

The Fabliau



Figure: Illustration of the Miller in the Ellesmere MS (public domain: [source](#))

Definition

Verse tale, often obscene, ridiculing members of some social class or profession and celebrating trickery.

Common Ingredients

- ▶ “Low” comedy and obscenity
- ▶ Lechery (of a clergyman or bachelor)
- ▶ Cuckoldry
- ▶ Unequal marriages (older husband, young wife)
- ▶ Trickery
- ▶ Stupidity
- ▶ Class or occupational satire

Non-Ingredients

- ▶ A serious moral and didactic purpose

Class in Fragment I

- ▶ Knight
 - ▶ Described in ideal terms in the Prologue
 - ▶ Tells “a noble storie” according to all, especially “the gentils”
- ▶ Monk
 - ▶ Portrayed as a secular hunter in the Prologue, but not dishonest
 - ▶ Eventually tells a moralizing tale of Boethian tragedy
 - ▶ The Knight and the Host criticize his tale as depressing and boring

Class in Fragment I

- ▶ Miller
 - ▶ Drunk
 - ▶ “A cherl”
 - ▶ “Abyd, Robyn, my leeve brother; / Some bettre man shal telle us first another.”
 - ▶ Tells a tale of cuckoldry
 - ▶ “Diverse folk diversely they seyde”
- ▶ Reeve
 - ▶ Depicted as a shrewd and dishonest man in the Prologue
 - ▶ Tells a filthier tale than the Miller
- ▶ Cook
 - ▶ “Wel koude he knowe a draughte of Londoun ale”
 - ▶ Fraudulent cooking practices
 - ▶ Tells a tale about a prostitute

Class in the Fables

- ▶ Universe largely limited to lower and middle classes plus clergy and students (i.e. peasantry and clergy, not nobility)
 - ▶ Carpenter
 - ▶ Shopkeeper
 - ▶ Merchant
 - ▶ Miller
- ▶ Within this universe, cunning counts for more than class; but the two are related
 - ▶ “A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle, / But if he koude a carpenter bigyle.”