

## Chaucer's Fabliau Women: Paradigms of Resistance and Pleasure\*

Chaucer'in Fabliyö (Fabliaux) Kadınları: Eğlence ve Direnme Paradigmaları

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### **Abstract**

Represented particularly in the *Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer in medieval English literature, fabliaux are stories of cuckoldry performed by the young wives of old husbands. Because of the adultery, lechery and the alleged moral weakness of women as their central themes, fabliaux have been considered as antifeminist narratives although at the same time, contrary to the conventional representations, women in fabliau play an active part in the story. However, women in the fabliaux often undermine the traditional roles assigned to men and women in marriage. The particular representation of women in the fabliaux as betraying adulterous wives stress women's unreliability but at the same time it allows women to produce their own pleasures and resistance to their subjection. Indeed, fabliaux are products of popular culture in their opposition to the dominant culture. In this context, fabliaux emphasise not the adultery but rather women's ingenuity and wit in outwitting their husbands and subverting the dominant discourse. Most stories do not punish the betraying fabliau women for their misbehaviour. Instead, fabliaux foreground the pleasure and entertainment produced by such narratives. In fabliaux, women occupy a subordinate position; they are presented as the disadvantaged and powerless victims of a predominantly male project of marriage, which they use to create their own oppositional meanings and pleasures. May and Alison as fabliau women in Chaucer's the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale* respectively are women of resistance as they are concerned with regaining partial control over their own bodies through adultery. By going against the norms of the dominant discourse, fabliau women turn their subordination to their benefit. Considering the fabliau women's resistance to the dominant paradigms in the context of popular culture theories developed by Fiske, this paper argues that Chaucer's fabliau

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women produce their oppositional paradigms and meanings out of the dominant man made sexual norms to reconstruct their relationship with the dominant discourse. Presented as agents of resistance through pleasure, fabliau women evade the dominant pressures and avoid total subjection. Alison in the *Miller's Tale*, and May in the *Merchant's Tale* contest their subjection through physical excess and bold gestures to undermine the male control over their bodies as young women reconstructing their subordinate position.

Keywords: fabliau woman, Chaucer's fabliaux, *Merchant's Tale*, *Miller's Tale*, popular resistance, popular pleasure.

### Öz

Ortaçağ İngiliz edebiyatında Chaucer'in *Canterbury Hikayeleri* adlı eserinde örnekleri olan fabliyö (fabliaux) genellikle yaşlı bir erkekle evli olan genç bir kadının eşini aldatması üzerine kurulu bir hikayesi olan ve bu yüzden içerdiği eş aldatma, cinselliğe aşırı düşkünlük ve kadının ahlaki zayıflığı gibi temalar bağlamında antifeminist bir edebi tür olduğu görüşü yaygın olan bir edebi türdür. Öte yandan, fabliyö, kadına geleneksel eğilimin aksine aktif bir rol verdiği için kadını önceleyen bir edebi tür olarak görünür. Aslında fabliyöler popüler kültür ürünü olarak egemen kültüre karşı konumlanan özellikte eserlerdir. İçerdikleri eş aldatma teması özellikle evlilik kurumunu zayıflatan ve sorgulayan bir tema olarak görülmüş ve kadınların sisteme başkaldırmasının sonuçları kadınların geleneksel olarak zayıf olduğu kabul edilen ahlak yapısına bağlanmıştır. Oysa, fabliyöde yaygın olan çeşitli oyunlarla eş aldatma teması erkek egemen söylem bağlamında genç fabliyö kadınlarının mağduriyetlerine başkaldırıp kendi anlamlarını oluşturmalarına da izin verir. Aslında fabliyö eşini aldatan kadının aldatmasını değil bu amaçla kullandığı zekasını ve becerisini vurgular. Hikayelerin çoğu aldatan kadını cezalandırmaz, aksine hikayeleri eğlence ve hoş vakit geçirme aracı olarak sunar. Fabliyöde kadınlar yaşlı erkeklerin kendilerine genç kadınları eş olarak seçmeleriyle oluşturulan evlilik projelerinde söz hakkı olmayan ve üzerinde hakimiyet kurulan bir konumdadırlar ve kendi tercihleri ve mutlulukları için yarattıkları fırsatlarla mağdur konumundan kurtulmaya çalışırlar. Chaucer'in *Merchant's Tale* (*Tüccarın Hikayesi*) deki May ve *Miller's Tale* (*Değirmenci'nin Hikayesi*) deki Alison eşlerini aldatma yoluyla kendi bedenleri üzerinde kısmi kontrol kazanan ve bu yolla egemen söyleme başkaldıran kadınlardır. Bir başka deyişle, fabliyöde eşlerini aldatan genç kadınların davranışları güçsüz olanın egemen olanın kaynaklarından yararlanarak geliştirdiği karşı duruştur. Egemen söyleme karşı çıkan fabliyö kadınları mağduriyetlerini kendi lehine çevirmeyi başarmaktadırlar. Bu makale, Fiske'in popüler kültür kuramından yararlanarak, Chaucer'in fabliyöleri *Merchant's Tale* ve *Miller's Tale*'de kadınların egemen söylemle olan ilişkilerini yeniden oluşturmak amacıyla erkek egemen cinsiyet normlarından kendi muhalif paradigmalarını ve anlamlarını oluşturdukları görüşünü savunmaktadır. Popüler kültürün oluşumundaki gibi fabliyö kadınları kendi kaynakları ve gücü olmayan öznelere. Bu nedenle de hem mahkumiyetlerini tahammül edilir boyuta getirmek hem de kendi öz anlamlarını oluşturmak için kendilerine evlilik bağlamında sunulan görev ve sorumlulukları yeniden biçimlendirerek kendi anlamlarını oluştururlar. Zevk ve eğlence yoluyla anlam üreten öznelere kadınlar bu bağlamda egemen söylem baskılarından kaçınmayı ve mutlak mahkumiyet ve bağımlılıktan kurtulmayı başarmaktadırlar. *Miller's Tale*'de yaşlı bir erkekle evli olan Alison ve *Merchant's Tale*'de yaşlı bir erkekle evli olan May, mahkumiyetlerini fiziksel aşırılık ve atak tavırlarıyla sorgulayan ve konumlarını yeniden tanımlayan genç kadınlar

olarak bedenleri üzerindeki erkek tahakkümünü az da olsa kontrol edebilmenin mutlu ettiği kadınlardır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Chaucer'ın fabliyöları (fabliaux), fabliyöda kadın, *Merchant's Tale*, *Miller's Tale*, popüler başkaldırı, popüler zevk

## Introduction

Although fabliau has “physical pleasure as its central value” (Muscatine, 1986, p. 83), it is considered to be a regulatory genre in which social hierarchy and the dominant values are reinforced through its condemnation of traditional female vices of cupidity and disobedience. Hawkes emphasises the corrective function of the fabliaux and argues that fabliaux do not attempt to subvert the established hierarchies. On the contrary,

Fabliaux can be considered as means of maintaining social order. They reinforced the social hierarchy... As a genre fabliau appeared at a time of social change to reinforce a social world both familiar and changing. The fabliau tales operated, despite their irreverence, to stabilise rather than to rupture the prevailing social structure. (2004, p. 235)

In order to maintain the social order and prevent its rupture through subversion of the established marital norms, fabliaux tend to criticise women “as representatives of their sex” (Lacy, 1993, p. 72). Campbell states,

the vanity, cupiditas and disobedience ascribed to all women in the misogynistic tradition emerge in the stark and often cruel actions of the female characters. A typical fabliau involves an attractive and lecherous wife more or less willingly with a cunning seducer, usually a cleric, in the deceit of a dull, jealous and often old husband. (1986, p.50)

Nykrog suggests that the main instruction in the fabliau is antifeminism: “fabliau reflects the particular interest of the fableurs in the relations between the sexes as only those vices which affect men negatively are represented” (qtd in Johnson, 1983, p.198). Maureen Fries notes the exceptional “wit and resourcefulness usually denied by the exegetes to women” as characteristics of the fabliau woman but that “she uses it to repeat Eve’s sins of disobedience especially cupiditas” (1980, p.84-5).

It is clear that fabliaux underline women’s censured tendencies and attitudes in marriage, but in so doing fabliaux also present women as active agents of opposition to the predominantly male discourse of the sexes. Women in the fabliaux indeed occupy a subordinate position and it is from this subordinate position that they stage their response to their representation as a condemned subject of disapproved behavior. It seems that fabliau woman’s powerlessness and disability in relation to the dominant powers also allow her to develop and use a conflictual relationship with the dominant discourse although her contestation of the power fails to reconstruct the discourse that defines her. In fact, “the

illicit sexual relationships” in the fabliau are “means of usurping roles intended for the legitimate spouse” (Schenck, 2011, p.30). In other words, fabliau women take part in a predominantly male project but their active participation in the plot is the response of the repressed and the subordinate to the dominant power. In following her desire, fabliau woman redefines the balance of power in her world and provides a useful corrective to the normative discourses of pleasure in marriage. As Burns argues, women in fabliaux “speak both from within and against the dominant discourses. While they underwrite the ideology that constructs them they do not entirely repudiate that construction” (1993, p. 17).

Fiske states that “popular culture is produced under conditions of subordination” (1989, p.46). Fabliau women as subjects married to old husbands without their consent, and bound by medieval marriage rules disallowing women any apparent right over their body constitute a subordinate weak group. Their subordinate position compels them to seek illegitimate and unofficial paradigms of release and freedom. This paper argues that, in ways similar to the relationship of the popular to the dominant culture, Chaucer’s fabliau women in the *Merchant’s Tale* and the *Miller’s Tale* can be considered as producers of popular meanings and popular pleasure in relation to the dominant official culture which endorses their subjection. In other words, May and Alison as fabliau women resort to illicit love affairs in order to perform their resistance to the system through pleasure. The betrayal of the husband does very little to change the subordinate position confirmed by their position as the young wives of old husbands; on the contrary, morally speaking, the use of trickery and deceit they employ to pursue their amorous interests somewhat confirms the traditional definitions of women as deceitful and disobedient. However, their disapproved behaviour is “a small triumph deriving from making do with the resources available that involves an understanding of the rules, of the strategy of the powerful” (Fiske, 1989, p.38).

Evidently, fabliaux present a struggle for domination and consequently problematise the claims to power through women’s disobedience and performance. Indeed, in the fabliau marriage, invariably “one character has real or potential sexual prerogatives over another” (Schenck, 2011, p.30). Schenck notes the exclusive interest in establishing power paradigms in fabliaux: “the only aspect of marriage important in the fabliau is the establishment of sexual rights. The role of marriage in the community at large in terms of children or of the economic unit is of no concern at all” (2011, p.30). As we observe in January’s plans of marrying a young woman, the husband is mainly concerned with establishing his authority and exercising his will on the bride (Chaucer, 1987, *Merchant’s Tale*, 1337-61).<sup>1</sup> Official claims to authority, however, are challenged also by the fact that fabliaux often celebrate women’s resourcefulness in deceiving their husbands. As Furrow states, “More often, the story ends with the husband deep in delusion and the wife free to pursue her amours happily ever after.” (2011, p.13). In evading their husbands’ authority

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<sup>1</sup> All references to *Chaucer* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed by L. Benson, 1987, and are given by line numbers.

and claim over their body, fabliau women win their own space, and as space hard won, in Fiske's terms, "it *is* won, and it *is* kept" (1989, p.46). In other words, fabliau women produce their own popular culture as they "subvert and thus challenge the established hierarchies and norms from which [the fabliau values] originate (Gaunt, 1995, p.235).

### **Fabliau as the Site of Popular Meaning and Pleasure**

The status of fabliaux can be instructive of the particular role played in the fabliau by women. Fabliaux, for the most part, "remained on the fringe of official culture" (Boitani, 1982, p.28) and were denied acceptance. Because of their popular appeal and popular allegiances, fabliaux were widely censored and were not committed to writing (Baugh, 1948, p.199). In fact, fabliaux were considered as popular entertainment: One fabliau preface reads

Fabliaux are greedily devoured these days. Those who tell and transmit them have pocketed a lot of money from them, for they bring great comfort to the bored and the idle-as long as there aren't troublesome people around-and even to those who are full of anger: if they hear a good fabliau told, it gives them great solace and makes them forget grief, trouble, unkindness, and heavy thoughts (Qtd in Olson, 1974, p.308)

Similarly, Chaucer, too, introduces fabliau as a story of entertainment with no serious claim to moral teaching. Its topic (harlotry) and the language it uses will be tolerated, for "men shal nat maken ernest of game." (I, 3186) Olson has noted that in Chaucer, fabliau is a story of delight, of entertainment, instead of moral instruction, and The Miller and the Merchant tell tales to recreate rather than to profit (1974, p.311). Significantly, these tales of adultery committed by young wives of old husbands generate little condemnation but acceptance and tolerance. As Lesley Johnson argues, in the fabliaux, "[w]e are not encouraged to laugh at the wives... nor to condemn them; rather we are invited to laugh with them and to view their success with considerable esteem"(1983, p.299). It seems that fabliaux often divert our attention from the vices committed by women to the means of their subversion and thus they produce a comic effect as a more privileged objective than "overturning conventional relationships or subverting appearances" (Johnson, 1983, p. 303). It is through rearrangement of the priorities in such tales that, as Johnson further argues, fabliaux encourage us to recognize the fabliau woman not as deceitful and adulterous but as cunning and high-spirited (1983, p.307). A similar view of fabliaux endorses their popular function: "The fabliaux are a form of play which is held to have abounded in the Middle Ages as a flip side to the solemnity of cultural productions sanctioned by church and state, a flip side to Official Culture... They... parody positive values and allow them to be swallowed by the negative' (Blamires, 2011, p. 624). Helen Cooper argues, "The point of the form is its amorality: the fabliau is the expression of the non-official culture of carnal irreverence, of all those feelings suppressed by courtly politeness or religious asceticism that break into joyous burlesque" (1989, p. 96).

In the popular world of the fabliaux, women, like the producers of popular culture, use tactics to evade the control system built to contain them and use the resources provided by the system for that evasion. As Fiske suggests for popular culture, fabliau women's resistance is productive in that it characteristically "is formed always in reaction to, and never as part of, the forces of domination" (1989, p. 43). Moreover, it is also "determined by the forces of domination to the extent that it is always...in reaction to them; but the dominant cannot control totally the meanings that the subordinate may construct, the social allegiances they may form" (1989, p.45). It is, thus, in the gaps and unoccupied spaces of the dominant that fabliau women traverse and form their oppositional pleasurable resistances. They seem to be motivated fully by what Fiske defines as "the pleasure of producing one's own meanings of social experience and the pleasure of avoiding the social discipline of the power-bloc" (1989, p. 47). Viewed in this context, it can be observed that fabliaux contain structures of domination and resistance. Lyons suggests that "two essentials of the fabliau are *savoir* and *avoir*. While *savoir* (wit and ingenuity) of the successful fabliau characters constantly assault and undermine the position of the other characters the *avoir* believe that their *avoir* (their fixed place in social hierarchy (whether be of a noble or a clerk or a husband) is god-given certain and unassailable" (qtd in Gaunt, 1995, p. 235). De Certeau's theory of everyday life, similarly, suggests that "the powerful are cumbersome, unimaginative and overorganised, while the weak are creative, nimble and flexible" (Fiske, 1989, p. 32). In the interaction of the powerful and the weak, the powerful uses "compulsion" while the weak uses adaptation: "He who adapts to circumstances has overcome compulsion...adaptation absorbs compulsions, transforms and turns them into products" (Lefebvre, 1971, p.88).

Patriarchal discourse of the Middle Ages often condemns women for their carnality and strictly forbids pleasure particularly to women.<sup>2</sup> Whereas, popular pleasures of the fabliau women arise from the social allegiances they form as the subordinate group and hence are oppositional. As de Certeau argues

Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game...characterise the subtle, the stubborn resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants's strategems, there is a certain art in placing one's blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space... Even in the field of manipulation and enjoyment". (1984, p.18)

In view of the fact that medieval marriage rules considered any solicitation of sex with a spouse for pleasure as a kind of adultery in itself (Payer, 1993, p.122) the fabliau

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<sup>2</sup> On the regulation of marriage in the Middle Ages see Sarah Salih, (2011), Unpleasures of the Self: Medieval Marriage, Masochism, and the History of Sexuality, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 33, 125-147, pp. 127-137.

women's illicit pleasures are doubly subversive engagements. In other words, in the fabliaux, the practice of the "ancient art of 'making do', of constructing *our* space within and against *their* place, of speaking *our* meanings with *their* language" (Fiske, 1989, p.36) is the common strategy.

### **Subversive Pleasures of the Subordinate in the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale***

Chaucer's fabliaux the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale* are structured around power relations of domination and subordination; they are tales of imposition and resistance. Much of the power struggle is intrinsic to the marriage institution which constitutes the main background and the site on which the conflictual interests of the marriage partners are exercised. As Hildebrand states, marriage as an institution is an important constituent of patriarchal power (2007, p.138); power in marriage is "exercised by the partner who demands and obeyed by the partner who renders" (Salih, 2011, p.135). January as the old and domineering husband of May in the *Merchant's Tale* and John the carpenter as the excessively jealous old husband of Alison in the *Miller's Tale* are arguably the authors of their eventual defeat by the subordinate forces employed by their wives. In the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*, in addition to the obvious lack of power in choosing to marry (we have no mention of what the brides thought of the marriage prior to their marriage), the age difference between the partners is introduced as legitimate grounds for the ensuing deceit and adultery. The age difference is particularly important in relation to the payment of the marital debt required by both partners but often demanded from wives rather than husbands (Salih, 2011, p.136). Canonical law stressed marriage as an institution to maintain the hierarchical gender divisions and continue the social system. The *Miller's Tale* and the *Merchant's Tale* both introduce the marriage of the young and the old as grounds for the consequent adultery. There is a strong emphasis on the inequality in the marriages these fabliaux relate. The *Miller's Tale*, for instance, introduces the relationship between Alison and her husband John as one of conflict on account of the age difference between them. The speaker, in fact, introduces the conflict as consequent to man's breach of decorum required in marriage. The merchant contends that "Men sholde wedden after hire estaat/For youthe and elde is often at debaat", (3229-30). The fabliau is aware of the consequent contest such marriages are likely to generate and takes it as a given. Alison's husband John is an instructive case: "But sith that he was fallen in the snare, He moste endure, as other folk, his care. (3231-32).

A similar recognition underlines the *Merchant's Tale* in which the narrative anticipates the adultery of May in terms of mirth and laughter that the marriage of the unequals in age, wealth and status will generate: "Whan tendre youthe hath wedded stoupyng age/Ther is swich myrthe that it may nat be writen" (1738-39). Clearly, the *Merchant's Tale* does not endorse the behaviour of the old man, either. Such remarks anticipate the resulting subversion and violation of hierarchies by pointing to its origins. It appears that fabliau indeed gives license to the excessive and bold actions of the female. Similarly, the Host's gloss on the fabliau told by the Merchant in the *Canterbury Tales* recognises the play for

domination central to *fabliaux*. The host locates men and women in oppositional power positions and confirms the role of women in these narratives as one of deceiving men through tricks and tactics. The Host, however, does not focus on the adultery committed by May, nor does he condemn women represented by May. In his presentation, the *fabliau* is more likely a tale of continuous struggle “between us men and them women”: “Lo! Which sleightes and subtilitees /In wommen been! For ay as bisy as bees/Been they, us sely men for to deceyve” (2421-23). The Host’s comment is as much an expression of acceptance of women as agents of trickery and deceit as an endorsement of the particular roles played by men and women in the *fabliaux*.

Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* as a *fabliau* foregrounds the power struggle of its female protagonist May against a male oriented world of power to produce her own pleasures and meanings. As stated above, a significant paradigm of power relations in the *fabliau* is its presentation of marriage as a project of a dominant male who chooses his wife from among the young women and then sets about patrolling his young wife against potential deceiving and adultery. The control element introduces to the *fabliau* a structure of contestation, a contest over the body of the young wife initiated by the old husband who takes her as a wife. Accordingly, January’s plans of marriage and his eventual marriage to May, a wife of young age, are structured around a number of axes of domination. Firstly, May is presented as a project clearly grounded on the norms of marriage institution.<sup>3</sup> The project in fact involves May only as one of the essential elements necessary for its realisation. January’s decision to marry a young woman and have children at the age of sixty involves May as a young wife who will produce children and will provide the man with a life of “joye and solaaas” (1273). January states confidently that “Whan a man is oold and hoor/ Thanne is a wyf the fruyt of his tresor/Thanne sholde he take a yong wyf and a feir/On which he myghte engendren hym an heir” (1269-72). May is clearly “devised out of January’s thoughts” while January is produced by an “equally determining discourse: he is a product of antifeminist discourse, as May herself is” (Hansen 251). January defines wives in terms of their required loyalty and submission to their husbands: “For who kan be so buxom as a wyf?/Who is so trewe, and eek so ententyf /To kepe hym, syk and hool, as is his make?/ For wele and wo she wole hym nat forsake;/She nys nat wery hym to love and serve./Though that he lyde betrede til he sterve. (1287-92). As he wishes for a wife that will “laste unto his lyves ende”, January envisages a wife who “seith nat ones “nay” whan he seith “ye”/ “Do this”, seith he; “Al redy, sire,” seith she” (1345-6).

In addition to servitude and obedience to the husband, January considers youth as a necessary quality in a wife. January intends to marry a young wife for he prefers “yong flesh” (1418) and “tendre weel” (1420). However, even more important is the fact that January wants a wife who will obey him and will not object to his moulding of her into the shape he wants. January is convinced that “ a yong thyng may men gye/ Right as men may warm wax with handes plye” (1429-30). Evidently, his preferences in marriage are

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<sup>3</sup> Medieval marriages were seldom based on the consent of the brides. Marriage was a matter of financial security and social improvement. See Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, 2006, pp 11-35.

guided by his concerns for power and domination. He is convinced that he can shape and school a young wife according to his liking. Further, it is made clear that January chose his wife “of his owene auctoritee” (1597) and secured his right over her body, “feffed in his lond” (1698) through “scrit and bond” (1697) and he has a predetermined wife figure that he imagines, “this was his fantasye” (1610): “He purtreied in his herte and in his thocht /Hir freshe beautee and hir age tendre/Her myddel smal, hire armes longe and sklendre, /Hir wise governaunce, hir gentillesse, /Hir wommanly berynge, and hire sadnesse” ( 1600-603). We have no mention of May’s consent. The subsequent inquiries into her mind by the narrator never make it clear what she might be thinking but it is clear that May is not eager to be a part of January’s plans (1849-54).

The fabliau world is a dynamic world of quick decisions and speedy actions. The quick bodied women and their lovers are easy to trick and overcome the obstacles of the dominant. *The Miller’s Tale* in fact is based on the quick thinking and elaborate plans of evasion by Alison and her young lover. They together manage to deceive not only the old husband but also the unwanted attentions of an aspiring rival lover. The specific pleasures and joys January’s marriage plans involve are instructive in this context. January above all is determined to be a “wedded man” and his preparations to become one are much controlled and guided by dominant ideas about marriage. However, it should be noted that January disregards counsel against his decision and is insistent upon providing himself with “a married life”: “Noon oother lyf,” seyde he, “is worth a bene,” (1263). Significantly, his deliberations of marriage focus on his future wife as an acquisition which will last: “ a wyf wol laste, and in thyn house endure” (1317). A wife, moreover, is very much in his likeness; she is not only similar to the husband/man but also is one body and one heart:

That wyf is mannes helpe and his confort,  
His paradys terrestre, and his disport,  
So buxom and so vertuous is she  
They moste nedes lyve in unitee.  
O flessch they been, and o flessch, as I gesse,  
Hath but oon herte, in weele and in distresse. (1331-36)

It is important to note that January’s marriage plans foreground his expectations from his wife to be. Particularly of importance is his subordination of such expectations to himself as the man of the marriage. Moreover, his discourse endorses endurance and continuity. On the other hand, quick and intermittent attacks on the system dominate in the lives of the subordinate. In that sense, the narrative anticipates the consequences of the slow and cumbersome movement of the dominant: “And trewely, it is an heigh corage/ That any man that stapen is in age/To take a yong wyf” (1513-15).

Moreover, January's marriage fantasy involves legitimation of his sexual desires; in fact, he aims to make up for his past fornications through lawful marriage to a young wife (1403-4). January's designs present explicit versions of his domination of desire in his marriage. He, first of all, considers sexual relationship as central to married bliss and is presented several times demanding and exacting his marital debt. His carefully planned and carefully executed sexual feats involve the construction of a love garden. The love garden he constructs is an extreme form of domination and restriction that he imposes on May's body. For May, January's demonstrations of love, particularly his love making, is loathsome: "She preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene", (1854) but she is presented as the obedient wife rendering her marital debt without obvious resistance. However, May's resistance to her subordination to the fulfillment of January's desires can be observed in her re-construction of January's love garden. May clearly usurps this place and makes it her own space where she enjoys sexual pleasure according to her own terms. May's use of the love garden as her meeting place with her lover is a clear indication of her use of the resources of the dominant. One can consider January's possession of the key to the garden as a symbol of his jealous control of May's body. The body that he buys --May is of lower status (1625)-- and makes into his lawful object of pleasure, he guards and protects from others and from May herself. The key thus is a powerful symbol of his domination and May's subordination: "That he wol no wight suffren bere the keye/Save he hymself" and he had the key "With which, whan that hym leste, he it unshette" (2044-46). The mirth and joy the garden enables, accordingly, only January enjoys. It is clear that May's betrayal of January undermines his authority and his claims over her body as a source of pleasure: "But worldly joye may nat alwey dure/To Januarie" (2055-56).

May's tactics in the *Merchant's Tale* to enjoy sexual pleasure as one of the objectives of marriage as devised by January are "maneuvers of the subordinate" (De Certau, 1984, p.18). May certainly constructs her own space "within and against their place, speaking [her] meanings with their language" (Fiske, 1989, p.36). Her reaction to January's confinement of her and definition of her pleasures is one of rupture. May plays the part of the duper in her dealings with January's marriage paradigms. Her deception of January involves convincing January that he certainly misinterpreted what he saw happening in the pear tree. As Schenck suggests, "the duper has not only the ability to create fanciful stories that are readily believed by the victim, but also a capacity to respond immediately to adverse circumstances. His reaction to threatened discovery is to obscure the situation either verbally or physically by hiding a person or object" (2011, p.31) as indeed May does in the *Merchant's Tale*. Consequently May's use of the private space of the walled garden as her own space is a subversive use of the means of dominant power. May's adultery eventually does not free her nor does it help her evade the positioning she is subjected to by the dominant ideology. However, as a quick and temporary victory over the agents of domination, it provides pleasures otherwise unavailable. May escapes oneness in marriage as it is devised by January and her adultery becomes a means of challenging the ideology of marriage. Salih suggests that "people do not seek, have, and enjoy sex simply for sexual reasons...they seek, have, and enjoy sex for reasons connected with their narratives of their selves" (2011, p. 132). May, in this sense, employs the strategy

of the dominant that she can be sly and calculating to have illicit pleasures, to remain within the system as well as rupturing it through the space provided by the system. In this deployment of the resources of marriage, May in a way produces her own definitions. Hence, January's garden of pleasure becomes ironically, and independently of January, May's garden of pleasure, too.

A similar tactic is employed by Alison in the *Miller's Tale*. The young wife of John evades the constraining authority of her husband and ruptures the control mechanism over her body through the means provided by her marriage. Alison does not necessarily defy her definition according to the patriarchal discourse but she clearly defies its expectations of obedience and faithfulness. John's story thus is a story co-authored by Alison as it is John who married a young wife despite his old age:

This carpenter hadde wedde newe a wyf,  
Which that he lovede moore than his lyf  
Of eighteteene yeer she was of age.  
Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage  
For she was wylde and yong, and he was old  
And deemed hymself lik a cokewold (3221-26)

*The Miller's Tale* thus normalises the subversive behaviour of Alison through its emphasis on the incompatibility of the partners and the natural conflict between young wives and old husbands. It, moreover, allows the misbehaving woman go unpunished. As May in the *Merchant's Tale*, indeed, in the *Miller's Tale*, Alison, too, enjoys illicit pleasures without any harm to herself or her reputation. The old husband, on the other hand, is the butt of joke and the source of merriment that closes the tale. Much of the heaviness of the adultery is mitigated and compensated thus.

## Conclusion

Alison in the *Miller's Tale* and May in the *Merchant's Tale* are willing participants in plans which circumvent the acknowledged power and the right of their respective husbands over their body as they follow their own schemes of sexual fulfillment. Often, the fabliau woman is the object of lust and excessive bodily pleasure. However, both May and Alison are described as uncontrollable and unmanageable in relation to the forces of the dominant husbands who guard them jealously. Alison finds herself a lover and participates in plans to keep her husband blissfully ignorant of her schemes. May is even bolder and daring when she persuades her husband that his impaired eyesight is responsible for the adultery he alleges to be committed in the tree. Temporary relief from the dominant powers and pleasure are their exploits and that is all they claim as the subordinate elements in a social equation which aims to subject them to total silence and

endurance. For January, May's body is a source of sanctioned pleasure and profit as he delights himself in her body and hopes to have children by her. Alison is a mismatch for her husband John who tries to confine her to a cage bird life. Both Alison and May, on the other hand, use their body for fun. They use their body to resist the norms and to partly control their relationship with the dominant ideology.

It is not possible to state that either May or Alison, as the young wives of old husbands pursued for their bodies by amorous young men, are agents of total freedom from the dominant power. However, as the powerless subjects of marriage based on the satisfaction of sexual desires of old men, both May and Alison play their subjection to their own advantage. Their bodies empower them against the dominant system as they can produce their oppositional pleasures and evasive meanings out of the body of sexual pleasure they own. By allowing the fabliau woman to choose a lover to evade and dupe an old jealous husband, fabliaux indeed empower women and illustrate the particular ways in which the power paradigms can be contested and restructured by the subordinate. The behaviour of May and Alison can be considered as modes of sexual behavior which contribute to the formation of oppositional selves and paradigms.

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