

## KNIFE AND SWORD IMAGERY IN THE REEVE'S TALE

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Symkyn the miller's arms which include a "panade", a "swerd", a "poppere" and a "Sheffeld thwitel" have been regarded as an emblem of his aggressive character and pride and, hence, as an element which contributes to the denouement of the fabliau<sup>1</sup>. As will be pointed out below, they are also phallic symbols. The knives and sword of Symkyn and the clerks Aleyn and John have various thematic functions since both literally and symbolically they add a new dimension to the fabliau. They are a detail contributing to the comedy of Symkyn's fall and a stock element of the estates satire, and, thus they become a vital link for the balance of the quitting theme established between the *Miller's Tale* and the *Reeve's Tale*.

In the two French fabliaux, which W.M. Hart has proposed as the analogues to Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*, the arms do not appear<sup>2</sup>. It is a commonplace in all the medieval fabliaux that all the moral and social significance of the character is emblematically depicted through the tools, costumes and other personal properties which belong to, or are used by the character. This is necessitated by the fact that the plot pattern of the French fabliau does not allow any character analysis, and Chaucer to some extent reiterates the same tradition.

If the emblems of the knife and sword are considered literally and interpreted as realistic detail it not only helps to reflect the moral traits of the character but also indirectly implies his intentions, as for example, can be demonstrated from the description of Symkyn's arms:

Ay by his belt he baar a long panade,  
And of a swerd ful trenchant was the blade.  
A joly poppere baar he is [sic] in his pouche;  
.....  
A Sheffeld thwitel baar he in his hose<sup>3</sup>.

(A 3939-33)

The miller is decked with a sword, a dagger, and two knives, moreover, he is a muscular and strong man. Hence, "ther was no man, for peril, dorste hym touche"(A 3937)

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- (1) See J.L. Lowes, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1934), p.179.; T.W. Craik, *The Comic Tales of Chaucer*, (London; Methuen, 1964), pp. 32-33.; Germaine Dempster, *Dramatic Irony in Chaucer*, (New York; Humanities Press, 1959), p.28.
- (2) "The Reeve's Tale" in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (New York; Humanities Press, 1958), p.28.
- (3) For quotations and textual references, the edition used is *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston; Houghton Mifflin Co. 1957).

The portrayal of his character through such traits may be regarded as a narrative stratagem which the Reeve uses to refer to his fellow pilgrim Robin of the *General Prologue*; thus as is often suggested Symkyn becomes a reiteration of Robin the miller in the *General Prologue*. They are both physically strong, highly skilful in wrestling and quite aggressive; Robin can easily find access to places where he is not wanted by breaking the doors with his head. Similarly, Symkyn is a threat to his immediate environment, and nobody dares to oppose him: "Ther dorste no wight hand upon hym legge,/ That he ne swoor he sholde anon abegge" (A 3937-38).

The physiognomies of Symkyn and Robin are also effective elements in establishing a link between the two characters. Robin's thick and wide shoulders, short neck, wide nose with the bristly red-haired wart, and big mouth are all signs of his lustiness, quarrelsomeness and styness according to medieval physiognomical lore<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, Symkyn's round face, "camus" nose and ape-like skull indicate his lusty nature and define him as a bully. Chaucer resembles Symkyn to an ape; through this simile he implies many aspects of the miller and foreshadows his downfall. In medieval animal-lore the ape was considered an "animal of grimaces and tricks", which is appropriate for Symkyn as he prides himself in trickery and theft. The ape was also equated to the worst stage of drunkenness. In addition to these, lasciviousness was another attribute of the ape<sup>5</sup>. Hence, through the simile Symkyn's lusty character is implied and a complete parallel to Robin is established.

The musical giftedness of the two millers is another trait that they both share. Hence, Robin's bagpipe has an additional rustic and sexual significance. As it resembled physically to the human stomach and male genitals, and produced incongruous sounds it was used in medieval iconography to signify the sins of lechery and gluttony<sup>6</sup>. Robin is noted for both sins as "he was a janglere and a goliardeys,/ And that was moost of synne and harlotries" (A 560-61). Later on, in keeping with his character he tells a fabliau of utter promiscuity, and during the pilgrimage he becomes so drunk that he can hardly ride on his horse. Symkyn is also described as a piper (A 3927); therefore, the associations of the bagpipe may be carried on to him as well, since he becomes drunk in the story and produces sounds of the same sort (A 4163-64).

Another aspect that both Robin and Symkyn share is their desire to style themselves above their social class. This quality has been indirectly implied through their clothing which was a common vehicle in estates satire. Both Robin and Symkyn are dressed in bright colours; Robin has a blue hood, and Symkyn a red hose. As Jones declares, in the Middle Ages "blue hats and brightly coloured hose were theoret-

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- (4) See W.C. Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), pp. 80 ff. and George F. Jones, "Chaucer and the Medieval Miller," *MLQ*, 16 (1955), 3-15.
- (5) see Berly Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World*, (Kent State Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 32 ff., Janette Richardson, *Blameth Nat Me*, (Paris: Mouton, 1970), pp. 95-96.
- (6) see G. Fenwick Jones, "Witen Wiler's Becki and Medieval Bagpipe," *JEGP*, 48 (1949), 209-28; Kathleen L. Scott, "Sow and Bagpipe Imagery in the Miller's Portrait," *RES*, NS, 18 (1967), 287-90; Thomas W. Ross, *Chaucer's Bawdy*, (New York: Dutton, 1972), s.v. "bagpipe".

ically illegal for the lower classes.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this aspect is stressed in the *Reeve's Tale* as Symkyn's and his wife's Sunday costumes are specially described. He has "his typet bounden aboute his heed," (A 3953); he has not put on the hood simply with the end hanging freely but, similar to the fashion prevalent among the upper classes, he has bound it around his head.<sup>8</sup> He is depicted as an upstart. This quality has been reflected in his matrimonial relations as well; not only does he pride in the noble blood he has incorporated into his family by marrying the parson's natural daughter (1), but also he is planning to marry his daughter up in the social scale as a means of achieving a higher social status (A 3981-82).

The Reeve establishes parallels between Symkyn and his fellow pilgrim Robin the miller so as to exhibit three main follies in their character: pride of status, pride of their assumed wisdom and slyness, pride of virility and physical strength. Exposing Symkyn in his tale as duped, cuckolded and beaten by Aleyn and John, the Reeve achieves his end, and the quitting theme between the Miller and the Reeve is fulfilled. The Reeve ridicules the Miller in the figure of Symkyn.

The duping of Symkyn as regards his trickery, pride of lineage and strength has been amply treated, but the Reeve's insult to Robin's virility has only been mentioned in passing by Janette Richardson.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to dwell on this point to understand the attack on Robin's virility.

As mentioned above, the imagery of the knife and sword does not appear in the analogues. The 'surprise' in the denouement requires a careful setting-up, therefore, the details in the portraits prepare the reader for the outcome of the events. If taken in this context the arms are of a preparatory nature in proving the miller's impotence.

The swords and knives assigned to Symkyn are obviously phallic symbols. In fact, in medieval French and English manuscript illumination various symbols have been used for the male and female reproductive organs. The staff, the scrip and hammers were frequently employed as phallic symbols<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, various other objects of the similar kind were also used<sup>11</sup>. Symkyn is described to carry a knife in his bag as well as one in his "hose":

*A joly poppere baar he is [sie] in his pouche;  
A Sheffield thwitel baar he in his hose.  
(A 3931, 3933)*

The qualifying adjective "joly" has been used for the "poppere", which means not only "pretty" but also "amorous" and "lustful".

(7) Jones, pp.3-15.

(8) see Iris Brooke, *A History of English Costume*, 2nd ed. (London; Eyre Methuen, 1972), p.20. Max von Bohlen, *Modes and Manners* (London; Harp and Co, 1932), I, 233.

(9) p.97.

(10) see Alain de Lille, *The Complaint of Nature*, trans. Douglas M. Moffat, (New York; Henry Holt, 1908), pp. 45,50, Ross 192-3.

(11) Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose* trans. Charles Dahlberg, (New Jersey; Princeton UP, 1971), p.136.

The phallic meaning of the knife and the sword is further reiterated in the false dream concocted by the Wife of Bath when she tries to persuade her fifth husband-to-be, Jankyn, to marry her:

*And eek I seyde I mette of hym al nyght,  
He wolde han slayn me as I lay upright,  
And al my bed was ful of verray blood;  
(D 577-79)*

She interprets the second half of the dream symbolically: "But yet I hope that he shal do me good, / For blood bitokeneth gold, as me was taught." (A 580-81) She equates blood to her money and wealth that she has acquired through four marriages. She symbolically implies that if Jankyn marries her, he will acquire all her wealth. She uses the word "slay" symbolically to imply sexual intercourse<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, the word "upright" has sexual overtones. Chaucer uses the word in the sexual context in the *Reeve's Tale* also: Alan "swyvvwed the milleres doghter bolt upright," (A 4266). A similar usage occurs in the business transaction between Don John and the merchant's wife in the *Shipman's Tale*. The wife agreed "that for thise hundred frankes he sholde al nyght / Have hire in his armes bolt upright;" (B 1506-7). We may deduce from this fact that the "slaying" may as well be done by the arms listed in the portrait of Symkyn.

Finally, the symbolic significance of the knives can further be assessed through an analysis of the Reeve's character. As Curry has rightly pointed out, the Reeve has a lecherous character which is implied through his physiognomical traits<sup>13</sup>. In his own prologue the Reeve refers to some of his youthful interests, and by alluding to old men like himself he says:

*We olde men, I drede, so fare we:  
Til we be roten, kan we nat be rype,  
We hoppen alwey whil the world wol pype.  
For in oure wyl ther stiketh evere a nayl,  
To have an hoor heed and a grene tayl,  
As hath a leek; for thogh oure myght be goon.  
Oure wyl desireth folie evere in oon.  
For whan we may nat doon, than wol we speke;  
Yet in oure asshen olde is fyr yreke.  
(A 3872 3882)*

The dance, which is suggested through the verb "hoppen", is certainly "loves dance" mentioned by Criseyde, that Pandarus complains of hopping always behind (TC, II 1106-7) and, is a sexual act. The Reeve unlike Pandarus, boasts of keeping up with the pipe which is obviously suggestion of carnal love. The type of music referred to is again piping; so, similar to Robin and Symkyn, the Reeve is himself dancing to the "old song" - the carnal life that must be given over before the spiritual life ('sing ye to

(12) see Beryl Rowland, "On the Timely Death of the Wife of Bath's Fourth Husband," *Archiv*, 209 (1973), 273-82.

(13) *Medieval Sciences*, pp. 73 ff.

the Lord a new song') can begin.<sup>14</sup> As the Reeve's prologue, which is in fact a dramatic monologue through which his traits are made manifest, proceeds, he claims to be in possession of "a coltes tooth" (A 3888), which is again a sexual image. Moreover, one detail of the Reeve's array which is symbolically related to his character has usually been overlooked and this is the rusty sword that "by his syde he baar" (A 618). Although Brooks Forehand has pointed out in passing that the rusty sword emblematically signifies the Reeve's old age, this is only a partial interpretation<sup>15</sup>. It is obvious that, the rusty sword is in fact of no use to the Reeve's but if it is interpreted as a phallic symbol it will be fully relevant to the Reeve's age, character, and carnal desires. Although he is past his prime and no more virile he is still preoccupied with sexual matters as can be understood from his words: "Whan we may nat doon, than wol we speke." (A 3881) In this respect, the Reeve is fond of using figurative speech and, hence, employs the same symbol in his tale and adds to the sexual innuendo of the insult directed at the Miller.

Furthermore, the quitting theme and the animal and other iconographic lore in the *Reeve's Tale* are additional proof of the specific purpose of the knife-sword imagery in this fabliau.

The Reeve's intention in telling a fabliau immediately after the Miller is to repay him in similar coin: "by youre leve, I shall hym quite anoon;/Right in his cherles termes wol I speke." (A 3916-17). He portrays such a miller in his tale that the resemblance is evident immediately, as illustrated above. However, he arranges his tale so as to make the miller's downfall threefold; Symkyn at the end of the tale is punished for his pride in his social status and slyness, and he is exposed as an impotent lecher. As Cooke has argued the "rhetoric in the fabliaux is frequently the fall guy in comedy; he is set up only to be knocked down"<sup>16</sup>. The Reeve seems to be jealous of Robin's strength and virility; hence, in his tale he prepares the reader to a fall in this aspect also. To this end he portrays Symkyn armed to the teeth, so the imagery of the knives functions congruously and implies the miller's pride in his sexual potency. In his portrait this facet of his character is emphasized. There is a reference to his interest in piping, and he is referred to as the "hote deynous Symkyn" (A 3941). The word "hote" was also used in the sexual context<sup>17</sup>. However, Symkyn never exhibits his power all through the tale; he is physically beaten without having any chance to use any of his arms and he does not prove his boasted virility. As Richardson claims "the man who prides himself upon the very thing he lacks is a favorite character with Chaucer,"<sup>18</sup> and Symkyn is no exception. Symkyn tries to expose himself as a virile and potent man. However, his wife's surprise at the extraordinary

(14) V.A. Klove, "Chaucer and Visual Arts", in *Writers and their Background: Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed Derek Brewer (London; G. Bell and sons, 1974). p.313

(15) "Old Age and Chaucer's Reeve" *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 984-89. (p984), where Forehand suggests that "the Reeve is past the age for using it (i.e. the sword) and asserts that he wears it because "he likes to think of things youthful".

(16) Thomas D. Cooke, *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux: A Study of their Comic Climax*, (Columbia and London; Univ of Missouri Press, 1978, p.80.

(17) Ross, sv. "hote".

(18) Richardson, p.81.

nightly activity which she believes is done by her husband, is proof of his impotency. Hence, the extraordinary importance given to the listing of the arms illustrates Symkyn's symbolic exhibition of the power he lacks.

The symbol operates significantly on this plane through the swords assigned to the clerks. Contrary to the two poor and needy clerks who invest in the bag of corn as their only capital in the analogues of the *Reeve's Tale*, Aleyn and John beg their maniple to allow them to take the corn to the mill. The atmosphere is one of "game and contest" as Olson has suggested:<sup>19</sup>

*Testif they were, and lusty for to pleye,  
And, oonly for hire myrthe and revelrye,  
Upon the wardeyn bisily they crye  
To yeve hem leve, but a litel stounde,  
To goon to mille and seen hir corn ygrounde  
(A 4004-8)*

The clerks set out to the mill to have their corn ground. With regard to the symbolism of the Middle Ages, the idiom has significance. It is generally admitted that symbolically the miller was equated to the husband and the mill to the wife. Hence, their action foreshadows the future events they are to take part in. The figurative application of the idiom is also in keeping with the only detail of array mentioned of the clerks:

*This Aleyn maketh redy al his gere,  
And on an hors the sak he caste anon.  
Forth goth Aleyn the clerk, and also John,  
With good swerd and with bokeler by hir syde.  
(A 4016-19)*

These items of their garb are not only "a detail in anyway required by the internal economy of the plot, and has all the appearance of empirical realism reflecting actual life"<sup>20</sup> but also an element of imagery to reinforce the theme of contest of wits between the clerks and the miller, and to symbolically foreshadow the future events.

A contest of wits between "churl" and "scholar" is set up in the tale. The clerks set out with the intention of winning the contest. After the first victory, Symkyn, having stolen a good amount of the clerks' corn meal, openly challenges them:

*Myn hous is streit, but ye han lerned art;  
Ye konne by argumentes make a place  
A myle brood of twenty foot of space.  
Lat se now if this place may suffise,  
Or make it rowm with speche, as is your gise.  
(A 4122-26)*

The clerks in fact do prove the room to be larger than it is by changing the place of the cradle and getting into different beds. They also take revenge by employing their swords and taking back their corn meal. Moreover, the revenge becomes threefold as

(19) "The *Reeve's Tale* as *Fabliau*", *MLQ*, 35 (1974), 219-30.

(20) "The *Reeve's Tale* and King's Hall, Cambridge," *Chau R.*, 5 (1971), 311-17.

they not only get back their corn meal, baked cake, but also "swyve" the miller's daughter and wife and, thus, in the process expose Symkyn as an impotent lecher, and they beat him in slyness.

The sword imagery in the tale functions to expose the Miller's pride in his assumed virility and in the end is ridiculed. Moreover, through the application of this imagery both in the Reeve's portrait and his tale the link between the tale and teller is firmly established and the tale refers back to the narrator. The quarrel and the vicious attacks of the Miller and the Reeve are also reinforced through the insult of the churls, both trying to expose the other as sinful, lecherous and cuckolded. Thus, it is a literary *tour de force* which Chaucer achieves through the manifold significance of his pilgrims' iconographical descriptions. His images function on different levels of meaning, which are interrelated and give the reader an insight into the character of his pilgrims.