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“To Late for to Crie”: Female Desire, Fabliau Politics, and Classical Legend in Chaucer’s Reeve’s Tale

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This article proposes that Chaucer’s Reeve’s Tale is a fusion of classical legend plot with fabliau setting and characters. This fusion helps Chaucer push the fabliau beyond its own limits, allowing the Reeve’s Tale to reveal late medieval culture’s conflicting attitudes towards female desire and masculine control and thus to interrogate more fully the gender politics of the Knight’s classical romance. The article argues that because the Reeve’s Tale revises many of the traditional features of medieval obscene discourse — features that the Miller’s Tale embodies — it is a crucial part of Chaucer’s meditation on issues of gender and genre in Fragment One.

KEYWORDS Ariadne, Chaucer, classical legend, fabliau, rape

In the climactic episode of Chaucer’s Reeve’s Tale, the clerk Aleyn, angry over Symkyn the miller’s theft of Cambridge grain, heads towards the bed of Symkyn’s daughter in search of “esement” (l.4179).1 The passage describing Aleyn’s approach is highly suggestive of rape:

And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte.
This wenche lay uprighete and faste slepte
Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,
That it had been to late for to crie,
And shortly for to seyn, they were aton. l.4193–7

The couple’s conversation the next morning, however, is all sweetness and light. Aleyn departs at dawn in a manner that evokes the courtly aube, calling Malyne “sweete wight” and vowing to be “thyn awen clerk” (l.4236; 4239). Malyne responds in kind, addressing Aleyn as “deere lemman” (l.4240) and revealing to him the location of a cake baked from the flour Symkyn had stolen from the two young clerks.
the previous day. Her revelation clinches her father’s defeat: the two clerks scoop up the cake before escaping from the mill, leaving Symkyn beaten, cuckolded, and humiliated.

The combination of disturbing brutality and comic high jinks that we see here and elsewhere in the Reeve’s Tale has presented a perennial challenge to scholars. Although the tale’s milieu and characters suggest comical fabliau trickery, it depicts extremes of brutality, desperation, and social anxiety that are unusual in the genre. As a result, critics have tended to dismiss the tale as a vengeful narrative by a bitter old man that signifies the decline of morality or political resistance (Muscatine, 204; Patterson, 276). In an evaluation that typifies decades of critical reactions to the tale, V. A. Kolve concludes that the Reeve “exhibits a fierce insight into human behavior, but it is a perception without purpose or future; it is not on the side of life” (255).²

What has remained notably absent from most critical treatments of the Reeve’s Tale is an attempt to determine why Chaucer would have given this tale a place of honor as the third entry in the Canterbury contest and why he would have taken such obvious pains in writing it (almost everyone agrees that the tale is technically brilliant) if his sole intent was to signify decline. I wish to propose that the Reeve’s Tale is much more important to our understanding of Fragment One than scholars have heretofore understood. If the tale’s significance has thus far been overlooked, it is because its most brilliant commentary is bound up with issues of gender whose pertinence to Fragment One has only recently been recognized.³ More than either of its forerunners in the first fragment, the Reeve’s Tale confronts the paradoxical status of women’s desire in late-fourteenth-century English society, where Christian doctrine granting women’s right of consent in matters of marriage and sex runs up against a lineage-based social system that renders women both the objects and the vessels of male power. Although rape and the erotic rebellion of a daughter may at first glance appear to be diametrically opposed events, they are unified by their common concern with women’s exercise of free will.

Both events form a trenchant critique of the Knight’s gender ideology. While the Knight’s obedient Emelye bypasses the problem of feminine desire by wanting everything that Theseus wants, the rebellious Malyne forces us to ask where masculine authority over women begins and ends. And while Theseus’ defense of the Argive widows expresses the chivalric belief that force in the right hands will always protect women, the assaults on Malyne and her mother expose how women are victimized by a patriarchal culture that accords high status to men who dominate through violence. Moreover, the connections Chaucer makes between the Reeve’s Tale women and male servants of the aristocracy suggest that his interest in women is also a metaphor for the plight of others who are subject to violent and powerful men.⁴

If the Reeve’s Tale is about gender politics and sexual violence, it is also very profoundly about the fabliau and the tradition of obscene comic discourse to which it belongs. Crucial to the tale’s ability to undercut the Knight’s aristocratic ideology are its significant divergences from fabliau convention.
debts to the fabliau, many of its events and characters are unusual in the Old French genre. One of the most fascinating features of the Reeve’s Tale — which has gone entirely unnoticed in previous criticism — is its extensive use of classical legend tropes. The tale’s suggestion of rape, its depiction of an all-consuming masculine competition for territorial control, and its betraying daughter, are far more characteristic of classical legend than they are of fabliau. In particular, the Reeve’s betraying Malyne gives the tale a close resemblance to the Ariadne legend, a narrative significant for its account of Theseus’ youthful shortcomings.

The success of the Reeve’s fabliau–classical legend fusion in posing hard questions of the Knight exposes the limitations of the Miller’s Tale and of obscene comic discourse in general. It reveals that in spite of the Miller’s claim regarding the ability of “harlotrie” (1.3184) to “quite” the Knight’s Tale, obscene comic discourse is actually quite limited in its capacity to interrogate the central assumptions about gender, violence, and masculine authority that structure the Knight’s classical romance.

The Reeve’s Tale’s interest in tracing the construction of gender across various discourses makes it a key text for feminist studies of Middle English and of Chaucer. Feminist scholarship on Fragment One has noted the similarity between the gender ideology of the Knight’s Tale and the Miller’s Tale (Lochrie; Hansen), but it has yet to consider the insights that Chaucer himself provides in Fragment One’s third tale. Nor have feminist scholars of Middle English fully come to terms with the gender politics of obscene comic discourse, in spite of obscene comedy’s prevalence in late medieval English texts and its famous (or infamous) construction of the unruly woman.5 Crucial to our understanding of obscenity in Middle English texts is the insight cultural studies has provided on the intimate connection between culture and social relations of power (Johnson, 76). When we place obscene discourse in the context of social power relations in the Middle Ages, we realize that it does not have the anti-authoritarian associations in medieval society that it often has in the modern West, an important difference that has gone largely unnoticed in Chaucer studies and that has, as a result, hampered our ability to understand Chaucer’s important critique of obscene comic discourse in Fragment One.

The daughter’s rebellion: using Ariadne to “quite” the Knight and the Miller

The Reeve’s Tale is remarkable for having a large number of Continental analogues — including Boccaccio’s Decameron 9.6, and two German versions, Das Studentenbenteuer (“The Students’ Adventure”) and Irregang und Girregar (“Waywardwight and Lustymite”; Benson and Andersson, 116–22). Its closest analogues are two erotic fabliaux: Gombert et les deus clers (4.296; “Gombert and the Two Clerks”) and Le Meunier et les deus clers (7.89; “The Miller and the Two Clerks”).6 Famous as narratives of sexual license and trickery, the erotic fabliaux often portray a love triangle involving a husband, his wife, and her lover. As the wife and her lover engage
in feats of wit and daring in order to sleep together, the husband battles to preserve control over his household. Often, the husband suffers a humiliating defeat at the hands of the lovers, particularly if he is jealous or controlling.7

At first glance, the Reeve’s Tale seems to adhere closely to fabliau tropes. Symkyn is violent and jealous, he is cuckolded, and he suffers a humiliating defeat at the hands of the women and the clerks. But in the betrayal, the Reeve’s Tale and the erotic fabliau diverge. Symkyn’s defeat occurs at the hands of his daughter, rather than his wife, a shift that is not in the analogues and that is highly unusual in the fabliau generally. Obsessed with the power dynamics of the marital relationship, the fabliau is rarely interested in inter-generational conflict. My own survey shows that none of the approximately 150 extant fabliaux feature a daughter who betrays her father in the manner of Chaucer’s Malyne. Nor does any fabliau explicitly characterize the daughter’s sexual escapades as a violation of her father’s ambitions for a socially advantageous marriage in the way that Chaucer does when he invests the Symkyn family with aristocratic pretensions and a hope that Malyne will marry up the social ladder “into som worthy blood of auncestyre” (1.3982).

If daughterly betrayal is rare in the fabliau, it is a common theme in classical legend, appearing in a variety of tales, many of which seem to have held a particular interest for Chaucer. Four out of the nine classical narratives in the Legend of Good Women — those of Thisbe, Medea, Hypermmestra, and Ariadne — focus on daughters who betray their fathers. In particular, the Reeve’s Tale bears a close resemblance to the Ariadne. Like Minos, who takes Athens, Chaucer’s Symkyn has been victorious in depriving other men of property. Like Theseus, the clerks arrive in the victor’s domain as representatives of those he has thwarted. And, also like Theseus, the clerks win back their lost property through an erotic relationship with the victor’s daughter that prompts her to betray her father. The tale’s final, climactic scenes (the frenzied battle in the darkened bedroom, the unexpected aid from the women, and the clerks’ escape into the dawn) ludicrously replay Theseus’ alliance with Ariadne and Phaedra, his battle with the Minotaur, and his subsequent flight from Crete.

By writing a fabliau featuring the betrayal of a daughter, rather than a wife, the Reeve interrogates assumptions about men’s right to direct women’s desires, a right that the Knight and the Miller uncritically accept. Although the Knight and the Miller may appear to tell narratives driven by diametrically opposed theories of gender, both tales ultimately support the right of husbands and fathers to control women’s desires (Lochrie, 303; Hansen, 209). The Knight’s Tale presents us with the ducile Emelye, who capitulates entirely to Theseus’ will (notwithstanding some quibbling in the Temple of Diana). The Miller opposes the Knight’s paragon of feminine virtue with the adulterous Alison. But Alison does little to interrogate the Knight’s celebration of patriarchal authority. John may be stupid, but his attempts to control Alison’s sexuality are legitimate according to any medieval theory of gender relations.

The erotic rebellion of the Reeve’s Malyne, on the other hand, occurs at a moment of conflict between medieval secular and ecclesiastical convictions regarding the
limits of masculine authority in the family. Secular culture tends to advocate a father’s right to direct his daughter’s erotic desires by choosing her husband. But ecclesiastical jurists and Church leaders advocate the doctrine that both men and women should exercise free will in their choice of marriage partner. Gratian’s declaration in the Decretals, “ubi non est consensus utriusque, non est coniugium,” sets Church policy (Secunda pars, causa 30, quaestio 2; “where they each do not consent, there is no marriage”). From the twelfth century onward, in England and elsewhere, Church courts uphold the principle of free consent by dissolving marriages found to be arranged through fear or force and by forbidding families from forcing marriage partners on children or wards.

The problem of rebellious daughters has particular pertinence to later medieval England. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, English jurists introduce a number of statutes concerning rape and abduction that are aimed at giving families greater control over the romantic choices of young women. Westminster II (1285) includes legislation aimed at closing a legal loophole that allowed young women to marry men of whom their families did not approve. Older statutes descended from Germanic law permitted a victim to marry her ravisher if she wished. The frequency with which such a measure was employed as a remedy in rape cases in post-conquest England strongly suggests that some young women were exploiting these laws by colluding in their own “abductions” as a way of publicly announcing a sexual relationship and thereby coercing reluctant families into accepting an unpopular marriage choice. Westminster II closes this loophole by allowing juries to charge the rapist, even if the woman herself consents to the ravishment after the fact. Thus, the family of the ravished woman does not have to depend on her to seek the indictment but can seek it themselves, a particularly useful right in cases where victim and ravisher are in collusion (Bellamy, 167; Post, “Ravishment of Women,” 158).

A century later, the Statute of Rapes (1382) gives even greater privileges to women’s families by allowing them to charge the ravisher with rape directly and to disinherit women from their dowers if they consent to rape after the fact, asserting that women who “post huiusmodi raptum huiusmodi raptoribus consenserint . . . decetero inhahiletuntur et inhahiles sint ipso facto ad omne hereditatem dotem alii facto ad omne hereditatem dotem sive conjunctum feoffamentum post mortem virorum et antecessorum suorum habendum vel vendicandum” (Statutes, 2.27; “after such rape do consent to such ravishers . . . be from thenceforth disabled, and by the same Deed be unable to have or challenge all Inheritance, Dower, or Joint Feoffment after the death of their husbands and ancestors”). The cumulative effect of these statutes is to remove a woman’s power to make her own choices and to hand this power over to her male relatives or guardians.

While the Symkyn family’s peasant status would seem to set them apart from the concerns of English elites, Chaucer’s use of an aristocratic vocabulary of marriage, inheritance, and alliance invites us to read the tale in precisely this context. Symkyn — proud that his wife is “yme of noble kyn” (1.3942) — is fiercely protective of Malyne’s “lynage” (1.4272). Of particular interest is Symkyn’s use of the verb
“disparage” (1.4271) after learning of Aleyn’s night with Malyne (“Who dorste be so boold to disparage / My doghtre, that is come of swich lynage?”; 1.4271–2). Although Symkyn is responding to Aleyn’s “swyving” of his daughter, the term is noteworthy because it is often used in Middle English to denote the social degradation of marrying below one’s rank, a top concern for the authors of the 1382 Statute.10

To a late-fourteenth-century audience undoubtedly familiar with the conflicts between ecclesiastical and secular valuations of women’s free will, Malyne’s betrayal of her father calls attention to the fact that men’s right to control their female relatives is not as unassailable as the tales of the Knight and the Miller assume. Malyne may appear in the guise of an unruly fabliau wench but she is much more difficult to condemn than the adulterous Alison because her betrayal of masculine authority occurs at a life stage when the Church advocates giving women’s desire free play. Malyne’s rebellion emphasizes that masculine command over women is not natural or preordained but is a culturally determined concept subject to revision and debate.

Rape and the Reeve’s Tale

One of the most remarkable differences between the Reeve’s Tale and all of its continental analogues is Chaucer’s refusal to provide clear evidence that Malyne consents to coitus with Aleyn. All of the Continental tales feature a willing maiden. In the two French analogues, the clerk seduces the daughter with a series of courtly love declarations and offers her a magical piece of jewelry, which he claims will maintain the wearer’s virginity no matter how many times she has intercourse. The young lady accepts the ring and the two spend a night of mutual enjoyment. In the Reeve’s Tale, Chaucer removes all mention of courtly seduction or valuable jewelry and replaces it with a scene that strongly suggests rape.

Nevertheless, few scholars have considered what the rape of Malyne might mean.11 A surprising (one might even say alarming) number of critics have failed even to recognize the suggestion of rape in the passage.12 The few scholars who do acknowledge the scene’s brutality have, at the same time, dismissed the notion that Chaucer intends it to be read seriously, pointing to Malyne’s apparent consent after the fact — symbolized by her loving words to Aleyn at dawn — as evidence that the scene is simply a reflection of the misogynist principle (common to a number of fabliaux) that women always desire sex, even when it is forced upon them.13

In fact, the sexual encounter between Aleyn and Malyne is very much at odds with the fabliau, both in its brutality and in the illogical behavior of Malyne. The violence suggested in Chaucer’s description of the episode diverges from fabliau representations of rape, which tend to soft-pedal sexual assault as a comical matter, devoid of sorrow and pain. If we examine Aleyn’s assault on Malyne in the context both of the fabliau and of attitudes to rape in other medieval discourses, we can see it bears a much closer resemblance to classical representations of rape than it does to medieval ones.
While the notion that women enjoy rape is certainly in circulation in the Middle Ages, it is not the only view of rape that the period has to offer. Diane Wolfthal’s study of rape imagery in medieval and Renaissance art demonstrates that medieval attitudes to rape vary dramatically according to a variety of different discourses, each producing its own reading of sexual violence (181). Censure of rape is particularly common in Christian discourse, due to the canon law’s emphasis on the importance of individual will. In spite of its rather narrow and idiosyncratic definition of the crime, canon law recognizes rape as an act of violence against women and classifies it as an *enormis delicta* (“great crime”). Gratian distinguishes rape as a crime more serious than any other kind of illicit coitus (Brundage, “Rape and Marriage,” 67). The English theologian and canonist Thomas of Cobham describes rape as “a detestable crime, according to both divine and secular law” (quoted in Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, 396). Condemnations of rape are also prevalent in Christian texts and imagery. Wolfthal’s survey of picture bibles produced through the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries reveals that they often show rape as a terrible act of violence that causes pain and sorrow to women (36). Both canon and secular statutes rendered the crime punishable by death.

Perhaps because powerful elements of medieval culture condemn rape so strongly, there are very few representations of violent rape in literature native to the Middle Ages. While many medieval fictions refer to rape, most avoid explicit depictions of the crime. Corinne Saunders has noted that two of the period’s most popular genres — chivalric romance and saints’ lives — repeatedly invoke the specter of rape only to defer it: “Abductions occur, rape and enforced marriage are threatened, but the woman’s honor is almost invariably upheld” (187).14

In spite of the fabliau’s reputation for misogyny, relatively few tales are concerned with rape. Those fabliaux that do depict non-consensual sex characterize it as a matter of humorous trickery. In the fabliau *Cele qui fu foutue et desfoutue* (“She who was fucked and de-fucked”), a silly young woman is tricked into coitus by a young man who tells her he will sell her his crane for “i. foutre” (“a fuck,” 4.151). Ignorant of the word’s meaning, she admits to being without a fuck, whereupon the young man volunteers to search for it under her dress. In the fabliau *La Damoiselle qui songoit* (“The Young Girl Who Dreamed”), a young man assails a maiden while she is asleep, as Aleyn does to Malyne in the *Reeve’s Tale* (4.45). In *La Damoiselle*, however, rape is a non-traumatic occurrence that quickly becomes a comic game of one-upmanship. The young woman has a pleasant sexual dream as the young man has intercourse with her four times. When she awakens, she excoriates him for taking her virginity but also demands more of the same, a task that the exhausted rapist finds difficult to repeat.

In the *Reeve’s Tale*, the fabliau soft-pedaling of rape is disrupted when Chaucer draws our attention to the possibility of violence at the very moment he should be ignoring it, according to fabliau convention. There is a strong suggestion of violence in the Reeve’s remark that Aleyn approaches so stealthily that “he so ny was, er she myghte espie, / That it had been to late for to crie” (1.4195–6). The passage’s
reference to crying out is particularly noteworthy, given that a woman’s outcry is one of the tests used by canon law to identify a sex act as rape (Brundage, “Rape and Seduction,” 143). Certainly, the remark in the Reeve’s Tale is ambiguous (Malyne does not cry out, and perhaps she never would have), but Chaucer deliberately keeps the suggestion of violence alive by having the Reeve assert that it was too late to cry out, thereby preventing us from assuming that Malyne consents. Further suggestions of Malyne’s lack of consent can be found in the passive image called up by Reeve’s description of Malyne, lying flat — “uprighte” (1.4194) — and by Aleyn’s later boast of having “swyved” the miller’s daughter “bolt uprighte” (1.4266).

The rape of Malyne is reminiscent of a number of scenarios in classical and pseudo-classical literature, several of which would have been well known to Chaucer’s audience from the Latin texts that formed the core of the medieval schoolboy’s curriculum. These include Achilles’ rape of Deidamia in Statius’ Achilleid, a number of passages in Ovid’s Ars amatoria, and the pseudo-classical twelfth-century Pamphilus (M. Woods). All of the poems include episodes that are frankly rendered as violent rapes. Their similarities to the Malyne–Aleyn coitus are notable. In the Achilleid, Achilles, disguised as a maiden, shares a bedroom with the beautiful Deidamia, the daughter of his host, King Lycodemes. Achilles, overcome with lust, eventually rapes Deidamia. In spite of this, Deidamia falls in love with the hero and weeps at his departure. The passage narrating Achilles’ rape of Deidamia leaves us in no doubt as to its brutality:

... et densa noctis gavisus in umbra
tempestiva suis torpere silentia furtis
vi potitur votis et toto pectore veros
admovet amplexus; vidit chorus ominis ab alto
astrorum et tenerae rubuerunt cornua Lunae.
illa quidem clamore nemus montemque replevit. Achilleid, 1.640–5

And happy that in the night’s thick darkness timely silence lies inert upon his dalliance, he gains his desire by force, launching veritable embraces, with all his heart. All the choir of stars saw it from on high and the young Moon’s horns blushed red. The girl filled wood and mountain with her cries. 3.361

In a passage in the Ars amatoria advocating rape as a seduction gambit, Ovid describes the rape of Deidamia in similar terms:

Forté erat in thalamo virgo regalis eodem;
Haec illum stupro comperit esse virum.
Viribus illa quidem victa est, ita credere oportet:
Sed voluit vinci viribus illa tamen.
Saepe “manet” dixit, cum iam properaret Achilles;
Fortia nam posito sumpserat arma colo.

It chanced that in the same chamber was the royal maid; by her rape she found him to be a man. By force indeed was she vanquished, so one must believe; yet by force did she
Malyne’s actions the next morning may seem to suggest that Chaucer agrees with Ovid regarding women’s enjoyment of sexual violence, but in fact, her behavior is so odd and illogical that it only accentuates the disturbing elements of the preceding scene. If Chaucer had indeed wished to illustrate the misogynist belief that women like rape, he would have provided us with a reasonable explanation for Malyne’s loving behavior, much in the same way that the author of La Damoselle qui songoit is careful to detail the maiden’s enjoyment of the assault. If he had wished to denigrate Malyne’s character, he could have characterized her as the stupid maiden of the tale’s fabliau analogues, who believes the clerk’s ludicrous story of the magic ring. But Chaucer does neither, choosing instead to make Malyne as obscure as possible (see also Kohanski, 228–38). Why Malyne speaks romantically to the clerk and why she betrays her father for him remains a mystery since Malyne’s eight-line aube is her only speech in the entire 400-line tale, and Chaucer gives us no additional insight into her motivations. This absence is quite amazing considering the attention Chaucer lavishes on the thoughts of the tale’s male characters. Even in terms of classical legend, Chaucer’s refusal to provide us with an explanation for Malyne’s behavior is unique: Ovid is careful to tell us that Deidamia wished (“voluit”) to be vanquished (700); Statius informs us that Deidamia keeps the rape a secret because she fears her father will punish Achilles with death (665–7); and Pamphilus de amore is famous for Galathea’s long speeches accentuating the pain of rape (Schotter). Chaucer’s refusal to explain Malyne is so deliberate that we must attribute it to some important cause. As I shall discuss in more detail presently, Malyne’s obscurity is tied to Chaucer’s concern over the sincerity of speech when it is articulated by subordinates to those who have power over them, as well as his interest in using women’s subjection as a metaphor for that of subordinate men.

Intimations of rape can also be found in the scene between Malyne’s mother and the second clerk, John. As he does in the Malyne–Aleyn episode, Chaucer accentuates the violence of the clerk’s assault on the mother to a much greater degree than the analogues. While the analogues characterize the mother as innately devious and lascivious (Gombert refers to the mother throughout as “Dame Guile”), the mother of the Reeve’s Tale is quite anxious to avoid the clerks. As she stumbles upon what she believes to be the clerks’ bed, the mother quickly corrects herself, exclaiming “Ey benedicte! Thanne hadde I foul yspede!” (1.4220). The Reeve later seems to suggest that the mother enjoys the coitus (“So myrie a fi t ne hadde she nat ful yoore,” 1.4230), but his description of John simultaneously implies that she undergoes a violent physical assault (“He priketh harde and depe as he were mad,” 1.4231). Canon law’s requirement that the victim be a virgin means that the assault on Malyne’s mother would not legally be classified as rape. Once again, however, we must remember the influence of classical literature on Chaucer’s audience, a tradition in which assaults on married women like Lucretia are unambiguously classified as rape. Indeed, John’s remark that “Unhardy is unseely” (1.4210) before he assaults Malyne’s mother is very
similar to Tarquinus’ proverbial observation in the *Legend of Good Women* as he vows to assault Lucretia: “Hap helpeth hardy man alday” (1773).

In both the rape of Malyne and that of her mother, the *Reeve’s Tale*’s classical representation of sexual brutality eliminates the obfuscations that render fabliau rapes comic and enjoyable. This alteration to fabliau convention has the effect of forcing Chaucer’s audience to confront contradictions in their culture’s valuation of female free will by highlighting the conflict between the fabliau’s light-hearted treatment of rape and those discourses in medieval culture that strongly condemn it as a serious crime.

**Women and martial violence: exposing the contradictions of the *Knight’s Tale***

The rapes of Malyne and her mother form the linchpin for a larger project in the *Reeve’s Tale* aimed at showing the destruction that results when men pursue a martial ethic in which a man’s social status is determined by the extent to which he can dominate other men in public displays of aggression. This facet of the *Reeve’s Tale* picks up on the struggle that a number of scholars have noted between the Knight’s optimistic view of chivalric heroism and the violent and destructive forces unleashed by the martial culture he promotes. Key to Chaucer’s project in this regard are his significant alterations to fabliau structures of masculine motivation. Here, once again, the *Reeve’s Tale*’s fusion of classical legend and fabliau is at the heart of its critique. By replacing the traditional erotic motivations of fabliau men with classical-legend-style contests over territory and social status, Chaucer exposes the destructive aspects of martial culture that the Knight suppresses in his tale.

In the *Reeve’s Tale*’s Continental analogues, as in the vast majority of erotic fabliaux, the clerks are motivated solely by sexual desire. Their intercourse with the miller’s wife and daughter does not have any purpose beyond the satisfaction of a sexual craving. This is true even of *Le Meunier*, the single analogue that shares the *Reeve’s Tale*’s theft motif. The patriarch of the fabliau analogues, meanwhile, has no social ambitions. Thus, the central conflict in the two tales — as in most erotic fabliaux — is between uncontrolled sexual impulses (represented by the women and their lovers) and a patriarchal authority (represented by the husband) that seeks to uphold the status quo. These narratives identify women and their sexuality as the prime causes of social disorder and imply that a husband can only maintain his own authority by asserting forceful control over his wife.15 The narrator’s evaluation of the miller in *Gombert et les deux clers* sums up a principle common to many fabliaux: “Or a Gombert bone mesnie, / Mout le mainent de male pile” (116–17; “Gombert had a good household, / but he ran it with a weak stick,” Benson and Andersson, 95).

The motivations of Chaucer’s men are very different, and that difference is clearly important to Chaucer, who expends many lines describing their ambitions. From these passages, we learn that all three men are motivated by an anxiety over their own social standing. Symkyn is a social climber jealous of the intellectual’s higher
status and anxious to prove the superiority of his own canny abilities over the clerks’ “lerned art” (1.4122–4). The clerks, meanwhile, are junior members of Cambridge who are terribly worried that a defeat at Symkyn’s hands will subject them “til hethyng and til scorn” before the Soler Hall community (1.4110). Rather than exhibiting the traditional fabliau contest between sexual desire and patriarchal order, the Reeve’s Tale’s men operate according to an ethic that has historically been identified with martial cultures, in both Ancient Greece and medieval Europe, according to which men gain honor amongst other men from publicly dominating others and are shamed by public defeats. Their conflict is a battle performed for other men.

The obsession of the Reeve’s Tale’s men with reputation, and their desperate struggle for power, returns us to contradictions within the chivalric ethic that the Knight refuses to acknowledge. Chaucer’s interest in having us read the Reeve’s Tale against the tale of the Knight is already evident in a number of plot parallels: Symkyn’s position as a patriarch in charge of a wife and a young, unmarried woman echoes the Theseus–Hippolyta–Emelye triad, and the two clerks’ entry into Symkyn’s rural kingdom reminds us of Palamon and Arcite’s relationship to Theseus (Hansen, 240–2). However, the Reeve’s Tale’s interrogation of the Knight is far more extensive than the simple rank-based spoof suggested by these similarities. By exposing the foolishness of the chivalric ethic of honor, and the destruction that ensues from it, Chaucer reawakens the critique of martial culture that appears in the classical source of the Knight’s Tale but is suppressed in both the Knight’s version and Chaucer’s immediate source for the Knight’s Tale, Boccaccio’s Teseida.

The germ of Boccaccio’s Teseida and, in turn, the Knight’s Tale is to be found in Theseus’ war on Creon in the twelfth book of Statius’ Thebaid. The Thebaid — which narrates the fratricidal contest over Thebes between Oedipus’ sons, Eteocles and Polyneices — confronts paternal tyranny, fraternal rivalry, and the destructive tendencies of a martial culture where men are bent on the pursuit of power over one another. In Book 1 of the Thebaid, the narrator condemns the Theban brothers for engaging in a mindless competition that sacrifices social good for pathetically small rewards:

\[... sed nuda potestas armavit fratres, pugna est de paupere regno. dumque uter angustae squalentia iugera Dirces verteret aut Tyrii solio non altus ovaret exsulis ambigitur, perit ius fasque bonumque et vitae mortisque pudor. quo tenditis iras, a, miseri? Thebaid 1.150–6\]

... naked power armed the brethren, their fight is for a pauper crown. While they disputed who should plough cramped Dirce’s barren acres or lord it on the Tyrian exile’s lonely throne, law human and divine, morality and decency in life and death, went by the board. Alas you wretches, to what end do you stretch your wrath?
Earlier in Book 1, Statius condemns the ignoble motivations behind the brothers’ struggle for power:

protinus adtoniti fratrum sub pectore motus,
gentilesque animos subiit furor aegraque laetis
invidia atque parens odii metus, inde regendi
saevus amor, ruptaeque vices iurisque secundi
ambitus impatiens, et summo dulcius unum
stare loco, sociisque comes discordia regnis.  

_Thebaid_ 1.125–30

shock stirred the brothers’ hearts. The family madness invaded their minds, envy sick at another’s good fortune and fear, parent of hate, then fierce love of rule, breach of give and take, ambition intolerant of second place, hankering to stand at the top alone, strife, the companion of shared sovereignty. 2.51

As a number of scholars have noted, the Knight’s romance treatment bypasses Statius’ confrontation of power lust and its destructive consequences. Following Boccaccio’s “romancing” of Statius, the Knight replaces the rivalry for power with a more noble rivalry for the love of a woman. Instead of Statius’ interest in the pointless violence sparked by powerful male rivals, the Knight attempts to make his tale a celebration of martial power exercised by the correct person. Winthrop Wetherbee notes that “[t]he role the knight assigns to Theseus is intended to express the highest ambitions of medieval culture in its secular aspect, transforming classical heroism into an enlightened chivalry capable of harmonizing valor in war with political responsibility and courtly grace” (306). In the _Knight’s Tale_, Theseus’ benevolent militarism works first to right injustice by returning the Argive dead to their grieving widows, and second to stem the violent and disruptive forces represented by Palamon and Arcite. While parts of the _Knight’s Tale_ suggest that the Knight’s optimistic vision of chivalry cannot contain the forces of violent disruption, it is only in the _Reeve’s Tale_ that we fully and explicitly return to a world where masculine contest is stripped of noble pretensions and revealed as a destructive struggle for power. In Symkyn and the clerks’ pathetic contest over a half bushel of flour, we see a return to Statius’ representation of Eteocles’ and Polynices’ fight for “paupere regno” (1.151; “a pauper crown”), and in the desperate and violent battle for social status between the miller and the clerks, a return to the maddened rivalry of the Theban brothers.

Insofar as the men of the _Reeve’s Tale_ demonstrate the contradictions and flaws in the Knight’s idealization of chivalric violence, they also demonstrate that the Miller remains complicit with the Knight’s world view. That complicity is, once again, directly related to the Miller’s fidelity to fabliau convention. The men of the _Miller’s Tale_ remain true to conventional fabliau motives: Nicholas and Absolon are driven almost entirely by erotic desire, and John cares only to maintain control over Alison. As such, the _Miller’s Tale_ repeats the fabliau tendency to blame women and their sexuality as the cause of social disorder — a view that accords with the
Knight’s proposition that the Theban cousins’ passion for Emelye is the only source of disruptive violence in Athens.

The Reeve’s most trenchant rebuttal of the Knight occurs in his use of classical legend to challenge the Knight’s positive vision of women’s status in a martial culture. In the *Knight’s Tale*, Theseus’ conquest of Femenye instills civilization by defeating barbarian female disorder. His conquest of Thebes for the sake of the grieving Argive widows justifies women’s subjection by showing how they are protected by a good leader’s martial skill, and his treatment of Emelye is characterized as a benevolent exercise of authority that provides her with a happy and profitable marriage. The Knight refuses to acknowledge that women’s dependence on powerful men also makes victims of them. As Roberta Krueger has observed, chivalry’s combination of violence and masculine propriety over women “makes women dependent upon, and victims of, the chivalric system: the threat of rape, or more generally of male violence against women, makes women need the protection of knights, and that protection makes them vulnerable to male aggression” (40).

The *Reeve’s Tale* demonstrates Krueger’s point, showing how women’s subjection to an aggressive masculine authority places them straight in the path of male violence. It is Symkyn’s drive to dominate that sparks the clerks’ violence; it is Malyne and her mother’s status as Symkyn’s property that makes them likely candidates for Aleyn and John’s retribution. In the clerks’ exchange prior to their assaults on the women, Chaucer is careful to show us that Aleyn and John are inspired solely by their shame at having been beaten by Symkyn. Aleyn lays out his motivations in the speech he makes to John directly before approaching Malyne’s bedside:

“For John,” seyde he, “als evere moot I thryve,  
If that I may, yon wenche wil I swyve.  
Som esement has lawe yshapen us,  
...  
Oure corn is stoln, sothly, it is na nay,  
And we han had an il fi t al this day;  
And syn I sal have neen amendement  
Agayn my los, I will have esement.” 1.4177–86

By his own admission, Aleyn assaults Malyne because he regards her as Symkyn’s property. The assault will at once assuage his damaged manhood by attesting to his ability to dominate others and shame Symkyn by violating his daughter.

John’s monologue in the following passage reveals his conviction that rape can help a man avoid the shame of defeat. As John considers the consequences of Aleyn’s action and meditates on his own situation, he decides that Aleyn’s violence will win praises from Soler Hall, while his own lack of action will earn him scorn as a fool (“daf”) and a weakling (“cokenay”):

“He has the milleris doghter in his arm.  
He auntred hym, and has his nedes sped,
And I ly as a draf-sak in my bed;
And when this jape is tald another day,
I sal been halde a daf, a cokenay! 1.4204–8

The clerks’ belief in rape as a means of restoring masculinity is in perfect keeping with what classical legend frankly acknowledges, but which romance and fabliau persistently obfuscate. Marjorie Curry Woods has persuasively argued that the classical texts used by generations of medieval schoolboys closely associate rape with the development and assertion of masculinity by teaching boys “about sexual violence as a method of defining their manhood and controlling their own lives” (73). In the Achilleid, the rape of Deidamia marks the beginning of Achilles’ transformation from a boy under the control of his mother to a hero of the Trojan war. Ovid also articulates this view in the Ars amatoria, when he prefaces the rape of Deidamia with a lament about Achilles’ feminine disguise (1.691–3).

The Reeve’s Tale’s echoes of the Ariadne story also comprise a critique of the Knight’s optimistic representation of women’s status in a martial culture. One of the unresolved contradictions of the Knight’s Tale is that it tries to make a symbol of justice and right rule out of Theseus, whose ira justa against Thebes does not change his history as a betrayer and a rapist. Winthrop Wetherbee observes that Statius shows himself to be well aware of the hero’s paradoxical status when he invokes the image of Ariadne as “a counterpart in Theseus’ own story to the many suffering women whose lives have been blighted by the heroic enterprise of the Theban war” (312–13). In the Knight’s Tale, Chaucer diverges somewhat from Boccaccio’s representation of the Cretan episode when he has the Knight describe Theseus riding off to conquer Thebes under the banner of “The Mynotaur, which that he wan in Crete” (980). The more extended reference to Ariadne in the Reeve’s Tale reintroduces Theseus’ exploitative past and suggests that Theseus’ manipulation of Emelye and Hippolyta in the Knight’s Tale is less an enactment of chivalric decency than a ploy to solidify his own power.

Chaucer’s previous experiments with the tale of Ariadne in the Legend of Good Women and their connection to the Reeve’s Tale indicate that Chaucer’s concern with gender is as much metaphoric as it is literal. Joan Scott has drawn our attention to the fact that gender frequently appears in Western philosophy and literature as a metaphor for relations of power: “concepts of power, though they may build on gender, are not always literally about gender itself” (1069). The prologues of the Legend of Good Women and the Reeve’s Tale suggest that Chaucer’s exploration of women’s subjection to violent and powerful men is related to his concern with the plight of subordinate men in aristocratic culture. The Ariadne story in the Legend of Good Women appears as part of a series of tales featuring women faithful in love, ostensibly told to placate the “myghty” (F 226) and irascible God of Love, who browbeats a fearful “Chaucer” about his representation of women in Troilus and Crisyede. “Chaucer’s” deferral to the God of Love and the resistance that is nevertheless embodied in the ironic and sometimes ludicrous tales of “good women” that
“Chaucer” produces, symbolize both the powerlessness of subordinate men to resist aristocratic dictates and the persistence of the individual will, which finds a way to assert itself even when open defiance is impossible.

A similar dynamic is at play with the Reeve. Already the Reeve has been introduced in the General Prologue as a subordinate adept at dealing with (and profiting from) the powerful. His initial response to the Miller’s Tale is to decry “harlotrye” or ribald tales (1.3145) and to point out that it is a sin “[t]o aperyren any man or hym defame, / And eek to bryngen wyves in swich fame” (1.3147–8). In his own prologue, the Reeve first refuses to speak of “ribaudye” (1.3866) but is forced into doing so by the domineering Host who, in a manner “as lordly as a kyng” (1.3900), condemns the Reeve’s discussion of old age and demands that he get on with a tale. The fact that the Reeve’s own will is violated in the prologue to a tale about the violations of female will indicates Chaucer’s interest in the connection between women’s subjection to dominant male aggression and that of subordinate men. Indeed, Chaucer’s interest in the women begins and ends at precisely the point where their plight intersects with that of subordinate men in aristocratic culture — that is, in the assertion of the individual will and its quashing through intimidation and force. These links provide additional insight into Chaucer’s obscure characterization of Malyne. The subjection of the Reeve in his prologue suggests that the compliance of subordinates with those of superior power is not necessarily sincere. Malyne’s words may signify affection for the clerk, or they may just be part of a script she utters because she has no other choice. Indeed, the fact that Malyne speaks words traditional from a genre, the courtly aube (Kaske), indicates exactly this possibility — a possibility that Chaucer is willing neither to confirm nor to deny through additional insights into her subjectivity.

The Miller, the Reeve, and obscene comic discourse

The Reeve’s direct target may be the Knight’s celebration of aristocratic culture, but in many ways the object of the tale’s most profound critique is the Miller’s Tale and the tradition of obscene comic discourse that it represents. As I have demonstrated throughout this essay, the Reeve’s Tale is only able to pose questions of the Knight through its violations of fabliau conventions. By demonstrating how the Miller’s more traditional fabliau fails to oppose many of the central ideological pillars of the Knight’s Tale, Chaucer reveals the extent to which obscene comic discourse is complicit with aristocratic ideology.

Chaucer’s late-fourteenth-century audience would have been considerably more prepared for a critique of obscene discourse’s limitations than modern audiences because the former would have approached the text with assumptions about obscenity and its function that are very different from those held by modern readers. In the modern West — particularly during the period following the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s — obscenity has often been associated with movements
advocating social change. This is not at all the status of obscenity in the Middle Ages. It is not that medieval culture lacks a sense of taboo about the obscene but that, in the Middle Ages, this sense of taboo is almost always mobilized in favor of the established order. Thus, to give just a few examples, carvings in medieval churches that feature women exhibiting their vulvas originate as part of a campaign initiated by twelfth-century monks and clergy to emphasize the sinfulness of female sexuality (Jermain and Weir, 150); the thirteenth-century French poet Rutebeuf mobilizes obscenity against social change in works that are moralistic and reactionary (Dunton-Downer, 34); and the authors of anti-Semitic works use obscenity to isolate and dehumanize Jews (Thomas, 228).

The general tendency of medieval obscenity to uphold the status quo is also true of the Old French fabliau. Since the publication of Per Nykrog’s landmark 1957 study, it has been axiomatic in Old French scholarship that fabliaux were enjoyed by the same aristocratic audiences who sponsored romance. While many fabliaux humorously invoke romance, Nykrog’s concept of “burlesque courtois” demonstrates that fabliau references to romance tend to emphasize the degradation of the fabliau’s bourgeois and peasant characters rather than satirizing romance’s aristocratic heroes (72). While the exact parameters of the fabliau’s audience in France continue to be debated by scholars, linguistic evidence suggests that Chaucer’s audience would have been particularly likely to associate the genre with the upper ranks of society. Only one fabliau, Dame Sirith, exists in English prior to Chaucer and the eight fabliaux found in British Isles manuscripts before Chaucer are all written in Anglo-Norman, the language of England’s ruling class.

We can trace the development of Chaucer’s relationship with obscene comedy if we examine his use of it in the Legend of Good Women, a work which predates the Canterbury Tales. In particular, the Legend’s Ariadne suggests that the alterations Chaucer makes to obscene comedy in the Reeve’s Tale may derive from his failure in the Ariadne to deploy traditional obscene discourse effectively against the aristocratic ideology of the Palamon–Arcite story. Queen Alceste’s reference in the Legend’s prologue to Chaucer’s poem about “al the love of Palamon and Arcite / Of Thebes” (F 420–1) indicates that Chaucer had authored some version of the Knight’s Tale before writing the Legend of Good Women. He clearly intended the Legend’s Ariadne to be in dialogue with the Palamon–Arcite romance, since the Ariadne includes a number of verbal echoes of the Knight’s Tale and features several events that have no parallels with any other classical or medieval version of the story, but that do parallel events in the Knight’s Tale (Percival, 185–8; Patterson, 238–40; Lowes, 804–10). The Ariadne legend is an ideal vehicle to undermine Theseus’ moral authority, since medieval readers disapproved of his abandonment of Ariadne (Percival, 178, 181). The unflattering portrayal of royal characters in the Legend of Good Women’s Ariadne has led scholars to conclude that Chaucer intended it as a sardonic critique of aristocratic pretensions to “gentillesse” that exposes the “lack of principle and naked expediency which are masked by the aristocratic ethos to which the Legend’s
heroes conform and which was valorized in the *Knight’s Tale*” (Percival, 188; see also Patterson, 238–9).

The legend’s satire, however, is very dependent on an appeal to the misogyny of obscene comic discourse. It is, above all, the women of the Ariadne who bear the brunt of Chaucer’s parody. The characters of Ariadne and Phaedra are very much indebted to the greedy, lascivious, and dishonest women of the fabliau. As Sheila Delany has noted, Phaedra’s speech describing how Theseus might escape the labyrinth is rife with obscene sexual puns that make it appear as if she is describing the sexual act (Delany, “Logic of Obscenity,” 196–7). In addition, the two women are figured as a pair of bored aristocratic maidens, “at a loose end and ripe for amorous adventure” (Percival, 183) who spend an inordinate amount of time musing on the great social advantages that will accrue from rescuing a “kinges sone” (1953).

Chaucer’s uninterrogated use of obscene comic discourse means that the Ariadne falls short of its goals. While the legend certainly does not cast Theseus in a favorable light, its reliance on obscene misogyny shifts the brunt of its critique away from masculine aristocratic culture and towards courtly idealizations of feminine virtue. In the end, the legend undermines the God of Love’s views on feminine virtue but does little to critique the principles that inform his tyrannical behavior in the *Legend of Good Women* prologue. In the *Reeve’s Tale*, Chaucer inverts the proposition of the Ariadne, making obscene comedy the dominant mode and using classical legend to alter it. By interrogating obscene comedy from the inside out and retreating from its misogynist valence, Chaucer is able to clear the field, and marshal obscene discourse to a more direct critique of aristocratic culture.

The close connection between power and the discourses by which it is spoken is always at issue for Chaucer, and it is noteworthy that the passive-aggressive resistance offered by “Chaucer” in the *Legend of Good Women* is carried out in his alterations. Like the *Legend of Good Women’s* Chaucer, the Reeve tells a tale in the genre required of him but registers his resistance by altering it in such a way as to ruin the pleasures it promises and to pose questions of the ideology governing the genre itself. Far from representing a degeneration, the Reeve’s generic fusions create a rich and productive model for Chaucer’s later use of the fabliau in the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer’s abiding interest in the fabliau is illustrated by the fact that it is by far the most-used genre in the Canterbury collection, appearing in the *Cook’s Tale*, the *Merchant’s Tale*, the *Shipman’s Tale*, and the * Summoner’s Tale* and exerting a strong influence over the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*. But Chaucer never again uses the fabliau in the traditional form we find in the *Miller’s Tale*, choosing instead to include only certain elements of the fabliau in tales that mingle a variety of genres and styles. The success of the Reeve’s classical legend–fabliau sets the stage for these later experimentations by demonstrating that obscene comedy does have the capacity to provide new perspectives on power relations but only if its tendency to affirm the established order can be disrupted through strategic fusions with other discourses.
Notes

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1 All citations from Chaucer are taken from The Riverside Chaucer. All subsequent references to The Canterbury Tales will be cited by fragment and line numbers in the text.

2 A notable exception to this is Worth, who argues for the thematic importance of the Reeve’s Tale to Fragment One.

3 Feminist readings of the Knight’s Tale and the Miller’s Tale only begin in the 1990s. See Hansen; Crane; Lochrie; and Delany, “Difference and the Difference it Makes.”

4 Ingham notes that both the victimization of Palamon and Arcite and the excessively emotional weeping of the tale’s female characters are essential to the Knight’s construction of Theseus as a wise and moderate ruler. Wallace (214) proposes that Chaucer’s own fears about becoming a victim of tyrannical violence are reflected in his interest in the rhetorical powers of wives to allay that violence.

5 Although feminist analyses still form a relatively small part of the critical literature on the fabliau, feminist and gender scholars have made more inroads here. See Burns; and Gaunt.

6 All citations from the Old French fabliaux are taken from Noomen. Titles include a reference by volume and starting page.

7 See, for instance, Aloul (3.14), De la dame qui fist les III tors entor le moustier (5.54), La Saineresse (4.36), and Du Prestre crucifié (4.27).

8 For the European context, see Brundage, Law, Sex, 238, 243, 275, 437–8, 500; and Noonan. For the English context, see Walker, “Punishing Convicted Ravishers,” and “Common Law Juries and Feudal Marriage Customs,” 706; and Helmholtz, 90–4.


10 Symkyn’s use of the term accords with the Middle English Dictionary s.v. “disparagen” meaning “to degrade (sb.) socially (i.e. for marrying below rank or without proper ceremony).” Chaucer uses this meaning of the term in the Wife of Bath’s Tale, when the young knight laments upon his marriage to the poor old hag, “Allas, that any of my nacioun/Sholde euere so foule disparaged be!” (3.1068–9).

11 Some recent studies of rape have begun to acknowledge the importance of the scene in the Reeve’s Tale and identify it as rape, but none provide an extended analysis of it or of Malyne. See Cannon, 83–4; and Saunders, 298–300.

12 Kolve describes the rapes as acts which “loosen the women’s bridles” (251). William F. Woods describes Malyne as obtaining a “long deferred emotional well being” from her sex with the clerk (155–6).

13 Cannon writes that the episodes involving Malyne and her mother are not rapes according to the “cherles termes” of the fabliau (84).

14 Rape does appear in the Old French pastourelle. However, the sexual violence is often ambiguous, making it difficult to classify as rape (Gravdal, 166). The rape of Hersent in the Roman de Renart also comes to mind, but this takes place only in the distancing medium of the beast fable.

15 In recent years, fabliau scholars have re-examined the assumption that the fabliau are unreflectively misogynist. These revisions include Burns’ use of French feminist theory to explore the treatment of women’s bodies and voices in the fabliau, and Gaunt’s discussion of the ways that gender partakes of the genre’s more general ambition to overturn perceived hierarchies. However, as many feminist scholars of the fabliau acknowledge, the genre’s experimentations with gender norms coexist with sentiments and plot structures that are frankly misogynist. Gaunt remarks, “the fact remains that the fabliaux evoke and use a deeply misogynistic discourse, often to condemn . . . women’s sexual desire” (268). Similarly, Burns proposes that the dialogue of fabliau wives often interrogates medieval gender norms, but she nevertheless acknowledges that the genre defines female nature as “irrational, pleasure-seeking, and wholly corporeal in opposition to the rationally endowed thinking male” (28).

16 Kaeuper and Karras have both emphasized the importance of dominance over other men, particularly through violence, to the chivalric ethic of honor. As Karras notes, “Violence was the fundamental measure of a man because it was a way of exerting dominance over men of one’s own social
stratum as well as over women and other social inferiors” (21). See also Kaeuper, 192. Bourdieu notes the importance of the male audience to assertions of manliness: “[M]anliness must be validated by other men, in its reality as actual or potential violence, and certified by recognition of membership of the group of ‘real men’” (52).

For further discussion of Chaucer’s and Boccaccio’s treatment of the Thebaid see Anderson; Hanning; Patterson; and Wetherbee. The notion that there was a lost fabliau tradition in English has been conclusively dismissed. See, for example, Busby, “Conspicuous by Its Absence,” and “Dame Sirith,” 73; and Furrow.

Works Cited


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