he was old / And demed hymself been lik a cokewold" (Miller's Tale I.3224–26). Likewise Symkin is jealous, particularly of his wife's and daughter's social capital, which he backs by force: "For jalous folk ben perilous everemo" (Reeve's Tale I.3961). Above all, it is hoarders who are the butts of the fabliau plot. Gabrielle Lyons has analysed the fabliau as a contrast between *avoir* and *savoir*, a contest between those who have, and try to keep what they have, and those who are clever enough to get it away from them.[26] In both these tales, the cleverness of clerks is pitted against the hoarding impetus of the wealthy tradesmen; Alan and John have gone on their mission to the mill, exactly because they think they are clever enough to outwit a theiving miller, in a kind of wager: "they dorste leye hir nekke / The millere sholde not stele hem half a pekke / Of corne by sleighte, ne by force hem reve" (Reeve's Tale I.4009–11). They are defeated in the first instance, victorious in the second, having thought of a remedy which the miller has not thought of. But victory does not necessarily go to the clever, as the Miller's Tale shows. There, Alison, if anyone, is the victor in that she goes unpunished, but her victory is less as a result of winning the game than of being outside it, enjoying herself outside of and in excess of the restricted economies of either arithemetical proportion in exchange or geometrical proportion in distribution.[27]

The Reeve's Tale plays off two systems of the transfer of goods against each other. One is a skewed version of inheritance, of the retention of goods within the family, and the other is the sale

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[26] Cited in Gaunt, *Gender and Genre* 223.

[27] Modern critics have somewhat anxiously sought for a way to include Alison as one of the punished. Thomas Cooke lists the arguments in *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux: A Study of Their Comic Climax* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1978) 182–83. See also Virginia Schaefer Carroll, "Women and Money in *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*," *Medieval Perspectives* 26.3 (1992): 283–92.

of goods, which is itself skewed by theft. The second is a horizontal transaction, exchange between equals, while the first might be thought of as vertical, through lines of descent. Both concern the ethics of the distribution of goods, and both are shown to be tainted by illegitimacy. The first is skewed by the illegitimacy of the parson's daughter, and the parson's twisted thinking: "For hooly chirches good moot been despended / On hooly chirches blood, that is descended" (I.3983–84). Symkin, bristling with weapons, guards his wife's and daughter's chastity as the lock boxes of the church's goods. That virginity is of the utmost importance to the marriage economy which establishes the social capital of the family is expressly asserted: "For Symkin wolde no wyf, as he sayde / But she were wel ynorissed and a mayde, / To saven his estaaat of yomanrye" (I.3947–49) The monetary dowry aspect of the marriage exchange is made equally explicit; the priest "yaf ful many a panne of bras" (I.3944) to purchase the alliance with Symkin. The education of the parson's daughter in a nunnery is presumably what guarantees her virginity. This treasure will have a matrilineal descent—for the parson plans to make his granddaughter his heir (in spite of the little page "in cradel"). The goods of Holy Church, always a feminine personification, will descend through the mother to her daughter. While keeping goods within the family and out of circulation is a form of hoarding, the goods are also what establish Malyne's exchange value on the marriage market, though only along with something else that must be guarded, her chastity. John F. Plummer notes "the concentration of the patrimony and other wealth in Malyne (sexual value, patrimony, knowledge of the stolen loaf's whereabouts)."[28] The clerks' use of revenge as a kind of equity in the exchange economy cuts through the carefully guarded marriage economy. In revenge for an illegitimate bargain, the clerks incidentally destroy, or at least significantly impair, the exchange value of the miller's daughter, in the terms he has himself given.

Jealousy here is watchfulness, and in this tale of the "bleryng of a proud milleres ye" (I.3865), visuality is of the essence. The two clerks attempt to circumvent the cheating miller by keeping a close watch at both ends of the milling process; but their close watch is

[28] "'Hooly Chirches Blood': Simony and Patrimony in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 18 (1983–84): 47–60.

exactly what prevents them from noticing the miller liberating their horse to run with the wild mares on the fen. The horse is the sign that something necessarily escapes when vigilance is exerted. Seeing that the clerks look only to the hopper, the miller is free to untie the horse. Yet as the evening's revel unfolds, it will be in the dark, where because of drunkenness and, it is safe to assume, an overconfidence that the worms will not turn, he fails to keep an eye on what we have been told he is most jealous of, the chastity of his wife and daughter. His motive in stealing the flour is not only commodity profit, but a contest against the stereotypical cleverness of clerks; understanding that they think they can outwit him, Symkin determines "But by my thrift, yet shall I blere hir ye, / for al the sleighte in hir philosophye" (Reeve's Tale i.4049–50). The *trompe l'oeil* of clerkly philosophy, that which can make "A myle brood of twenty foot of space" (Reeve's Tale i.4123) is despised as a false labour by a miller who can also manipulate quantity, who perhaps also has "a thombe of gold" and can "tollen thries" like the Miller of the General Prologue (i.562–63).

The economics of the Miller's Tale can be separated into two issues: the economy of marriage, and the economy of male rivalry. The first concerns the value of Alison, her desirability, and Nicholas' plot to 'steal' a sexual encounter from her jealous husband. The second is the rivalrous play of cleverness and possession between men, which is a conflict between different kinds of labour. The value of Alison is established, in a famous passage (i.3233–70), by a veritable metaphoric cornucopia, by comparison with things of nature in its burgeoning, productive capacity, with young animals in their spring vitality, with early fruits (the "pere-jonette," the "sloo" and also, tellingly the "hoord of apples") but also with the "noble forged new" as Virginia Carroll has noticed: "her youth, her sensuality, her wild, innocent femininity are precisely what give Alison her value; these qualities are also what force John to hoard his treasure, to try, as much as possible, to keep his coin from becoming tarnished or lost."[29] Karma Lochrie points out that Alison's precise sexual value is established in the social hierarchy by the claim that she is a prize "for any lord to legen in his bedde, / Or yet for any good yeman to wedde" (i.3268–70). Lochrie's point is that the

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[29] "Women and Money" 79

desired woman is established as valuable/desirable *at all* by the desire of other men. She writes, "Cuckoldry ... is made possible by the wife's value as a commodity to be exchanged among men, even though one man is clearly disadvantaged in the process."[30] But it is simply too blunt to assert that this structure of *desire* means that the woman is exchanged every time she takes a new sexual partner; it makes vague the entire concept of marriage exchange, which is to forge bonds between men, not disrupt them. Unmarried women may be exchanged in marriage, but only once (unless they are widowed). Wives are *not* exchanged; a great deal of the comic force of the fabliau concerns the *giving away* of what is no longer on the market. Alison's value is what might be called residual exchange value; just what made her desirable and marriageable for her husband continues to make her attractive to other men. But in large part, and paradoxically, what makes Alison attractive and valuable in the restricted economy of marriage is her participation in the general economy of natural abundance, fecundity, *foyson*, as her adornment with metaphor shows. The competition between three men insists on the 'scarcity' of Alison, even while both the teller and the tale, on the contrary, insist on her abundance. The general economy is the strut of the restricted.

The male rivalries which surround the desirable Alison are structured by *indigentia*, the neediness of desire as "love-longynge" (I.3705), and by the conflict between *avoir* and *savoir*. John is in possession of a wife, but possession is not security; the difficulty of holding on to a desirable good breeds anxiety. John's jealousy is a commitment to the notions of scarcity which underlie the restricted economy, and this anxious commitment is what allows Nicholas to gull John by means of his mistaken belief in a cosmic pattern of destruction and retribution, of divine punishment for sins in the form of the coming second flood. Given Alison's willingness in the affair, the contrivance of this plot by Nicholas seems excessive to the simpler aim of getting to bed with her, but it is necessary just because it asserts Nicholas' cultural capital, his cleverness and book-learning, his magical technique, against the mere possession of the carpenter. In constructing his plot, Nicholas turns what had been

[30] "Woman's 'Pryvetees' and Fabliau Politics in the Miller's Tale," *Exemplaria* 6.2 (1994): 289.

"rage and pleye" (I.3273) into clerical work: "A clerk had litherly beset his whyle, / But if he koude a carpenter bigyle" (I.3299–300). What Nicholas 'does' is astrology, a not-for-profit occupation apparently since he must live "After his freendes fyndyng and his rente" (I.3220), but his plot asserts the value of his labour, over that of John. John, like Symkin in the Reeve's Tale, sees clerical labour as the dangerous and useless pastime of those who cannot see the marly-pit for the stars (I.4360); indeed he does not see it as labour at all, but contrasts the clerk with 'working men': "Thynk on God, as we doon, men that swynke" (I.3491).

Absalom in turn intervenes with a display of *his* cultural capital, the currency of a debased and foolish courtliness, to express his own desire. That his love-longing is a kind of (postlapsarian) work seems implied: "for your love I swete ther I go" (I.3702). His offerings of serenades and sighings, his nightly waking and watching are the lover's 'work.' His strategy of wooing, as a kind of hedging of his bets, slides back to a version of the exchange economy and away from the performatives of love-longing; he offers wine and wafers "And, for she was of town, he profred meede; / For some folk wol be wonnen for richesse" (I.3380–81). The initial hint that Absalom, in spite of his airs, reduces desire to sex for money, is confirmed when he purports in the end to offer a gold ring for another kiss. It is not Alison who accepts this token from the restricted economy, but Nicholas, who intercepts it, and in doing so, for no other reason than to gratuitously punish a rival, himself receives the vengeful punishment which subsists in that economy. The rivalry between the men precipitates their punishments, in a sense because each refuses to accept the Miller's original scandalous thesis, that there is enough of woman's sexuality to go around, that it is not a scarcity to be contested at all. They are therefore caught up in a cycle of (amusing) retributions, those of the distribution of poetic justice. Thus I argue that the rivalrous competition over a supposed scarcity in this tale shows the male commitment to the restricted economy, and that in the end they suffer by the logic they live by and reap what they have sowed.

I turn now to the question of how the distribution of rewards and punishments comes about, and then to the question as to why the fabliau logic of retribution misses the women in the tales. The kind of justice, which is common to both tales, is distributive justice, that glossed by Aristotle as the kind "which is

manifested in distributions of honour or money or the other things that fall to be divided among those who have a share in the constitution." This definition is alien to modern ethical thinking, for the distribution of goods and honours proposes a distributor, and a hierarchical social structure wherein those on top distribute largesse to those beneath.[31] In the up-so-down world of the fabliau, centrally concerned with the redistribution of goods, it is not the *munia* and *munera*, and duties and rewards of the community that are dispensed, but ridicule and ignominy for the losers, and base satisfactions to the winners.

The geometrical proportionality which Aristotle and Aquinas assign to just distribution of goods is in respect of the person, that is, it is appropriate to the value of the person (whereas rectificatory justice aims at equality). The notion of proportionality and appropriateness is of the essence of 'poetic justice,' as is its symbolic nature—that is, its justice will depend on a symbolic 'fit.' Thus Absalom is punished by getting the literal version, what he 'really' wants, debased lower-body sexuality, genital contact instead of the sublimated sexuality of courtly love and kisses; as Lochrie writes, this is the substitution of "genital for gender insignia."[32] The extravagant rewards and punishments at the end of these fabliaux are both proportional and appropriate, rather than equitable. The payment is unexpected, but *appropriate* at a different symbolic level than that on which the character believes himself to be acting; thus the Reeve's miller, for hoarding flour, is punished in the other, and more valuable thing he is hoarding, his daughter's chastity. In the fabliau, you get what you deserve, even if the logic followed is that if you get it, you must deserve just this.

The agent of distribution is not a person, but a plot. For this is overwhelmingly the distinguishing feature of fabliaux, which *always* shows the machinations of individuals, no matter how clever, as ultimately inconclusive, outcomes being brought about by a realignment which no one can control, which works *automatically*, that is, by means of an automaton, the invisible hand of the plot. This automaton is often quite simply the movement of signifiers

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[31] Another classical standard which inflected such thinking is Seneca's *De Beneficiis*, widely circulated in fragments, quotations and florilegium as well as in its entirety in the Middle Ages.

[32] "Woman's 'Pryvetees'" 300.

from place to place (for example, the cradle and the horse in the Reeve's Tale). Simon Gaunt has argued for the notion of mobility in the fabliaux, a mobility which extends ultimately to an upsetting of social hierarchy[33] and which causes wide-scale redistribution, largely accomplished by the mobility of signifiers. Circulation and substitution are the imperatives of the genre, asserted exactly against hoarding, and it is this narrative imperative which accounts for the genre's characteristic interest in money. Indeed, in the Shipman's Tale it is only money which circulates, but the process of circulation, the circuit that the money takes between the husband and the wife, is exactly what produces the surplus of sexual pleasure. Circulation is sometimes simply movement wherein a displaced signifier causes a fatal slide in the network, and sometimes it is substitution, as when Alan precipitates the plot by determining to substitute the "esement" of sex for the stolen flour.

In the Reeve's Tale, the cradle that stands at the end of the bed is the automaton of the plot. It is a signifier of maternity and can thus stand for the proper place of the miller's wife, indeed for the whole network of proper family relations (legitimacy of children, faithfulness of the wife, the transmission of property) which the miller is trying to maintain. It is, in Lacanian terminology, a *point de capiton*, a symbolic 'upholstery button' which holds this network of signifiers in place.[34] It is, at a much dumber level, also a landmark in the night by which to negotiate the room. Simply because it is moveable, the plot is able to unravel itself. In the Miller's Tale, what moves the plot is the substitution of one signifier for another; there is a simple reversal, or in the Freudian sense, displacement, of upper to lower body, when Alison substitutes her rear end for her kissing mouth. Nicholas' stupidity in substituting his own arse for Alison's causes the displacement of Absalom's revenge onto himself. The substitution of the male anus for the female genitalia certainly causes a conceptual slide in the network of gender significations which would seem to be essential for the

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[33] *Gender and Genre* ch. 5. See also Charles Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986) 169: "The hedonism and materialism and the ethic of cleverness of the fabliaux find a rough correspondence in the economic, commercial and social development of the period."

[34] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 87–88.

story to make sense at all.[35] The sliding and substitution of signifiers typical of the genre have led R. Howard Bloch to propose that the genre is *about* linguistic indeterminacy.[36] But the results of this circulation of sense are both determining and determinate; rather than ambiguity or indeterminacy, they are about the *coincidence* of signifiers, their status as narrative puns. Thus it is that the dénouement in the Miller's Tale is the most perfect of comic devices; it is the 'pun' of one signifier in two plot syntaxes—the cry 'water' which in the Absalom plot is a naturalistic outcry, is coincident as the key signifier in the literally suspended plot of the hanging tubs. Circulation and substitution counteract hoarding; they also result in the 'distributive' justice of the fabliau, and enable the plot-driven enjoyment of punishment.

The neatness of outcomes in these plots is countered by the sense that women are not included in them. It is not my argument that women 'win' in the complicated games of the plot, but rather that they escape, and are represented as escaping with enjoyment. But why is this the case? The answer I think lies in the economic presumptions which underlie not only these two tales, but the whole of Fragment I. Distributive economic justice is one of the sets of concerns which unites Fragment I of *The Canterbury Tales*; in the proper sense of proportional distribution according to the merits of the person, it is perhaps not the Reeve's or Miller's Tale which is the best exemplar but the Knight's Tale, with its fundamental problem as to how Theseus will adjudicate the 'distribution' of an indivisible good—Emily—between two claimants. Both her 'scarcity' and their 'indigentia' are stressed: as Theseus says: "Ye woot yourself she may nat wedden two / Atones, though ye fighten everemo / ...This is to seyn, she may nat now han bothe, / Al be ye never so jalouse ne so wrothe" (I.1835–40).[37] Without the

[35] See Elaine Tuttle Hansen's brilliant account of the ambiguity about "holes" in this tale, in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992) 223 ff.

[36] *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 44–45. Thomas D. Cooke, *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux: A Study of their Comic Climax* (Columbus: U of Missouri P, 1978) describes this feature as metaphoric (130–31).

[37] Emily "represents an extra female whom Theseus himself cannot marry, but whose sexuality must be contained by marriage"—in this sense she, like Alison is "excessive female sexuality"; see Hansen, *Fictions of Gender* 208.

obscene parameters of the fabliau's suggestions about use value, there is not enough of Emily to go around, and the result is the jealousy of contention.

For it is the use value of female sexuality that is the source of plenty in the fabliau, that which lies outside the restricted economy. Luce Irigaray writes: "As commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value."[38] Put another way, these are actually two forms of value, a use value and an exchange value. Fragment I of *The Canterbury Tales* is centrally concerned with the value of women, and the Miller's and Reeve's tales turn on a scandalous, misogynistic conflict between use value and exchange value. Irigaray goes on to develop her theory of the value of women in terms of role; these roles are mother, virgin, and prostitute. The virgin is "pure exchange value," the marriageable daughter, whose value is as a future mother. Once exchanged, she becomes a wife and potential mother, her value now in being *off* the market, reserved to one man's use, necessarily in order to preserve the integrity of descent, both of children and goods, as the Reeve's Tale explicitly states. At the other extreme is the prostitute, whose exchange value has been compromised, leaving her only with use value—which she then commodifies and sells. The virgin, and the chaste wife, are valuable insofar as their use is restricted, the prostitute valuable only if used by many. This may seem unduly schematic, but it is the scheme invoked in Fragment I, which descends from the absolute value of Emily to the contested value of wives and daughters with jealous husbands in the Miller's and Reeve's tales, to the prostitute of the Cook's Tale. The value the wife has, as Irigaray points out, is no longer exchange value, which is the provenance of the virgin daughter, but use value. In part, that value is because of her reproductive capacity; but her sexuality is still in excess of that aim, for use value is also for "friendship," as Oresme puts it. Since use value is also the value of the prostitute, the difference then resides in the hoarding of that use to a particular user, her husband. Part of the conflict arises because these stories stress the residual exchange value of women. It is the part of the chaste wife to efface that value, as Oresme advises: "For were she too

[38] "Women on the Market," *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985) 175.

alluring, it would seem that she was not chaste and that she was spending to the detriment of her children's inheritance."[39] In the Merchant's Tale, May's covering story is that she *is* exchanging her own sexuality for something, her husband's sight, thus generating a profitable confusion in her husband's mind between her exchange value, which seems to have done him good, and the use value he was trying to hoard. It is the notion of use value that brings the Miller's remarks about his wife's sexuality in the Prologue strongly to bear on the tale he tells; we return to the notion of *foyson*—plenty, of the uses of what can be used without being used up (unlike flour or virginity). The anxious male relation to exchange value overlooks the enjoyable 'plenty' of use. Since use in these tales is not 'for sale,' and is shown to be not exchangeable, it remains in the general economy, an economy of expenditure and plenty, which, unassimilated to restricted exchange, yields the pure profit of pleasure.

The notion of woman's pleasure as excess, surplus value, to the quiting among men is nonetheless hardly a blow for feminism. By Hansen's reading the attribution of female pleasure represents something that escapes from the male/male rivalry that these stories are really about, but this is not "a liberating ... sign of female desire."[40] Indeed it could just as easily be considered in an antifeminist light—female pleasure is responded to by masculine fear and loathing (Absalom), or a kind of cynical knowingness (the Miller himself). Yet I would ask, why is it there at all? What is wrong for women, ethically, is their exclusion from being exchangers. This exclusion generates the implicit acknowledgement for the male competitors in the tales that sexual pleasure for women is simply outside the equations of economic justice, something that cannot be counted on or counted out. This is "the an-economic exposition" which Derrida associates with the gift;[41] so it is perhaps unsurprising that in the end, the Miller's daughter 'gives' the clerks

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[39] *Livre* 827g.

[40] *Fictions of Gender* 225. The debate about whether the fabliau offers a positive representation of women is documented in Gaunt, *Gender and Genre* 237—the constraints of the genre are such that the fabliau isn't good for anyone who aspires to a subjectivity.

[41] *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) 23.

back the stolen flour. The profit of female pleasure is incalculable. The curious result of their ethical impairment is that it is registered *here* as sexual enjoyment. But plainly this is not always the case as we see in the adjoining tales.

The surplus value of female sexuality, in its an-economic nature as that which is outside exchange, emerges in radically different ways in the first and final tales of the fragment. In the Knight's Tale Emily's desire is simply nullified; unlike the women in the fabliaux she cannot have what she wants, which is to *not* be exchanged. She is pure exchange value, the end of the spectrum. But because she is on the market, so to speak, she is not being hoarded. In its resolution of the intense male rivalry for the good that is Emily, the Knight's Tale also shows a deployment of the general economy, but not in the form of sexual pleasure. Rather, it dispels the hostility of the restricted economy in the form of the massive unproductive social expenditure of mourning. In the unfinished Cook's Tale the sketch is of the reduction of that female sexuality in its sale as commodified use. The men of the tale have here lapsed into the 'negative scene' of the general economy, that of rottenness and waste: revelry, borrowing, profligacy, and gambling. The woman is now the economic agent of exchanges—the shop, the swyving—while the men assert their perverse relation to plenty. Female sexuality is no longer an excess, but a commodity.

While all the men are appropriately punished (they get what they are owed), Alison is not; she simply escapes the equation, as does the Miller's daughter. Since women are commodified and hoarded, explicitly considered in terms of their exchange value, in both tales, they are not available to the ethics which apply to exchangers; yet ethical impairment is here registered as sexual enjoyment. The surplus value generated after the exhaustion of the transactions between men is pleasure. If we ask in what circumstances this pleasure can emerge, since it does not, either in the Knight's Tale or the Cook's, then we formulate a principle something like this: in stories that concentrate on exchange value as a kind of hoarding, use value emerges as a useless excess to the calculation—as pleasure. If Emily as pure exchange value cannot have what she wants, and the prostitute in the Cook's Tale has managed to commodify her use value, those women in the neither/nor position, the women of the fabliaux, are free to enjoy use.