PRIVACY AND THE BOUNDARIES OF FABLIAU IN THE MILLER’S TALE

BY THOMAS J. FARRELL

Most Old French fabliaux construct a private universe, one where society’s concerns and well-being are subordinated to the satisfaction of some character’s personal desires, even those of “the basest instinctual aspects of the psyche.”1 Characters act for their own interests, and the genre rewards most generously those who do so most imaginatively. The genre’s two chief narrative topoi—sexual triumph and physical battery—do not provide a realistic depiction of the fabric of life so much as powerful metaphors for private vengeance or domination: in fabliaux, sex occurs outside the social institution of marriage, and quite often as an extramarital attack on the institution; violence almost inevitably privileges individual vindictiveness (or whim) over social order. The typical setting is also private, since fabliau plots repeatedly demand small hiding places—tubs, closets, rafters, chests, cupboards, nooks—and of course beds. These loci circumscribe or limit the action, and also dictate that the typical larger settings be relatively crowded middle-class houses rather than the spacious halls and wide forests of romance. The root, etymological meaning of privacy identifies the household as the essentially private domain: Roman civil law gave society no authority over it.2 The fabliaux develop this principle to an ultimate degree: characters are fully empowered to manipulate private space to their own advantage.3

The genre’s insistence upon the private—the personal, the selfish, the secret, the hidden—has been noticed before, although not to my knowledge as directly as here. My emphasis harmonizes with those of a longstanding scholarly tradition that has sought to explain the peculiar aura surrounding the fabliaux. Joseph Bedier explained the aura as an absence: “il manque de métaphysique [it lacks metaphysics]”; Roy Pearcy notices instead the presence of a quasi-magical, almost irresistible mana, seizing control of the narrative.4 Both insights suggest the autonomy of what happens in fabliaux from external standards of judgment. Scheming pragmatism and immediate gratification define their operative ethic, labeled “hedonistic materialism” by Charles Muscatine. The narra-
tion functions much like a spotlight, limiting our attention and concern to the immediately present, because “what is not seen is of no moment.” Trickery becomes a significant virtue, regardless of who is tricking, or being tricked.⁵

There are fabliaux in which the topos of privacy is relatively insignificant. But even when the genre does not emphasize privacy, it rarely contradicts the terms of self-serving, nonmetaphysical life: when there is a contest, wit and audacity are triumphant; when neighbors or spouses inquire about their doings, fabliau characters do whatever is necessary to keep their scheming secret; when personal gain comes into conflict with social good, private enterprise always wins out. In this way the fabliaux once again contrast with romances, where privacy plays a minor role. The conventions of fin amors can make secrecy an issue, but many romances seek to over-ride the hero’s indulgence in private emotion and to restore his sense of social responsibility.⁶ The knight whose private quest has taken him into isolation must cycle back to the social matrix of the court to validate his experience, and his quest is frequently guided by a social virtue like “trouthe”: a sense of commitment to a set of values outside himself.⁷ In the Knight’s Tale, an atypical medieval romance germane here as an inevitable point of comparison to the Miller’s Tale, the words “pryvetee,” “privy,” and “prively” characterize the essential nature of Palamon and Arcite’s love for Emily.⁸ But Theseus, who changes their battle for love into a marriage tournament, never needs that “private” vocabulary and makes the tale’s dominant concerns social. The fabliaux’s contrasting emphasis on “pryvete” remains definitive.⁹

The Miller’s Tale creates and sustains an atmosphere of privacy in several ways, ranging from Nicholas’s mastery of “deerne love” (3200) to the isolation of its central characters in separate tubs. But a single reference to privacy has absorbed critical attention almost wholly.

An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.

(3163–64)

This is an extraordinarily fertile couplet, but the tale’s penchant for words denoting privacy is not at all local.¹⁰ “Pryvete,” “privy,” and “prively” occur more commonly in this tale than in any other on the pilgrimage, about eight times more commonly than in the Knight’s Tale; that persistent repetition demands a global response, begin-

Privacy in The Miller’s Tale
ning with genre. The Miller’s Tale never calls itself a fabliau (in this like more than half of the Old French fabliaux)—indeed the Chaucerian concordance does not contain the word “fabliau.” Nevertheless, the tale invites us to think of it as something like a fabliau in many ways: by the repetition of the “pryvetee” terms, by the use of the famous pun on “pryvetee” to foreshadow the structure of the tale, and by the warnings of the Chaucer-pilgrim about the “cherles tale” (3169) he must report. All these may be seen as generic markers. Yet because the genre of the Miller’s Tale is never specified, its insistent deployment of the privacy topos so typical of fabliaux dangles a series of questions about the tale’s generic tendencies.

The Miller’s Tale is usually classified as a fabliau because of its content. It certainly fits Bédier’s definition—“des contes à rire en vers [humorous tales in verse]” (30)—and the other pilgrims’ reaction accords with the “recreational justification” for literature usually invoked for fabliaux: “Diverse folk diversely they seyde, / But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde” (3855–58). But the tale seems to most critics to exceed the boundaries of the genre. Where the Old French fabliau is typically spare, direct, and uncluttered by any details not immediately necessary to the plot, the Miller’s Tale gives us long rhetorical descriptiones of the major characters, an Oxford setting in accurately rendered detail, and the intricate interweaving of its separate plot strands. In all of these ways the Miller’s Tale goes beyond what is normally found in its antecedents. Chaucer has subjected the genre to a “process of accretion, expansion, or elaboration,” and the Miller’s Tale is the fullest example of that process. More than other Chaucerian fabliaux, the Miller’s Tale moves beyond the limits of its generic tradition, even while it draws attention to the determinedly generic topos of privacy to an unequaled and extraordinary degree. This is, or ought to be, surprising. The expectations created by the repetition of “pryvete,” “privy,” and “privily” do not define the experience of the tale; Tillyard contemplated its denouement with “feelings akin to those of religious wonder,” and that is certainly not what a fabliau usually intends to inspire.

The privacy of the fabliaux also makes them inherently unjust, since medieval justice is never private or secret. (Middle English supplies a good antonym to those terms in the word “apert,” which I shall use consistently to mean open or public in contrast to

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But justice, like genre, is a problematic issue in the *Miller's Tale*, and the imprecise vocabulary scholarship has used has made the issue more complex. There can be no “apert” justice—certainly not in medieval terms—without a supernal source of order to dispense that justice, however the source is identified. This was both the intellectual and the popular understanding; it is reflected, for instance, in the *Boece*, when the character Boethius makes the perceived injustice of his fate the center of his complaint. The essential part of Philosophy’s cure for this conviction—her “sharp” remedy—begins with her invocation of “O thow Fadir, . . . that governest this world by perdurable resoun” (III.M9.1–3). Because reasoned governance is an essential element in her sense of universal justice, Boethius must learn to understand providence (or “purveaunce”) as “thilke devyne resoun that is establissed in the sovereyn prince of thinges, the whiche purveaunce disponith alle thinges” (IV.P6.61–63), even though the variable mechanism of fate obscures human ability to perceive that design.

Middle English usage reflects the same understanding, employing “justice” as a name for God or one of his attributes. The noun is elsewhere used concretely only of those who, like an anointed king, represent God’s justice in action. That representation must also and in consequence be public: the private person of the king was not considered to have divine sanction for his acts. When used in the abstract, “justice” consistently occurs in accounts that depict a king or emperor enacting (or failing to enact) justice through established judicial forms. Georges Duby situates the attitudes that underlie this usage in the social mythology of the Middle Ages: even in the face of a reality that repeatedly contradicted it, “the idea persisted, at least in the minds of cultivated men, that the function of the king was to preserve peace and justice in a community of free men.”

The other side of this coin of public justice is predictable: “privy” action is often recognizable as unjust. The Parson has much to say on “privy” sins, and the Knight’s final use of the word is put into the mouth of Saturn, now widely seen as an emblem of chaos in that tale—the opposite of the Boethian order of Jupiter proclaimed by Theseus.

Myn is the strangylyng and hangyng by the throte,
The murmure and the cherles rebellyng,
The gronynge, and the pryvee empoysonyng.

(2458–60)
The private world of the fabliau lacks providential (that is, metaphysical) explanations, and thus any Boethian or Christian sense of order. Just as fabliaux almost always work out their plots in private terms and actions, so—and therefore—they avoid a public, overtly ideological denouement, presided over by nature, God, or some other source of “apert” justice. Self-gratification, based on an opportunism that can be either orderly or destructive of order, makes raw power more interesting to the fableors than justice.21

A painstakingly symmetrical plot compensates for the absence of meaningful justice in the more fully crafted fabliaux: artistic order substitutes for moral order. This tendency is most obvious in the many patently unjust tales. Des .III. Bocus menesterels constructs a textual logic demanding the unprovoked murder of an ugly hunchback who looks like the dead bodies a porter has been trying to dispose of. The porter’s fury at what he takes to be the persistently revivified corpse is the joke, and the unjustness of his fatal attack is essential to the joke. Similarly, in De L’enfant qui fu remis au soleil, a merchant sells his wife’s illegitimate son into slavery as revenge for her unfaithfulness. We are not invited to pity the child, and the merchant, more culpable than his wife by most external ideologies, ultimately triumphs in the fabliau by replying to her tale—that the boy was conceived on a tower, in the cold of winter, from a flake of snow—with a better tale of how the hot summer sun on an Italian mountain had melted him, no doubt because of his unusual conception. In both texts, the symmetry is precise and justice is absent; and symmetry brings resolution.22

That lesson should be remembered in texts whose symmetry rallies the reader’s sympathy to the triumphant character. De Berengier au Lonc Cul, containing a “misdirected kiss” analogous to the one in the Miller’s Tale, illustrates why. A noble wife discovers her churlish husband’s chivalric impostures and, disguised as Berengier, forces him to kiss her derriere in preference to fighting her. We may well approve of the wife’s treatment of her husband, who has shown himself to be base and cowardly. But however fitting his humiliation, it exists primarily as a sign of her vengeance and power, and of his weakness.23

Du Prestre crucifié is the most striking of the few fabliaux whose symmetry is so exact as to suggest “poetic justice” to modern readers. An adulterous priest, trapped by the returning husband—a sculptor of religious images—tries to escape by pretending to be the statue on a crucifix. But the sculptor recognizes and castrates

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him, declaring with grim delight that he must have been drunk to carve an obscene figure on the image. Thus the priest suffers because he is in more than one sense an inadequate representation of Christ. The effect of the symmetry is certainly poetically satisfying, although the carver’s private reaction to the sin committed against him keeps the “justice” from being “apert.” Moreover, the carver will, even after the castration, have the hapless priest beaten and extract a ransom of fifteen pounds from him. Thus the action we find poetically just was apparently insufficient to make the fabler feel that he had carried out his project. The fabliau treats whatever kind of justice the tale contains as inessential, and emphasizes instead gleeful savagery and insistent vengeance. In short, we need to recognize that “poetic justice” is not a medieval concept. The phrase was first used about seventeenth century neoclassical tragedy, and can be applied to medieval texts only anachronistically. Careful scholarship has continued to use it, if at all, only in quotation marks, to indicate that such “poetic justice” may not have had significance to the authors of texts like Du Prestre crucifié. Although the requirements of plot symmetry occasionally coincide with the sympathies evoked in us by external standards of justice, the weight of counterexamples indicates that they need not.

For these reasons, we need plenty of caution in attributing justice to the Miller’s Tale; if the tale is as private as its emphasis on “pryvete” suggests, it cannot enact what Chaucer would have recognized as justice. Again, however, the experience of reading the tale is less clearcut than the theoretical and generic expectations it has engendered. A sense that the fates suffered by Nicholas and Absolon are appropriate and just seems to be nearly universal: Nicholas’s hot love is repaid in kind, and the aroma of Absolon’s perfumed infatuation decays noticeably. But when the argument has been extended to include old John, and to define the specific vices being punished in each character, there is more room to doubt. Paul Olson reads John’s willingness to take Nicholas as a lodger in malo, as a sign of avarice; but as good a case can be made for taking that willingness in bono as a sign of generosity. And there is little room in any such discussion for Alison, whose allotted fate—a night of obviously well-enjoyed mirth with Nicholas and a devastating triumph over the despised Absolon—can be called punishment only by the most grotesque distortions of the term. Morton Bloomfield finds no justice in the tale, arguing that “what we
have here is a very unBoethian universe, a world which seems rational but is really not so." The syllogism is tempting—fabliaux are unBoethian texts, incapable of distributing justice; the Miller’s Tale is a fabliau; ergo, there can be no justice in the Miller’s Tale—but the minor premise is weak. Both the genre of the tale and its potential for justice may seem to be settled by the repeated invocation of “pryvete,” but just as the question of genre opens itself to reinterpretation as we read, so must our understanding of the fates endured by the various characters.

The Miller’s Tale stresses “pryvete” from the moment it begins to construct its fictional world, and in doing so suggests that the tale is a fabliau and can be expected not to concern itself with the dispensation of any recognizable justice to its characters. And yet both of those suggestions are at least questionable: readers have very reasonably found at least some justice in the tale, and doubted that it is a fabliau in any definitive way. But let us turn this analysis around. To the extent that the action remains private, it remains a fabliau, and divine or natural justice is impossible. If at any point the action opens up and becomes more than a private battle among characters enacting triumph over their adversaries, then the tale is likely to seem like something more than a fabliau and will probably tempt us to detect an operant justice.

Those parts of the Miller’s Tale which clearly embody the ethos of “pryvete” are quite distinct from those in which the characters are not carrying out their own private purposes. The cuckolding of old John is a perfectly typical fabliau situation: it is a private contest between the old husband and the young lover, inevitably won by the latter. No moral judgment is passed on John for this failure; at worst he is a fool for marrying a young wife. Similarly, Nicholas’s sexual “pleye” with Alison even as Absolon steals to her window full of “love-longynge” (3705) is a demonstration of the former’s superior wooing: “Alwey the nye slye / Maketh the ferre leeve to be looth” (3392–93). The judgment we pass on the two suitors has everything to do with Nicholas’s “hendiness” and nothing to do with just desserts on any moral scale. Finally, the episode of the misdirected kiss fits the pattern of private combat as well. Like the frustrated wife in De Berengier au Lonc Cul, Alison uses the kiss as a demonstration of her power over an unworthy lover, in this case triumphing in her ability to find a better man. And because her role

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in the tale ends with the triumphant “Tee-hee,” Alison cannot be fitted into any scheme of justice. All of her actions take place while the tale is fabliau-bound, and any efforts to describe her punishment are therefore fruitless.

The later action of the plot, however, does not fit the generic pattern of private action. Absolon’s return visit to the house, *cum coulter*, is intended to allow him to wreak vengeance on Alison, and as far as we can tell he thinks he is doing so even as he strikes. But she is not at the window, and so he does not succeed in taking vengeance on her. Instead, his mistake inflicts what most readers will see as a fitting, moral punishment on Nicholas. Revenge does not interfere with the justice of Nicholas’s fate, as it did in *Du Prestre crucifié*, because the characters are unable to carry out their intended private vengeance. As a result, justice is opened up, made “apert” for the reader. In a similar way, Nicholas’s desperate cry for “Water” is not intended to awaken Old John, nor to extend or complete Nicholas’s domination of him. Nevertheless, John’s cuckoldry is thereby supplemented with a broken arm and the strikingly public ridicule heaped on him: the two schemers against “Goddes pryvetee” both receive a sharp physical rebuke for their supposed metaphysical calculation. The fact that Nicholas invokes a concept as obviously metaphysical as “Goddes pryvetee” first sets the stage for the later disruption of typical fabliau action, as Bédier’s insight—“il manque de métaphysique”—could have warned us. (There are additional ramifications to the presence of “Goddes pryvetee” in the tale, but consideration of these must be postponed momentarily.)

The examples of typical, generic, private conflict in the *Miller’s Tale* all precede the examples of extra-typical, supergeneric justice. The tale moves beyond its generic boundaries at a memorable narrative seam, after Absolon has been humiliated by the target of his kiss, but before his attempt to take vengeance for that insult sets in motion the machinery of justice. The moment is marked by the last occurrence of one of the “pryvete” words, which are otherwise concentrated in the narrative before Alison cries “Tee-hee” as she slams the window and unwittingly brings the generic action to a close.

This Nicholas was risen for to pisse,
And thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape.
He sholde kisse his ers er that he scape.
Nicholas believes that he is still in control of events, just as he had been all through the tale. Confident in the power of his ingenuity, he believes that he is acting as the kind of fableor-within-the-tale described by Howard Bloch as a common feature of the genre. Bloch delineates how, in the action of one fabliau, "the deception that is staged by the three makers of tales within the tale becomes indistinguishable from the fabliau itself. ‘Les. III. Dames qui trou-verbent un anel’ comes to mean literally ‘the three women who found a ring’ and ‘the three women who composed—in the medieval sense of *trobar* (trouvèr, troubadour)—the poem.’"  

Most of the Miller’s Tale gives us a similar sense: Nicholas clearly stages a fabliau which, until this point, is essentially identical with the Miller’s Tale. But what Nicholas has in mind is the relatively simple text which we might call Noel’s Flood. The complexity of the plot in the Miller’s Tale (for which Chaucer is so often praised) and specifically the introduction of a rival lover—an element extremely uncommon in the Old French fabliaux—were not part of Nicholas’s plan; they tax his powers of Invention, in both senses of the term. Nicholas, suddenly finding himself inscribed in Absolon’s comically inept effort to compose a courtly romance, will be unable to rewrite that text as a new fabliau. This explains the seemingly pointless and oxymoronic act of mooning “prvely.” In the Middle Ages as today one bared one’s hindquarters to another as either a lark or a determined and necessarily “apert” insult. “Prvely” here therefore emphasizes Nicholas’s intent to re-privatize the action and regain control of the tale. Above all, the word signals a belief that he too (like Alison) can humiliate Absolon fabliau-style. But unhappily for Nicholas, he has misread the situation; we know about the coulter, and he does not. Bloch’s condition that the action he plans be “indistinguishable from the fabliau itself” no longer describes the Miller’s Tale. Nicholas’s stint as fableor is about to end, largely because the Miller’s Tale has stopped being a fabliau. At the moment when Nicholas rises to piss, the narrative axioms have changed and justice is about to appear, although, as frequently happens in the Miller’s narration, we do not learn of the change until enmeshed in the later action.

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As we know from the *Reeve's Tale*, pissing is also a common enough element in the fabliau, as it well might be, being in more than one sense a "pryvete" matter. Nicholas believes that this bit of private business has put him in position to "amenden al the jape," to "excel [or] surpass" (*MED*, "amenden" v. 9) what has already occurred. But "amenden" can also mean "to punish (a misdeed)" (v. 13), and both senses of the word are operating. Nicholas is unable to fulfill his vow that Absolon shall "kisse his ers er that he scape" (3800), although the effete dandy will suffer a more fitting punishment. Nor is it likely that Nicholas will think the jape to have been amended much by Absolon's contribution to it, the red-hot coulter. But readers can recognize in that instrument the punishment required by the other sense of "amenden." At the end of the tale, the results characters obtain by their actions are consistently unintended and therefore can never emblematize domination or vengeance; their significance is always more apparent to us than to the characters involved. When the words for "pryvete" disappear from the tale, the possibility of a purely private action goes with them. The process of opening up the *Miller's Tale* reaches a perfect climax in Nicholas's cry for "Water!" The connectedness of all the action suddenly becomes visible in John's reaction to that cry. The fabliau spotlight is suddenly overwhelmed by brilliant house lights, which lay bare the theatrical machinery in full motion. And the potentially providential nature of the connectedness is enough to justify the remarkable theology of John's "now comth Nowelis flood!" (3818). We recall that Noah's flood was read in the Middle Ages as a figure of the final cataclysm on Doomsday, the second coming of Christ (with Noel as the first), when God's justice would reveal the whole pattern of human action.

The *Miller's Tale*’s division between elements clearly belonging to the fabliau tradition and those which go beyond the usual generic boundaries is unique. The closest analogue contains all of the principal motifs used by Chaucer but keeps the plot lines simpler in significant ways. Its heroine—Heile of Beersele—keeps removed from the action once her second wooer appears. Instead of being kissed, she directs the current occupant of her bed, the local priest, to elicit the misdirected kiss from wooer number two, a smith. The priest tries to repeat the trick when the angry and humiliated smith returns with a glowing iron. By branding him, the smith therefore revenges himself on his rival in a generically typ-
ical example of one-upsmanship, and that vengeance is the gener-
ically predictable point of emphasis.

> The smith had something of a hard time, but he stood it very
> much the better for the fact that the priest had his behind
> burned. He had revenged himself well.35

The note sounded here is much like that of Chaucer’s most generic
fabliau, the Reeve’s Tale: “‘Hym thor nat wene wel that yvele
dooth’ / A gylour shal hymself bigyled be” (4320–21). The trickster
of Trumpington is trumped by two better cards, and that is the
whole point. Clear by contrast to those two is the much more ab-
stract tone of the Miller’s closure.

> Thus swyvved was this carpenteris wyf,
> For al his kepyng and his jalousye,
> And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,
> And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
> The tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!

(3850–54)

The Miller is no Boethian, and he mixes just and unjust actions
together in a blissful ignorance of his tale’s overtones. Even so,
there is no hint of vengeance in his summary. Instead, the predom-
inantly passive voice reinforces our perception of the small role
played by Absolon and John, or even Nicholas and Alison, in re-
solving the tale’s plot: except for Absolon, who misfires in the ob-
ject of his attentions, only God is active (although subjunctive) in
the denouement of the Miller’s Tale.

> Given the unique manipulation of generic expectations in the
> Miller’s Tale, Nicholas’s need to urinate becomes the central event
> in it, and we are inevitably drawn to ask whether that need is a
> private event. The evidence is difficult to weigh accurately. Middle
> English, like many other languages, is marked by a striking impre-
cision in the use of words having to do with sexual, reproductive, or
excretory functions. The nouns “pryvete” (1g) or “privates,”
(“private” n., sense f) could be used in reference to the anus, the
vagina, the uterus, and the penis (in either its sexual or excretory
function), either singly or in various combinations; Chaucer ex-
plows that range of meaning fully. He also uses the common hom-
onym “pryvee,” meaning “privy” (CT, VI.527).

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So in the same way that the Miller's Tale encourages us to think of it as essentially private, generically a fabliau, and inherently unjust, it encourages us to think of the need to urinate as private business, to be conducted, if possible, in a privy. Even Chaucer's syntax—"Nicholas was risen for to pisse"—suggests that the clerk is acting volitionally, following his own private inclinations. But we should have learned to be wary of such encouragement. It has failed to pan out in determining genre or justice, and we all know that urination is not a wholly volitional question: it cannot be postponed indefinitely. In Middle English, as in Modern, that fact was recognized by attributing the necessity to a powerful outside agency. "Nature calls," we say; and the idiom is evidently an old one. In Mankind, the devil Titivillus seeks to distract Mankind from his prayers by reminding him of a full bladder. "Arise and avent thee! Nature compellys."36

Readers may be surprised to learn that the words "nature" and "natural" do not occur in the Miller's Tale; neither do their close synonyms "kynde" and "kyndely," even amid the images of animals and fruits which decorate the description of Alison. Their absence is a counterpoint to the constant repetition of "pryvete" and its cognates. The void is particularly noteworthy because a supposed ethos of the natural world has become central to critical discussion of the tale.37 To be sure, nature is not absent from the tale—the periphrastic invocation of it as "Goddes pryvetee" tells us as much—but the tale takes pains to conceal the workings of the natural order. That effort at concealment requires an explanation which goes beyond assuming that nature bestows a beneficent benediction on all that occurs in the tale. What is the sense of "Goddes pryvetee" which the tale is trying to hide?

"Goddes pryvetee" is first invoked as a plotting device: it is another way of creating the private world in which the fabliau plot can be advanced. But we have already seen that the other assertions of privacy in the tale cannot be substantiated. Although, after John bought the tubs, "pryvely he sente hem to his in, / And heng hem in the roof in pryvetee" (3622–23), they cannot effectively be concealed; inevitably the neighbors arrive and "Into the roof they kiken and they cape" (3841). Nicholas tries to amend the joke when "out his erse he putteth pryvely" (3802), but Absolon seems to know what to expect.38 John, having been warned of the impending flood, "to his wyf . . . tolde his pryvetee," but his delusion of secrecy is immediately rebutted: "And she was war, and knew it bet
than he” (3603–4). Each of the male characters fails to keep his relationship with Alison as private as he wishes: John’s rest with Alison is disturbed by Absolon’s singing; Nicholas’s play with her is similarly disrupted by his rival’s wooing; Absolon, planning “Ful pryvely [to] knokken at [Alison’s] wyndowe” (3676) finds a larger audience than he expected. Nicholas engages John’s interest in the flood partly by promising that “thanne shul we be lordes al oure lyf/ Of al the world” (3581–82), but no one ever attains such solitary blessedness.

The phrase “Goddes pryvete” occurs commonly enough in Middle English, and there are various synonymous phrases for the concept it evokes. The MED entry suggests its importance for serious, especially mystical contexts, but gives no hint of its use in “popular” poetry outside the Miller’s Tale. Nicholas uses it to refer to the supposed second flood—“after wol I speke in pryvetee” (3493) and “I wol nat tellen Goddes pryvetee” (3558), while John employs it when condemning (momentarily) Nicholas’s astrological calculations: “Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvete” (3454). Yet of course neither of their claims has any substance. The flood is a fraud from beginning to end, and John’s later adventures seem particularly well designed to demonstrate that ignorance is a vice, not a virtue. The workings of the universe are quite unmysterious in this tale; it was not privity, but God’s open promise in Genesis, reinforced by popular religion in the mystery plays (of which the Miller’s Tale is filled with reminders) that there would never be another flood.39

Like all its other pretenses of privacy, then, the Miller’s Tale’s invocation of “Goddes pryvetee” finally undercuts its own claim to credibility, since the claim is based on a false distinction between God’s plan for the world and human initiative; the tale shows how the former overrides the latter. In all its attempts to divert our attention elsewhere, the tale cannot quite cover what it rather obviously tries to conceal: the sense of “Goddes pryvetee” as that Boethian providential design which orders the world even if humans cannot see how and in spite of whatever efforts they may muster against it.40 That “God ledeth and constreyneth alle thingis by ordre” (Boece, V.P1.41–42) is an excellent example of “Goddes pryvetee” considered as a “sacred mystery [or] divine secret” (MED, “privete” n. 3).

This view—that Providence disposes all random or fortunate events in a meaningful and just pattern—is the antithesis to the
emphasis on privacy usual in the fabliau. It is also the view Theseus had sought to argue in the “First Mover” speech, which the Miller’s Tale is therefore often thought to dismantle. But the role played by nature—“the universe as divine creation” (MED, “nature” n. 1a), embodying “natural law as the norm of human experience” (2a)—demands that we reconsider the relationship of those two tales. However whimsically, nature or providence acts in the perfect timing of Nicholas’s need to piss. It silently inverts the Miller’s protestations about privacy in his tale and thereby enforces a recognizable form of moral law on the unsuspecting actors in what we all had thought was a simple fabliau.

The most explicit link between the Knight’s and Miller’s tales is the repetition of a line—“Allone, withouten any compaignye”—with privacy as its controlling idea. The exact repetition signals the unique relationship between these two tales, notwithstanding their dynamic interaction with all of Fragment I. Fortunately, many aspects of their relationship are by now commonplace: they provide a matrix against which the complementary treatment of “privy” or “apert” action and justice in the two tales can be pinpointed fairly briefly.41

The Knight makes room for private action, but tends ultimately to subsume those parts of his tale under more public business. Theseus’s limited allowance for the folly of young love—“For in my tyme a servant was Ioon” (1814)—is typical of the tale. The private goals of lesser characters are nowhere labeled unworthy, but they usually remain unfulfilled. Theseus dominates the tale, and he acts consistently for public purposes (although he sometimes needs to be persuaded), mounting a war against the injustice done to the widows of Thebes and overriding the private desires and “privy” actions of Palamon and Arcite with the public tournament. Although Palamon, Emily, and Arcite all seek to further their private desires by making secret devotions to deities whom they see as individual sponsors of their lives, their petitions are essentially effete. Saturn, not Venus, arranges that Palamon’s desire will be fulfilled.

“Apert” action is not unproblematic in the Knight’s Tale, but there is in that text a conviction that public and social concerns are, unlike private ones, unavoidable. It may not be possible to determine in a wholly satisfactory way who will marry Emily, but the question must be asked, and—more—it must be answered in what-
ever terms can be brought to bear on it. Concerns of common profit intrude themselves inevitably, so that the ultimate marriage of Emily and Palamon, certainly satisfactory enough in strictly personal terms, is also depicted as a social good, an alliance between the formerly warring states of Athens and Thebes. Because the demands of society are so fully recognized, “apert” action is the norm; purely private busy-ness, although tolerated to a point, is inherently suspect.

Ostentatious public ritual, however, cannot guarantee the achievement of justice. The Knight’s Tale shows us how difficult it is to know that our chosen response to a social question will in fact resolve it in a just and satisfying manner. Theseus cannot insure the common good by the marriage of Emily to Palamon any more than he did by his decision to supplant the lovers’ quarrel with the tournament, which concludes so chaotically. Especially given Theseus’s long Boethian disquisition on Arcite’s fate and the mutability of human life only a few lines before, we remain unconvinced that the marriage of Palamon and Emily will be “O parfit joye, lastynge evermo” (3072). The determinate power of Saturn implies that the world may after all be driven to serve inscrutable private ends rather than universal justice. Yet when Theseus’s somewhat hollow praise of Jupiter redounds on Saturn, the effect is not an ironic devaluation of Theseus’s acuity. There is no one else who can provide better answers to the questions which, as the tale has shown, must be asked—and answered. Instead, we see that the Knight’s efforts to open up his tale, to show in its careful ordering and patterning the process of divine justice, must remain tentative; the link between public action and justice is, at best, tenuous.

In usurping the Monk’s tale-telling slot, the Miller picks up the Host’s directive that the next tale “quit” the Knight’s, and his performance unfolds a series of meanings for that word. The common view that it foreshadows a fabliau-like adversarial relationship between the two is humorously appropriate, but the Host certainly was not using “quit” in that sense. We need to keep in mind the word’s broader connotations of balance: the Miller’s Tale poises equally but oppositely the strengths and weaknesses of its mate. In most respects, the Miller’s Tale inverts or parodies whatever it finds in the Knight’s: fabliau (of a sort) for romance (of a sort); the triangle of Alison, Nicholas, and Absolon for Emily, Palamon, and Arcite; carpenter John for master-builder Theseus, and so on. The Miller’s obsession with secrecy and privateness is another aspect of that

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parodic inversion. The occasional moments of public action early in his tale become just as effete as private action was in the *Knight’s Tale*. Absolon woos the wives of the parish openly, “And namely . . . this carpenteris wyf” (3343), but he cannot compete with Nicholas’s tactics: “And *prively* he caughte hire by the queynte” (3276). The Miller’s narration is designed to make “apertness” seem undesirable and pointless to the same degree that the Knight’s narration impugned “pryvetee.”

The same reversal characterizes narrative technique. To clarify the structure of his tale, the Knight repeatedly “pigeonholes” his narrative in a manner reminiscent of interlaced romance, even though its straightforward structure hardly demands such readers’ aids.

> Up to the ankle foughethe they in hir blood.  
> And in this wise I letem fightyn dwelle,  
> And forth I wole of Theseus you telle.  

(1660–62)

> Arcite is coold, ther Mars his soule gye!  
> Now wol I spoken forth of Emelye.  

(2815–6)

The Miller never does anything of the sort, and the tale he tells demands that his narration never be so “apert.” Were he to pause at a crucial moment to make a similar structuring transition—

> In this hoot plyghte I stynte of Nicholas,  
> And of oold John now wol I telle the cas—  

the spirit of his tale would be lost.

Nevertheless, and despite the Miller’s narrative legerdemain, the concluding action of his tale opens up for us a world in which nothing can prevent the headlong flight to justice. The Miller can allow all the parts of his story to arrive and be told in the most chaotic fashion, because in retrospect none of us will ever imagine that the plot is at all chaotic. This situation precisely reverses that of the *Knight’s Tale*: its attempt to discern or project order onto an apparently chaotic world in an effort to reveal the justice of divine providence is “quit” by a tale which discloses the ineluctable justice arising out of an action as apparently chaotic as possible. Here “quit” seems to mean “To give reward; . . . recompense (sb.) for
“quiten” (MED, “quiten” v. 2a): the Knight’s efforts to find justice in the universe are finally rewarded by—of all people—the Miller. At the end of the Miller’s Tale, Absolon, Nicholas, and John have become unable to direct their actions toward meaningful private ends; the tale preempts their petty agendas by superimposing the blueprint that leads them to justice. What has happened confuses them, and their genuine confusion is an “apert” metonym for the pseudo-knowledge that inspired their earlier and apparently more purposeful action. Thinking that their extraordinary planning has given birth only to chaos, they balance or quit the error of Theseus, who took Saturn’s arbitrary resolution and praised it as Jupiter’s beneficent ordering.

The disruption of genre in the Miller’s Tale thus makes its quitting of the Knight’s Tale less dichotomous than the history of their receptions would suggest. Early in this century, the Miller’s Tale was widely seen as objectionable: Manly described it as “not fit to be read in mixed company”; he echoes Root’s complaint of a generation earlier: “It is certainly a pity that such excellent skill was expended on a story which many of Chaucer’s readers will prefer to skip.” Simultaneously, the Knight’s Tale was often given the highest praise: “By placing it in the mouth of the Knight and in the forefront of the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer seems almost to have declared it his finest poem,” claims Hinckley, while Chesterton comments that “every one knows” the outline of the story in some detail. Since the 1950s, however, the tendency has been to praise the Miller at the Knight’s expense. Although the Miller’s Tale has always generated enthusiasm in some of its readers, only recently has it come to be seen widely as a corrective to its predecessor, an exposé of the flaws in the Knight’s philosophizing. The rapid success of the “dramatic interpretation,” with its emphasis on the conflict between the Knight and Miller, no doubt made easier two now relatively common perceptions: that, while we naturally admire the Knight’s Tale, the Miller’s Tale is livelier and more Chaucerian, or that the easy freedom depicted in the latter is preferable (often politically preferable) to the painful conformity of the former. And of course the Miller’s Tale is now the Chaucerian text. Virtually all students studying English literature in college read it, and advanced American high school students are familiar with it in all but a few shocked school districts. Concurrently, the Knight’s Tale is in something of a decline. Like the Miller’s Tale in the 1920s, it still

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has its devotees, but attacks on its ideology are hardly uncommon, even if these are accompanied by the ritual invocation of Chaucer’s irony to explain its flaws as deliberate. Students are unlikely to meet it except in a senior-level Chaucer class.

But the notion that we must privilege one of these tales is wrong-headed. Neither is able to exploit the flaws or inconsistencies of the other, because even the inconsistencies mirror one another. Every aspect of the Knight’s Tale is quit by the Miller, including those which the Miller’s Tale is often thought to attack: the apparent but deceptive chaos of his conclusion is the other side of the coin first presented in the Knight’s overly sanguine depiction of meaning and order. Neither tale can fully triumph over the other, because each silently concedes the other’s central contention: the Knight cannot exorcise Saturn, who embodies the Miller’s insistence on “pryvete”; and the Miller must cede to the just dispensation of Nature, whom Theseus had invoked as the agent of beneficent providence in his ambitious “First Mover” speech.

That the grim and dubious battle against chaos in the Knight’s Tale gives way to the cheerful surrender to justice in the Miller’s Tale suggests the essentially Christian optimism underlying much of Chaucer’s poetry. Spearing’s conclusion that the Knight’s Tale may not “necessarily [be] Chaucer’s own total and final view” is in one sense obviously too tentative. Given the Miller’s Tale as a deliberately chosen sequel, the Knight’s Tale cannot be his final view. Nor, when the interplay between the two is considered, will the Knight’s view seem even possibly “total.” Today, however, it may be more important to stress that the Miller’s Tale also fails to supply Chaucer’s fullest vision. Where it supplements and corrects the Knight’s Tale, it is also open to supplementation and correction. If it is life-affirming play or “game” in open rebellion against the rules and “ernest” of the Knight’s Tale, we need to remember that medieval society sanctioned such play in order to reinvigorate acceptance of the need for rules. Even while it rebels, such play reinforces the order it mocks. Sharing so much with the Knight’s Tale, the Miller’s Tale cannot be a rebuttal of it. In their radically different terms, the two tales make statements which may be regarded as variant readings of the same text, and both conclude with the subjunctive expression of a meaningfully similar hope.

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NOTES

6 See, for example, Stephen Knight’s discussion of Chaucer’s Troilus as a tragic conflict between the hero’s sense of public responsibility and Criseyde’s vision of a private, internal life (Geoffrey Chaucer [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986], 32–65). The infamous codification of love by Andreas Capellanus, The Art of Courtly Love (John Jay Parry, trans. [1941; rpt. New York: Norton, 1969]) also reflects the tension within the courtly system between private and courtly values. Rule 13 claims that “When made public love rarely endures” (185), but there is also a constant stress on the social function of love: “the man in love becomes accustomed to performing many services gracefully for everyone. O what a wonderful thing is love, which makes a man shine with so many virtues and teaches everyone, no matter who he is, so many good traits of character!” (31). While the original emotion is seen as private, its development as fin amors has social significance.
7 John Stevens argues that the importance of “truthe” in the Franklin’s Tale is generically significant (Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches [New York: Norton, 1973], 63). Also notable are the emphases on “Truthe” in Chaucer’s description of the Knight, “trawe” in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and “triwe” in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzival.

Georges Duby comments on the social role of the court and the rejection of privacy in romance in “The Emergence of the Individual: Solitude: Eleventh to Thirteenth Centuries,” in Revelations of the Medieval World, (note 2) 517–18. Unfortunately, the essay that this volume devotes to literature (313–93) mentions individual fabliaux very sporadically, and never addresses the genre.
8 Arcite threatens “To sleen hymself . . . pryvely” (1222) over his banishment from Athens and Emily, relies on a squire “That knew his privetee” (1411) when he returns in disguise to pursue her, uses men who “broghte hym . . . ful pryvely his

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rente” (1442–43) to sustain himself in the pursuit, and “Ful prively” (1630) procures armor for the secret combat with Palamon in the glade. Only “pryvee” occurs elsewhere in the tale, in a context I will discuss later.

9 Several critics have commented on the political significance of the tale in terms which I might be thought to contradict: Robert P. Miller, “The Miller’s Tale as Complaint,” Chaucer Review 5 (1970): 147–60; Knight (note 6), 90–93, and Lee Patterson, “’No man his reson herde’: Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer’s Miller, and the Structure of the Canterbury Tales,” South Atlantic Quarterly 86 (1987): 457–95. There is no fundamental disagreement, however, because the emphasis on privacy helps to make the tale socially disruptive. See Miller, 157; Knight, 91; and Patterson, 482.

10 There are some exceptions: Paula Neuss traces the semantic range of the word in the tale in “Double Entendre in The Miller’s Tale,” Essays in Criticism 24 (1974): 325–40. More recently, Laura Kendrick has discussed the previously downplayed connotations of God’s sexual organs (Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988], 5–19). D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. notes the consistent juxtaposition of the sacred and profane engendered by the famous pun (“’Goddes Pryvetee’ and Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale,” Christianity and Literature 33 [1984]: 7–12).

11 Only the Miller’s Tale and the much longer Parson’s Tale use the three words “pryvete,” “privy,” and “prively” more than ten times in total: the Miller 13 (averaging once in less than 58 lines) and the Parson 15 (once in about 73 “lines,” which are really independent clauses). The median rate of occurrence in the Tales is once in 184.3 lines (the Second Nun); only the Cook, the Miller, the Parson, and the Shipman—three of the four telling fabliaux—have rates of more than one in a hundred lines. For comparison, the Knight’s Tale’s rate is one in 450 lines.


13 On the theory of refreshment, and the obvious way in which the Miller’s Tale fulfills its prescriptions, see Glending Olson, Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982), 135–47.


18 The MED’s treatment of the word is exemplary: the early definitions refer to God (2b), divine law (3b), the personification of Justice as a daughter of God (2c), or the cardinal virtue (1). The last four (5–8) refer to those publicly empowered to
dispense justice. Definition 4, “Punishment, vengeance” is regularly contextualized in accordance with my terms: the Romance of the Rose invokes “apert justice,” and Chaucer’s Boece sounds a common note by making it clear that punishment can be equated with justice only when it is the divinely sanctioned meed of “wikkid schrewes” (Middle English Dictionary, ed. Hans Kurath et al. [Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1954]). Justice as a name of God is seen in Jeremiah 23:6.


20 I am thinking of A. C. Spearing’s introduction to his edition of the Knight’s Tale (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1966), especially 62–65. Spearing rightly emphasizes the anaphoric “Myn” of I.2456–60 (his 1598–1602), which at least suggests the essential privacy of Saturn’s authority.


25 Cooke (note 12) comments that “Moral justice in the fabliaux is only ancillary to artistic symmetry” (166). In discussions of the fabliaux, arguments for “poetic justice” often have a circular form which is well expressed by Pearcy: “any story whose narrative pattern generates, and decisively resolves, some conflict between individuals clearly differentiated from one another in their attitudes will necessarily imply a moral schema coincident with the system of rewards and punishments which pertains within its fictional world” (“Sentence and Solas” [note 4], 232). But to call that phenomenon justice of any sort is simply to multiply terms unnecessarily. In his recent The Canterbury Tales and the Good Society (note 15), which subsumes his earlier article, Paul A. Olson downplays the term “poetic justice”; he now contrasts the “transformative justice” of the Knight’s Tale to the “retributive justice” of the Miller’s (79). I will have more to say about that contrast at the end of this essay; for the moment I take “retributive justice” to be an oxymoronic reference to the dominance of retribution—a private activity in the terms I have been using—in the ethos of the fabliaux.

26 Olson discusses John’s avarice in “Poetic Justice” (note 14), 231–32. But according to Bloomfield (note 21), John is “obviously fond of his lodger” (209). Neither argument is strong enough to clinch the point, although Muscatine (note 5) notes that generosity is consistently treated as a virtue in the genre (75).

27 Cooke summarizes and punctures several attempts to describe the justice of Alison’s fate, concluding that “perfect justice does not function in this story” (183), at least with respect to her.

28 Bloomfield, 207.

29 Kolve (note 5), 197, makes this point with a rhetorical flourish.
It is not very clear how well lit we are to imagine the scene with the coulter to be, and therefore how “apert” Nicholas’s “privy” action may have been. “Derk was the nyght as pich” (3731) when Alison tricked Absolon, but after John’s fall the neighbors arrive, and “Into the roof they kiken and they cape” (3841), presumably aided by enough light to see the tubs. The scene between Nicholas and Absolon falls between these two, and must have had some light—certainly Absolon’s aim is accurate! On the timing of the tale see Macklin Smith, “‘Or I Wol Caste a Ston,’” Studies in the Age of Chaucer 8 (1986): 3–30, especially 28.

Among the Old French fabliaux, urination is most prominent in D’Aloul (Eichmann and DuVal, 1:162–201), in which a priest, working his way toward an assignation in his neighbor’s bed, pisses on a door to keep it from squeaking (Muscatine, 61).


David Bevington, ed., Medieval Drama (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 923. The MED lists this gobbet under “nature” n. 6b, “the urge to defecate”; but a clear contextual reference to kidney stones certifies that urination is the primarily intended meaning.

Kolve, 158–216. His chapter is entitled “Nature, Youth, and Nowell’s Flood.”

Neuss, 333–34, notes the oxymoronic quality of these incidents. For her, too, privacy is an illusion in this tale.

Compare Genesis 9:11–15. In the extant English mystery plays, references to this promise can be found in the Chester cycle (De Deluvio Noe, 345–60) and the York cycle (The Flood, 275–302).

Blodgett (note 17) makes a similar point (484). My image of the ultimate nakedness of privacy in the Miller’s Tale, which it tries to conceal with pyrotechnic variations on the words for privacy, is indebted to Bloch’s discussion of “The Ill-Fitting Coat of the Fabliaux” (note 30, 22–58), although my point is perhaps less determinedly deconstructionist than his in assuming a certain Chaucerian awareness of the process.

My discussion of the Knight’s Tale draws eclecticly on various familiar arguments, especially Charles Muscatine’s emphasis on the theme of order in Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957), 175–90, the inadequacy of Theseus’s effort to project that order as articulated by Spearing’s introduction and Elizabeth Salter, Chaucer: The Knight’s Tale and the Clerk’s Tale (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), 9–36, and the correlation of that inadequacy with the pagan setting of the poem in Kolve, 132–57.

There are many more examples, including 872–74, 1056–61, 1334–36, 1449–50, 2093–94, 2479–82, and 2741–42.


45 Kendrick (note 10) opts for the lively play of the *Miller’s Tale* (116–17), while Knight (note 6) voices the political view (92–93).


47 Spearing (note 20), 79.

48 Kendrick—rather grudgingly—makes the same point (129). My sense of the way the first two tales deconstruct one another could alternatively be expressed in Bakhtinian terms of heteroglossia. To the extent that the two are seen in a dialogic relationship (and certainly that is a plausible way to view them), it is impossible to use one as a lever against the other.