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10 March 2016

The Power of the *Fabliaux*

In Medieval France, the *fabliaux* were rich and comedic folklore that emerged out of the working class. The Middle Ages are often characterized by religious oppression and the feudal system, which categorized people according to a hierarchic scale. Therefore, the societal rigidity of this time severely limited the rights of the peasantry, leaving them seemingly powerless. The peasants, however, used the power of storytelling to convey the social reality of the time, offering insight into their relationship with the Church and other classes. These stories, or *fabliaux*, reflect the culture and values of the lower class, providing an alternate perspective on life at the time. In using this unique insight, the peasantry was able to generate their own literary vernacular as a means to open expression during a time where they were otherwise limited. This genre of literature speaks volumes about the ideas and beliefs of the peasants, and in many ways it functions as their voice amid societal and religious oppression. One of the reoccurring themes that surfaces in the *fabliaux* is the Church and their relationship with the peasantry. Although the Church preached about the importance of leading a virtuous life, many of its clergymen were corrupt, inflated with self-righteousness, and took full advantage of their superior ranking. Thus, the *fabliaux* functioned as a source of power for the peasants, which allowed them to speak out against the Church by mocking the promiscuity and grandiosity exhibited by priests, and using symbolism to shame their transgressions.

The theme of promiscuity among priests is recognized as one of the aspects of corruption in the Medieval Church and is commonly depicted in the *fabliaux*. In some of these folklores, the priests' actions alone allude to the immorality in the Church. For instance, "Les Perdrix" plays with the idea of promiscuity in the Church as the woman convinces the priest that her husband was violently jealous, leading the priest "sans s'attarder, s'enfuit le plus vite qu'il peut" (Baugnon). His instant reaction implies his understanding of the husband's jealousy and also suggests culpability on his part, insinuating the immorality of clergymen at the time. Alternative depictions of this aspect of the Church are increasingly explicit, further illustrating their corruption plainly. In "Le Dit dou Soucretain," the "lecherous priest... offers to divest himself of his possessions in return for sexual favors" (Bloch 36). The directness of the priest's offer exposes the lack of shame surrounding his corruption. In using the *fabliaux* as a means to divulge the hypocrisy of the Church, the peasantry further tarnishes its image in enforcing this scandalous depiction of the clergymen. In fact, Nykrog notes that in stories where adultery takes place, "the lover is *always* a priest" (qtd. in Bloch 63). The frequency of priests being cast into the role of a lover reflects their reputation of being lustful. The perception that the peasantry had of the clergy is indubitably reflected in the typical role of a lover for the priests in the *fabliaux*.

In addition to promiscuity, the corruption of the Church is also portrayed in the pomposity of the priests. The attitudes of grandiosity manifest themselves in various ways, yet are rooted in a mentality of absolute authority. The priest in "Brunain la vache du prêtre" uses his high-ranking position to manipulate others and benefit his greed and self-righteousness. He "reminds his congregation that 'It is good to give, for God who understands reason renders double to those who give willingly'" (qtd. in Broche 76). Although his sermon was rooted in virtuous concepts, his intentions are elsewhere. In hiding his true motives behind the concept of

generosity for God, he tailors his sermon for his own benefit, as he was “*toujours d’humeur à prendre*” (Baugnon). The sentiments of self-importance fueled his greed, leading him to manipulate others for his own profit. The moral of the *fabliau* stresses the corruptness of the priest “*qui le cache et enfouit*” (Baugnon). Therefore, the *fabliau* uses the example of the priest as a warning and demonstrates that his pretension and manipulation of the situation led him to failure. The grandiosity of the clergy is also illustrated in the *fabliau* “*Estula.*” A boy, amazed by what he just witnessed, asks the priest to come see. The priest refuses since he does not have shoes on, yet when the boy suggests carrying him, he “*sans plus discuter, monte sur les épaules du jeune homme, qui se remet en route*” (Baugnon, lines 66-67). Rather than putting on his shoes, the priest is carried down to the house on the boy’s shoulder, symbolizing the mentality and hierarchy of the Church. His physical placement on top of the boy represents the power that the Church exercised over the people. He repeatedly refused to put on his shoes and showed no leniency in his decision until the boy offered to carry him on his shoulders. If the priest were to agree to put on his shoes and accompany the boy on foot, it would require him to walk alongside the boy in an equal manner. Ergo, the priest agrees to be carried so to remind the boy that they he is above him on the hierarchic scale of society and to satisfy his sentiments of grandiosity. Overall, the attitudes of the Church were personified in the priests of the *fabliaux*, implying the corruption, immorality, and pretention that figures in the Church were known for.

The corruption of the clergy, though exhibited through acts of promiscuity and grandiosity, was additionally identified as transgression and penalized in numerous *fabliaux*. The peasantry utilized the *fabliaux*, not only as a means to bring this corruption to light, but also as a way to highlight it as immoral and sin. The following *fabliaux* call attention to the wrongdoings of the clergymen through the symbolism of the body. To start, in the tale “*Du Prestre qu’on*

porte,” various characters encounter a dead body, and with each one believing that he is responsible, they dispose of the body where another character stumbles upon it and continues this cycle. According to Bloch, “the body is a shifter. As it circulates it derives its significance from the subject with which it comes in contact, the subject who is obliged to invest it with meaning” (67-68). When the bishop encounters the body and mistakenly believes that he was responsible for the death, he “innocents himself by quietly burying it” (Broche 66). For the bishop, the body represents his transgressions, and his burial of it is his recognition of his deception. This *fabliau* identifies the bishop’s actions as sin “and if one is always already guilty before the circulating corpse, it is because one is obliged to invest it with a meaning” (69). Thus the corpse embodied the corruption of the Church and was quietly buried in the same way that much of the hypocrisy that came out of the Church was concealed or disguised as a more righteous motive. In some of the *fabliaux*, the clergymen are physically punished for their recognized transgressions, such as in *Huth Merlin*, where the priest “dies a multiple death: ‘Etranglé et vif et pendu’” (qtd. in Broche 68). Since the body itself can carry significance, the violence and thoroughness of the priest’s death is a reflection of the numerous wrongdoings committed by the Church. Similarly, the transgressions of the clergymen were also depicted in the form of dismemberment. In “Du Prestre crucifié” a priest involved in an adulterous relationship tries to flee when his lover’s husband returns home. He tries to hide amongst the husband’s sculptures, but when the husband goes to trim the excess material, he ends up castrating the priest. The moral of the story further penalizes him in saying that “this example shows us well that a priest should under no circumstances love another’s wife, nor come around her” (62). The moral of the *fabliau* shames the priest, by preaching correct conduct and morality as well as castrating him. Castration is not at all uncommon in the *fabliaux*, of which priests are

frequently depicted as the victims. According to Broche, the *fabliaux* “attributes castration to sexual desire” and this “mutilation is the direct result of transgression and transgression the proper of the priest” (83). As a way of both signifying the wrongdoing of the priest and penalizing him, the priest would have his sexual organs severed. In doing so, the priest is identified as having transgressions tied to his sexual desire and therefore punished through dismemberment. Thus, the corruption of the Church is not only alluded to, but also plainly identified it as sin and punished.

The *fabliaux*, though comical and provocative, act as an important piece in medieval French literature. Although the peasantry was oppressed by the rigidity of social ranking due to the feudal system and absolute power of the Church, they found a means to express their ideas. Therefore, the *fabliaux* reflect life in the middle ages through the eyes of the commoner, which allows an alternate perspective of the time compared to other literary texts. The peasantry were able to openly express their ideas and beliefs through the medium of the *fabliaux*, offering insight into the corruption of the Church. Through accessing this literary voice amid religious oppression and hypocrisy, these folklore were used to speak out against the Church, shaming the immorality and pretension of the clergymen. Additionally, the *fabliaux* shamed the wrongdoings of the priests, which were illustrated through symbolism of the body and its dismemberment. The *fabliaux* ultimately empowered the peasants, allowing them to have a voice in literature. Thus, the *fabliaux* acted as the voice of the peasantry, giving them the power of expression and forging them a place in the literary world.

Bibliography

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