The English Fabliau in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the fabliau attained a belated vogue in English. This paper offers a review of existing criticism on the English fabliaux, outlining the main issues it addresses, as well as suggesting the future directions scholarship might take. In particular, it offers a detailed analysis of how English writers after Chaucer tried to bring the fabliau genre into line with fifteenth-century notions of orthodoxy, a project which caused them to confront the challenges of the Lollard heresy in subtle but pervasive ways. It also notes that the very tactics used by the fabliaux to uphold late-medieval orthodoxy against Wycliffism rendered them all the more popular after the Reformation, despite their obvious Catholic sympathies. It is concluded that these two elements in the texts merit closer study, as they resonate with recent assessments of the period and its culture.

Since Joseph Bédier revived interest in them in the 1890s, the French fabliaux have attracted an increasingly large body of commentary. These brief comic narratives in verse, focusing on trickery, violence and adultery, have been the subject of numerous studies, editions and essay-collections: the last decade alone has seen work on them by Keith Busby, Norris Levy, Holly Crocker, and several others. However, such attention stands in marked contrast to the critical reception of the fabliaux in English. The texts produced out of this later tradition, which spans the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, have been comparatively neglected. There is, for instance, no English equivalent of the exhaustive compendia of French texts produced by Montaiglon and Raynaud or Noomen and Van den Boogaard. The closest to a comprehensive modern collection are the miscellanies of Hazlitt, McKnight, or Brewer, or the useful but avowedly selective anthologies of Melissa Furrow. Likewise, there are far fewer studies dedicated to them, with only one monograph to date analysing them specifically, Hines’ Fabliau in English.

At first glance, this disregard is understandable. As Davenport writes, the texts are fairly ‘scattered’ in nature, with most surviving in only one copy, and varying in metre, sophistication and even generic designation. It is also difficult to know what context to read them against, as they are often resistant to precise dating. While most are preserved in early printed editions, these can often be at some remove from their date of composition: for example, Dane Hew Munk of Leicestre was published by John Allde between 1560 and 1567, although is usually placed a century earlier. Nevertheless, despite these problems, the texts do repay study for a number of reasons. In the first place, there is every indication that they were not always as marginal as they now appear. Their number is not inconsiderable: according to Lewis, around thirty such pieces are still extant. While this is far below the
number of French texts, the true amount may be much larger: the Stationer’s Register preserves a number of titles that might refer to lost pieces, such as *A mery iest of a puddinge* and *Howe twoo fell in strifë about a yonge Bryde*, licensed in 1587 and 1597 respectively. They are also among the most popular texts of the period, with many achieving an impressive longevity. *The Frere and the boye* has a publication record spanning several centuries: first occurring in three manuscripts, the earliest dating from c.1453-63, the piece was printed at least ten times between c.1513 and 1698, and continued to be produced in lightly modernised versions throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The texts also commanded a wide readership, one not confined to the traditional ‘underground’ of popular literature. While they appear in the libraries of the Warwick mason ‘captin Cox’, the London merchant Richard Hill, and the Lincolnshire yeoman John Craddock, allusions to them also occur in the work of Burton, Nash, Middleton, and perhaps Marlowe and Shakespeare. Two of the texts can even be linked with Thomas More and his circle. *Howe a Sergeaunt wolde lerne to be a frere* is widely accepted as More’s work, and doubtless contributed to his posthumous reputation as ‘merry More...given to jests and practical jokes’, while the *XII Mery lestes of Wyddow Edyth* was written by Walter Smith, a servant in his household. In short, the English fabliau was a key part of the bloodstream of late medieval and early modern culture, permeating it and colouring it. It is the purpose of the present article to explore some of the questions posed by the English fabliaux, as well as to review some of the texts in this little-read corpus.

Since the fabliaux have drawn little sustained analysis, critical debate around them has tended to focus on a few principal issues. The first of these is how the tradition developed in the first place. Earlier commentators, including Canby, Baugh and Wilson, held that the English fabliau emerged in parallel with the French form, and that these later texts might therefore continue a thirteenth- and fourteenth-century form. The staunchest proponent of this view is Hines, who specifically argues that the texts offer ‘a delayed glimpse of a Middle English’ fabliau tradition. However, more recent critics have tended to discount this view, arguing that there is little evidence the fabliau had any foothold in early Middle English. Essays by Glenn Wright and Catherine La Farge, for instance, suggest that English writers before Chaucer saw the fabliau more as a disembodied ‘ethos’ than a definite genre, a loose collection of ideas rather than a fully-fledged framework. Even *Dame Sirip*, the only serious candidate for ‘pre-Chaucerian English fabliau’, tends to be considered ‘dramatic rather than narrative’ in recent assessments, such as those of Hertog, Busby and Boitani.
Likewise a number of commentators note that the fifteenth-century texts do not point back to an earlier native tradition at all, usually advertising their debts to Chaucer or to French material. At least four of them are adapted more or less directly from continental sources: Dane Hew Munk of Leicestre from Le Sacristain, Queen Elenor’s Confession from Du chevalier qui fist sa fame confesse, Howe Johan Splynter made his testament from Een Sonderlinc Testament, and the Friars of Berwick from Le povre cler. Even when the texts lack a single source, they draw on common fabliau motifs: the slapstick battle between husband and wife featured in La Veuve and Sire Hain et Dame Anuieuse appears in several English texts, including The Wife Lapped in Morrelles Skin, the Jest of an Old Fool and A wife that threst her husband with a fflealle. Similarly, Chaucer’s influence registers in several pieces. It is especially clear in the Mylner of Abyngdon, printed by De Worde in c.1532, which is a straightforward reworking of the Reeve’s Tale: even the points at which it departs from this source contain clear echoes of Chaucer, as one of the clerks is renamed Jankyn, like the Wife of Bath’s final husband, and is even addressed with Bailley’s words to the Parson ‘Jankyn be ye there’. A further example is The Vnluckie Firmentie, printed by Thomas Colwell between 1560 and 1575 although probably in circulation earlier, like most of Colwell’s output. Firmentie extends the ‘misdirected kiss’ motif from the Miller’s Tale to grotesque proportions: its main character not only kisses the arse of a sleeping old woman, but ‘feeds’ it a ladleful of porridge, and even berates it for repeatedly blowing on the food. Other texts merge these two lines of influence, such as the sixteenth-century ballad The Wanton Wife of Bath. This transplants Chaucer’s Alisoun into the narrative of Du vilain qui conquist paradis, as she argues her way into heaven on the basis that Adam, Lot, Thomas and other biblical figures committed far worse sins than hers. In short, most critics have tended to move away from seeing the texts as continuations of an earlier English tradition, arguing that they were instead following Chaucer’s precedent by bringing these stories into English. It is generally agreed that Chaucer’s experiments with the French genre were a ‘novelty in English’, and the later texts were produced only ‘in the wake of Chaucer’s example’. While it is largely accepted that Chaucer initiated this tradition, it is also frequently noted that his example was not followed in every respect. A further focus of criticism on the fabliaux is the ways in which they diverge from the French or Chaucerian pieces. In these discussions, the main point of difference flagged up is their comparative restraint, as the poems are usually characterised as ‘conservative’ or ‘orthodox’. For example, Melissa Furrow notes that the gleeful inversion of accepted standards found in many of the French poems all but
disappears from their English counterparts, writing that ‘fabliau justice peculiar to the French poems is replaced by something a step closer to orthodox morality’. The same conclusion is reached by Cooke, who notes that ‘the cleverness and licentiousness of adulterers and fornicators’ tends to meet with ‘failure and punishment’ rather than celebration in the English poems. These appraisals are also echoed in studies of individual texts. Thus Darjes and Rendell detect a ‘gingerly treatment of the earthier aspects of the genre’ in the Beryn Prologue, while Robbins dismisses The Mylner of Abyngton for its ‘sentimentality’ and use of ‘external moral evaluation’. In short, most of the studies which deal with these texts treat them as tamer versions of the earlier, more irreverent and subversive poems.

Although these evaluations carry some difficult implications, at their core there is little that can be disputed. Throughout the texts there is indeed a common tendency, as Furrow notes, ‘to put a stop to illicit behaviour rather than to further it’. Rather than making trickery instrumental in adultery and theft, the English poems generally use it to restore the given order. In the Lady Prioress and Wright’s Chaste Wife, for instance, women use tricks to deter their seducers, rather than to facilitate a liaison in the vein of other fabliau heroines, such as the ‘feme de grant paraige’ of Les Tresces. Likewise, while many French texts take the side of socially marginal figures, with itinerant clerks being the only ‘social group…fabliau authors consistently favor’, English texts tend to punish or restrain them. The title character of Smith’s Widow Edyth, for instance, is a transient trickster who is brought to heel: repeatedly attracting suitors before absconding with their cash, Edith not only faces poisoning and imprisonment in the course of her ‘gestes’ but, as Anne Prescott notes, a sense of futility pervades her antics, as she always ends up ‘back where she started’ at the end of each scheme. These modifications are perhaps better termed a ‘narrowing’ of the fabliau, to use Strohm’s term, than an outright revision of it. After all, while some French fabliaux do relish in their own amorality, with poems such as Estormi gleefully killing characters who ‘n’i a pas mort deservie’ (‘do not deserve death’), many others employ corrective plots or have an underlying moral point, as Schenk and Busby observe. Nonetheless, it remains broadly true that the English texts give more prominence to correction than their continental forebears.

What makes these discussions problematic is that they generally carry implicit judgements on the fabliaux. All too often these appraisals have been used more as a pretext for disregarding the texts than a reason to ask further questions about them. In much existing scholarship,
identifying a ‘strongly conservative factor’ in the poems functions as a shorthand for dismissing them, as though only texts showing ‘pleasure in disorder’ merit attention. However, the presence of this feature in the English fabliaux in fact signposts where scholarship on the poems might turn next. The fact that the writers of English fabliaux felt compelled to modify the form in this way is itself an interesting issue, not least because ‘orthodoxy’ is a highly vexed issue in the late Middle Ages and early modernity. Given that this period saw several sweeping reforms of vernacular culture, the texts’ self-conscious attempt to adapt their genre to this fluctuating concept should repay study, if only as an insight into how these pressures were understood and responded to.

Something of this has been implied by commentary on what is probably the most discussed English fabliau outside Chaucer’s work, the Prologue of the Tale of Beryn. The reason why this has attracted a higher volume of criticism is no doubt because of its unusual proximity to Chaucer. The text is in fact composed as a continuation of the Canterbury Tales, as it details the arrival of the pilgrims at Canterbury, their overnight stay at the ‘Cheker of the Hope’, and their visit to the shrine of St Thomas. The text ends with the pilgrims returning to London before giving way to a second story by the Merchant, a redaction of the French romance Berinus. The authorship and date of this text are equally uncertain. Derek Pearsall suggests a date of c.1410, while Peter Brown has proposed 1420, the fifth jubilee of Canterbury Cathedral, which the text might have been composed to commemorate. Likewise, its author can only be identified from a note in its one surviving copy which calls him ‘filius ecclesie Thome’ (‘son of the church of Thomas’): this may place him in the Benedictine community at Canterbury Cathedral, although he has also been linked with the Inns of Court or the rectory at Winchelsea.

What makes the Beryn Prologue important here is that much of the text is taken up by a fabliau narrative involving the Pardoner: the prominence of this episode drove Urry, the first modern editor of the poem, to dub the entire piece ‘the mery adventure of the Pardonere and Tapstere’. After its opening review of the Canterbury Tales, which notes Chaucer’s inclusion of ‘myrthis’ amongst his ‘tales…of vertu’, the poem lets the Pardoner peel away from the other pilgrims and try to seduce Kitt, ‘tapstere’ of their lodgings. As might be imagined, this attempt ends in disaster. Kitt merely cheats the Pardoner out of his possessions, and catches him up in a running battle with her ‘paramour’ in the scullery of the Cheker, much like the priest in the earlier fabliau Aloul.
largely playful in nature, criticism has identified a darker undertow at work. As John Bowers has shown, there are numerous points in the text that seem to be responding to official clampdowns on Wycliffism in the early fifteenth century, such as Archbishop Arundel’s 
Constitutions and its secular counterpart De Haeretico Comburendo. Chief among these is a 
general celebration of authority, embodied particularly by the Knight and the Host who, as 
Bowers states, function as ‘the voice of order and harmony to which all members of the 
pilgrim-community give their immediate assent’. This also has clear religious connotations: 
at one point Bailly silences the Miller and Pardoner’s facetious comments at the cathedral, 
ordering them to ‘goth up and doth yeur offerynge’. Given that these comments include 
debating whether a stained glass of Adam digging represents a man with ‘a balstaff’, ‘a rakes 
ende’ or ‘a spere…with a prik tofore’, what Bailly is doing is in fact curbing vernacular 
religious interpretation of exactly the kind that was central to Lollardy’s ‘vernacular 
theology’. 

It is also possible to go further than this, and see further rebuttals of heresy in the Prologue. 
For instance, several critics have observed that the text transforms the Pardoner, turning him 
from an ‘effeminate male homosexual’ into ‘a randy, if silly, heterosexual’. Since, as 
Carolyn Dinshaw suggests, heresy in general and Wycliffism in particular were often 
associated with sodomy, this revision might also be a seen as the text suppressing any hint of 
unorthodoxy. In fact, the whole enterprise of continuing the frame narrative of the 
Canterbury Tales, and allowing the pilgrims to reach their destination, may be seen in the 
same light. One of the effects of this extension is to deprive the Parson’s Tale of its 
concluding place in Chaucer’s unfinished text. As Frances McCormack in particular has 
stressed, the Parson is one of Chaucer’s most problematic figures, rife with ‘implied 
heterodoxy’. Not only is he attached to the problematic term ‘lollere’ in the Man of Law’s 
Prologue, but his glowing portrait in the General Prologue seems at several points to be 
‘aligned…with the Lollard ideal’. With this in mind, the production of the Prologue can be 
seen as an attempt to play down the importance of this suspicious figure, dislodging his 
‘Lollard voice’ in favour of a display of orthodox devotion at the shrine of St Thomas. In 
effect, there are two clear concerns at work in the Beryn Prologue. It not only tries to steer 
away from heresy, but suggests some degree of anxiety around Chaucer as well, whose work, 
as Anne Hudson pointed out, was written in a period when ‘Wycliffite concerns coincided 
with the general interests of the time’ and would only later ‘divide the orthodox from the 
heretic’. What the text makes manifest is a desire to follow Chaucer’s example in
vernacular composition, but a concomitant sense that he needed to be purged of tendencies that had become more sensitive in the decades following his death, when Lollardy had been more fully defined and heretical.

These concerns and strategies also register in other fabliaux. For instance, How the Plowman lerned his Pater Noster, which survives in a printed edition of c.1510 by Wynkyn de Worde, also seems to be grounded in the tacit refutation of Lollardy. The story itself concerns a priest who sets out to educate a prosperous but stubbornly illiterate ploughman. He achieves this by sending forty ‘blere-eyed’ beggars to pick over his household, each of whom is named after a phrase from the Lord’s Prayer: for example ‘Panem’ and ‘Nostrum’ take ‘two bushelles of whete’, while ‘Sanctifetur, and Nomen Tuum’ help themselves to ‘a hole tunne’. When the ploughman comes to the priest for reimbursement, he is told to list the ‘poore people’ who fleeced him: after having ‘rehersed them on a rowe’, he finds that he can recite his Pater Noster. Even at first glance the text is clearly on the side of orthodoxy. With its wise if crafty priest and its adherence to Latin in matters of liturgy, with no translation or explanatory gloss, its treatment of religion is self-evidently conservative. Its orthodoxy is also clear from its catchetical designs, as it also offers the reader a mnemonic device by which they too may rote-learn the prayer. However, it gains added point from its choice of protagonist. The Ploughman himself is an extremely loaded figure in late medieval literature, having become increasingly radicalised during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as Hill and others have documented. In a number of texts he even functions openly as an apologist for Wycliffism, opposing the corruption of the church with his rustic honesty. In the Praier & Complaynte of the Ploweman unto Christe (c.1400), for instance, he argues in favour of such core Lollard concerns as lay preaching, lamenting that ‘yf a lewde man wolde tech thy people truth of thy words…he shalbe forboden & yput in prison’, while in Pierce the Plowman’s Crede (c.1393) he is a selfless educator who freely instructs the narrator as the official priesthood clamour for ‘money oþer…katell oþer corne’. Given the extent to which Ploughman figures had become absorbed into Lollard discourse, it is not difficult to see a parodic reversal of Wycliffite texts in How the Plowman. It not only satirises and humiliates its own peasant character, but makes him the ignorant party and the priest the benevolent teacher. The fabliau further resembles the Beryn Prologue in its evident desire to recuperate Chaucer. The text connects itself with Chaucer from the outset. Its opening account of the protagonist’s occupation recalls the idealised Ploughman of the Canterbury Tales, describing how he can ‘sowe and holde and plow./ Both dike, hedge, and milke a cow…a better labourer was never
born’. Since Chaucer’s ploughman pilgrim had also been drawn into heterodox polemic, as the fifteenth-century Ploughman’s Tale makes him voice support for ‘caytyffes…i-cleped lollers’, the fabliau might be directed at Chaucer at some level, evoking him to counter Wycliffite appropriation of his work.53

Similar concerns also filter into a further fabliau, the Tale of the Basyn. The Tale involves a leaching priest and unruly wife who have formed a suspiciously close alliance, and are busily cheating her husband ‘of howse and londe that was so fere’. The two receive their humiliation by means of a chamber-pot which clings to anyone who touches it, forcing them to run to their neighbours for help ‘all baly naked’, and carrying the pot of piss with them. What is interesting here is less the artefact itself, which is a fairly widespread folkloric device, but its appearance in the context of a fabliau.54 As Goodall has noted, genuine magic is relatively rare in the French texts.55 With a handful of exceptions, when the French texts touch on the supernatural, they generally treat it with scepticism: in Levy’s phrase, their references to magic come with ‘an only too–rational explanation’, being simply a means by which the naïve can be manipulated.56 Thus French texts feature fake ghosts, like the bacon-stealing peasant of Barat et Haimet, false miracles, such as the carved figure of Christ in L’Oue au Chapelain which supposedly eats a goose, and bogus spells, such as the ‘operation’ in La pucele qui voloit voler which is meant to turn a girl into a bird, but in fact leaves her pregnant.57 The intrusion of this eccentric element into the Tale of the Basyn seems to rest on similar motivations to the Beryn Prologue’s engagement with Chaucer. What is significant here is that a priest produces the necessary spell, a parson ‘knowen for a gode clerke’ who is brother to the wronged husband. The magic is therefore a direct result of the specialist knowledge of the clergy: the text in fact emphasises its esoteric nature by disclosing little about how the basin is enchanted, merely stating that the parson performs ‘a priue experiment’. The Tale therefore seems to be affirming the ability of ordained clerics to manipulate and control the supernatural. It is difficult not to see a further repudiation of heresy at work in this, as such powers were a central target for Lollard polemic. Although Lollard doctrine was highly variable, insistence that confession, the mass, even marriage, need not be performed by an ordained priest recurs throughout Wycliffite testimony: texts state that ‘may every trewe man and womman in Godis lawe make þe sacrament of the bred’, ‘confessioun made to prestis’ is ‘not nedful’, and ‘oonly consent of love betuxe man and woman is sufficiant for matrimonie’.58 Avoiding such a position seems to hover behind the Tale, with its portrayal of a priest whose powers are inaccessible to the laity, and are even
withheld from the reader. The provenance of the text makes it likely that this is deliberate. It occurs in a manuscript compiled in c.1465 by the Lichfield subdeacon Gilbert Pilkington, and may well have served as a ‘comic exemplum on the social dangers of sexual sin’, according to Wade.59

All of this permits the common critical assessment of the English fabliau, that it displays a greater degree of ‘orthodoxy’ than its French predecessor and ‘piously respects conventional standards’, to be deepened and extended.60 It would be naïve to assume that the fabliaux were responding directly to anti-Lollard legislation and simply testify to a climate of ‘repressive orthodoxy’, especially since recent assessments have shown that the effect of these statutes was more limited than once supposed.61 What the texts do highlight, however, is what it means to reassert orthodox morality in the fifteenth century, as the texts cannot simply voice their values without confronting challenges to them. The presence of heresy, and its close association with vernacular literature, means that it often appears to be an unspoken ghost-presence in the fabliaux, shaping their contents and structure as they attempt to deflect it. In sum, the texts serve as a reminder that trying to uphold orthodoxy in the fifteenth century involved engaging at some level with heretical strands within vernacular culture, even for a set of texts as playful and non-polemical as these. The fabliaux therefore offer proof of Ghosh’s observation that ‘the very shape of what emerged as “Lollardy”, as well as “orthodoxy”, was determined by…interplay between the two’.62

What makes this all the more remarkable is that the same tactics used by the texts to uphold religious conservatism also seem to have ensured their popularity after the Reformation. A case in point is their treatment of the clergy. At first glance, the handling of priestly characters in the English texts does seem to follow French precedent fairly closely, as they are often subjected to extreme physical violence. Thus Dane Hew involves a lecherous monk being beaten to death and his corpse subjected to repeated attacks as it is secretly conveyed around Leicester, while a priest in The Lady Prioress is made to leap from a window, breaking ‘fowle ys heed’ so that ‘the blod ran dowen to ys fett’.63 In The frere and the boye, the latter bewitches the former and forces him to dance in a thornbush until ‘the breres scratched hym in the face…that the blode brast oute’.64 In The Friar Well-Fitted, which survives in a late seventeenth-century broadside but was in circulation much earlier, as allusions by Middleton, Dekker and Skelton attest, a ‘bonny lass’ pitches a mendicant into a well and leaves him ‘dropping wet like a new wash’d sheep’.65 Such hostility to priests is
also common in the French fabliaux, as ‘violent death’ is the means by which ‘clergy usually
meet their downfall’ in the texts. Thus a priest is castrated with a chisel in Du Prestre

From the given text, it appears to be discussing the common themes in French fabliaux and how they are reflected in English texts. The text highlights the aggressive anti-clericalism present in the French tradition and the peculiar inflection it gains in the English texts. It discusses the ways in which priests are depicted as trespassing into the territories of the laity, damaging private property or the integrity of the family, and the consequences of their actions. The text also points out the use of the 'feigned friar' motif in English fabliaux, where a layman masquerades as a mendicant to warn against impostures and the consequences of such actions.
confession, only to be rewarded with a series of disturbing revelations: his wife discloses that
she has ‘made a box of poyson strong’ to kill him, repeatedly cuckolded him, and only given
birth to one son that is legitimately his, the youngest and ugliest. Just as the other fabliaux
punish priests for crossing the division between church and laity, so these texts punish
laymen for violating the same boundary in the other direction. In either case, the texts are
clearly concerned with maintaining the distinction between the two groups. Once again, all
this seems to be a response to the demands of orthodoxy in the fifteenth and early sixteenth
centuries. There is a clear convergence here between the texts and anti-heresy legislation,
which often sought to reinforce the same boundary: Arundel’s third constitution, for instance,
draws firm limits around the material permissible for each group, stating that the ‘vices’ of
priests can only be addressed before an audience of priests, and the ‘sins’ of laymen before
the laity, ‘and not the other way around’. In fact there were clear strands in both Wycliffism
and Protestantism that challenged this division, such as Wyclif’s theory of dominion and
Luther’s doctrine of universal priesthood. It is this sense that ‘theology...must be kept where
it belonged’ that probably underpins the behaviour of the fabliaux.

Although the fabliaux’ treatment of the priesthood is therefore deeply conservative by late
medieval standards, it does not seem to have been held in the same light after the
Reformation. While the texts were probably trying to buttress the frontier between priesthood
and public, their content seems to have been re-evaluated as general anticlericalism by
sixteenth-century readers. The list of texts that were printed in the modern period speaks for
itself: The Frere and the boye, More’s Gest of a Sergeaunt, Dane Hewe, Queen Elenor’s
Confession and The Vnluckie Firmentie were all either composed after the Reformation or re-
issued then, while more obviously pro-ecclesiastic texts, such as the Tale of the Basyn or
How the Plowman disappear from circulation. In fact, early printed editions of the texts tend
to foreground their assaults on the clergy. The frontispieces of Dane Hew and most versions
of the Frere and the boye display woodcuts proudly depicting the injuries received by their
priest characters. Like other instances of using comic texts for such ends, such as George
Elde’s edition of the jest-book Merry Iests, Concerning Popes, Monkes and Friers, the
fabliaux were evidently promoted as testaments to the venality of the Catholic clergy as much
as entertainments, becoming co-opted as ‘Protestant propaganda’.

However, the absorption of the fabliaux into sixteenth-century culture does not seem to have
been entirely unproblematic. Several modern writers found them unacceptably medieval in
content. Thus the Leicestershire curate Arthur Dent singles out ‘The merry Iest of the Frier and the Boy’ and ‘the pretie conceit of John Splinters last Will and Testament’ as ‘vaine & friuolous books of tales, iests, and lies’ that distract from the truth of scripture, while Barnabe Rich draws parallels between fabliaux and pro-Catholic pamphlets, seeing both as equal in their ‘doctrine’ and ‘authoritie’ amongst ‘children and fooles’. There is then a sense that the fabliaux are irreducibly Catholic in their sympathies, and present a particular hazard to uninformed readers, as their fanciful narratives suspiciously recall medieval belief in the miraculous. It is perhaps in response to such concerns that other writers were driven to defend the fabliaux. One case for them is put forward by the play Sir John Oldcastle, written by Anthony Munday in 1599 in collaboration with Drayton, Hathway and Wilson. The play itself is clearly an attempt to claim a medieval basis for contemporary religious ideologies, as it turns the historical Oldcastle into a proto-Protestant martyr, probably in response to Shakespeare’s rollicking depiction of him as Falstaff. At one point its title-character’s library is seized by the Bishop of Rochester, who is horrified to discover ‘the Bible, the Testament, the Psalms…all in English’ in his possession. When the Bishop orders them burned, Oldcastle’s servant Harpoole interjects, stating ‘I have there English books, my lord, that I’ll not part with for your bishopric’ and listing ‘The Friar and the Boy’ among these ‘godly stories’. While this may be a jibe at popular tastes, as Harpoole’s concern does not extend to the more edifying works held by his master, it also serves to corroborate the value of the fabliaux. It affiliates them with works thought to anticipate the Reformation, placing them in the same company as Wycliffite biblical translations. As Matthews writes, in a scene which draws a stark ‘opposition between Latinity and the vernacular’, even these texts gain a radical value, standing outside and against ‘the devious Church’. Overall, the fabliaux’ absorption into early modern culture was not complete or trouble-free. They seem to have invited the same ambivalence that Tiffany Jo Werth detects in early modern responses to romance, provoking suspicion about their implicit Catholicism alongside a desire to retain them as ‘an unlikely resource in the project of reform’.

In conclusion, as this article has hopefully demonstrated, the English fabliaux offer scope for further research and discussion. Identifying them as ‘more orthodox’ than the French tradition need not be the end of analysis: since they were being written and circulated when this label was under scrutiny and re-negotiation, this only opens up further questions. But perhaps more significantly, the persistence of the genre into the modern period makes them even more interesting. The very longevity of these texts, which are not only medieval
productions but look defiantly back to a medieval form, blurs the conventional distinction between medieval and modern, as they carried equal appeal either side of the divide. In effect, focusing on such pieces raises the same sorts of questions found in recent reassessments of the idea of modernity: reading the texts cannot help but echo Simpson’s invitation to ‘traverse the medieval/early modern boundary’ in order to challenge the ‘binary, revolutionary logic that underlies the very notion of periodisation’. In short, the texts raise profound questions about the period in which they circulated, producing a more complex engagement with their culture than their comic and derivative nature would suggest.

* Add stuff about David Lawton – engagement with term conservative; add John Bowers – Chaucer and Langland: the Antagonistic Tradition; Seth Lerer and Paul Strohm?

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20 Luciano Rossi and Richard Straub (eds.), Fabliaux erotiques: Textes de jongleurs des XIIe et XIIIe siècles (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1992), pp.297-343; NRCF 2.1-26; Hazlitt, Popular Poetry, 4.179-226; A Merry Jest of an Old Fool With A Young Wife (London: Peter Treveris, n.d.) (STC 14520.5). A wife that threst her husband with a fflealle appears in the Stationer’s Register in 1587, when it was licensed to Thomas Scarlett (SR 2.262v), and is preserved in part in a manuscript of Sir Robert Cotton: see C.J. Wright, Sir Robert Cotton as Collector: Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and his Legacy (London: British Library, 1997), p.360.

21 A ryght pleasaunt and merye historie, of the mylner of Abyngton, with his wife, and his fayre daughter: and of two poore scholers of Cambridge Wherevnto is adioyned another merye lest, of a sargeaunt that woulde have learned to be a fryar (London: J. Charlewood, n.d.), f.1 (STC 79).


30 Furrow, ‘Middle English Fabliaux’, 13.

31 NRCF 6.207-58 (217).


41 NRCF 3.1-44.
43 Bowers, Canterbury Tales: Continuations, p.3.


Levy, The Comic Text, p.177


Hines, Fabliau in English, p.208.


Ibid., pp.95-156.


Alison Williams, Tricksters and Pranksters: Roguery in French and German Literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2000), p.51.


The statute reads: ‘Quod praedicator conformet se auditorio, aliter puniatur...clero praesertim praedicans de vitiis pullulantibus inter eos, et laicos de peccatis inter eos communitier usitatiss, et non e contra; alioquin sic praedicans secundum qualitatem delicti, per loci ordinarium canonice et acriter puniatur’ (‘That a preacher should conform in his speech, or be punished...when preaching to clerics, all will specifically preach of the faults which spring forth among them, and when preaching to laymen, of the sins they commonly commit, and not the other way around; if anyone goes beyond this dictate in preaching, he will sharply punished by the canon of that place’): David Wilkins (ed), *Consiliae Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, 3 vols (London: Sumptibus Gosling, 1737), 3.314-15.


