

## REPRESENTATIONS OF FOOD AND SEXUALITY IN GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S FABLIAUX\*

*Geoffrey Chaucer'in Fabliyölerinde Yiyecek ve Cinsellik Temsilleri*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to analyze Chaucer's use of food as a sexual metaphor in the carnal universe of his fabliaux, namely, *The Miller's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale*, and *The Merchant's Tale*. Fabliaux usually narrate the adulterous relationship revolving around a young wife, her old husband, and a young virile man. Therefore, sex plays an essential part in the dynamics of these tales. This paper argues that food is both associated with female characters' sexual escapades in a positive way denoting their sexual power and also reveals their husbands' unsuccessful efforts to satisfy their young wives sexually. Thus, the metaphors of food implicitly reflect the husbands' impotence because of old age. In this regard, this paper engages with Chaucer's subversive use of food in *The Miller's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale*, and *The Merchant's Tale* and investigates how Chaucer overturns the gendered power struggle between wife and husband with regard to their sexual activities by employing metaphors of food.

**Keywords:** Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, food, fabliau, sexuality

**ÖZ:** Bu makale, *Değirmenci'nin Hikayesi (The Miller's Tale)*, *Kahya'nın Hikayesi (The Reeve's Tale)* ve *Tüccar'ın Hikayesi (The Merchant's Tale)* başlıklı fabliyölerin dünyevi evreninde, Chaucer'in yiyeceği cinsel bir metafor olarak kullanımını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Fabliyöler genellikle genç bir eş, onun yaşlı kocası ve genç ve iktidar sahibi bir adam etrafında dönen yasak ilişkiyi anlatır. Bu nedenle cinsel ilişki, bu hikayelerin dinamiklerinde önemli bir rol oynar. Bu makale, yiyeceklerin hem kadın karakterlerin cinsel kaçamaklarıyla olumlu bir şekilde ilişkili olduğunu, hem de cinsel güçlerini ifade ettiğini iddia etmekte ve aynı zamanda kocalarının genç eşlerini cinsel olarak tatmin etme konusundaki başarısız çabalarını ortaya koymaktadır. Dolayısıyla, yiyecek metaforları örtük olarak bu kocaların yaşlılıktan kaynaklanan iktidarsızlığını da yansıtır. Bu bağlamda, bu

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makale *Değirmenci'nin Hikayesi (The Miller's Tale)*, *Kahya'nın Hikayesi (The Reeve's Tale)* ve *Tüccar'ın Hikayesi (The Merchant's Tale)*'nde Chaucer'in yiyecek kullanımının yıkıcı oluşunu incelemekte ve Chaucer'in yiyecek metaforlarını kullanarak karı ve koca arasındaki cinsel faaliyetlere ilişkin cinsiyetçi güç mücadelesini nasıl altüst ettiğini araştırmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Hikayeleri*, yiyecek, fabliyö, cinsellik

### Introduction

Food comprises the nexus between the beginning and ending points in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which starts with a storytelling competition among pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. The reward for this contest is a free meal, "a soper at oure aller cost" (Chaucer, 2008: I (A) 799) at the Tabard Inn on their return, suggesting that pilgrims will have another meal there. Evidently, food surpasses its dictionary definition in *The Canterbury Tales* and displays the historical conditions of the time: medieval attitudes towards eating habits, hunting, feasting, and religious preferences such as abstinence, fasting, and gluttony. Thus, *The Tales* naturally involves a myriad of references to food used by Chaucer for various reasons. As Kathryn L. Lynch explains, Chaucer employs food as a part of his language "to introduce his cast of characters" (2007: 119), to display their personality, morality, social and economic statuses, and eating habits. In the light of these, this paper analyses Chaucer's use of food in his fabliaux, namely, *The Miller's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale*, and *The Merchant's Tale*, regarding sexual content of the genre and its influence on the power struggle between the wife and the husband.

Fabliau is originally a French genre that emerged in the twelfth century and can be defined as a bawdy tale that narrates a young wife's betrayal of her old husband (Pekşen Yakar, 2021: 552). Therefore, its common plot revolves around a love triangle in which an old husband is cuckolded by his young wife. In this plot structure, the female character occupies the role of an unfaithful, adulterous, fickle, and sexually insatiable wife. Such representations of women reinforce the fabliau's categorisation as an antifeminist genre. However, on closer examination of the dynamics of the genre and the power struggle between husband and wife in the tale, it can be seen that in fact the wives hold a secondary position despite their adulterous, manipulative, and scheming representation. The husbands are the ultimate power holders, who victimise their wives. Therefore, in this power struggle in marital relations, women are the victims, and their husbands are their victimisers.

In this plot pattern<sup>1</sup>, both parts are depicted in an endless power struggle in which the husband attempts to maintain his power over his wife, and his wife intends to fabricate ways to avoid her husband's oppression on her. Among all these marital negotiations and power conflicts, sex and food work interactively. This interaction demonstrates the power struggle and the tactics of gaining the power of each part efficaciously. The subversive attitude of the genre, that is, the female character is neither condemned nor punished for the adultery she has committed is even strengthened by food references since these accentuate the woman's sexual power and active part in the plot as well as men's lack of virility at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

### **Representations of Food and Sexuality**

The concept of food transgresses its role of nourishment and survival and acquires a "polyvalent and polyglot" definition (Tomasik and Vitullo, 2007: xi) in the selected fabliaux. As a matter of fact, Chaucer employs gendered food references in his fabliaux, through which the conflict for sustaining power in marital relations is unveiled. For instance, January tells his friends what kind of woman he intends to marry by specific food references:

"I wol noon oold wyf han in no manere.  
She shal nat passe twenty yeer, certain;  
Oold fish and yong flessch wolde I have fayn.  
Bet is, quod he, "a pyk than a pykere,  
And bet than old boef is the tendre veel.  
I wol no womman thritty yeer of age;  
It is but bene-straw and greet forage" (Chaucer, 2008: IV (E) 1416-1422).

January's debasing description of a possible young wife for himself includes many food references such as pear, fish, meat, and beef. According to January, all these foods must be fresh to be eaten and consumed by himself. If they are not fresh enough, they are nothing but straw, which is for animals' nutrition.

In addition, it is important to note that men are mostly associated with hunters as the holders of power. As Biebel explicates, "[men] are hunters, they are known for their physical strength;" thus, "the high-protein content of meat has contributed to the traditional view that meat is the appropriate food source for men" (1998: 16). Nevertheless, women are not considered hunters; on the contrary, they are prey to be hunted or they are simply associated with vegetation. Therefore, as Biebel notes, "[w]oman does not benefit from her association with dead animals as man does from his link with living ones" (1998: 16). Rather, woman is reduced to meat to be consumed by man as can be observed in January's description of woman.

Another equally important point to elaborate on is the recipes January prepares for himself for the wedding night<sup>3</sup>. In addition to the eatables in the feast, January prepares some aphrodisiacs before consummation of their marriage:

“He [January] drynketh ypocras, clarree, and vernage  
Of spices hooted t’encressen his corage  
And many a letuarie hath he ful fyn,  
Swiche as the cursed monk, daun Constantyn,  
Hath writen in his book *De Coitu*;  
To eten hem alle he has no thyng eschu” (Chaucer, 2008: IV (E) 1807-1812).

Due to January’s impotence probably because of his old age, he needs aphrodisiacs to reinforce his virility. Therefore, January drinks spiced wine and eats specific foods, extensively consumed as aphrodisiacs in the Middle Ages. Their recipes can be found in Constantinus Africanus’s *On Copulation*, a treatise on sexual intercourse. It offers guidance for sexual intercourse and contains some recipes to be virile during it. January experiences the wedding night as he dreams, and he thinks his performance is positively harsh due to all these aphrodisiacs. Here, January’s need for aphrodisiacs made up of various recipes indicates his lack of virility. However, May does not need aphrodisiacs thanks to her young age. Thus, May’s sexuality can be considered the medium of her partial liberation from her subordinate position to her husband. Furthermore, it proves the fact that May cannot be relegated to prey to be hunted or meat to be consumed by January. This subversion also contributes to the comic climax of the fabliau, which arises from the thematic principle of the genre, that is, the hunter is hunted.

May’s alliance and secret ploy with Damian, January’s squire, made around the pear tree in January’s garden reinforce her resistance. The idea of her resistance in this escapade is once again underlined with metaphors to food highlighting May’s sexual power. To give an example, the pear tree, traditionally containing highly symbolic and subversive meanings in the tale, is associated with May’s sexuality. May tells her husband that she desires to taste the green pears. Her craving for them suggests her pregnancy with January’s possible heir: “I telle yow wel, a woman in my plit/May han to fruyt so greet an appetit/That she may dyen but she of it have” (Chaucer, 2008: IV (E) 2335-2337). Whether her object of desire is unripe pears or Damian, who is already awaiting May on the tree, remains a question. Indeed, both cases may prove correct. She may want to taste the pears and satisfy her sexual appetite simultaneously. Obviously, pears symbolize her

young age, fertility, and sexual desire. Therefore, her craving for pears may also stand for her passion for Damian and hunger for sexuality. To achieve her desires, she abuses January's wish for an heir and requests his help to climb the tree. Yet, he cannot help her because he has lost his sight. May literally climbs January's back first and then up the tree so as to be with Damian:

"He stoupeth doun, and on his bak she stood,  
And caught hire by a twiste, and up she gooth –  
Ladies, I prey yow that ye be nat wroth;  
I kan nat glose, I am a rude man –  
And sodeynly anon this Damyas  
Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng" (Chaucer, 2008: IV (E) 2348-2353).

Here, the pear tree becomes the space where May acts out her own desires rather than his husband's. Besides, she does it by stepping on January's back. Particularly, it is not only a tree, but a pear tree, denoting May's sexual appetite for and escapade with Damian, which even enriches the pear as a symbol.

As a matter of fact, Chaucer's placing the illicit lovers on a pear tree is not unique. On the contrary, there is a long-standing literary tradition of using pear tree motif as the locus of an adulterous relationship. The pear tree as a literary motif has been employed in both European and Oriental sources of Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* (Heffernan, 1995: 32). Hence, it is highly probable that Chaucer was already familiar with the pear tree motif in Continental analogue tales. Furthermore, Chaucer knew the sexual connotations of the pear in the Middle Ages for pears resembled female breasts as well as male genitalia. The explanation for the pear tree's link with human sexuality is plausibly "due to its sweet taste, juiciness and also to its shape which has a suggestion of the feminine about it" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996: 742).

As Lynch maintains in another context, the fabliau narrates "the appetites – for food, for sex, for revenge" (2007: 123), similarly, *The Merchant's Tale* includes all in May's appetites. She craves pears and wishes to be with Damian, by which she acquires the means of revenge. That is, she manipulates January's motivation of progeny to be with Damian and to conceive with him rather than her husband and produce a false heir, which is a part of her revenge (Blamires, 2010: 115; Everest, 1995: 165; Pekşen Yakar, 2021: 559). Thus, the garden that is first given as "the externalized representation of January's fantasy" and his "sexual paradise" (Kloss, 1974: 72) is transformed into May's space for her arboreal tryst. Therefore, it can

be stated that January's thought that "he can buy as a wife a domestic beast that will serve his every wish and, somehow, fulfill his most erotic fantasies" is overturned (Donaldson, 1970: 44-45). In other words, January intends to consume May sexually. Yet, May subverts his wishes on her body, which can be overtly observed in food references.

*The Miller's Tale* like *the Merchant's Tale* includes a love triangle in which Alison, the young wife, cuckolds her husband John with their lodger Nicholas. These two illicit lovers plan an erotic escapade that includes biblical references such as the Deluge. John persuaded by Nicholas imprudently believes that there will be a catastrophic flood. To be able to survive the flood, John buys a tub and fills it with sufficient food including ale, bread and cheese.

These foods, namely ale, bread, and cheese in a tub, can immediately be associated with biblical stories such as Noah's Flood. Despite the fact that they are highly related to biblical context, they are used in this fabliau as a part of a sexual joke rather than a biblical story. Alison and Nicholas' plan is employed for the young lovers to be together in John's marital bed while John was sleeping in the tub filled with food. They achieve their desires and make love:

"Ther was the revel and melodye;  
And thus lith Alison and Nicholas,  
In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas,  
Til that the belle of laudes gan to ryng,  
And freres in the chauncel gonne synge" (Chaucer, 2008: I 3652-3656).

As these lines obviously show that Alison's escapade with Nicholas in her husband's bed is described as "bisynesse of myrthe" (Chaucer, 2008: I 3650) which creates "revel and melodye" (Chaucer, 2008: I 3652). This depiction accentuates Alison's active sexuality. In the tale, the female character's sexuality is foregrounded and depicted in a positive way. While their plan seems to work smoothly, things divert from their course, and Nicholas howls in pain "–Water, water." Nicholas' cry wakes up John. When John hears the words "Water, water," he supposes the flood has come and cuts the ropes of the tub and falls to the ground. The neighbours gather around asking about John, who is in the tub on the ground with ale, bread, and cheese. Due to John's ridiculous position, Alison labels him mad and escapes punishment for her betrayal. Therefore, *The Miller's Tale* transforms this biblical story to a parodic comic story by mingling the sexual and the

biblical, and the tale uses food to demonstrate Alison's active sexuality and quick wit to overcome John's oppression.

Another fabliau that involves abundant food descriptions is *The Reeve's Tale*. Similar to *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale*, the food representations can be associated with women's sexuality and sexual pleasure out of their illicit sexual relationships. Like *The Merchant's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale* involves a power struggle, yet the struggle in the latter is much more multifaceted than the former. In *The Reeve's Tale*, Symkyn is the ultimate authority, and he oppresses not only his wife but also his daughter and two students.

Symkyn, a miller, is infamous for his tricks and stealing his clients' grain. Even though Aleyn and John vow not to be tricked by Symkyn this time, Symkyn achieves cheating them. Besides, these students find themselves in a situation that they pay Symkyn for accommodation. On the night of their stay, Symkyn orders his daughter Malyne to buy bread and ale, and he prepares a goose for his lodgers. They sit together and drink ale in the same room. Due to heavy drinking, they are sound asleep. However, John and Aleyn wake up because of Symkyn and his wife's farts. They talk to each other and believe they will be mocked unless they compensate their loss. Therefore, Aleyn creates an opportunity to make love with Symkyn's daughter Malyne although they are sleeping in the very same room:

"And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte.  
This wenche lay upright and faste slepte,  
Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,  
That it had been to late for to crie,  
And shortly for to seyn, they were aton" (Chaucer, 2008: I 4193-4194).

For Malyne, Aleyn's act is an unexpected one. Nevertheless, it is absolutely a rebellion to and liberation from Symkyn's oppressive guardianship. Symkyn intends to marry off Malyne to a wealthy man. That is, he wants to trade her body for social climbing. Hence, Symkyn is furious at her daughter's violation. According to Helen Cooper, Symkyn's reaction is not due to "his care for his daughter nor outraged morality, but . . . the affront to his social standing" (1996: 114). In this context, Aleyn both compensates his loss by ravishing Malyne and also ruins Symkyn's plans of being a social climber.

Furthermore, Malyne liberates herself from Symkyn's plans on her body by using her own body for her own pleasure. Despite being temporary, "Malyne succeeds in attaining the authority over her desires and subverts the

oppression of the father through her sexuality” (Pekşen, 2013: 40). Nevertheless, for several critics, the line “it had been to late for to crie” (Chaucer, 2008: I 4196) may denote that this action is a rape. Malyne is depicted as a brawny girl who is able to resist and stop unwanted action on her body. As they all sleep in the same place, the girl may scream and stop Aleyn. Moreover, these speculations must be reconsidered with Malyne’s future acts. Malyne bids farewell to Aleyn and calls him “deere lemman” (Chaucer, 2008: I 4315) and informs him about the place of the cake she made out of the flour Symkyn has stolen from them: “Whan that thou wendest homeward by the melle,/Right at the entree of the dore bihynde/Thou shalt a cake of half a bushel fynde” (Chaucer, 2008: I 4237-4239). In this context, it would be unrealistic to call the sexual engagement of Malyne and Aleyn as a rape. Obviously, it is an action that Malyne also takes pleasure. Yet, it could be more than an act to derive pleasure out of sexual intercourse. Malyne resists Symkyn and his abusive plans on her body. Therefore, Malyne avenges Symkyn’s oppression on herself and rewards the clerks with the cake. Amanda Hopkins comments on the cake she gave to the clerks and defines it as a “payment for services” (Hopkins, 2010: 11). Conspicuously, Malyne expresses her thanks to Aleyn not only for the night but also for the opportunity to subvert Symkyn’s oppression upon her. In this case, the night with Aleyn could be categorized as “the erotic rebellion of Malyne” (Pekşen, 2013: 41), and rebellion is symbolised with the cake she baked.

### **Conclusion**

By exploring Chaucer’s use of food in *The Miller’s Tale*, *The Reeve’s Tale*, and *The Merchant’s Tale*, this paper analyzes the power struggle between the married couples in the tales and investigates how metaphors of food are used to display women’s active sexuality positively, which enable them to outwit their oppressive husbands and subvert their interests. In *The Merchant’s Tale*, May’s sexual alliance with Damian on the pear tree in January’s garden enables her to avoid January’s oppression and realize her own desires. Her illicit sexual escapade is not condemned, and she is not punished for it. On the contrary, her active sexuality is illustrated with food references which emphasizes her sexual power positively in contrast to January’s lack of. In this regard, woman’s conventional association with butchered animals and vegetation and their relegation to food to be consumed by man is subverted with May’s empowered representation. Similarly, it is observed that Alison’s plan with Damian provides Alison with the opportunity to subvert her husband John’s intentions on her body.



The metaphors of food derived from Biblical references are used to accentuate Alison's sexuality and quick wit. Also, these metaphors of food prove John's lack of potency and create a situation that makes Alison's claims of John's madness reliable. In *The Reeve's Tale*, the foods both prepare the environment for the victimized to overturn Symkyn's oppression and also are used as the reward. In each tale, food is usually associated with women's active sexuality that assists them to have temporary liberation from their victimizers.

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#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *The Reeve’s Tale* is an exception. In its plot, the daughter also had a relationship with one of the students in the tale.

<sup>2</sup> While making assumptions about Chaucer’s food references, one should keep in mind that the characters in *The Canterbury Tales* are on a pilgrimage; thus, the concept of food and its representations oscillate between its functions of physical and spiritual nourishment (Biebel, 1998: 16). Nevertheless, the fabliau as a genre offers a physical world prioritising materiality and earthly values over spiritual ones (Wright, 2005: 484); thus, the representations of food in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* ironically do not include any implication concerning the spiritual nourishment of the pilgrims. However, since the fabliau generically deals with physical aspects of life, especially carnal love, the concept of food follows the corporeality of the genre *per se*.

<sup>3</sup> Their wedding ceremony involves a wedding feast, which is filled with delicious eatables and music, and even “Bacus the wyn hem shynketh al aboute” (Chaucer, 2008: IV (E) 1722). Wine and delicious eatables are familiar representations of food and drink in medieval wedding banquets.