Chaucer’s Uncanny Regionalism: Rereading the North in The Reeve’s Tale

Joseph Taylor


Published by University of Illinois Press

DOI: 10.1353/egp.2010.0018

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/egp/summary/v109/109.4.taylor.html
Chaucer’s Uncanny Regionalism:
Rereading the North in The Reeve’s Tale

Joseph Taylor, University of Alabama in Huntsville

Considered one of the most striking instances of regionalism in medieval English literature, Chaucer’s use of northern dialect in The Reeve’s Tale has monopolized interpretation of the text’s attention to the North of England. The Reeve tells us that his clerks are from “fer in the north” (I.4015), and although he “kan nat telle where” (I.4015), the Reeve aptly mimes a recognizable northern speech. Hoping to stymie Symkyn’s thievery, they long to see “How that the hopur wagges til and fra” (I.4039). Literary historians famously have designated the text’s linguistic northernisms the first use of dialect for comedy in English literature. Among early critics, J. R. R. Tolkien establishes what becomes a frequent refrain, calling the tale’s northern dialect “primarily a linguistic joke” while also claiming it as “dramatic realism” and the product of “philological curiosity.” Critics in his wake have consequently viewed the tale’s dialect as shallow regionalism born of a few instances of the northern long /a/ amidst other northernisms that largely serve the tale’s literary realism, its inherent comedy, and its context in the quitting game between the Miller and Reeve.

Far from lending itself only to comedy, however, the North maintains a significant and sustained presence within the narrative landscape of The Canterbury Tales. Including the Reeve’s own story, four of the eight tales set on English soil refer to the North of England at some point in their narrative. In The Man of Law’s Tale, Constance finds herself washed I would like to thank the editors of JEGP and the anonymous reader for their insightful suggestions. I would, further, like to thank Elizabeth Scala, Daniel Birkholz, Mary Blockley, Jonathan Lamb, Brooke Hunter, Gregory Foran, Randy Schiff, and Timothy Turner for their incisive comments and suggestions at various stages of this essay’s development.

2. J. R. R. Tolkien, “Chaucer as Philologist: The Reeve’s Tale,” Transactions of the Philological Society, (1934), 2–3. By 1934, Tolkien can already claim that the tale’s northern speech is “so well known that it is taken for granted” (p. 3). A. C. Spearing calls the tale’s dialect a “consistent realism.” The Reeve’s Prologue and Tale, with the Cook’s Prologue and the Fragment of his Tale from the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), p. 3; Derek Pearsall terms the clerks mere “rustic buffoons.” The Canterbury Tales (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 188.
3. The three other tales I consider as explicitly taking place in England are those of the
ashore “Fer in Northumberlond” (II.508) where her own “Latyn corrupt” (II.519) is hardly understood. The devil-yeoman of The Friar’s Tale hails from “fer in the north contree” (III.1413), and the Summoner sets his own tale in Yorkshire in “A mersshy countree called Holdernesse” (III.1710). The Canterbury Tales draws to a close with the Parson’s vehement rejection of the northern alliterative verse form: “I am a Southren man; / I kan nat geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf,’ by lettre” (X.42–3). The region’s repeated appearance in The Canterbury Tales implies that the North has far greater implications for Chaucer than the linguistic humor and realism that has occupied attention for much of The Reeve’s Tale’s critical history.

Only recently have critics begun to move past the philological joke. Notably, Katie Wales offers various historical circumstances that might undergird Chaucer’s use of northern dialect, circumstances that she claims are “completely ignored” by linguistic historians: “the Anglo-Scottish wars of the fourteenth century”; the tense political situation in the years surrounding the likely date of composition of The Canterbury Tales; and “[t]he attention of Richard II . . . entirely focused on the wild borderlands as a political arena.” Thus, the northern dialect draws on more than a “simple opposition between southern superiority and northern inferiority.” Literary critics have also largely ignored these circumstances while pursuing new readings of The Reeve’s Tale. Combining cultural history and contemporary fourteenth-century politics, Wales suggests that, through the tale’s northern dialect and other allusions, “the mythology of the ‘North-South divide’ is intensified and complicated by new images of the political and ethnic, as the border conflicts and defence of the ‘frontier’ began to heighten the sense of an ‘English’ nation.” Given the focus of her study, which aims at a diachronic understanding of the social history of northern English to the present day, Wales does not further elaborate on her provocative comments about The Reeve’s Tale. But her observations adumbrate the literary effect of a northern consciousness on England’s emerging national literature. Such a comment suggests that we might profitably reexamine the North’s role in The Reeve’s Tale as participating in a dialectic of region and nation.

There is clearly something more to be said about the North in The Reeve’s Tale. Rather than its linguistic northernisms, however, I pro-

Miller, Cook, Canon’s Yeoman, and arguably the Wife of Bath (with its Arthurian setting). Although its locale is not specified, we can argue that The Nun’s Priest’s Tale takes place in England given the reference to the martyred St. Kenelm of Mercia (VII.4301–4302).


5. Wales, Northern English, p. 75.

6. Wales, Northern English, p. 75.
pose to analyze The Reeve’s Tale’s conceptual northernness, viewing the northern dialect as a symptom of the tale’s complex integration of the English North and the historical phenomenon of the North-South divide. The North’s problematic identity, born of its rebellious history, precarious position between the hegemony of southern England and the enemy Scotland, and its consequent ambiguity as either a loyal frontline of defense or place “much given to rebellion,”7 is fittingly captured by the Freudian term “uncanny,” an expression that conjoins the known and the unknown, the familiar with the frighteningly unfamiliar.8 In reading Chaucer’s regionalism in the text—both his depiction of northerners and his implied concerns for the Southeast in which he lives—as an attempt to work through anxieties provoked by the North’s uncanny presence in England, we discover Chaucer’s emergent national consciousness and the ways that regional identity complicate and contest his project.9

I. FAR IN THE NORTH

Even recent regionally-inflected readings of medieval literature have posited the notion of a provincialism that participates in the larger conversation of nation. Approaching the regional view from the perspective of national narratives, Thorlac Turville-Petre has suggested that “[t]he integration of divided loyalties is the driving force behind Havelok [the Dane], as it constructs a revised national story in which the Lincolnshire community plays a central part.” By examining the Lincolnshire from which Havelok emerges, then, Turville-Petre “stud[ies] the ways in which local communities expressed their sense of regional distinctiveness but


8. In exploring the term “uncanny” (unheimlich), Freud famously scrutinizes the definitions of heimlich and unheimlich in various lexicons, and he finds that the terms seem to merge—synonym and antonym—into one. Freud’s translators offer as English equivalents of these terms “homely” and “unhomely,” and also “familiar” and “unfamiliar,” the latter of which I will use interchangeably in this essay along with related terms such as “known” and “unknown,” and “familiar” and “strange.” All quotations of Freud are taken from The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 17, ed. James Strachey with Anna Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), pp. 217–52. For more on heimlich and unheimlich, see Sigmund Freud, The Uncanny, trans. David Mcintock (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 123–34.

at the same time demanded to be included in the image the nation had constructed of itself.” Taking the opposite approach, Robert Barrett studies a large corpus of Cheshire texts that “attends to the intranational tensions between Cheshire and the larger English community.” Such an investigation reveals “the strategies whereby local writers, texts, and performances maintain regional continuity in response to the administrative pressures of academic and political centers.” Like *Havelok* or the Cheshire texts of Barrett’s study, *The Canterbury Tales*—emerging amidst the social and political turmoil of the 1380s and early 1390s—demonstrates an assured interest in negotiations of the local and the national with its diverse group of pilgrims from “every shires ende” (I.15) who are forced to confront internal difference in order to achieve communal salvation at the shrine of Thomas Beckett.

Chaucer’s position in London distinguishes his regionalism from that of the *Havelok* author or Cestrian writers. He does not pen his text from the margins of the realm, hoping to overwrite cultural differences in order to infuse his own disparate region into the national imagination; rather, Chaucer writes from what is, in the late fourteenth century, the emerging center of English politics, law, and culture. London’s centrality is not unproblematic. Noting the scant literary production of England’s chief city during the early and mid-fourteenth century, Ralph Hanna finds that “before Chaucer, London may truly have been ‘provincial’, among England’s vernacular literary backwaters, just another locality.”

Chaucer’s words and the terminus of his study (1380), however, local-


ize Chaucer as a transitional figure, while Chaucer consciously places his own southeastern vernacular literature within a national framework wherein London becomes the focal point. This telescoping is evident in The Reeve’s Tale. Moreover, in his sociolinguistic study of the tale’s dialectology, Robert Epstein claims that the northern speech ultimately “serves to demonstrate that only the London dialect is the proper form of artistic expression; all other dialects become variations from the norm.”

More than linguistic hierarchies, however, Chaucer’s regionalism in The Reeve’s Tale (and over the course of The Canterbury Tales) argues that London is the center around which the rest of England turns, whose gravity draws in provincials and foreigners alike. London becomes the icon for a clear English hegemony in the Southeast—comprised of Westminster, London, and Canterbury as seats of law, commerce, and church—by the end of the fourteenth century, its status cemented by intense government consolidation in the later fifteenth century.

Chaucer, consequently, writes from this new center as if to understand better marginal communities—such as the medieval North—whose peoples were by then regularly infiltrating the city. John Bowers has called this communitarian impulse an “inside job’ undertaken by members of the ruling elite, Chaucer included, [whose] goal was the extension of a sense of collective belonging from the polis to the patria, from the face-to-face society of the city to the abstract community of the nation.” Yet the tension inhering in this transition from mere province (Hanna’s “literary backwater”) to national center occurs in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, wherein connotations of imperialism disturb the sense of communitarian wholeness. Explicitly, Epstein argues that Chaucer’s role in depicting northern speech in The Reeve’s Tale “resembles Said’s description of an Orientalist,” whose representation of the other seems “objective, accurate, for the purpose of ‘useful knowledge’ but the knowledge is useful to groups already in socially superior positions, whose authority is further legitimated by their access to philological knowledge.”

15. In Chaucer’s oeuvre, London largely constitutes an “absent city,” in David Wallace’s words, but this is only in the most literal sense. If London is rarely a setting in Chaucer’s poetry, it nevertheless haunts the works of the poet for whom it is a backdrop in his daily life: Wallace, Chaucerian Politic: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 156–81.
such a way, The Reeve’s Tale’s funny northern speech is meant to quell anxieties about a more dangerous northern other, so that Chaucer’s Southeast might feel comfortable about the ill-defined North’s assured place within the realm. The North becomes an object of study whose representation in the literature of London and the Southeast bears witness to a presumed inferiority.

Even before the clerks’ northern idiom, however, Chaucer can be seen to bring the patria into the polis through the figure of Oswald the Reeve. His ambivalent persona is far more unsettling than comical. The Reeve’s own Norfolk dialect associates him with the great number of East Midlanders who poured into London in the fourteenth century. Thomas Garbáty points to the Reeve’s Norfolk speech as something “all Londoners knew, that the Reeve is a “stock figure in London.”18 Derek Pearsall further exclaims of Oswald, “That one of the nastiest people in the Canterbury Tales should come from Norfolk seems a gratuitous slur, and one suspects that Chaucer is playing on Londoners’ contempt for parvenu immigrants from that area, especially given that they came into London in such numbers.”19 Oswald, then, occupies the uncanny space of a “common” London stranger.20

Oswald’s East Anglia origins also make him one of what John Trevisa calls the “men of myddel Engelond” who “understoneþ better þe side langages, norþerne and souþerne, þan norþerne and souþerne under-standeþ eipær oþer.”21 It is not surprising, then, that the Reeve can mimic northern dialect in his tale and also speak to southerners such as those on the pilgrimage with him. He is truly a “myddel man.” This intertwining of the familiar and the strange in the Reeve’s immigrant status and linguistic acumen carries over into his presence in The Canterbury Tales.

20. Derek Pearsall explains three terms often used to refer to noncitizens of London. “Strangers” are those people from other parts of England who immigrated to London. “Aliens” are those people from overseas who came to the city. “Foreigners” are residents of London, but, as with the city’s strangers and aliens, they were not freemen or citizens; rather, they were unenfranchised (“Strangers,” pp. 48–49). In this essay, I will use these terms as Pearsall defines them here.
His emergence from the “hyndreste of oure route” (I.622) to the center of the contest in order to quit the Miller, his self-description of his “hoor heed and . . . grene tayl” (I.3878) and his “olde lemes” (I.3886) and “coltes tooth” (I.3888), his likeness to the “open-ers” (I.3871) or medlar’s fruit that is rotten yet ripe at the same time, all frame the context of an ambiguous North in his tale. The paradox of the Reeve outlines the ensuing contemplation of an uncanny North that subtly underlies his narrative.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the North looms as a cultural and political bogeyman over the rest of England. As a border community promising to defend England from foreign incursion while at the same time evoking fear as a landscape already “full of filthy, treacherous, subhuman Scots,” the North induces anxiety over the paradox of its physical and cultural geography. Unlike the Irish, the Welsh, and for that matter the enemy Scots, northerners remained within the borders of England while at the same time far-flung from the ideological heart of the realm in the South. This geographic remoteness calls to mind what Kathy Lavezzo terms “problematic lacks: to be ‘barren,’ to be ‘fragile,’ and to ‘degenerate.’” For nonnortherners like Chaucer, the North’s marginality insinuated a sterile nationalism, a weak military vanguard, and a culturally inferior people. Such a view is summed up by a 1385 entry in the Westminster Chronicle. Commenting on the defense of the borders, the author contends: “Whereas in the old days our Northerners used to be very active and vigorous, they have . . . become lazy and spiritless, disdaining to protect their homeland against the wiles of the enemy.” This ambivalence to a national defense is coupled with a long history of aggressiveness and rebellion that finds the North, as Trevisa translates Higden in 1387, “more unstable, more cruel, and more unesy” than England’s other regions.

Chaucer’s apparent simple evocation of northernness through dialect in The Reeve’s Tale means to calm anxieties provoked by the North’s equivocal identity. But through its dialectology The Reeve’s Tale, unwittingly or

23. The South’s prominence as the ruling center of England grew particularly in the late-thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Bruce M. S. Campbell notes that other than times of war, medieval kings spent much of their time in the South and Midlands, of which “London and Westminster . . . were [the] nerve center,” and which held the majority of their palaces and hunting grounds. Notably, by 1350, 85 percent of all councils and parliaments were held in London and Westminster. Campbell, “North-South Dichotomies, 1066–1550,” in Geographies of England: The North-South Divide Material and Imagined, ed. Allen R. H. Barker and Mark Billinge (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), p. 158.
otherwise, imports more than it intends and certainly more than the mere humor with which critics so often associate it. Epstein’s incisive depiction of Chaucer as an Orientalist remains, for the purpose of his study, at the philological level. Yet attention to the tale’s action, specifically its violent end, and what I will show is an enlightened close reading by the Cook suggest that its representation of northerners—a kind of doubling of the northern other—works against its implied nationalist aims. Patricia Clare Ingham explains that “Freud’s ‘uncanny’ resonates with the submission required by national communities,”27 that nations fantasize their unity through acts of doubling wherein the problematic other is domesticated into the larger community. Literary critics like Ingham have discovered numerous rich and complex examples of this “psychoanalytic logic” to nationalism in medieval vernacular romances, but I argue that we can find it in Chaucer’s fabliau as well. This logic reverberates in The Reeve’s Tale, but it does so at a cost. Such doubling or mimicry, as Homi Bhabha has taught us, “must continually produce [the other’s] slippage, its excess, its difference,”28 and in Chaucer’s second fabliau, the representation of the two clerks brings with it the full and frightening weight of northern strange-ness, a grave threat to Chaucer’s national imagination. If in mimicking northerners The Reeve’s Tale aims at a literary surmounting of northern otherness to the benefit of the English nation, then that doubling produces instead a menacing North that undoes Chaucer’s project altogether.

II. UNSETTLING GEOGRAPHIES, OR “NOT FAR FROM CAMBRIDGE”

Elements of the uncanny, of the familiar and unfamiliar, overwhelm The Reeve’s Tale and its context. Ignoring Cambridge as the locus amoenus of his story, the obvious rebuttal to the Miller’s Oxford setting, the Reeve instead takes us all to Trumpington. The quitting game between the Miller and Reeve obscures the fact that this quarrel is not specifically Cambridge set against Oxford. Oswald provides some mundane details of the place—a “brooke,” “brigge,” and “mille” (I.3922–23)—and we are assured that Trumpington is “nat fer fro Cantebrigge” (I.3921). But the tiny crossroads is not Cambridge and we are denied the surer footing of a town setting similar to that of The Miller’s Tale’s “at Oxenford” (I.3187). If we con-

27. Ingham, Sovereign Fantasies, p. 208. Ingham gestures here toward the interplay of the uncanny and issues of political nationhood, national ideology, and foreignness in the work of Homi K. Bhabha (see nn. 28 and 46 below) and Julia Kristeva (notably Strangers to Ourselves, trans. Leon S. Roudiez [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991]).
sider the pilgrim’s place at this moment in the *Canterbury Tales*, then we realize that the Reeve’s audience is between Southwark and Greenwich (“Lo Grenewyke, ther many a shrew is inne!” [I.3907]), listening to a stranger from “Biseye . . . Baldeuswelle” (I.620) tell a tale that takes place “nat fer fro Cantebrigge.” The pilgrim route to Canterbury is well known and Trumpington is not unknown, but the geography in and around The Reeve’s Tale remains unsettling. This always liminal status is illustrated further in the sequence of descriptors that inform John’s and Aleyn’s origins in the North. The clerks are “from a toun . . . that highte Strother” (I.4014), but if we find any surety of place here, it dissolves in the Reeve’s “I kan nat telle where” (I.4015).

The clerks’ vague origins should not obscure the fact that, like their narrator, they intimate London connections. This stems from the role served frequently by their college in service of the crown’s administrative works in London. John and Aleyn arrive at Symkyn’s mill from the “greet colleuge . . . / Men clepen the Soler Halle” (I.3989–90), which Alan Cobban long ago suggested refers to the King’s Hall at Cambridge. The King’s Hall garnered a substantial portion of its scholars from Yorkshire.29 Founded by Edward II as the Society of King’s Scholars and endowed by Edward III, the college “seems always to have been intended to provide a supply of graduates in both ecclesiastical and secular spheres particularly for the king’s service.”30 Its graduates, then, may have been common to London, employed in the Chancery or any number of other services. As Cobban further allows, “Even if Chaucer did not actually visit the college (although he may very well have done), his close court connections and career as a royal servant make it more than likely that some of the King’s Scholars would have been numbered among his acquaintance.”31 Walking about London speaking in his regional tongue, a northern “soler halle” scholar like John or Aleyn might be seen paradoxically as both familiar and strange, not unlike the Norfolk Reeve.

Given this discussion of immigrants in London, it is telling that The Cook’s Prologue and Tale immediately follow The Reeve’s. The Cook indeed is the only one who laughs at its conclusion. The pilgrims, who “for the moore part . . . loughe and pleyde” (I.3858) at The Miller’s Tale’s end,

---

29. Alan B. Cobban, *The King’s Hall within the University of Cambridge in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969). Only the county of Norfolk provided a greater number of students. As Cobban finds, from the period 1317–1443, the two counties provide one quarter of the 203 scholars whose geographic origins might be identified by surnames (pp. 157–59), remarkable given that scholars over this period arrive from thirty-six different counties.


31. Cobban, *The King’s Hall*, p. 16.
sit silently as the Cook of London chuckles: “Ha! ha!” (I. 4327). If we con-
tinue with The Cook’s Prologue, however, his laughter is explained. His
affinity for Flemish proverbs—“sooth pley, quaad pley” (I.4357)—points
to his comfort with London immigrants. In other words, he is the only one
who gets the Reeve; he is the only one who would be comfortable with
Norfolk men, northerners, and Flemings in London. Yet this is because
the Cook was himself once an immigrant, who has now seemingly settled
permanently in the city. Twice called the “Cook of London,” Roger, in his
own words, hails from Ware, a town north of London in Hertfordshire that,
as David Wallace has explained, staged significant resistance to the Statute
of Laborers in the 1350s and whose citizens played a prominent role in
the events of 1381 (notably sacking John of Gaunt’s palace at the Savoy).
As Wallace suggests, “The name of Ware comes freighted with suggestions
of unruliness or violence imported to the city from the provinces.”32 We
must wonder whether the Cook’s amicable gestures towards the Reeve
imply more sinister collusion between the two in the future.

What might The Cook’s Tale have offered on the topic of strangers not
merely lurking in Trumpington or at the Scottish marches but within the city
itself? The centrality of Roger of Ware and his penchant for alien proverbs
foreground the reality of, and the ideological concerns for, the foreigner,
the stranger, or the alien within London. Symkyn is offensive for his local
scheme, a dishonest miller who steals from the folks and institutions of the
surrounding Cambridge countryside and who aims to better himself and
his family through “hooly chirches” wealth. If Symkyn operates far from
the city in the tale, the London associations of the Reeve, the two clerks, and
the Cook intimate that the Cambridge miller might take his thieving to the
capital sooner rather than later. Each of these strangers provokes anxiety
for the multiple geographies that inhere in them and for the uncanny
way their “real” and textual personas are conflated—the manner in which
details of their descriptions allude to the “strange” in London. They come
to embody marginalized communities enfolded over the English center.

III. THE LOCAL AND THE NATIONAL,
FABLIAU AND ROMANCE

In pitting northerners against “deynous Symkyn” (I.3941), The Reeve’s
Tale aims to achieve the containment of both. Symkyn’s character of-
fends in numerous ways. His “hosen of the same” (I.3955) as his wife’s
“gyte of reed” (I.3954), his base occupation (“A theef he was for sothe

of corn and mele” (I.3939)), and his plot to marry his virgin daughter “Into som worthy blood of auncetrye” (I.3982) leave little doubt that he is a despicable character. The Reeve overwhelms us with his description, nearly eighty of the tale’s 404 lines. The two clerks John and Aleyn are meant to stymie Symkyn’s social disruption, much as the Reeve aims to “Stynt [the] clappe!” (I.3144) of the pilgrim Miller when he interrupts the storytelling contest. In this way, the tale adumbrates a North in service to the greater English nation, symbolically quelling the social unrest of Symkyn’s local quasi-rebellion and putting Symkyn in his proper place quietly grinding corn.

The Man of Law’s Tale offers a similar example of such juxtaposition, where the contiguity of two others, Syria and Northumberland, is used towards gentrifying one of them. Suzanne Conklin Akbari notes that the two pagan locales “highlight the variable nature of strangeness,” but Northumberland “goes on to become not only a Christian country but part of England itself. It is both strange (then) and familiar (now).”33 The nearness of exotic Syria enhances Northumberland’s conversion over the course of the tale as it is brought into the English fold. In multifarious ways, The Reeve’s Tale’s local and contained settings—a fabliau at a miller’s tiny house just beyond the small village of Trumpington—nevertheless pursue similar interests. The Reeve’s Tale, as numerous scholars have rightly suggested, attends to the shifting nature of the English economy whose participants come from a burgeoning middle class. The tale aims to make familiar the peasant other signified through Symkyn, to put him in his place.34 But it is also preoccupied with the fragility of an emergent English nation. It seems subtly to ask, “What about the North?” Indeed, The Reeve’s Tale combines its interests in the local and the national, each


of which testifies to the internal liminality of the English nation-state in the late fourteenth century.

The national implications underlying gestures to the English North in The Reeve’s Tale seem beyond the realism, moral subversion, and atmosphere of game typical of the fabliau. Various circumstances brought the North to the forefront of late fourteenth-century English politics at the very same time that the country wrestled with the destabilization of the monarchy and chronic war with France and Scotland. Richard II, defiantly playing upon the social phenomenon of the North-South divide, moved the Bench and Chancery to York in 1392, as Helen Jewell notes, to “spite London.” Bowers, further, suggests that the move was “an early experiment at distancing the offices of government as well as the king’s familia from the antagonistic southeastern counties.” Richard also brought several northerners into his intimate circle including the soon-to-be-deposed English Chancellor Michael de la Pole from Hull, whose brother (perhaps ironically) owned a water mill at Trumpington.

35. In his seminal study of the French influence on Chaucer, Charles Muscatine finds the literature of the bourgeois tradition, within which he includes fabliau, to be “‘realistic’ or ‘naturalistic’” in the sense that it “[deals] with life directly, with something of life’s natural shape and vitality”; it is, further, “full of exaggeration, of caricature, and grotesque imagination” that “finds its easiest subject in low life.” Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1957), p. 59. Benson echoes Muscatine in his introduction to The Miller’s Tale in the *Riverside Chaucer*, where he describes the fabliau as “a lively image of everyday life among the middle and lower classes” (p. 7). In his admittedly “elephantine description,” Erik Hertog defines the fabliau as “a stylized short narrative in a predominantly materialist semantic register, involving mostly stock bourgeois, lower-class and clerical characters in rigidly programmed plots of far-fetched, humorous and often sexual deceptions and retaliations, governed by local space and clock-time, and often concluded with a moral.” Hertog, *Chaucer’s Fabliaux As Analogues* (Belgium: Leuven Univ. Press, 1991), p. 3.


37. John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), p. 73. Bowers also discusses at length Richard’s obsession with Cheshire, his surrounding himself (quite literally) with Cheshire men, and his rumored intent to “make Cheshire the inner citadel of the nation, a central bastion from which to rule Wales and Ireland as well as England” (p. 74). Such a revelation only heightens the anxieties of Londoners like Chaucer who aimed both to declare and maintain the capital as England’s hegemonic center.

38. See Britton J. Harwood, “Psychoanalytic Politics: Chaucer and Two Peasants,” *ELH*, 68 (2001), 2–27. Harwood suggests that Chaucer has in mind various historical figures and events, including the Peasant’s Revolt, when he writes The Reeve’s Tale. Important here is Harwood’s assertion that Edmund de la Pole, who owned a water mill at Trumpington from 1372 and was the brother of the former chancellor of England Michael de la Pole, is the signified for Symkyn’s mill in this tale of overtly political imperatives. Harwood correlates various figures, including Chaucer himself, with the tale’s characters (some multiple times—Chaucer is both Symkyn and the clerks), and suggests that the clerks’ northern dialect is one of many ways Michael de la Pole’s identity is “displaced,” since the Poles “for three generations came from Hull and Yorkshire” (p. 10).
It is not, then, far-fetched to suggest that such events informed Chaucer’s northern consciousness as he wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, though it is remarkable that it should emerge first in a brief fabliau. But *The Reeve’s Tale* does not lend itself to such a strict interpretation of the genre as does its counterpart, The Miller’s Tale. V. A. Kolve has said, “Although Chaucer’s program calls for us to hear two fabliaux in a row, he avoids the mere repetition of mood and material by altering almost totally the context in which we hear the second.”\(^3\) Speaking specifically of Arthurian romance, Ingham argues that “medieval community is imagined not through homogeneous stories of a singular ‘people,’ but through narratives of sovereignty as a negotiation of differences, of ethnicity, region, language, class, and gender.”\(^4\) Her comment is applicable to romance more broadly, and it complements Geraldine Heng’s explanation of romance as a genre whose “objects of attention are crises of collective and communal identity—the identity of the emerging medieval nation of England.”\(^5\) But *The Reeve’s Tale* demonstrates an attention to such crises.\(^6\) In a moment revealing of its national consciousness, *The Reeve’s Tale* subtly gestures toward romance through an overlooked correlation with *The Knight’s Tale*.

Symkyn patronizes the clerks, who come to the miller’s house to solicit lodging after a long day chasing their loosed horse through the fens. Symkyn challenges them in their own clerkly terms—to “make a place / A myle brood of twenty foot of space” (I.4123–24). Numerous critics follow the logic that Symkyn’s mocking equation stems explicitly from the town and gown rivalry we witness in *The Miller’s Tale*. But I would offer an alternative reading here: Symkyn’s metaphoric “myle brood” house finds its precursor in Theseus’s “noble theatre” (I.1885) in *The Knight’s Tale*, whose “circuit a myle was aboute” (I.1887). Theseus’s arena signifies his power over his subjects in the act of its construction, in its sheer physical presence, and its function. It literally surrounds not just Athenian citizens, but prisoners and foreign armies. It becomes a site of naturalization, of gentrifying those who are unfamiliar, strange, and offensive. Theseus, according to William Woods, embodies “a world of chivalry where princes’

---

42. In his seminal study of *Les Fabliaux* (Geneva: Droz, 1971), Per Nykrog famously illustrates the proximity, at times overlap, of romance and fabliau: the fabliau is a “caricature burlesque” of the courtly romance. What I hope this essay demonstrates is that the fabliau aspires to more than simple parody; rather, that more pressing concerns of the local and national might underlie the explicit comedy of the fabliau.
wills preserve the order of things inherited from old times.”43 But if Theseus “tempers the chivalric with the domestic,”44 then he also, specifically, domesticates the foreign. This ethic that informs Chaucer’s own interests in London’s strangers, including those surrounding The Reeve’s Prologue and Tale: the Reeve, the two clerks, and the Cook. Though he tears down the walls of Thebes, Theseus encloses the leftover Thebans, Palamoun and Arcite, in the Athenian walls of his prisonhouse. His marriage to Hypolita, his inquisition of the crying Theban widows—“why that ye been clothed thus in black” (I.911)—his conquest of Creon for the Theban king’s strange treatment of dead bodies, and, again, his war theater, all serve to render knowable, and consequently safe, the alien other. The two Theban princes, Palamoun and Arcite, are supported by whole armies of “straunge” men—under the “kyng of Trace” (I.2129) and the “kyng of Inde” (I.2156), men carrying a “Pruce sheeld” (I.2122) or the “clooth of Tars” (I.2160). Theseus masterfully surrounds these foreign forces with his theater where his own Athenian citizens, his true subjects, observe and, thus, come to know these exotics in the context of safe entertainment.45

The narrator-Knight performs his own naturalizing act in the description of the two armies, linking the foreign, mercenary knights of Palamoun’s and Arcite’s forces with domestic, English knights:

> For if ther felle tomorwe swich a cas,
> Ye knownen wel that every lusty knyght
> That loveth paramours and hath his might,
> Were it in Engelond or elleswhere,
> They wolde, hir thankes, wilnen to be there (I.2110–14)

A hypothetical “Were it in Engelond” modifies the “cas” of fighting for Emelye’s hand, yet it also informs “every lusty knyght.” Chaucer’s English Knight speaks for fellow “lusty” English compatriots who, because of their devotion to “paramours,” would take up this competition whether it was conveniently at home in England or elsewhere. His interjection makes the foreign armies more English.

We expect such explicit colonial discourse from a romance like The Knight’s Tale. Yet this attention to crises and the resultant domesticating impulse witnessed in The Knight’s Tale is at work in The Reeve’s Tale as well. The everyday concerns of the fabliau become, as Bhabha might describe them, “[t]he scraps, patches, and rags of daily life [that] must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very

43. Woods, *Chaucerian Spaces*, p. 16
act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects.”46 Symkyn means his house to become, like Theseus’s arena, a sign of his own triumphs over the clerks, but his dwelling also becomes an arena of sorts in which a contest between strangers plays out. In the baser rivalries typical of the fabliau, Chaucer’s attention to the nation re-emerges. John responds to Symkyn’s mocking provocation to “make rowm of speche” with another of the tale’s northernisms: “by Seint Cuthberd, / Ay is thou myrie, and this is faire answerd. / I have herd seyd, ‘Man sal taa of twa thynges: / Slyk as he fyndes, or taa slyk as he brynges” (I.4127–30). If we have forgotten their northernness by this point in the tale, John’s evocation of the northern St. Cuthbert and his curious maxim spoken in northern inflections remind us that the miller brings clerks more strange than usual into his home. This second smaller amphitheater will aim to naturalize the strange clerks. Contrary to John’s dictum, however, these northerners take both what they find and what they bring.

IV. NORTHERN DOPPELGÄNGERS

In the miller’s house, Symkyn and the northern clerks—“Right in the same chambr by and by” (I.4143)—confront each other blindly, “for it was derk” (I.4225), and the day ends badly for the miller. Darkness necessitates the tale’s bedroom melee and seems almost to activate the frightening turn in the clumsy northerners, who then prey on the wife and daughter. Noting Freud’s lexical investigation of the term “uncanny,” Nicholas Royle admits, “Darkness is a factor that stares us in the face . . . when it comes to considering the various dictionary definitions of ‘heimlich’ and ‘unheimlich.’”47 Freud notes a particular passage, for example, “The unheimliche, fearful hours of night.”48 But darkness here, as a literal lack of sight or blindness, equates further to a figurative sightlessness. Freud remembers F. W. J. Schelling’s definition of the uncanny “as some-
thing which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.” This slippage in Freud’s discussion from literal darkness to figurative blindness reverberates in the action of The Reeve’s Tale. Susan Yager points out that The Reeve’s Tale “contains numerous references to visual perception, especially examples of hindered or restricted sight,” and Helen Cooper witnesses in the tale “linked ideas of illusion, understanding, and blindness.” The tale’s violent shift in the bedroom seems brought on by the lack of light. Woods tellingly notes at this moment in the narrative a “freedom” that unleashes the clerks’ “natural’ aggression,” their animalism. One is reminded of a story Freud recounts, in which a young couple stumbles around in the dark of their new flat fancying that they see something moving about the place. The implication is that the bizarre crocodiles carved into the couple’s table come to life in the darkness. Though Freud calls the story naïve, he still finds its effect remarkably uncanny. Similarly, the darkness of the miller’s bedroom brings out the monstrous—a latent violent northernness—in the clerks.

In the climactic scene of The Reeve’s Tale, the clerks are not merely antagonists to Symkyn but his unwieldy doubles. Symkyn has spent part of the tale miming clerical speech—his ironic proverb, for example, “The gretteste clerces been noght wisest men” (I.4054). And the clerks have pursued milling—John will “se hougates the corn gas in” (I.4037) and Aleyen notes “how that the mele falles doun” (I.4042). But John and Aleyen do not come to double upon Symkyn until they inhabit the tiny confines of the dark bedroom. This doubling action most explicitly begins when Aleyen couples with the miller’s daughter, Malyne. Aleyen admittedly claims the daughter’s virginity as repayment for losses he has accrued, and in taking possession of her maidenhood, the very thing that Symkyn wields towards the refashioning of his own peasanthood, Aleyen comes to double on Symkyn himself. Malyne has been an instrument through which her father and grandfather, the village parson, play out their socially distorted designs. Now, however, she profits Aleyen by leading him to the clerks’ baked grain. Blinded by pride, much as Symkyn throughout the story, Aleyen climbs back into what he thinks is his own bed and proceeds to recount his sexual exploits unwittingly to the miller himself. Their ensuing fight sets off the tale’s final chaotic moments. Before his own undoing, however, Symkyn quite literally reshapes Aleyen’s visage into his own image: “And on

the nose he smoot hym with his fest. / Doun ran the blody streem upon his brest; / And in the floor, with nose and mouth tobroke, / They walwe as doon two pigges in a poke” (I.4275–78). Symkyn gives Aleyn the “kamus nose” (I.3974) he and his daughter notably wear, and the miller and clerk then fall into a pile indistinguishable as “two pigges in a poke.”

Remaking the room by moving the cradle, John takes up the place of Symkyn, even the place of the miller’s bed. John, further, doubles on Symkyn quite literally taking his place atop the miller’s wife in copulation. Like the diminutive hero of Chaucer’s mock romance Sir Thopas, who “pryked as he were wood” (VII.774), John “priketh harde and depe as he were mad” (I.4231), performing, as Woods cleverly notes, a sexual grinding that parallels Symkyn’s milling.53 John’s sporting with the wife seems both funny and frightening. Daniel Pigg, however, reads the description of John’s lovemaking unambiguously as “[transforming] the sexual coupling into an act of violence.”54 Such a reading reflects back on Aleyn’s own lovemaking.

The analogues to The Reeve’s Tale all involve some sort of complicity on the part of the miller’s daughter, whether this be her clear acceptance of the clerk into her bed or, in the case of De Gombert et des II clers and Le Meunier et les deux clers, a faux ring taken from a cooking pan meant to express the clerk’s earnestness to her.55 Diverging from these earlier tales, Chaucer’s version suggests a darker crime:

And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte.
This wenche lay uprighte and faste slept,
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. (I.4193–97)

Aleyn does not proposition Malyne with words or ring, but rather simply attacks her so fast that she cannot even cry out. The question of rape here may never be answered, and Malyne’s near weeping at Aleyn’s dawn departure challenges the argument altogether.56 Yet Pigg sees her crying

53. Woods, Chaucerian Spaces, p. 53
56. Long ago, R. E. Kaske refuted sympathetic readings of the miller’s daughter, suggesting instead that the parting speeches between Malyne and Aleyn were parodies of the aube or dawn-song, parodies that inform the lowliness of both the clerk’s and the daughter’s characters. His essay offers a brilliant comparative reading of The Reeve’s Tale’s aube with the medieval tradition of the dawn-song, yet Kaske does not study the lines preceding the night of sex, the lines of Aleyn’s approaching Malyne, which I think are essential to interpreting the entirety of the scene’s intentions. Kaske, “An Aube in The Reeve’s Tale,” ELH, 26 (1959), 295–310.
as “recognition that she could not possibly prove it now,” and other readings of the scene by Elaine Tuttle Hansen and Tamarah Kohanski, without hesitation, speak of “the Reeve’s description of the rape of Malyne.”

Most recently, Nicole Nolan Sidhu clarifies that though rape is not uncommon to the fabliau “[t]he 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 or pain.”

These acts of violence complicate the tale’s aim to domesticate the northern other and illustrate the slippages that are always the product of doubling.

For Symkyn, bringing the clerks into his home was to conclude his labor of both making the clerks more peasant-like as himself and at the same time making himself more clerical. Subsumed into his domestic space, the clerks are initially what Symkyn would have them be: doubles of himself that are ambivalently the same as him, yet inferior. In this way, they symbolically affirm the continuation of his thievery and his livelihood. This is akin to Freud’s own explanation of the double, citing the work of Otto Rank, as a defense against annihilation. But the excess violence adhering in Aleyn’s rape and the excess pleasure the wife derives from John’s unSymkyn-like lovemaking forebode the miller’s demise. We realize the moment when the double in its slippages and difference becomes, as Freud terms it, “the uncanny harbinger of death” in the little bit of light that permeates the miller’s bedroom.

In the final scene of the tale, the “litel shymering of a light” (I.4297) from the moon effects a process of unfortunate enlightenment. Royle concedes, “It is not so much darkness itself . . . but the process of ceasing to be dark, the process of revelation or bringing to light that is uncanny.”

In the newfound clarity of the bedroom, the full weight of the clerks’ violent turn comes to fruition, and this is contributed to by one final derivative of fabliau comedy. Symkyn’s wife commits a last act of misrecognition:

And whan she gan the white thyng espye,
She wende the clerk hadde wered a volupeer,
And with the staf she drow ay neer and neer,


58. Nicole Nolan Sidhu, “‘To Late for to Crie’: Female Desire, Fabliau Politics, and Classical Legend in Chaucer’s Reeve’s Tale,” Exemplaria, 21 (2009), 8–12.


61. Royle, The Uncanny, p. 108
And wende han hit this Aleyn at the fulle,
And smoot the millere on the pyled骷髅。(I.4302–4306)

Like a “crack of doom,” this figurative deathblow signals the end of Symkyn as we know him—he cries, “Harrow! I dye!” (I.4307)—his larger-than-peasant body, his own strangeness, reduced to mere normalcy. Ironically, the promise of light in an otherwise dark room provokes the wife’s misguided blow, a point that only further illustrates the fragility of sight intrinsic in the uncanny and rehearsed throughout The Reeve’s Tale. In the “white thyng,” the bald head mistaken for a clerk’s volup, she cannot recognize the familiar from the strange.

Stunned by her blow, Symkyn is helpless as the clerks “beete hym weel and lete hym lye” (I.4308), but by their own final violent act, the tale’s investment in the North has soured. The Reeve’s Tale aims to surmount northern otherness through the comedy of regional speech and through the quitting of the economic other, Symkyn, but the violence the clerks perpetrate implies a decidedly unfunny remainder of the North that redoubles not only on the miller but on the tale’s nationalist impulse. The North becomes what Bhabha would describe as the “double vision that is the result of . . . the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object.”62 The clerks’ assault on the Symkyn family does not merely fail to naturalize their northernness; it infects the miller’s family with strangeness. As in numerous anxieties about the sexual prowess of the ethnic or cultural stranger that proliferate throughout western history, Aley’s invasion is one that fuses his strange northern body to the nonnorthern woman; and she takes pleasure in it. The wife’s confusion at the gratification she derives from John—she too finds it pleasurable—further underlines the dangerous possibilities inherent in the stranger’s presence. John’s act defuses Symkyn’s overt masculinity making him strange to his wife, “So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yoore” (I.4230). At the same time, wife and daughter are figuratively converted in what Gila Aloni calls a “series of optical errors and confusions that . . . reveal that those whom Symkyn believes to be the most intimate to him—his private property, his wife and daughter—are the most foreign to him.”63 Herein lies the significance of the Cook’s laughter.

V. KNIFE, NORTH, AND NATION

The Cook, in a fit, chuckles, “For Cristes passion, / This millere hadde a sharp conclusion / Upon his argument of herbergage!” (I.4327–29).

62. Bhabha, The Location of Culture, p. 89.
These lines are frequently glossed as referring back to the moments of Symkyn’s anticlericism, when he mocks the two Cambridge clerks for their “lerned art” (I.4122) and challenges them of his house to “make it rowm of speche” (I.4126). It seems, thus, Symkyn the “gylour” is “hymself bigyled” (I.4321). Yet the miller’s bad experience with lodgers, his “sharp conclusion,” is not merely mock-philosophic. If we consider Symkyn’s description in The Reeve’s Tale’s opening lines, we then realize that the Cook’s close reading might mean something quite different, that he indeed alludes to Symkyn’s own knife with his modifying “sharpness.” The arsenal of blades is prominent in the Reeve’s sketch of him:

Ay by his belt he baar a long panade,
And of a sword ful trenchant was the blade.
A joly poppere baar he in his pouche;
Ther was no man, for peril, dorste hym touche.
A Sheffeld thwitel baar he in his hose. (I.3929–33)

What lies subtly among these weapons is actually the tale’s first evocation of the English North: the “Sheffeld thwitel,” a detail of the Reeve’s knowledge of the North that signifies much like the clerks’ own dialect. The Cook’s facetious remark tellingly links that northern blade with the northern clerks. Ironically, like the men within The Knight’s Tale’s amphitheater who wear Tarsian cloths and Prussian shields, Symkyn bears a weapon exotic in its own Insular way. Lingering “in his hose,” the northern knife prefigures the miller’s demise. Indeed, Symkyn carries the North in his pants, and the irony should not be lost. The Sheffield steel, familiar as a weapon on which Symkyn depends for protection and, more, for intimidation, figuratively redounds upon him in the northern students’ violent attack on the miller and his family.

The knife, however, gestures beyond the tale itself, offering what can be seen as a fitting caveat about the North of England. In his own prologue, the Cook responds to Symkyn’s fate with a Biblical admonition: “‘Ne bryng nat every man into thyn hous, / For herberwyne by nyghte is perilous. / Wel oghte a man avysed for to be” (I.4331–33). The imperative is explicit: one shouldn’t be flippant about the person he allows into his home. But the Cook’s careful attention to the Reeve’s story, more careful than we would expect, highlights the northernness lurking in the tale, and his point about the miller’s “sharp conclusioun” suggests a more complex exegesis of Solomon’s proverb on “herbergage.” The Cook’s “by nyghte” implies both the literal and figurative darkness that facilitates the violent assaults in Symkyn’s bedroom. This is the uncanny effect of darkness, one’s “being in the dark,” unaware of who or what stands in front of them or who sleeps beside them (“Right in the same chambre by and by” [I.4143]). Such darkness might
not allow “a man avysed for to be,” just as Symkyn’s arrogance blinds him towards the dangerous potential of the two bumbling Cambridge students, just as he carries a northern blade on him each day. A question, then, emerges that reflects on the ambivalence of the medieval North: what can one do about the “man” already in one’s house, the man whose motives are shadowed and to whose potentialities one is blind?

The Cook’s close reading reminds the tale’s audience that the North is already within the borders of England, in “thyn hous,” as are the northern clerks in Symkyn’s dwelling and the northern blade in his pants. Symkyn inadvertently replaces his northern blade with two northern pricks that ravish both his wife and daughter and leave him in a bloody heap. The excess of violence that inheres in the final scene exposes traces of the frightening North, a brutality that might recoil upon nonnortherners who blindly expect its protection at the boundaries of their realm, much as Symkyn’s knife comes back on him. In juxtaposing the North with the more immediate social threat in Symkyn, Chaucer’s tale desires to know the North, to affirm its place in an expanding English community, but the uncanny region both complicates and disturbs these desires. If Symkyn has threatened the local Cambridge economy, then the North, signified in the two clerks, threatens England’s economy of nation.

In the figures of the Reeve and his clerks, we witness Chaucer’s regionalism, his writing from the center, in service of its apparent opposite, nationalism. But by depicting such troubling yet common strangers, Chaucer illustrates, perhaps unwittingly, the pressures under which his own ideological narrative succumbs. His nationalist text is riven by difference at the very moment it evokes the North, northerners, and northerness, the great other at England’s margins where difference waits to reemerge and envelop the center. Chaucer’s failure to hold onto the North in his tale further enlivens the regionality of Symkyn, the Reeve, and the Cook. Chaucer’s attempt to bring the North and other “strangers” into the fold in fact reverses the figurative centeredness of the pilgrims as a whole. Rather than bringing England together “from every shires ende,” the emergence of the uncanny North in The Reeve’s Tale aids the redistribution of regional identity to the gathered pilgrims. No longer are they signifiers of a multipolar England subsumed into a single body and marching towards salvation in Canterbury; instead, they reflect the still disembodied state of the English nation, colluding with, crashing into, and repulsing one another, wilting along the road of a never-ending journey toward redemption. If Chaucer sees his own region in the Southeast as a center whose unity will reflect out toward the margins of the realm, his preoccupation with the North suggests that what is reflected back at Chaucer is instead the very impossibility of that wholeness; rather than a city wiped clean of
difference, London is instead populated by a mesh of Norfolk men, Ware
men, northern scholars, Flemings, and other miscreants who defile the
purity of a conceptual English nation.

National narratives must work to deny and hide these ruptures, and we
might view such intentions in The Reeve’s Tale’s contemplation of the
North and the ensuing repetitions of the North in The Canterbury Tales,
but they are already undone the moment Symkyn’s northern blade is
named. This is why all of the anxiety and fear provoked by the Reeve and
his clerks does not add up to the “hilarious nonsense” so often read into
the tale’s “brilliant connotative linguistic joke,” a joke Chaucer’s audience
according to critics is supposed to have found “excruciatingly funny.”64
We might suppose that Chaucer does imagine an English nation in The
Canterbury Tales, and in those tales where he considers the North, his
fantasies are most promising and yet problematic at the same time. The
uncanny North, in its familiarity, intimates the productive possibilities
of national fantasy, but in its horror, it only threatens to render sterile such
desires—an imagined community snuffed out by the “Sheffeld thwitel.”

1071.