

## The Uses of Torture and Violence in the Fabliaux: When Comedy Crosses the Line<sup>1</sup>

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Comic violence is a device used in the Old French fabliaux to mete out just punishments, to castigate transgression, and to amuse a widely-mixed audience for whom violence was all too common. Yet, despite the farcical nature of most violence in the genre, some plots cross the line separating violence and torture from acceptable narrative motifs in medieval culture. It is in these thirteenth-century tales that a modern audience sees realistic medieval fears of power and dominance, where justice is replaced by tyranny, and violence is no longer merely a question of fun and amusement. *Du Prestre crucefié*, *De Connebert* (*Li prestre ki perdi les colles*), and *La Dame escoilleé*<sup>2</sup> depict realistic forms of torture, whose purpose is to cause prolonged pain in a public demonstration of power and dominance that parodies legal practice. *Du Prestre crucefié* tells of a priest who poses as a figure on a crucifix to avoid detection by a suspicious husband and is emasculated both physically and psychologically, *De Connebert* narrates the consequences of cuckolding a blacksmith bent on revenge, and *La Dame escoilleé* deals with a shrewish mother-in-law whose sharp tongue provokes a staged scene of pseudo-castration enacted with

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- 1 I am indebted to Holly A. Crocker and Raymond J. Cormier for their tireless support and invaluable suggestions regarding this article, and to R. Howard Bloch for inspiring this paper through his National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar “Old French Fabliaux and the Medieval Sense of the Comic” at Yale University, 2003.
  - 2 The Old French texts of all three fabliaux are available in *Nouveau Recueil Complet des Fabliaux*, eds. Noomen and van den Boogaard: *Le Prestre crucefié*, 4:91-106; *Connebert*, 7:215-37; and *La Dame escoilleé*, 8:1-125. The Old French text of *Du Prestre crucefié* and its English translation are in *The French Fabliau: B.N. MS. 837*, ed. and trans. by Raymond Eichmann and John DuVal, 2:62-67.

realistic violence. While medieval culture is often thought to have had a high tolerance for cruelty in daily life, these stories fuse violence and punishment in a formal manner that exceeds the usual limits of humorous spectacle. By depicting such excessive forms of violence in the guise of a cleverly-crafted tale, each of these three fabliaux evokes horror and condemns the excessive brutality that stretches the limits of comic violence.

Generally, the humour of the fabliaux does not lie in violence itself but in its relative ineffectiveness: the lover still gets away, the husband is still duped, and the wife still manages to carry on as she wishes. However, in contrast to the notion of violence as levity illustrated in the majority of fabliaux through farcical beatings and slapstick fights, these three tales present vivid scenes of sexual mutilation performed in public and motivated by a struggle for power. In these episodes of castration, the violence is premeditated and calculated, a deliberate act carried out as a public display of power. All the perpetrators in these scenes subvert the traditional judicial process by taking the law into their own hands and inflicting punishment on victims they have tried and judged guilty. According to R. Howard Bloch, “The literary performance stood as a sporting version of trial — a ceremonial demonstration of the principles by which the community defined itself, at once the code and the inventory of its most basic values.”<sup>3</sup> The castration episodes in these three fabliaux parody the judicial process, mocking the law and authority, but the excessive punishment falls outside the boundaries of even carnivalesque humour and cries out for censure. Earlier scholars, like Joseph Bédier and Per Nykrog,<sup>4</sup> do not discuss the issue of castration, and while many scholars like Norris Lacy and Howard Bloch address violence as part of their larger discussion of the fabliaux, few analyse the specific cultural implications of brutality in these tales or compare these violent episodes to similar instances in other medieval literary texts. The castration episodes are often glossed over as anomalies or presented in the context of a theoretical and thus metaphorical interpretation, or are addressed as literal representations of the cruel delight of medieval poets, as the “narrator’s practice,” according to Lacy, “of savoring an unsavory subject.”<sup>5</sup>

If the poet actually enjoyed recounting scenes of unmitigated violence, as some critics suggest, there are greater implications for the presence of torture in secular literature.

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3 Bloch, *Medieval French Literature and Law*, 3.

4 See Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, and Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*. Both authors address the violence of individual fabliaux, but their primary interest is the history, classification, and intended audience of the fabliau as a genre. Thus, the violence is discussed throughout each work as a means of categorizing and contextualizing the genre.

5 Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, 60.

Rather than condemning the abuse of power, these three fabiliaux are often regarded as a testament to it. A society that preserves and circulates this literature, Johan Huizinga argues, can only be barbaric and bloodthirsty.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Raymond Cormier writes that “numerous brutal and bloody episodes in mid-twelfth-century French romance reveal an unrepentant and unreformed taste for violence, aggression, and revenge” and that the violent elements of medieval French romance “very broadly speaking, reflect a certain reality — perhaps by trickle-down — into poetry and letters” of the worst aspects of militaristic knighthood.<sup>7</sup> While military violence is commonly portrayed in medieval literature, peacetime civilian violence is far less frequently depicted. Most of the evidence in medieval secular literature suggests that medieval society was no more violent or cruel than any other. Judicial torture appears largely in religious literature, in hagiography or Passion narratives, where it elevates the didactic message of the Church and reinforces the sanctity of its martyrs by demonizing the pagan judges who employ it.<sup>8</sup> In secular literature, where it rarely appears, torture is generally dishonourable or transgressive: it is a horrible punishment administered for a horrible crime, exemplified by the Old Norse / Icelandic *Brennu-Njal’s Saga*, in which Broðir is eviscerated for killing the saintly Brian Boru at the battle of Clontarf. This act of evisceration is replicated in the fifteenth-century *Life of St. Alban and St. Amphibal*, in which the fictitious Saint Amphibal is disembowelled by Roman soldiers and tied to a stake with his own entrails, but it appears in few other sources.<sup>9</sup> Some of these literary examples reinforce traditional authority by condemning those who act outside it, as in hagiography, but the fabiliaux as a genre often engage in a carnivalesque parody of authority, inverting it as these three fabiliaux invert the law. In the castration scenes, the perpetrators subvert the process by which their grievances could be addressed and instead take the law into their own hands, wielding it with savagery and brutality. They flout the law and they flout the system of proofs; rather than enacting justice, they exact revenge, with punishments forbidden in the legal proceedings of the age. As F. R. P. Akehurst points out, “In a period

6 In “The Violent Tenor of Life,” the first chapter of his *Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924), Huizinga discusses “the high degree of irritability which distinguishes the Middle Ages from our own time” and the “excitability of the medieval soul,” which meant that people could not “get their fill of seeing the tortures inflicted, on a high platform in the middle of the market-place, on the magistrates suspected of treason”; Huizinga, *Waning*, 14, 19, and 23. Other scholars have since challenged this notion, notably Cantor, *Civilization*, 314 and 425.

7 Cormier, “Brutality and Violence,” 67-68.

8 For more on torture in medieval hagiography, see Tracy, “Torture Narrative.”

9 For more information on the evisceration of Saint Amphibal and Broðir, see Tracy, “British Library MS Harley 630”; Frankis, “From Saint’s Life to Saga”; and Hill, “The Evisceration of Bróðir.”

such as the thirteenth century in France when the torture of witnesses was not systematic and may not have been practiced at all, perhaps only a supernatural fear could force witnesses or accused persons to tell the truth when it was to their probable detriment.”<sup>10</sup> In these three fabliaux the “judge” does not use supernatural fear to force his victim into submission or to extract a confession; instead, he uses realistic fears of torture and dismemberment to wield power and subvert justice, crossing the boundaries of both legal procedure and humorous farce.

On the other hand, the fabliau author may cross these boundaries deliberately: possibly to emphasize the cruelty inherent in a domineering patriarchal society, potentially to condemn the abuse of power endemic to the upper levels of the feudal system, or in some cases to do both, as with the “gelding” of the mother-in-law in *La Dame escoilleé*. If the tales are to be taken at face value, then the torture must be too, and modern audiences would have to confront a sadistic medieval delight in violence and bloodshed unsupported by most secular literature of the time. In contrast to a critical position like that of Norris Lacy, who argues that the fabliaux are literal renderings, it is my contention that the tales are subversive, because they contain fragments of dissent and ironic humour. From this perspective, graphic portrayals of human cruelty form a much more complex portrait of medieval sensibilities. Certain fabliaux give modern readers a glimpse of a society plagued by secular abuse and tyranny, displaying excesses in condemnation rather than celebration of violence.

Within the corpus of fabliaux, slapstick violence abounds — beatings that leave no more than a momentary mark, draw no blood, and seem to do no harm at all. Women and men are flogged, trounced, dragged through the mud, and beaten with sticks, stones, pots and pans; clothes are ripped and heads are bashed, yet none of this seems out of place in a genre that for the most part contravenes traditional expectations by imposing new ones. This kind of violence is reminiscent of the rhetorical violence enacted in medieval drama, in which, Jody Enders writes, “Such comic beatings also recall the ambiguous relationship of rhetoric itself to pain and its pleasures.”<sup>11</sup> This ambiguity leads to the question what is funny and what is excessive in the performance of pain represented in literary genres like the fabliau, and whether the violence enacted should be taken seriously or as subversive. Medieval cultural constructions of torture and the characteristics that distinguish it from other acts of violence represented in the genre provide good indicators in determining the subversive intent of this subset of fabliaux.

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10 Akehurst, “Good Name, Reputation, and Notoriety,” 91.

11 Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty*, 179.

Medieval torture was associated with the notion of truth, whether in its revelation, extraction, or invention.<sup>12</sup> Edward Peters argues that the term “torture” should be applied only to judicial proceedings: “judicial torture is the *only* kind of torture, whether administered by an official judiciary or by other instruments of the state. [...] The juxtaposition of familiar terms from one area of meaning to another for dramatic effect is a device of rhetoric, not historical or social analysis.”<sup>13</sup> However, in her study of the rhetoric of violence Enders observes that historians have increasingly focused on the relationship between torture and truth, but have devoted far less attention to “the role of dramatic theory and spectacle in the rhetorical discovery, interpretation, enactment, and even theatricalization of torture.”<sup>14</sup> Yet Foucault defines torture as a studied technique, not “an extreme expression of lawless rage.”<sup>15</sup> It is not merely causing pain, or enacting violence on a subject; torture is a deliberate practice performed publicly as an exercise of judicial power and domination, condoned by the authorities in what Elaine Scarry calls the “wholly illusory but, to the torturers and the regime they represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power.”<sup>16</sup> As Peters notes, in historical studies of society “The lawyers and historians [...] all find one common element in torture: it is torment inflicted by a public authority for ostensibly public purposes. [...] Torture is thus something that a public authority does or condones.”<sup>17</sup>

In the fabliaux there are two public spheres: the characters who act as witnesses to the torture in the narrative and the audience to whom the jongleur is telling the

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12 Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty*, 3.

13 Peters, *Torture*, 7.

14 Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty*, 3.

15 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 33. He defines torture as follows: “To be torture, punishment must obey three principal criteria: first, it must produce a certain degree of pain which may be measured exactly, or at least calculated, compared and hierarchised; death is a torture in so far as it is not simply a withdrawal of the right to live, but is the occasion and culmination of a calculated gradation of pain: from decapitation (which reduces all pain to a single gesture, performed in a single moment — the zero degree of torture), through hanging, the stake and the wheel (all of which prolong the agony), to quartering, which carries pain almost to infinity; death-torture is the art of maintaining life in pain, by subdividing it into a ‘thousand deaths’, by achieving before life ceases ‘the most exquisite agonies’. Torture rests on a whole quantitative art of pain. But there is more to it: this production of pain is regulated. Torture correlates the type of corporal effect, the quality, intensity, duration of pain, with the gravity of the crime, the person of the criminal, the rank of his victims”; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 33-34.

16 Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 27.

17 Peters, *Torture*, 3.

tale.<sup>18</sup> In *Du Prestre crucefié* and *De Connebert* the public authority is supplanted by the outraged husbands, and in *La Dame escoilleé* the count serves as his own authority. The brutality is not “torture” in the judicial sense, but it serves the same public purpose. One man acts as judge and witness against his adversary — the accuser sets up a mock process in which he condemns the accused and exacts punishment. While the brutality is not enacted under the strict guidance of the law, these scenes adopt a quasi-judicial narrative, a “trial” is held, the accused is found guilty in a public forum and summarily punished in front of a jury of his peers composed of his neighbours. In appropriate thirteenth-century jurisprudence, torture is used to exact truth, but in these narratives the “truth” is less connected to the guilt of the victim than to the brutality of the abuser who attempts to establish himself as the law, to mimic the law, but who misunderstands and misinterprets its role. Ulpian defined torture as an algorithm of judicial discovery: “By ‘torture’ we should understand torment and corporeal suffering and pain employed to extract the truth.”<sup>19</sup> This definition can be used to explore the truths extracted in these three brutal fabliaux — the truth of fear, domination and power, and the truth of crime and justice. According to Margaret E. Owens, “Dismemberment tends to expose the social and political inscription of the human body and hence of the subject.”<sup>20</sup> In the case of these three fabliaux, dismemberment in the form of castration inscribes on the body of these victims a visceral fear of aggression, retribution, and emasculation, and raises the question of the notion of acceptable violence in a humorous milieu. Perhaps the torture of each victim was meant to elicit a confession of guilt, of adultery, or of contrariness — a confession that might justify the tormentor’s actions — but no confession is made despite the savage methods. The castration in these tales is rhetorical torture, the violence may be extra-judicial but it serves a judicial purpose. It is torture, but the “truth” extracted is questionable and illegitimate. In the fabliaux, incidents of torture rely on the public spectacle of the tale provided by the presence of an audience, in the text and outside it, as well as the dramatic effect of the narrative and the climax of this punishment.

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18 In contrast, Farrell argues that the “privacy of the fabliaux also makes them inherently unjust, since medieval justice is never private or secret”; Farrell, “Privacy and the Boundaries,” 775. However, I contend that this performance transforms what *should* be private into a public spectacle in order to highlight the injustice of the punishment.

19 “‘Quaestionem’ intellegere debemus tormenta et corporis dolorem ad eruendam veritatem.” Justinian, *Digest*, 47.10.15.41. Quoted in Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty*, 26.

20 Owens, *Stages of Dismemberment*, 20.

These three fabliaux use the spectacle of violence in ways that vitiate humour; the joke becomes secondary, and the emphasis is on the fact that such brutality is excessive, thus directly criticizing this degree of violence. The investigation into adultery, or in *La Dame escoilleé* into pride and contrariness, leads to torture and punishment. In *Du Prestre crucefié* and *De Connebert*, the husbands have suspicions about their wives' fidelity, and, in order to confirm them, they develop elaborate schemes that will end in the "justified" punishment of the philandering priests. All three tales are concerned with the establishment of male power and masculine domination, and are staged for dramatic effect to set up the expectations of the jongleur's audience. The formulaic structure relies on these recognizable motifs — the wayward wife, the pretense of a journey, the early return, the blacksmith's shop or sculptor's workshop as a stage, and the shrewish mother-in-law. The same set-up usually leads to a different result when the tale is sympathetic to the wife, who then outwits her suspicious husband. These three fabliaux provide an antidote for such tales. Every detail is carefully enhanced for the "discovery" of the perceived crime in front of local witnesses. The comedy is presented in the form of the fabliau itself, the expectation developed by the formulaic nature of the genre. As Anne Elizabeth Cobby observes, "We are led to varying expectations, but the means are essentially the same: our past experience of fabliaux [...] is recalled by the use of characteristic formulae, and particular reactions are prepared in line with the author's intentions."<sup>21</sup> The brutal enactment of torture jars the audience from a comfortable, generic setting into the painful reality of retribution. This may be the poet's condemnation of vigilantism and of those who cross the boundaries of prescribed legal procedure by subverting the communal sense of justice. According to Peters, "the ideal of a justice within reach of human determination came to be widely accepted" with the creation of uniform legal procedures,<sup>22</sup> but this justice is elusive when husbands ignore the uniform procedures for dealing with adulterers and attempt to exact their own vigilante justice. This subset of fabliaux deviates from the expectations of humour with the introduction of violent punishments: the husband (or son-in-law) punishes the wife who thought to outwit him, and the priest pays a heavy price for his presumption and transgressions. The farce is drowned in the display of unmitigated violence uncommon and unexpected in a genre largely designed to provoke laughter.

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<sup>21</sup> Cobby, *Ambivalent Conventions*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Peters, *Torture*, 43.

Many scholars have argued that the fabliaux are inherently misogynistic, and while Lacy demands that the fabliaux be judged individually,<sup>23</sup> he agrees that they indulge in brutal humour at the expense of hapless others: ignorant peasants, jealous and stupid husbands, lascivious priests, libidinous and insatiable women, and an occasional fallen philosopher. Lacy argues that “It would be easy — but erroneous — to equate this irreverent spirit with subversion. Instead, the fabliaux as a group are profoundly conservative, even reactionary, compositions, using humor to preserve and enforce a status quo considered to be natural or even divinely instituted.”<sup>24</sup> If the fabliaux, as a whole or individually, support the status quo and are a reaction to subversion, then the implication of these three specific fabliaux is that brutality is justified, acceptable, and legitimate, and that humour is derived from the feeling that the “victim” got what he or she deserved. There would have to be an agreement that certain kinds of brutality are allowed, even laughable. According to Thomas J. Farrell, the main purpose of the fabliaux is to provide “powerful metaphors for private vengeance or domination,” where violence “almost inevitably privileges individual vindictiveness (or whim) over social order.”<sup>25</sup> However, the context of these three fabliaux refutes the legitimacy of this violence — the torture and punishment meted out is condemned as excessive through the detailed language of pain. In other fabliaux, by contrast, there is a clear sense that no one is permanently injured, and that the bumps and bruises will heal without scars.

But the images of torture presented in these three fabliaux are too real, too vivid, to be humorous or rational. And while “the entire medieval parody is based on the grotesque concept of the body,”<sup>26</sup> these three scenes go beyond the grotesque of the carnival. The torture brings down the curtain of fantasy and destroys the comfort created by the suspension of disbelief. It is possible to categorize these scenes as farcical depictions of excessive cruelty that are humorous in their exaggeration, but the images are disturbing in that they are far from ridiculous or ludicrous. As Enders aptly points out, “The potential assignment of ‘certain comic effects’ to disfigured, bloodied bodies might eventually have fallen under the rubric of the ‘silly spectacles.’ [...] But there is nothing silly about staining the mind’s *dramatis personae* with blood to enhance their evocative

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23 Lacy warns that sweeping generalizations about the genre as a whole diminish the individual tales: “Specifically, scholars have most often responded to the need to say something applicable to the entire genre, something concerning fabliau publics, for example, or fabliau parody, or women in the fabliaux. The results, unfortunately, tend to lose sight of the individual fabliau in a forest of generalizations about *the fabliaux*”; Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, ix.

24 Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, 37-38.

25 Farrell, “Privacy and the Boundaries,” 773.

26 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 27.



value.”<sup>27</sup> However, many scholars have debated whether a medieval audience would have been as affected by scenes of gratuitous cruelty or if it would have embraced such spectacles as a natural part of life. Humour is subjective, but this portrayal of violence is excessive in a humorous milieu, no matter how accustomed an audience might be to violence in everyday life. Rather than satiating a gruesome sense of sadism, the authors of these three fabliaux may have used torture as a means of expressing fears inherent in their own society, provoking a response of disgust and repugnance. As Enders writes, “If an urban legend ‘truly represents’ real fears, then so too would a medieval allegation of real violence.”<sup>28</sup>

### ***Du Prestre crucefié***

The shortest of the torture narratives addressed, *Du Prestre crucefié*, begins as a formulaic tale of a wronged husband, his wife, and her lover. As in many other fabliaux, the husband (a crucifix carver) pretends to leave so that he can secretly return and witness his wife’s transgression. Seeing his wife and the priest sharing an intimate dinner, the woodcarver announces his return. The priest attempts to escape discovery by stripping and hiding naked in the husband’s workshop, masquerading as one of the artist’s life-size crucifix figures. Fully aware of the deception, the husband announces his intention to trim the excess off his “statue” and castrates the priest. The wounded priest flees into the crowd of villagers who beat him, throw him in a ditch, and then return him to the husband who exacts a ransom. The moral of the story is given as a remonstrance against promiscuous clerics:

Cest exemple nous moustre bien  
que nus prestres por nule rien  
ne devoit autrui fame amer,  
n’entor li venir ne aler,  
quiconques fust en calengage,  
que il n’i lest ou coille ou gage.<sup>29</sup>

[This tale shows us well / That no priest for any reason whatsoever / Ought to love another man’s wife, / Or come or go around her; / Nor should anyone get involved in a quarrel, / Lest he leave either balls or forfeit.]

<sup>27</sup> Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty*, 69.

<sup>28</sup> Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty*, 209.

<sup>29</sup> *Du Prestre crucefié*, ll. 93-98. Old French quotations from *Du Prestre crucefié*, together with their English translations, are taken from *The French Fabliau B.N. MS. 837*, edited and translated by Eichmann and DuVal, 2:62-67. Hereafter, line numbers are provided parenthetically in the text above.

The moral suggests that the wife's punishment is a justified reaction to her infidelity; but the castration of the priest oversteps the boundaries of comic violence, and the poet presents the priest as a sympathetic character, calling into question the husband's right to exact vengeance. Unlike other fabliaux in which the priest is caught with his trousers down, this priest *removes* his clothes to escape detection, an act which not only makes him more vulnerable but also strips him of plausible deniability, because naked he cannot deny a charge of adultery. He strips himself of his clerical identity before the husband strips him of his masculine one.

By all appearances, the meeting between priest and wife looks innocent: "Par un pertuis les a veüz, / assis estoient au mengier" ("Through a peephole he saw them, / Seated for a meal," ll. 28-29). However, the poet declares their guilt in a rhetorical move that suggests a need to situate the violence that is yet to come: "Et sa fame seur toute rien / avoit enamé un provoire" ("But his wife had fallen / Desperately in love with a priest," ll. 8-9). But the husband steps out of line as the formulaic fabliau husband and the audience can sympathize with the disrobed priest, appalled by the gruesome public staging of what might otherwise appear to be a closed episode of "domestic correction." Both the wife and her lover are terrified by the husband before he does anything — this cruel act manifests the abuse of power and fear, physical fear rather than just the fear of public disgrace or loss of reputation. The husband seems to enjoy wielding this power; he takes perverse pleasure in his cruelty that need never have gone so far.<sup>30</sup> The potential comedy of this tale is diminished by the vivid description of the brutal act itself, especially paired with the paralyzing fear that grips the priest and renders him immobile and thus incapable of escape until after the fact:

Et ice vous di je por voir  
que vit et coilles li trencha,  
que onques rien[s] ne li lessa  
que il n'ait tout outre trenchié.

(ll. 70-73)

[And I tell you this in truth: / That he cut off the prick and balls, / So that he didn't leave  
a thing / That he didn't completely cut away.]

This castration moves beyond a figurative or linguistic removal of the testicles meant to evoke laughter at the disintegration of the husband's position and power. Rather it is a graphic account of the husband's attempt to assert power in a public display of cruelty.

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<sup>30</sup> In her discussion of fabliau conventions, Cobby emphasizes the husband's unsympathetic nature. Cobby, *Ambivalent Conventions*, 30-32.

Castrating the priest in front of his wife, whom he has already cowed into submission, before letting him run for his life into a second arena of punishment cumulatively undermines the husband's claim to legitimate authority, especially since it also implicates the tale's external audience.

In this tale, as with all the episodes of torture in these three fabliaux, the audience is the public for whom the spectacle is intended, a witness necessary to the act of cruelty in order to reestablish a social order that has been inverted. Other characters in these three tales also act as witnesses, and in some cases participate in the punishment, adding to the public dimension of the torture. In this, it could be said that the poet rebels against his genre, placing the husband back in the position of patriarchal dominance and reaffirming the conventional social and gender roles expected in medieval society. Yet if this were the case, the husband would be far more sympathetic; he would be the *victim* of a crime rather than the perpetrator of another. This tale could be read more subversively as a rebellion against the Church and its excesses, a literary attempt to put priests into their prescribed place, that of sexless eunuch. It is possible that some audiences responded to the brutality in this tale as just retribution for the representative of a social sector that wielded its own power cruelly and with impunity, but in a homosocial society this kind of punishment was taboo. The *Costuma d'Agen* lists public humiliation for both the wife and her lover as the appropriate punishment. According to this thirteenth-century statute, the two offenders, having been caught and *witnessed* in the sexual act by a judge appointed after the initial accusation and two council members, would be bound together naked and led through the town preceded by trumpeters. The audience of assembled villagers could then gawk and even beat the two with clubs.<sup>31</sup>

The castration of Abelard for his sexual liaison with Heloise exemplifies this taboo. Abelard may have engaged in fornication, but nothing justified the vigilante justice meted out by Heloise's uncle. Fulbert's servants who carried out their master's revenge

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31 Agen, France, Archives départementales de Lot-et-Garonne, MS 42, fol. 42v., trans. by and qtd. in Akehurst, "Good Name, Reputation, and Notoriety," 89. While there seem to be no references to castration in French customary law, according to a collection of judicial precedents from thirteenth-century Spain, punishing the offending wife was acceptable, but the lover was protected by the law: "A knight of Ciudad Rodrigo castrated another knight whom he caught sleeping with his wife. The relatives of the other man complained to the king [...]. The decision of the court was that the husband ought to hang, because [...] if the husband wanted to kill anyone, he could kill his wife with no penalties; [...] but since [he] had not killed his wife, he had taken the law into his own hands [and] had also dishonored his victim." *Libro de los fueros de Castiella*, ed. Sanchez, 58-59, título 116. It is not a law, but a judicial decision called a *fazana*, which established a legal precedent; see Vann, "Private Murders and Public Retribution," 812. I am grateful to Theresa Vann and Nathaniel Dubin for this reference.

were subjected to the same punishment plus blinding.<sup>32</sup> The evidence of this historical episode is supported by *De Connebert*, where a cuckolded husband discusses revenge with his fellow cuckolds, all of whom are terrified at the thought of religious retribution:

‘Chastoiez vo fame, la fole,  
Qui tot vos destruit et afole:  
N’irons oan por li a Rome,  
Ainz remandron comme prodome!’

[‘Castigate your wives, the fool, / who destroy and cripple you, / for we won’t go to Rome for that; / thus we will remain wise men!’]<sup>33</sup>

The law would have also protected priests, and the wrath of the Church would have been a very real consequence for anyone who presumed to take justice into his own hands. The *Etablissements de Saint Louis* (1:89) are clear about the boundaries of secular jurisdiction.<sup>34</sup> The suggestion is that violence against a priest is synonymous with violence against the Church, a crime of heresy and treason, but even in these cases the perpetrator would not be punished with castration because it appears to have been forbidden. French customary law does not mention castration, but “the customs deal with the interesting exceptions rather than the mainstream law. Everybody knew about the laws or customs that governed common or everyday situations, so it was not necessary to write them down.”<sup>35</sup> It is possible that a husband could punish his wife and perhaps her lover without legal sanction, but most evidence suggests that castration would

32 Abelard, *Historia calamitatum*, 75.

33 *Connebert*, ll. 61-64. Old French quotations from *Connebert* and *La Dame escoilleé* are taken from *Nouveau Recueil Complet des Fabliaux*, edited by Noomen and van den Boogaard: *Connebert*, 7:215-37, and *La Dame escoilleé*, 8:1-125. Hereafter, line numbers are provided parenthetically in the text above. Translations of these two poems are my own, but I am grateful to Dr. Ellen Friedrich for her expertise and assistance in verifying them.

34 *The Customs of Touraine and Anjou* 1:89 in *The Etablissements de Saint Louis*, 58-59. This statute, “On jurisdiction over clerks, and on handing over crusaders to Holy Church,” sets the boundaries of secular jurisdiction: “If the king or the count, or a baron or some vassal who has the administration of justice in his lands arrests a clerk, or a crusader, or some man of religion, even though he were a layman, he should be handed over to Holy Church, whatever crime he had committed. And if a clerk <commits an offense for which he should be hanged or killed, and he> does not have a tonsure, the secular authority should deal with him. <And if he has a tonsure and a clerk’s habit and can read, no admission and no answer he makes can be to his detriment; for [the secular judge] is not the judge having jurisdiction over him [ordinaire]; and an admission before a judge who is not his proper judge is invalid, according to written law in the *Decretals*, De Judiciis, c. At si clerici and c. Cum non ab homine.>” *Decr. Greg. IX* 2.1.4, 10, cited by Akehurst, *The Etablissements de Saint Louis*, 59, n. 118.

35 Akehurst, ed., *The Etablissements de Saint Louis*, xxxvi.

have been taking an otherwise justified punishment too far, whether it was prohibited in writing or not.

### ***De Connebert***

Gautier le Leu's *De Connebert* diverges from the expectations set up by the introduction of the tale, and the warning issued by the other men of the village. A blacksmith finds that his wife is having an affair with the parish priest and seeks the counsel of his fellow villagers, discovering that the priest has made cuckolds and fools of them all. He devises a plan to punish the offending priest, but rather than resorting to murder which would anger Rome, the blacksmith chooses castration. The husband creates the illusion that he is hard at work in his forge while the priest scuttles into bed with the wife. When the blacksmith catches the lovers in the act, he drags the naked priest publicly through the village to the empty forge. There the wronged husband nails the priest's scrotum to the workbench, hands him a straight razor, and sets the shop on fire, telling the priest to choose between his life and his testicles. The priest deliberates, cuts himself free, and then runs away. A doctor heals him in time, after which the priest attempts to seek retribution in an unsympathetic court that denies him compensation, to which he is entitled according to French customary law outlined in the *Etablissements de Saint Louis*, 2:24.<sup>36</sup> In the final stanza, Gautier describes hungry dogs fighting over and devouring the priest's now-roasted testicles.

On the surface, the actions of the husband may seem justified and the punishment warranted. But the intricate discussion of the husband's plan and of the way he carries it out transfers sympathy from the wronged husband to the lecherous priest. Charles Muscatine writes, "In the fabliaux of the talented Gautier le Leu there is occasionally a perfervid excessiveness that suggests a temperament most congenial to the mood of confrontation. The sadism of his *Connebert* is remarkably insistent, as if to conjure up by its own violence a vision of the moral system it outrages."<sup>37</sup> Even as Muscatine suggests that the use of torture is vindicated, he also acknowledges the shift in representation such excessive violence precipitates: the husband is depicted as cold, calculating, and exceedingly unsympathetic.

From the beginning, the tale works to sway the audience's sympathy by announcing the outcome: an adulterous priest will be publicly castrated for what seems to be a

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36 *Customs of the Orléans District* 2:24 in *The Etablissements de Saint Louis*, 144. This statute is entitled "On fines in the court of high justice for spilling blood or causing bruises." For the full text on these fines see note 63 below.

37 Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux*, 160.

private crime. Muscatine argues that this announcement creates irony at the expense of the priest “that the audience is expected to enjoy more than it would a surprise at the plot’s climax.”<sup>38</sup> The prelude serves as a disclaimer explaining that this tale is not for the faint-hearted, but it does not diminish its effect. The poet evokes sympathy for this priest who is portrayed as the victim:

D’un autre preste la matiere,  
 Qui n’ot mie la coille antiere,  
 Qant il s’an parti de celui  
 Qui li ot fait honte et enui.

(ll. 3-6)

[About another priest martyr / who didn’t have a bit of [his] balls / when he departed from him / who made him shamed and anxious.]

The nature of his castration is made worse by the unavoidable need for self-mutilation:

Convint meïsmes a tranchier  
 A un mout boen rasor d’acier,  
 Mais il lo fist mout a enviz,  
 Car mout en enpira ses viz!

(ll. 17-20)

[It suited him to cut himself / with a very sharp razor of steel, / but he did it very much against his will, / for much did he worsen his prick!]

Despite the fact that he engages in lively sex with another man’s wife, the priest appears as the foolish innocent who allows himself to be caught. He becomes the victim rather than the duper or arch-villain who carries out the deception and the misdeed.<sup>39</sup> When confronted by his peers with the possibility of Church retaliation, the husband suggests that cuckolds who do nothing should be burned at the stake. Since the priest has emasculated his friends, he says he will return the favour to avoid being “unmanned” himself. Fearing the figurative castration of reputation, he will retaliate with physical castration, seeking vengeance, not justice. The stark reality of this tale is conveyed not only through the language of punishment, but also through the description of the blacksmith’s shop stripped of its economic purpose and transformed quite literally into a torture chamber. As Muscatine concludes, the audience is left with “an impression of dense physical reality through the use of details that accumulate in the course

<sup>38</sup> Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux*, 52.

<sup>39</sup> Schenck, *The Fabliaux*, 77.

of the narrative.”<sup>40</sup> Muscatine calls *De Connebert* the product of a “fableor with the oddest mind,”<sup>41</sup> suggesting that the tale is merely a sick joke but a joke nonetheless; however, the violence strips away laughter as the priest escapes and finds a place to recuperate. The poet is clear about the impact of his ordeal: “fu esgenez” (“he was tortured,” l. 276). There is little room for humour in this tale which, according to Charles Livingston, “exhale une brutalité et une haine qui atteignent à leur maximum dans les derniers vers (303 et s.) et qui en font le plus violent des fabliaux” (exudes a brutality and a hatred which attain their zenith in the last lines [303 etc.] and makes this the most violent of the fabliaux).<sup>42</sup> A sense of comedy is restored somewhat when the priest tries to prosecute his attackers and is told there is no compensation for adulterers, but the foul taste of violence still lingers with the feeling of injustice and excessive vengeance.

### ***La Dame escoilleé***

*De Connebert* has been labelled the most brutal of the fabliaux, and Muscatine suggests its violence is approached only by “the antifeminist *La Dame escoillee*, which culminates in the pretended extraction of testicles from the wounded buttocks of a contrary mother-in-law.”<sup>43</sup> *La Dame escoilleé* begins in courtly fashion: a woman is wooed by a man who loves her and then marries her, but his desire to accommodate her wishes is so irksome that she sets out to contradict him in everything. He adapts, presenting the opposite of his desires so that he can get what he wants. Their roles are reversed, she is not only contrary, but she has assumed the masculine role of dominance. When a count comes to woo their daughter based on her reputation for beauty, the husband pretends to forbid the match so that his wife will agree. The count is appalled by this social shift and sets examples for his new wife by killing the disobedient dogs and horse given to them as wedding gifts. She challenges his authority once, ordering the cook to use garlic sauce on their food. He responds by mutilating the cook, cutting off a hand and an ear and plucking out one of his eyes; and then he beats his wife so severely that it takes her three months to recover. When her parents come to visit, the count accuses his mother-in-law of having testicles and stages a pseudo-castration scene in which he slices open her buttocks and pretends to remove bull’s testicles. She relents and lapses into submission

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40 Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux*, 62.

41 Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux*, 126.

42 Livingston, ed., *Le jongleur Gautier le Leu*, 219. Livingston also points out that this kind of violence is rare in this satirical genre: “C’est l’un des rares poèmes de ce genre où l’intention satirique soit évidente”; *Le jongleur Gautier le Leu*, 219.

43 Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux*, 127.

when he threatens to cauterize the wounds to prevent the testicles from growing back. He then presents his father-in-law with the testicular “evidence” and a newly malleable wife. Their daughter, recovered from her first “lesson,” is cowed into submission by the fear of being subjected to the same punishment.

Many scholars, including Lacy, argue that this is a text “in which a condemnation of women is premise as well as conclusion” and which “has achieved some notoriety as one of the most misogynistic texts belonging to a misogynistic genre.”<sup>44</sup> While he does not agree that all fabliaux are misogynist, Lacy argues that “readers are likely to find in this work an unadorned hatred of women and to attribute that view to the author.”<sup>45</sup> While on the surface this text appears to be a condemnation of women, the violence inflicted by the count on his wife, his cook, his dogs, his horse, and his mother-in-law evokes more sympathy for his victims, obstinate though they may be. Even if somewhat deserved, his actions are excessive and cross the boundary of acceptable punishment. Despite the concern for “rightful male dominance” strongly evident in the poem, Sharon Collingwood writes, “there also seems to be censure of unthinking brute power.”<sup>46</sup> Many critics suggest that the violence in this tale is a product of misogyny, but if the poem is read as a parody, then the son-in-law’s actions and the anti-feminist moral must also be parodies. Misogyny and the poet’s presumed anti-feminism have informed the interpretation and sympathetic placement in tales like *La Dame escoilleé* and others where women are subjected to torture. If the poet is a misogynist, then obviously the son-in-law is justified because he is more sympathetic, but if the poem condemns his over-arching desire for power and paints this punishment as excessive, the sympathy of the audience shifts to the women. Some scholars suggest the brutality is justified in the eyes of the poet, and perhaps of the audience, because she is a woman who has stepped out of place.<sup>47</sup> However, the mother-in-law is not tortured because she is a woman but for challenging accepted social authority. The fabliaux resist the notion that this brutality is part of acceptable gender regulation because the torture of women, even if they “deserve it,” is

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44 Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, 60.

45 Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, 62. Lacy also notes that until recently the “fundamental misogyny” of the fabliaux was taken for granted, but that a “revisionist spirit has led several recent scholars to challenge this traditional assumption, either denying the misogynistic intent of authors altogether or, [...] contending that the fabliaux, while perhaps antifeminist, [are] no more so than other medieval genres”; Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, 68.

46 Collingwood, “*Sagesse and Misogyny*,” 62.

47 For more on the discussion of misogyny in medieval texts and the fabliaux, see Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*; Bloch and Ferguson, *Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy*; Lorcin, *Façons de sentir et de penser*; and Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux*, 122.



no more commendable in the corpus of the fabliaux than the torture of men. The characters, male and female, in these three fabliaux become victims of tyranny. Fabliaux justice whereby the cunning wife and her lover are the victors is replaced with vigilantism that contradicts all forms of law, real or farcical.

In *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, R. Howard Bloch describes this fabliau as a parable of reintegration of law in which the actions of the count are “a series of symbolic dismemberments” the most significant of which is the mock-castration of his mother-in-law, the ultimate outcome being the submission of the audience to the tale despite its status as fiction.<sup>48</sup> But the violence in this tale is more than symbolic; it represents a real fear of transgression and punishment and a genuine need to submit to authority despite the injustice of that submission. The humour of the tale exists in the invention of castration, the metaphoric condition, but the poem crosses the boundary into discomfort and distaste because it involves actual violence and bloodshed. In my opinion, the poet does not advocate a “reintegration of the law,”<sup>49</sup> but condemns the brutal abuse of power exercised by the son-in-law who oversteps his social boundaries by punishing another man’s wife, even though technically he is of a higher status than his father-in-law and could invoke his feudal rights. But perhaps this is the heart of the poet’s condemnation. If the son-in-law is nobler than his in-laws, then he should behave nobly and use the law properly, abiding by its processes and maintaining its order. There is no reintegration of law because the law has been abused and the son-in-law becomes a tyrant who rules through fear and violence rather than benevolence and justice.

As is the case with *Du Prestre crucefié* and *De Connebert*, the poet of *La Dame escoilleé* adopts a tone of sympathy in the recitation of torture. The count exercises power through tyranny without mercy, explaining that “Por seul itant / Que trespasserent mon command” (“For only then / did they transgress my command;” ll. 275-76). Even after the wife admits that she challenged his authority by countermanding his orders to the cook and repents her behaviour, he beats her within an inch of her life:

‘– Bele, ce dit li quens, par Dé,  
 Ja ne vos sera pardoné  
 Sanz le vostre chastement!<sup>9</sup>  
 Il saut, par les cheveus la prant,  
 A la terre la met encline,  
 Tant la bat d’un baston d’espine

48 Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, 122-23.

49 Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, 122-23.

Qu'il l'a laissiee presque morte.  
 Tote pasmee el lit la porte.  
 Iluec jut ele bien trois mois,  
 Qu'ele ne pot seoir as dois.

(ll. 363-72)

[‘Dear Lady,’ thus said the count, ‘by God, / you will not be pardoned / without your punishment!’ / He bounds, by the hair he takes her, / to the ground he takes her down, / so much he beats her with a thorn club / that he has left her almost dead; / to the bed he takes her all fainted away. / There she lay a good three months / before she could sit on the dais.]

While the husband may be exercising his marital rights, this brutal punishment for such a minor infraction is excessive, and while the fabliau genre is never absolutely homogenous, expectations have been established that lead an audience to believe that no real harm will come to anyone, except in a rare instance like the beatings in *Estormi* and *Aloul*. The count mutilates the cook for obeying the young wife in an act of substitution. The wife is punished and beaten, and the cook’s permanent dismemberment represents the knight’s capacity for brutality that he cannot inflict on his wife. In the same way, killing the horse and the greyhounds is an “instructive” demonstration of his power. He makes examples of them and the cook to control his wife; she is his audience, just as her father will be the audience for his cruelty later. All of these actions are then presented to the jongleur’s audience as he recites the tale. These demonstrations and substitutions are representations of power and domination inherent in the practice of torture and are precursors to the final cruel scene. The array of brutal acts, while perhaps designed to prepare the audience for the narrative’s ultimate violence, also adds up to a litany of abuse that cannot be justified by simple audience assent.

The punishment inflicted by the count on his mother-in-law is also a substitute for the punishment he believes should have been meted out by her husband; he subverts his role as son by taking that of husband and “master.” The son-in-law oversteps the line by trying to reassert patriarchal control over a household he does not have the right to order, thus displacing the father, who has worked out a scheme of control on his own. In a graphic display, he “removes” the testicles:

Uns des serjanz le rasoir prant,  
 Demi pié la nache li fent;  
 Son poig i met enz et tot clos:  
 Un des coillons au tor mout gros  
 Ça et la tire, et ele brait.

(ll. 481-85)

[One of the servants took the razor, / he split the buttock by half a foot; / his fist he put in  
and all enclosed within, / one of the big bull's balls / here and there he pulls, and she brayed.]

After the act is performed, the count shows the evidence to his father-in-law and convinces both of them that the mother-in-law has been castrated. At least *publicly* they seem convinced. The count manipulates both his in-laws by his performance and oversteps the line by forcing them into submission. Bloch asserts that the wife's belief in her own dismemberment brings her under the patriarchal law and the mimetic repetition of the scene of mutilation has the same effect on her daughter, and so the paternal order is reestablished and the patriarchy restored.<sup>50</sup> One may ask if the mother-in-law actually believes that she possessed testicles, or if she is simply wise enough not to contradict the man who has shown himself capable of such cruelty on a number of occasions. Whether the mother-in-law truly believes it or not, her scars remind her of the possibility of further punishment if she transgresses again. The poet attempts to make the audience aware of the cruelty of this deception and the reality of this abuse of power to which they have become witnesses. The mother-in-law's behaviour is contrary and disagreeable, but the count undermines his own position by the violent manner in which he teaches her and his wife a lesson.

At the end of the tale, the audience is left with an instructive moral that has produced readings of the text as a misogynist treatise on controlling women:

Honi soient, et il si ierent,  
Cil qui lor feme tel dangierent.  
Les bones devez mout amer,  
Et chier tenir et hennorer,  
Et il otroit mal et contraire  
A ramosneuse de put aire.  
Teus est de cest flabel la some:  
Dahet feme qui despit home!

(ll. 567-74)

[May they be shamed, and thus they will be, / those whom their wives dominate! / The  
good ones you should love much / and dearly hold and honour, / And award those bad  
and contrary / With insults of nasty air / Those of whom this fable is the sum. / Damn  
women who despise men!]<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, 123.

<sup>51</sup> The verb *dangierent* is the third person plural form and can also mean “to fear,” “to revere,” “to take care of” and may have been given this double meaning by the poet in an attempt to lessen the misogynist moral, or to play on the different interpretations of individual audiences who would hear what they wanted. My thanks to Ellen Friedrich for bringing this to my attention.

Lacy argues that, based on the first twenty-four lines, there is no reason to assume that the poet is not serious in the rest of the tale or in the moral.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps he means to be taken seriously, just not literally. Perhaps his condemnation of this behaviour rests in the audience's reaction to it; he condemns the brutality by giving an exaggerated exhibition of it. The moral opens a way for some people to find this tale funny, "covering" for the brutality by treating this excess as justifiable punishment. But the moral is contrary to the violence of the tale itself. Whatever the interpretation of the fabliau, the presence and purpose of torture is the same. It is used as a means of control, a public display of power demonstrated through cruelty. In reference to dramatic productions of violence, Enders writes, "The banished, vanished criminal's public performance of iniquity has become a private but no less fearful performance of public fears about authoritarianism, public and private."<sup>53</sup> In *La Dame escoilleé*, the misuse of power by the count similarly represents authoritarianism and may be a reaction against extreme abuse of power, especially if examined in relation to the castration episodes in *Du Prestre crucefié* and *De Connebert*.

In the fabliaux, castration is the most prevalent fear, both figurative and literal. Bloch, in *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, thoroughly analyses metaphors of castration from the perspective of Freudian psychoanalytic theory: for him the body and the humour of the fabliaux are inextricably linked. He also presents castration as a religious allegory and an expectation of the fabliaux humour where "the priest is almost always dismembered — castrated, beaten, or killed — for his concupiscence."<sup>54</sup> However, this castration is often only metaphorical; moreover, there are instances where castration is threatened but not enacted or else it is performed on a corpse. Bloch observes that "We have seen how closely the representation of the body in the fabliaux is linked to the theme of fragmentation — to detached members, both male and female; to actual and metaphoric castrations; but most of all, to metaphor as castration."<sup>55</sup> In these instances, severed body parts seem to exist independently of the act that severed them and the inherent societal fear is not presented in gruesome form, but as farce. The act of castration is never described and the penis just appears as if it were never part of a living body. The discussion of previously cut off penises does not involve pain, and while the implication of violent castration exists, it is not graphically presented to the audience in a display of power.

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52 Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, 61.

53 Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty*, 217.

54 Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, 63.

55 Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, 101.

There are many figurative episodes of castration in the fabliaux, intricately and ingeniously wrought by the poets to substitute literal, physical castration with shame and disgrace. These are scenes of mock-castration, and the unwitting victim becomes the butt of the joke. Ultimately, the greatest injury is to the victim's pride and perhaps his marriage — there are no physical scars or reminders that cannot be shed like another man's pants. However, actual castrations in the fabliaux exceed figurative acts of punishment, focusing on pain and suffering instead of humiliation and potential humour. Bakhtin associates the fabliaux with the humour of “the lower part [...] the genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks,”<sup>56</sup> but the palpable fear, threat, or act of castration in these three fabliaux turns celebration into a renunciation and a denial of sexuality, and becomes a demonstration of power. Bloch argues that the humour of the fabliaux, in fact all humour, is derived from something that has been dismembered or castrated: “that which provokes laughter always involves a cutting short, a foreshortening.”<sup>57</sup> In these tales the castration can be seen as a “cutting short” of the proclivities, the adultery, the lascivious behaviour, and thus of the humour itself. Or it can be seen as enacting a horrific punishment condemned by practically all strata of society. Muscatine argues that the sexual sadism in each of these tales is made indirect by more powerful motives that it seems to be serving: “In *Connebert* it is hatred (and envy?) of the clergy. The issue of *La Dame escoillee* [...] is domination.”<sup>58</sup> Both Bloch and Muscatine address the apparent purpose of castration in the fabliaux, but it is not sexual cruelty even though sex or the sex organs seem to be inextricably linked to it; it is brutality performed for power and fed by the various motivations in each tale.

Metaphoric castration pervades the fabliaux — exchanges of power predicated upon the exchange or absence of sexual desire signified by genitalia — but the plain, literal act of castration and its implications are often overlooked. The fear of castration was certainly real enough, as was the fear of torture after the institution of the inquisitorial process in the twelfth century.<sup>59</sup> The realistic representations of bodily harm illuminate a medieval awareness and possible rejection of torture as a means of control or even as a means of extracting a confession in a regulated judicial process. Castration resists torture's exercise of power because it subverts accepted social ideas against genital mutilation, exemplified by its absence in the most brutal torture narratives and in

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56 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 21.

57 Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, 111.

58 Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux*, 128.

59 For a comprehensive discussion on the historical sources of torture and the evolution of the inquisitorial process, see Peters, *Inquisition*.

the customary laws of the period. Torture was an acceptable motif in female hagiography; saints like Christina and Dorothy defy their pagan judges by withstanding their brutal attempts to force either confession of Christianity or conversion. Yet despite the proliferation of torture in medieval hagiography, genitalia remain untouched except in rare instances, because castration or vaginal mutilation violates the purity of the saint and contaminates the perception of virginity. It is a boundary never crossed by even the most salaciously brutal of pagan judges depicted in medieval hagiography, nor is it a punishment meted out to even the most deserving of traitors in epics and sagas.<sup>60</sup> Evisceration, flaying, boiling, dismemberment, and mutilation figure prominently in religious narratives but only occasionally in secular ones, and then only as a deterrent or a mark of dishonour. In secular literature like the fabliaux where episodes of violence rarely approach the brutality of hagiography, incidents of castration are even more shocking and taboo because torture is not an accepted motif of the genre.

To manipulate this taboo, the poet must first establish a sympathetic characterization for its victim, contradicting the institution of torture and subverting the judicial process. The audience must care if the priest is castrated, and if they do not, their fear and revulsion of castration transforms into approbation of a justified punishment enacted by a legitimate authority. The physical castration of the adulterous priest may be considered vengeance for the figurative and symbolic castration of the cuckolded husband. However, sympathy does not lie necessarily with the husband despite the fact that the priest is actually guilty, and his punishment could be considered justified in fabliaux representing calculated, staged, literal castration.<sup>61</sup> But is the brutal castration carried out in these tales proper justice? Bloch argues that behind every beating there is a lesson to be learned, that behind every castration there is a reimposition of the law, and that both *Du Prestre crucefié* and *De Connebert* are exemplary tales of castrated priests.<sup>62</sup> This applies if the moral of the tales is taken literally, rather than as parody or satire. If

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60 According to Jean Froissart in his *Chronicles*, though not in other sources, public castration is exactly the punishment visited upon Hugh Despenser, Edward II's favourite. Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, BnF Fr 2643, fol. 11. The graphic illumination of Hugh Despenser being publicly disembowelled and castrated takes up a quarter of the left-hand column. The following transcription is mine: "Quant it fut / ainsy loye on lui coupa tout / prennement le vit & les / couillons pour tant quil / estoit heretique & sodomite / ... Et pour ce auoit/ le roy dechasse la royne de / lui & par son ennortenet / Quant le vit & les couil /lons furent de lui coupez on / les getta ou feu pour adroit / Et après lui fut le aieur / coupe hor[es] du ventres et gette/ ou feu pour tant q'[i] estoit / [fol. 11v] faubo & traytre de cuer et que/ par traytre conseil & enortement le roy."

61 Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, 112.

62 Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, 120.

the primary humour of the fabliau is a product of successful schemes with minimal consequences, then the reestablishment of the law and the status quo cannot be comic, especially if it is reestablished through unwarranted brutality that actually contradicts accepted legal practice. Episodes of castration cannot be “exemplary tales” if castration was forbidden and generally taboo. The very blood drawn in these scenes defies French customary law, which states that any party who causes the loss of blood or visible bruising, and is proved guilty by witnesses, is culpable for sixty *sous* in damages to the judge and fifteen *sous* to the plaintiff, and is responsible for the cost of the plaintiff’s lost days of work and having the wound healed.<sup>63</sup> Castration is outside the law, and if the perpetrators succeed, then they invert judicial process and exercise illegitimate authority. These episodes parody the law and subvert it to such an extent that any humour is spoiled or destroyed in the bloody contravention of acceptable humour.

It is difficult to gauge how these poems would have been received; as Muscatine observes, there is “no simple formula by which we can describe fabliau social attitudes, and it is sometimes difficult to tell precisely what attitude is being evoked by a given poem.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps these scenes were considered funny precisely *because* they crossed a boundary of violence and enacted secret retribution. The truth of torture was in the eye of the beholder, “so too was its cruelty and its theater,” as Enders reminds us.<sup>65</sup> Torture was designed to elicit truth in a legitimate judicial process, but the truth extracted by torture in the fabliaux is that of fear, domination, and power; of crime, arrogance, and adultery; of transgression and social upheaval; and, for some, the truth of justice. The violence of torture, particularly castration, exceeds even the ubiquitous violence of the fabliaux and renders its presentation shocking and distasteful to some audiences. In the fabliaux, killings are rare, castration and torture even more so; and because of the rarity of torture in the fabliaux and other secular medieval texts, modern audiences and scholars are forced to challenge the preconceptions concerning the Middle Ages that

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63 *Customs of the Orléans District* 2:24, in *The Etablissements de Saint Louis*, 144. This particular statute gives townsmen and commoners equal status in paying remuneration for serious, but not-life-threatening, wounds unless amputation is involved: “But [the judge] must look at where the blood came from, and if there is a serious wound [*plaie mortie*], he must pay the fine mentioned above, according to the practice of the Orléans district; for townsmen and commoners pay no more than sixty sous as a fine, whatever offense they have committed, except for larceny, or rape, or murder, or treachery [*traïson*]; or unless there is some loss of limb, such as foot or hand, nose or ear, or eye, according to the provisions of the charter, as it is said above” (2:24). Even though castration is not mentioned, it must have fallen under the provisions for graver bodily crimes like amputation.

64 Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux*, 39.

65 Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty*, 179.

have developed over time and realize that torture has a place in all societies, but in the three texts under discussion the portrayal of torture is used to condemn its practice.

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