

Agency and the Successful Fabliau

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The order of the stories in *The Canterbury Tales* can seem arbitrary at first glance. The tales appear together in only two manuscripts, while the rest of the extant texts appear in fragments of two or three tales grouped together. Even Chaucer's manner of writing seems to offer no clue as to the "intended" order of the tales, since the initial order of telling laid out by the Host is overturned after only one story. However, the fragments are quite consistent in the tales that they group together. This, in combination with the structure of the tales themselves, as opposed to the frame narrative, allows us to be fairly sure that certain tales belong together. With this accepted, it becomes clear that Chaucer has a mischievous love of the incongruous and the ridiculous. Satire is the bedrock of the *Tales*.

The Knight's long-winded tale of honor, chivalry, and love divorced from sex is immediately followed by a near perfect riposte in the ribald and dishonorable *Miller's Tale*. There is a clear dualism between these two tales, but there is more to it than mere humorous juxtaposition; there is a narrative thread which runs beyond the Knight and the Miller to include the Reeve. In fact, this thread runs throughout the entire first fragment, barring the General Prologue, and it is this: the agency of women. Even when taken as a standalone tale, it is strikingly clear that Alison, the central female character of the *Miller's Tale*, has an extraordinary degree of freedom to choose her own fate. However, it is only when the tale is placed in the context of both the *Knight's Tale* and the Reeve's that her agency, and its ramifications, can be truly appreciated. Her freedom is highlighted by the helplessness of Emelye in the *Knight's Tale*. It is also the key difference between the hilarious *Miller's Tale* and the frankly disturbing *Reeve's Tale*.

The agency of Alison is, in fact, what makes the *Miller's Tale* a successful story.

If one is going to talk about agency in the context of the *Miller's Tale*, then the *Knight's Tale* is an obvious place to start. Given the prohibitive length of the story, it is mildly surprising how little the Knight has to say about women in general, and Emelye in particular. The story opens with Theseus conquering the land of the Amazons, a place where women ruled. That's already a subjugation and humiliation of women, but the female society of the Amazons is further degraded because Theseus:

wedded the queene Ypolita
and broghte hire hoom with hym in his contree
with muchel glorie and greet solempnytee
and eek hir faire suster Emelye. (868-71)

Neither Ypolita, nor Emelye have any say in this, and the Knight's treatment of Emelye is especially strange, because she is the key to his tale. She is the catalyst for all the noble conflict between Arcite and Palamon and without her there is no tale. Yet, he includes her almost as an afterthought, a trifling piece of booty for Theseus tacked on to the real treasure of Ypolita. From the start, Emelye is not treated with any importance, either in the tale itself or in the telling of it.

The turning point of the story, in which both knights see Emelye for the first time, comes early on in the gargantuan text, and Emelye is again conspicuous in her absence from the proceedings. Arcite, upon seeing her declares:

The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly
of hire that rometh in the yonder place,
and but I have hir mercy and hir grace,
that I may seen hire atte leeste weye,

I nam but deed! Ther is namoore to seye. (1118-22)

This could be dismissed as a simple love declaration for which consent is not needed, but after this statement, Arcite and Palamon fall to squabbling over her. Palamon says “I loved hire first and tolde thee my wo” (1146), while Arcite argues that:

What wiltow seyn, thou wisest nat yet now
wheither she be a womman or goddesse.
Thyn is affeccoun of hoolynesse,
and myn is love, as to a creature. (1156-59)

Neither of them ever pauses to ask which of them Emelye might prefer, or if she would want either of them. She doesn't even know they exist, yet they have already become rivals for her. What she may think of a liaison is not considered, either by the men in the story, or by the Knight telling the tale. This lack of regard for her opinion continues when Theseus arranges the tournament in which Arcite and Palamon are to fight for her.

Emelye does not speak nor come into prominence as anything other than a plot device and a trophy until section three when she makes a heartfelt appeal to the goddess Diana:

Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I
desire to ben a mayden al my lyf.
Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf! (2304-06)

...

Bihoold, goddesse of the clene chastitee,
the bittre teeris that on my chekes falle!
Syn thou art mayde and kepere of us alle,
my maydenhede thou kepe and wel conserve.

And whil I lyve, a mayde I wol thee serve.
(2326-30)

When at last she is given a voice, it is clear that Emelye is unhappy. She wants nothing to do with Arcite, Palamon, or any other man. She wants to serve Diana as a virgin, and she pleads with that goddess to allow her to continue in this way. The reply is crushing:

Doghter, stynt thyn hevynesse!
Among the goddes hye, it is affermed
and by eterne word writen and confermed:
thou shalt ben wedded unto oon of tho
that han for thee so muchel care and wo. (2348-
52)

Emelye is allowed no agency in the tale, no choice nor option, not even that of suicide. Her one vocal complaint is instantly quashed by the gods as something not to be bourn.

With the helplessness of Emelye as a backdrop, we may now turn to the *Miller's Tale* itself. The difference begins right at the start of the tale. Where Emelye was barely described at all, Alison is given seventy odd lines of detailed description, both of her appearance and demeanor. This depiction establishes her as being flirtatious (line 3244), and she is compared to colt (3263), or an unbroken horse, indicating that she is hard to control. From the moment of her introduction, we are shown a woman of spirit, capable of taking an active role in her own destiny.

Alison displays her agency most clearly in her dealings with Nicholas and her husband. Nicholas *does* pursue her so it can be debated as to how consensual the groping and kissing is. We do have a record of Alison's objection:

She seyde, 'I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!

Why, lat be, quod ich, lat be Nicholas,
or I wol crie 'out, harrow and allas!
do wey youre handes, for youre curteisye!' (3284-87)

and Nicholas ignores this plea, which could be seen as a taking away of Alison's agency; however, she does not call for help, as she threatens to, which seems to indicate that her "no" is not truly meant.

Whatever one may think of the exchange, there is no denying that Alison gives her explicit consent to the affair in the following lines:

she hir love hym graunted atte last
and swoor hir ooth, 'By Seint Thomas of Kent'
that she wol been at his comandement
whan that she may hir leyser wel espie." (3290-94)

The words in which she chooses to frame her consent are particularly interesting. She not only gives in to Nicholas' pleas, but does so with a religious oath. She uses sacred language to bind herself to the unholy act of adultery, which shows a break, not only from the authority of her husband, but also from that of heaven. It transforms an already bold show of agency into something bordering an act of rebellion against heaven.

Alison's agency continues to be shown in smaller ways as the story progresses. When Absolon becomes infatuated with her, she regards him with disdain, thus proving that she is not merely available to be taken by any man bold enough to try. Nicholas prevails because she likes him, while the luckless Absolon is refused. Alison follows Nicholas' instructions to trick her husband, playing her part to the hilt:

And to his wyf he tolde his pryvetee.

And she was war and knew it bet than he
what al this queynte cast was for to seye.
But natheles she ferde as she wolde deye
and seyde, 'Allas! Go forth thy wey anon.
Help us to scape or we been lost echon!
I am thy trewe, verray wedded wyf.
God deere spouse, and help to save oure lyf!
(3603-10)

Later, when Nicholas is sneaking down from his water butte, she creeps down from hers, and goes willingly with him to bed. There is no element of compulsion in the deed, and Alison is free to halt matters whenever she wishes. The lack of such a halt acts to reaffirm her agency. Her prank on Absolon shows yet another degree of freedom, since she can not only lie to her husband and control who comes unto her bed but can also play tricks upon men alien to her household.

The contrast with the *Knight's Tale* makes Alison's freedom and agency in the *Miller's Tale* more obvious, but why is that important? The answer lies in an examination of the genre of this and the following *Reeve's Tale*. Both fall into a genre of narrative poetry called Fabliau. This humorous genre is characterized by themes of sex, power, and money, and usually has to do with the middle or lower classes. One of the key elements of the fabliau is the use of satire. That is a word that is used and misused quite a lot, so it is useful to define it. Satire is the opposite of didactic. It is not meant to show correct behavior, but rather to display completely incorrect behavior. It shows the world as it should never be. This means that satire typically involves a breakdown of the natural or social order.

This is where Alison's freedom comes in. She has far more freedom than one might expect. She has an affair, making her a thoroughly reprehensible character, and she is never punished. That is a clear inversion of the typical patriarchal

and moral order, and it stems directly from the degree of freedom that she is allowed. However, this inversion is what makes the tale funny and unexpected, as can be seen when one compares it with the *Reeve's Tale*.

The tale told by the Reeve is even worse than the *Knight's Tale* in terms of female agency. The miller's daughter is presented, not so much as a person, but as property or livestock. She gets a brief description, but unlike Alison's, it says nothing about her character; it reads almost like a prospectus:

This wenche thikke and wel ygrowen was,
with kamuse nose and eyen greye as glas,
buttokes brode and brestes rounde and hye.
But right fair was hire heer, I wol nat lye. (3973-
76)

Furthermore, sale seems to be what the miller has in mind for her; he maintains iron control over her marriage prospects, because "his purpos was for to bistowe hire hye / into som worthy blood of auncetrye" (3981-82). He wants to use her as a lever for social advantage, and seems not to care what she may think of this.

Later on in the tale, the daughter is again treated like property by the clerk Aleyn. He declares to his friend John that "yon wenche wil I swyve" (4178) without once thinking of her consent. This becomes even more disturbing and objectifying when he says, a few lines later:

Oure corn is stoln. Shortly is ne nay,
and we han had an il fit al this day.
And syn I sal have neen amendement
agayn my los, I wil have esement. (4283-86)

He means to take the daughter as a recompense for his stolen goods and the unpleasantness of his day, which he does, creeping up on her until “that it had been to late for to crie. / And shortly for to seyn, they were aton” (4196-97).

The daughter doesn’t even have time to cry out before Aleyn has conjoined himself with her. This is a clear rape and the tale delves further into rape culture when the time comes for Aleyn to leave her. A popular trope of old romance and spy movies, most especially early Bond movies, is that of kissing the girl until she likes it. This is what happens in the *Reeve’s Tale*. The daughter has been raped all night until she has come to like it. So much so that she tells Aleyn where to find his stolen corn, and her goodbye is bizarrely affectionate: “And, goode lemman, God thee save and kepe! / And with that word almoost she gan to wepe” (4247-48). The miller’s daughter is so robbed of her agency that she cannot even object to what has been done to her, but rather treats it as the fruit of real love.

This utter lack of freedom on the part of the daughter is what sinks the *Reeve’s Tale* as a fabliau. It is not funny, but distasteful and distressing. There is no real breakdown of the social order, no satire, which makes it a failure. The miller steals corn, the clerks steal it back, and rapes his wife and daughter into the bargain. It’s horrible, but not a breakdown of order. The middle-class miller is punished for his theft by the intelligent clerks; the women are raped and enjoy it. This is not an inversion, but rather a magnification of the patriarchal and judicial order, with the women being completely dominated and the thief being stolen from.

In comparing these three tales, Alison shines as the mistress of her own fate. Where the miller’s daughter has no voice save to thank her rapist and Emelye speaks only to be corrected, Alison is able to twist and pervert sacred language to serve unhallowed actions. Emelye is forced to marry against her will; Alison is able not only to trick her husband,

but also to have him shut up as a madman. The miller's daughter has no say in her assault, while Alison freely chooses her lover. She manages to work a complete inversion of patriarchy, justice, morals, and logic. Of the four characters in the *Miller's Tale*, she is the only one to come out of the tale unscathed, the punishments for her iniquitous actions falling upon the men surrounding her. The unwanted suitor, Absolon, is humiliated through her cleverness. The lover, Nicholas, is burned for her trick upon Absolon. Finally, her husband, arguably the only innocent in the tale whose only fault is foolishness in taking so young a wife, is physically injured and condemned as a lunatic. She is mistress, not only of her own life and fate, but of all three men, husband, lover, and suitor, in a display of female agency and control made all the more striking for its absence in the surrounding stories. Alison is the queen of agency in these three tales, which is what makes the *Miller's Tale* a successful fabliau, while the *Reeve's Tale* flounders.

Works Cited

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. Edited by Robert Boenig & Andrew Taylor, Broadview Press, 2008.