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Men's Words in Women's Mouths: Why Misogynous Stereotypes are Humorous in the Old French Fabliaux

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Abstract

While many scholars have examined the subject of misogyny in Old French fabliaux in a number of contexts, no consensus has yet been reached on how the fabliaux can be considered humorous in the light of the stereotypes found therein. By conducting a close contextualised study of three fabliaux, this paper asserts that the humour of the fabliaux is created out of misogynous stereotypes by investing female characters with the ability to appropriate and subvert masculinist rhetoric and discourse styles. This subversive portrayal of women enjoys a circular relationship with humour; the creation of a clearly defined 'joke-world' within the fabliaux licenses socially outrageous portrayals of female protagonists, which in turn create humour through their incongruity with the realities^[2] faced by medieval women of all social classes.

Keywords: Fabliaux, masculinist discourse, humour, medieval women

Introduction

The subject of misogyny in the fabliaux has been an area of particular interest for modern medievalists^[3], yet the question remains: how can misogyny, or any such unabashed and unrepentant diatribe against women, be part of a genre which is largely considered to be comic?^[4] This paper will argue that, although discourse styles which are often attributed to men may find an outlet in the fabliaux, on several occasions they are found to be channelled through the genre's female protagonists, whose subsequent treatment of them casts a new light on the role of the fabliau woman and her place in the social hierarchy. Simultaneously, this paper aims to show that humour is not only the product of the creation of strong female protagonists but also that it facilitates this portrayal; that the humorous world created by the *fableors* allows fabliau women to take and subvert traditional, narrative and social forms of masculinist discourse, empowering them and enabling them to display their creativity, wit and ability to succeed.

An Overview of Women and Humour in Medieval Society

In order to begin to address the treatment of misogynous stereotypes in the fabliaux, a brief overview of the status of woman in medieval society and literature is necessary. Pre-Christian, Aristotelian views suggested that women should be controlled by their husbands and that females were not as fully human as men, as in reproduction only man could provide the 'soul' and the 'form' to bring life to the 'material' provided by woman (*De Generatione Animalium*, cited in Blamires, 1992: 38-39). This philosophy, which invested men alone with the influence and the power to create, along with Biblical teachings such as the story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:26 - 3:24), influenced medieval perceptions of women and their role in society. Medieval woman was considered secondary and subservient to man, yet with her numerous vices and faults, she was compelled to cause men problems. Bloch (1987: 3) notes that many of medieval women's vices are verbal ones: garrulousness, criticism, reproach and incessant demands, to name but a few,^[5] which suggests that an analysis of the speech of fabliau women is particularly pertinent.

Such views, however, pose a problem for the medieval scholar. Though some women, particularly in higher social classes, were known to have some influence, the prevailing social hierarchy of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was a patriarchal and patrilineal one. Yet the female protagonists portrayed in the fabliaux are not all oppressed or suppressed by misogynous ideals; on the contrary, there are many examples in the fabliaux where the woman is seen to succeed at the expense of a cuckolded husband or a less calculating female character. How then were such subversive portrayals permitted and, moreover, why are they amusing?

The characterisation of women in ways which society might deem improper could not be achieved through earnest representation without attracting censure. Humour is often transgressive, and some of the funniest jokes address taboo subjects whose treatment would be socially unacceptable if delivered with serious intent. Indeed, as Mary Douglas (1975: 98) explains:

The telling of [a joke] is potentially subversive, since its form consists of a victorious tilting of uncontrol against control, it is an image of the levelling of hierarchy, [...] of unofficial values [triumphing] over official ones.

Yet as Davies argues, the 'ephemeral and epiphenomenal' (2004: 3) nature of jokes prevents them being mistaken for a serious attempt to effect change upon society. Consequently, in the fabliaux, the use of humour confers immunity upon the *fableor*, allowing him to address socially unacceptable issues. As Boutet (1985: 116) explains:

La conduite générale du récit [...] nous inciterait plutôt à limiter notre interprétation au seul domaine de l'écriture.

[The general tone of the story leads us to confine our interpretation of it solely within the domain of the written word.] (Author's own translation)

With respect to the portrayal of women specifically, the *fableors'* use of humour confines the outlandish characterisation of creative, successful women to the non-threatening world of literary conjecture, allowing the author to return to the accepted world order without reproach.

There is, however, a second justification behind such 'joke-worlds', as women themselves were considered to be inherently subversive and dangerous to society (Bloch, 1987: 17). Logically then, allowing women more freedom in society would cause untold problems; instead, they are allowed free rein to pursue their desires and express themselves in the fabliaux. Abastado (1979 : 237) summarises this liberating effect of the fabliaux:

La littérature carnavalesque se caractérise par la liberté des sujets, une trivialité qui ne recule devant aucune outrance, la fantaisie de la fiction [...]; et, sous ce couvert, s'autorise la plus grande audace de la pensée.

[Carnavalesque literature is characterised by the freedom of its protagonists, its trivial nature which is unrepentant in the face of outrage, the fantasy of fiction [...], and, under this guise, it authorises the most audacious ways of thinking.] (Author's own translation)

This is exactly the kind of liberty of word and thought enjoyed by the women of the fabliaux; however, such behaviour is permitted solely on the understanding that the literary 'joke-world' is the only world in which they will be allowed to disport themselves in this way.

Men's Words in Women's Mouths: a Contextualised Study of Three Fabliaux

These subversive portrayals of women as successful, creative and powerful lead to 'unconventional perspectives in [the fabliau] narratives' through which the *fableors* 'establish the authority of women in their tales' (Johnson, 1983: 307). An essential element in establishing the authority of the 'winning woman'^[6] in the three fabliaux I have chosen is the way in which she presents her ideas and challenges her adversaries through her use of words. However, in order to analyse her discourse, I must first examine how the sexes use language differently. Robin Lakoff, the eminent sociolinguist who was among the first linguists to explore gendered language in depth, suggested in her 1975 work that women use a language which is submissive, using features such as 'hedging', polite forms and empty adjectives more than men. Tannen (1990) supports this conciliatory and co-operative view of women's language, as her findings indicated that women's communication tended to be supportive and often used to build rapport. Finally, in the context of a study of sexual power, Holland *et al.* (1998: 56) suggested that male language use was 'dominant' over women's disparagingly entitled 'girls' talk'. In contrast to these assessments of women's language use, men are said to use language in order to dominate and compete and are referential rather than emotional when they speak (Holmes, 1998: 462). My definition of masculinist discourse encapsulates not only these impressions of male speech, but also misogynist rhetoric such as stereotypes about how women should behave and their status within society.

As some fabliau women assert their authority through their treatment or appropriation of a form of masculinist discourse, I will analyse closely the reinterpretation of masculinist social discourse in *De la damme qui fist trois tours entour le moustier* [The lady who took three turns about the church tower], followed by traditional formal discourse in *Les trois dames qui troverent un vit* [Three ladies who found a penis] and finally narrative discourse in *Le Lai du Lecheor*^[7] [The Lay of the Lecher]. These fabliaux have been chosen for the different ways in which the successful female protagonist uses language and also because each fabliau

features a different adversary for the aforementioned protagonist: in the first case, her spouse; in the second case, three fellow women; and in the final case, a group of courtly men who are neither related to nor married to the protagonist. Each woman also comes from a different social background: the first lady is of relatively good social standing as the wife of a squire (l.17); the second woman, an abbess, leads a simple life as befits her vocation, and the third lady is recognised as a member of the aristocracy. It must be noted that this selection is necessarily limited and does not pretend to provide a comprehensive representation of women in medieval comic literature. Yet, as Johnson points out, 'the mode of the fabliau world is essentially a contingent one which resists attempts to build up a character portrait of Woman in the tales' (1983: 300). This 'contingent' nature of the fabliaux not only justifies a contextualised study, but our inability to generalise about fabliau women is evidence of the liberty afforded to them by the *fablors*, a freedom whose empowering effects are clear to see.

In the case of Rutebeuf's *De la damme qui fist trois tours entour le moustier*, the female protagonist appropriates masculinist social rhetoric about the virtues of the ideal wife in order to get ahead. She recasts long-standing stereotypes and assumptions in her own voice and style, creating a screen to conceal her extramarital activities from her husband and simultaneously casting him as the one at fault. For example, as a ruse to go out late at night, she tells her husband that she needs wool from a friend for her tapestry: an undeniably suitable pastime for a medieval lady. She espouses an affective rather than referential speech style in accordance with Holmes's suggestion that women tend to focus on the affective meaning of verbal interaction (1998: 462); she does this by purporting to worry about her husband's lack of sleep, coercing him to go to bed in order to get him out of her way (ll.64-72).^[8] Through using this typically feminine style, she further lulls her husband into a false sense of security. The audience, however, knows of her affair with a local priest and can therefore appreciate the lady's shrewd play-acting. It is notable that this style of speech contrasts with the style she uses with the priest when she is no longer affecting this feminine façade. The priest himself lives up to fabliau stereotype, 'abus[ing] his education by engaging in mock-courtly wooing in pursuit of base prostitution' (Burrows, 2005: 75), as we see here:

Fet li prestres ice me tue
 Que vous serez ia trop batue
 Onques de moi ne vous souiengne
 Dant prestres de vous vous couiengne
 Dist la damoisele en riant. [The priest said "It kills me,
 The thought that your husband will beat you."
 "Don't worry about me,
 Good priest, concern yourself with yourself,"
 The lady said, laughing.](ll.113-17; author's own translation)

The priest's 'wooing' could be described as affective discourse, as he claims to have concerns about the lady's wellbeing, which she summarily dismisses, laughing, with a sense of self-assurance and practicality commensurate with the masculinist discourse style she now uses.

The lady's coup-de-grâce is achieved when she returns home. As she has been gone a long time, the husband wildly harangues her, even unwittingly accusing her of her true crime (l.128) in an uncontrolled and contentious manner redolent of the faults attributed to medieval women (Bloch, 1987: 3). His lady, however, calmly tells him that she is pregnant by him and that she has been performing an age-old ritual which will indicate the sex of the baby (ll.138-

55). Whether she is actually pregnant or not is a moot point; her husband believes her, admits that he is at fault for suspecting her of any less virtuous behaviour and they make peace with each other (ll.156-66). Here the lady has been particularly clever; the production of an heir, especially a male one, was considered to be a lady's foremost task in marriage. By ostensibly fulfilling all the roles expected of a respectable medieval wife, she puts herself beyond reproach and shames her husband for doubting her. The audience, aware of how the lady has manipulated cultural exigencies, laugh with the wife as she may continue her adulterous relationship free of suspicion and laugh at the credulous husband, who has been thoroughly outplayed by his spouse.

The way in which Rutebeuf takes well-known stereotypes about women and passes them into the hands (or rather mouth) of a sharp-witted woman is a motif noted by E. Jane Burns (1993: xiv):

The very fact that a woman actively speaks the stereotypes that are typically uttered by men about women allows for a different reading: one that would significantly change the terms of the standard hierarchical equation.

In this instance the 'hierarchical equation' is completely reversed; not only because socially accepted masculinist discourse is subverted by the lady to achieve her own ends, but also because the addition of a creative, calmly assertive dimension to her character comes at a cost to the portrayal of her adversary. Lacy (1985: 324) surmises that 'the man remains an individual' compared with the generic women of the fabliaux, yet in this case I would argue that the lady's wit, skill and daring personality are in sharp contrast to her husband's dull, exaggeratedly one-dimensional nature. As the fabliau men abdicate their rationality and their reason, they abandon some of the fundamental distinctions between the sexes. Consequently, the traditional definitions of 'female' and 'male' traits become much more fluid, allowing the female characters to flourish and succeed. Making use of a fundamentally male trait, creativity, the lady here 'voic[es] a challenge to the ideology which [misogynous stereotypes] were initially designed to convey' (Burns, 1993: xv), as she is clearly neither subservient nor answerable to her husband.

But why would an audience, of which around half the members would be male, find the emasculation and humiliation of a fellow man funny? I agree with Gaunt's assertion that 'the point seems to be that one man's stupidity allows a clever woman to get the better of him, [...] and that other men laugh at this oaf.' (1995: 267) The Freudian concept of *Schadenfreude* certainly seems to come into play here as the 'laughter [of the watching audience] expresses a pleasurable sense of the superiority which [they] feel in relation to him' (Freud, 1973b: 195), as they themselves remain uncuckolded and untricked. It is also possible that the relatively high social status of the couple in question would add to the humour, because it is thought that the largest audience demographic for the fabliaux was the urban bourgeoisie,¹⁹¹ who would relish the opportunity to laugh at the misfortune of one of their 'betters', at least as far as the feudal hierarchy was concerned.

Yet this woman's ability to triumph over the man may in fact be of even greater threat to the accepted social order than the simple fact of an empowered female character. Medieval opinion was preoccupied with the weakening, even blinding effect that women's sophistry and irrationality could have on men (Bloch, 1987: 17). The motif of the outwitted husband must therefore carry an element of fantasy or impossibility in order to entertain rather than threaten. Accordingly, the exaggerated impotence of this husband who is so hopelessly

outplayed by his wife also invites ridicule as a result of its extreme incongruence vis-à-vis the realities of medieval society, in which men of all social classes had social and legal control over their wives (Palmer, n.d.).

The second work I shall examine also features the success of a woman as a result of the diminution of other characters, in this case three particularly silly and quarrelsome women. In *Les trois dames qui troverent un vit*, the 'winning woman' is an abbess who embraces a traditionally male role but who, in contrast to the lady in *De la damme qui fist trois tours entour le moustier*, also espouses the corresponding discourse style to great effect.

Three women, described as 'parish wives' (Revard, 2005: 114), are on pilgrimage when they find a '.ii. coiz et .i. vit mout gros' [two balls and a great big penis] (l.13, ^[10] author's own translation) under a hawthorn hedge. The hysterical reaction of two of the women on finding the *vit* [penis] perpetuates the traditional stereotypical image of irrational, lustful females. As they fight over the ownership of and their shares in the *vit*, they finally decide to solve the problem by taking it to a fair arbiter; in this instance, the abbess of a nearby convent. The abbess agrees to preside over the case of the disputed *vit* but swiftly undercuts the wives by claiming the *vit* as the abbey's lost door-bolt (ll.92-94).

The humour in this fabliau comes from the mismatch of character traits between the three women and the abbess, allowing the author to challenge how women are traditionally portrayed, and is augmented by the strangeness of the situation and the sudden, unexpected turn of events. Controversially, the abbess is invested with a traditionally masculine role as the presiding judge in the case of the *vit*. Although her court is an informal one, the abbess is metaphorically placed above the parish wives in her new-found role and justifies this position through her demeanour and speech. The abbess adopts many traditionally masculine attributes: calmness, rationality and quick-thinking, to produce an impressively audacious justification for her 'ruling'. Similarly, her speech shows masculinist discourse markers; for example, when the parish wives first call for the abbess's judgment:

Par foy fet l'abaesse avant
Jert l'auoir mis et le verron
Et en après en Jugeron

["My faith," said the abbess,
"Bring it before us, we shall look upon it
And after, we shall judge it."]

(ll. 72-74; author's own translation)

The abbess communicates to the wives precisely what she intends to do, without passing comment on their emotional state or the personal details of the case. In this way her speech is highly referential, like masculinist discourse, with few allusions to affective communication. There is recent research which could help shed light on the reasons behind this: O'Barr and Atkins (1980: 109) conducted research into how men and women used language in a court setting. They found that discourse markers such as those used by the abbess were used by people from higher social backgrounds, such as well-established professionals, irrespective of their sex. Similarly, low-ranking men were as likely to use 'powerless' language, something like the uncontrolled, emotional and incoherent outbursts (ll.101-06) of the parish wives, as women. This suggests that the abbess takes on this masculinist discourse style not because

she is fulfilling the role normally played by a man, but because it is a role which confers power upon the speaker. I shall further discuss the effects of power upon discourse later in this paper.

Such overtly powerful discourse markers coming from the mouth of a woman, a daughter of Christ no less, is an alien enough concept for the audience. However, when juxtaposed with the behaviour of the parish wives, whose hysterical outbursts and 'riotousness' have been considered by philosophers to be typically female attributes (Freud, 1973a; Bloch, 1987: 3-6), the incongruity of the abbess's behaviour is such that the idea of a woman in a position of power seems almost proper and socially acceptable.

Moreover, as Douglas explains, jokes 'bring into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which is in some way hidden in the first.' (1975: 96) The disparate elements in this equation are the abbess and the strange and obscene disassociated penis, which combine not to produce a show of pious disapproval but opportunistic audacity. A feminist reading of this episode could suggest that the 'hidden pattern' is that quick-thinking and cleverness are in fact attributes which many women share, but that are rarely recognised in the patriarchal medieval social structure. What is certain is that the abbess's unexpected, incongruous conduct leaves the surprised audience no choice but to laugh, simultaneously showing their approbation of the calmly daring abbess and condemning the stereotypical, shallow parish wives to the status of fabliau losers, along with the husband in *De la damme qui fist trois tours entour le moustier*.

The wholesale capture of masculinist discourse and its markers is also evident in the third work of interest, the *Lai du Lecheor*. This work is 'one of the very few examples of a courtly narrative which deals with sexual matters explicitly' (Eley, 1999: 8) and interestingly, this explicit narrative is delivered with relish and authority not by daring knights, but a group of courtly ladies. The *Lai du Lecheor* contrasts with the preceding works, however, as the ladies' subversion of narrative discourse creates cohesion rather than conflict between them and their verbal jousting partners. The story is set on St Pantelion's Day, when stories of knightly valour and prowess are traded and a new lai is composed by the assembly. This year, however, a small group of eight courtly noble women, described as 'de Bretagne la flors' [the flower of Brittany] (l.57),^[11] seize upon the idea that all knightly endeavours and triumphs can be attributed to the knight's devotion to the *con* [cunt].

The member of the group who makes this astute observation is a masterful oratrix. There is no doubting her authoritative style, stereotypically a characteristic of masculinist speech (Hogg, 1985: 104), as she uses language cleverly to command her audience. She uses rhetorical questions, anaphora and 21 lines of the text, one sixth of the text as a whole, to create tension before finally uttering the crucial word. Consequently, the shock value of the incongruously crude *con* releases tension, causing us to laugh with the lady's seven companions and to congratulate her wit and observation as they start to compose the new lai (ll.101-103).

As we laugh, we perceive a clearly defined 'joke-world' created by the incongruous and shocking 'renversement' [reversal] (Méla, 1987: 61) of accepted social and literary conventions. Within this non-threatening comic arena, the *Lai du Lecheor* allows itself to make challenging propositions and expose one-dimensional stereotypes of women as such. In contrast to the accepted view that women are capable of producing little more than chaos and anxiety (Bloch, 1987: 3, 4), we see a group of multi-dimensional women, whose combination

of traditionally feminine grace and stereotypically male creativity and forthrightness allows them to confront the male knights and clerks as intellectual equals. The lady's style of speech could also be described as competitive, a characteristic of masculinist discourse identified by Plato (Brown, 1988: 597-98), as she challenges accepted behaviours and competes to propose the best topic for that year's lai, a competition usually disputed by the men who recount their noble deeds and achievements. She also distances herself from stereotypically feminine discourse styles; one of the earliest sociolinguists to comment upon gender, Otto Jespersen, noted a preference among women for 'refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions' (1922: 245). There is nothing indirect about our lady's assertions, as she expresses herself without recourse to euphemism, thereby wresting power from the unexpected men present by challenging social preconceptions (McConnell-Ginet, 1980: 14).

With reference to these men, the ladies' adversaries, it is important to note that less time is devoted to describing the men and their role is secondary in comparison with the women. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the men in the *Lai du Lecheor* do not produce any direct speech at all. This is in contrast with recent research by Tannen (2007: 182, 190), which found that men tend to speak significantly more than women in public situations, such as the large gathering described in the *Lai du Lecheor*, and that they appear to be more comfortable than many women when using talk to claim attention. This role reversal reinforces the women's appropriation of the masculinist style. However, the men's characters and virtues remain relatively undiminished, unlike the husband in *De la damme qui fist trois tours entour le moustier*. Their weaknesses are exposed and recognised, but they retain their social status and recover something of their standing with their ladies, working with them as equals to compose the lai of the *con*. This is a clear divergence from the Judaeo-Christian tradition in which the woman is a derivation of man and therefore cannot compete with him as an equal.

The emergent equality between the ladies, the clerks and the knights is possible because of an important change in the balance of power between women and men which has been effected by humour. Bakhtin's commentary on medieval laughter never rang truer than in this context; 'this laughing truth, expressed in curses and abusive words, degraded power' (1984: 92-93). The truth observed by the ladies, that the *con* influences and inspires knightly valour, is conveyed merrily through the use of the profanity, which consequently destroys the official divisions and bestowal of power between men and women.

A Question of Power

The successes of the women in the three fabliaux I have studied have all been due to the female protagonist exercising power over her adversary: in *De la damme qui fist trois tours entour le moustier*, the lady successfully claims to know what her husband wants to hear and how he wants to hear it; in *Les Trois Dames qui troverent un vit*, the abbess profits from the position of power in which she has been put by the parish wives, and in the *Lai du Lecheor*, the lady claims power by placing herself as a sole speaker in front of a public audience. The question must be then asked: is it sexual difference or simply a question of status and authority which licenses the use of masculinist discourse? O'Barr and Atkins's (1980: 109) research, as commented upon with reference to the abbess, found that the way their subjects used language did not differ for any biological reason, but in fact due to the social status of the person using it. In order to apply their suggestion that Lakoff's 'women's language' is in fact 'powerless language' (1980: 104), in conjunction with Gaunt's view that 'the prime

motivation of the fabliaux is an interest in mutability, coupled with a mistrust of fixed hierarchies' (1995: 235), my definition of masculinist discourse must be refined. Masculinist discourse style is not 'male' for biological reasons, but because medieval society dictated that power and the corresponding discourse was (almost) the sole preserve of men. Consequently, the fabliau women adopt the discourse of power because of the powerful positions they claim relative to their adversaries, rather than espousing a kind of discourse which is usually unavailable to them for any biological reason.

Conclusion

The debate over the antifeminist sentiments of the fabliaux may continue, but for my part I believe that the popular – and populist – fabliaux create a synergy between the empowerment of fabliau women and the humorous nature of the genre. In this circular relationship, female appropriation and subversion of powerful discourse and misogynist stereotypes provokes laughter through the incongruity created; laughter which simultaneously sanctions such socially threatening representations of 'misrule' (Perfetti, 2003: 12). This laughter is permitted because it is ephemeral (Bahktin, 1984: 88-89, Davies, 2004: 3), offering the audience brief tempting views of a different world order before society and reality come back into harsh focus.

Furthermore, 'laughter's potential to resist the construction of women as passive' (Perfetti, 2003: 12) is in evidence in the fabliaux I have discussed; their female protagonists each actively lay claim to a different kind of powerful discourse and turn it to their own advantage. While some scholars, like Johnson, celebrate their success, saying 'the winning women of the fabliaux are above all cunning and high-spirited (rather than adulterous and deceitful)' (1983: 307), the unusual forthrightness of these women has led some scholars to view the portrayal of women as negative and antifeminist; Power describes fabliau women as 'odious' (1975: 11). My opinions, however, align with those of Gaunt; I do not believe that the *fableors* wish to press either a feminist or an anti-feminist agenda, regardless of the immunity afforded to them by their use of humour. Instead, they are using humour to play devil's advocate with accepted social norms; to suggest what *could* be, rather than what *should* be. As Gaunt (1995: 235) explains:

The principal preoccupation of the genre is, rather, an impulse to overturn perceived hierarchical structures of all kinds, to reveal them as artificial and susceptible to manipulation.

In order to do this, the *fableors* bestow upon their female protagonists a powerful persona rarely afforded to them in reality, and this persona is licensed by the way in which the women speak and the roles they accept or reject as females. Whether they manipulate misogynist stereotypes to their advantage, or work to disprove them altogether; whether they knowingly dress their speech as powerless to outwit their adversaries, or use the discourse of power to boldly claim attention, the 'winning women' of the fabliaux and their respective successes and simultaneously celebrated and empowered through the liberated laughter of their audience.

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Notes

[1] Rebecca graduated from the University of Sheffield in June 2010 with a degree in French and Linguistics and is currently the Graduate Trainee Librarian at the Classical Faculty Library, University of Cambridge. She is looking to return to university to continue her studies in September 2011

[2] One must be cautious when referring to the 'real' life of the medieval woman and must avoid generalising across the social classes. There are accounts of some empowered women in the Middle Ages, usually aristocratic ones, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, described by Owen as 'one of the most influential figures of the twelfth century' (1996: back cover), and Hildegard of Bingen and Adela of Blois. Furthermore, the emergence of *femmes soles* who were active in trade in the twelfth century suggests that women in the middle classes too were more visible than is usually assumed (Power, 1975: 2). For these reasons it is difficult to generalise about the reality faced by the medieval woman, as their realities depended largely on their social class. However, historians such as McNamara and Wemple (1988: 94) and Georges Duby (1977) suggest that the practice of primogeniture did in general diminish the power of woman, and Power (1975: 2) suggests that the aristocratic lawmakers of the day 'were in agreement in placing woman in subject to man, [therefore] neither the concept of marriage nor the law took note of her as a complete individual.' See note 4 for more information about the status of the medieval woman.

[3] Medievalists who have discussed this issue include Power (1975) and Bloch (1987), who argued that the medieval portrayal of women was a negative one which reflected society's misogynist treatment of women; alternatively scholars such as Ladd (1976), Johnson (1983), Burns (1993) and Perfetti (2003), who are incidentally all female, promote a rather more positive view on the subject, suggesting that the women are empowered, rather than slandered, by the *fableors*.

[4] While most scholars believe that the fabliaux are intended to be humorous – Bédier (1893) called them 'contes à rire en vers' [humorous tales in verse] by way of a definition – some find humour too fluid a concept in itself to constitute a defining feature. Noomen and van den Boogaard, for example, did not consider humour as a criterion when finalising the

corpus of their *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux (NRCF)*. It is true that some of the more violent fabliaux, for example *Les Tresces*, may not appeal to modern sensibilities (nor indeed some members of its medieval audience). However, as humour is neither universal nor uniform, so general consensus, that the fabliaux are largely comic, holds sway here.

[5] For more information about the status of the medieval woman, see Blamires (1992) for a holistic discussion of views on women from the pre-Christian tradition up to around 1800; Fiero *et al.* (1989) for three medieval poems about women (note that the shortest poem addresses the virtues of woman, and almost all these virtues refer to her effect on man); García Teruel (1995) for opinions in 12th and 13th century French literature; Palmer (n.d.) for the laws women were subject to in marriage in 12th century England; Power (1975, particularly Chapter 1) for a comprehensive portrait of medieval women in Europe.

[6] The classification of successful fabliaux females as 'winning women' was first used by Anne Ladd (1976: 100) and was seized upon by Lesley Johnson in her key article 'Women on Top: Antifeminism in the Fabliaux?' (1983: 298, 307)

[7] The classification of *Le Lai du Lecheor* is a contentious issue. Scholars such as Maddox (2005: fn. vii), Tobin (quoted in Burgess and Brooks, 1999: 10) and Burgess and Brooks themselves (1999: 10) recognise the difficulties of classifying *Lecheor*; even Marie de France referred to it as a fabliau (Tudor 2004: 11). Indeed, the text I am using was found in a manuscript containing 24 lais (MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, nouv. acq. Fr. 1104, f. 43r, col.1 – 43v, col.1), yet its subject matter is more akin to that of the fabliaux. Other fabliaux have been known to feature courtly characters and aristocratic audiences were thought to have enjoyed fabliaux as much as the lower classes (Nykrog 1973). Furthermore, according to Scott (1977: 10), it is precisely the content which distinguishes the lai from the fabliau. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, as the content of the piece is my main focus, I consider it to be a fabliau with a courtly setting.

[8] Line references from this fabliau are taken from Manuscript A in *NRCF* vol.5 (1990).

[9] The first to suggest this was Bédier (1898: 327), though it must be noted that Nykrog (1957: 230) disagrees, insisting that the audience of the fabliaux was the same as that which appreciated courtly romances. Rychner, conversely, notes how both audiences could well have appreciated the same fabliau, or at least versions of it (1960). Unfortunately no hard and fast proof of the audience demographic exists, which leaves such questions enticingly open to interpretation.

[10] Line references for this fabliau are taken from Manuscript E in *NRCF* vol.8 (1994).

[11] Quotes and line references for the *Lai du Lecheor* are taken from the original text in Burgess and Brook eds. 1999: 66-71

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