

Sagesse and Misogyny in the fabliau *La dame escoillee*

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The fabliau *La dame escoillee* is often cited as a disturbing example of the medieval attitude toward women. Although violence is often presented as comic in the genre as a whole, the physical abuse suffered by women in this poem is so brutal that most scholars find it offensive, and feminist scholars in particular find it distressing that it was a relatively popular tale, preserved in six manuscripts.¹ Norris Lacy has, somewhat apologetically, praised this fabliau for its narrative complexity and skilled construction, and has called for a reading of the poem that takes into account factors other than the narrator's misogyny.² He adds that this fabliau is addressed to an all-male audience, which may explain its strongly negative portrait of women as grasping and controlling, a portrait that conforms to the medieval stereotype. Male characters, Lacy reminds us, are often held up to derisive laughter for their individual faults, not for traits that merely confirm their gender. Lacy also notes that although the six versions of this fabliau are similar in content, there is a marked difference in narrative tone. Nottingham MS 19152, used as the basis for both Willem Noomen's critical edition and the previous Montaiglon-Raynaud edition,³ contains a long prologue, essentially a diatribe against women, while authorial intrusions throughout this version continue in this misogynist tone; the other versions of the fabliau pay much less attention to the female characters. Lacy refuses to tackle the complex question of whether MS 19152, the longest and most complete of the six manuscripts, preserves the original version, but he does favour the idea that the prologue may be a later addition (p. 110).

I propose in this paper to concentrate solely on the narrative of *La dame escoillee*, disregarding the authorial intrusions of MS 19152. I shall take as my starting point Lacy's observation that the fabliau tends to attribute women's faults to their gender and to assign individual responsibility for male failings, and will try to follow his lead

by focusing on the unusual literary quality of this poem, which I believe is important, not only for an appreciation of the aesthetics of this fabliau, but also for a clearer understanding of the text as a whole.

La dame escoillee differs markedly from most fabliaux: the aristocratic setting, courtly language, tripartite structure, and unusually long length indicate a concern for the courtly ethic.⁴ The courtly elements are particularly apparent in the opening scene of the poem, in which a young count is separated from his hunting party by a sudden storm. He seeks shelter in a castle, which he discovers to have an unusual domestic arrangement; the lady of the castle rules in everything, while her husband can only obey her every command. This, we are told, is the result of the lord's having loved his lady too much:

Chevaliers ert, tint grant hennor.
 Mais tant avoit amé s'ossor
 Que desor lui l'avoit levee,
 Et seignorie abandonnee (27-35).

[He was a knight of great honour.
 But so much had he loved his wife
 That he had raised her above him,
 And abandoned his sovereignty.]

These verses announce the central theme of the poem: an overindulgent husband incurs disrespect and disorder in his own home. The struggle for domestic sovereignty is a commonplace in the fabliau tradition, and *La dame escoillee*, for all its courtly elements, fits well into the pattern of the comic conjugal battle. However, this long and complex poem reveals a much more sophisticated meditation on the nature of power than is seen in the usual fabliau dispute over who will “wear the pants” in the family.

The action begins with the introduction of the young count to the inhabitants of the castle. The lord welcomes him when he arrives at the gate, but confesses he has no authority to offer him hospitality. He advises the count to wait while he goes to his lady and demands she send the young man away. This, says the lord, will lead to her inviting him to stay. The ruse is successful, and later, before the welcoming banquet, the lord counsels his wife to conceal their beautiful young daughter from the count. Predictably, the daughter attends the banquet, and the young people meet. The count immediately proposes marriage, but the father advises his wife to refuse,

saying he had planned to give his daughter to a man of lower estate. This advice, too, the mother countermands, and the young couple marry in the morning.

Before the wedding journey to the count's lands, both mother and father have advice for their daughter. The father's message is brief, yet demonstrates his concern for his daughter. He advises her to take her proper role in the social order, for it is in obedience to her husband that a wife finds her true honour. Unsurprisingly, the mother's advice is exactly the opposite, and it is worthy of note that her concern is not for the material advantage often gained through social position, but only for the acknowledgment of sovereignty itself:

Prenez essample a vostre mere
 Qui tos jors desdit vostre pere:
 Se vos volez avoir henor,
 Si desdites vostre seignor,
 Metez l'arriere et vos avant,
 Petit faites de son coumant:
 S'ainsi faits, ma fille estrés,
 Se nel faites, vos conparrez! (231-234)

[Take the example of your mother
 (She) who always contradicts your father:
 If you wish to have honour
 Contradict your lord
 Put him second, and yourself first
 Ignore his commands:
 If you do this, you're my daughter,
 If you don't, you will suffer!]

The first part of the fabliau ends with an obvious lesson on the exercise of power. The mother's obsession with the need for control, her intractable domination, has demonstrably been no match for her husband's manipulation. She has been led to invite and care for a guest, and to give him her daughter's hand in marriage, all at her husband's suggestion. As the young couple departs on the wedding journey, the audience must surely realise the inadvisability of the mother's advice, and may well reflect on the irony implicit in this scene: those who wield power for its own sake run the risk of being controlled by others.

The father's advice also needs closer examination. He counsels his daughter that only by accepting her proper role in the family can she maintain her honour. His advice is doubly stressed, as it both precedes and follows his wife's words to their daughter, yet his message is undercut by the fact that it is given by one who cannot maintain his own proper role in family life. On one level, the father's advice prepares the way for the conflict between the newlyweds, who have yet to determine which of them is to have mastery in their marriage. However, on another level, the underlying irony of the father's position in his own marriage diminishes the effect of his message, so that this part of the poem ends with ambivalence.

The author of the fabliau clearly believes that manipulation is not an honourable way for a man to achieve dominance. Lacy notes that it is the father's lack of status at the end of the first part of the poem which prevents closure and necessitates further episodes in which male power will be affirmed(64). Martin also regards the first part of the poem as incomplete, a representation of an upside-down world which requires correction(75). There is no denying the conservative message at the heart of this fabliau, which rests on the principle of male authority. The succeeding episodes of the poem are variations on the theme of male dominance, and they do affirm the status quo. However, they are also filled with details that tend to undermine this message and allow alternative interpretations, much as the parents' advice to their newly-wed daughter, taken in context, allows a more multifaceted understanding of the story.

The second part of the poem begins with a journey. The bride's father gives the couple a beautiful horse and two fine hounds that will accompany them to the count's lands. They travel through many fields, and in one of them they catch sight of a hare. The count sends the hounds after it, telling them to catch it before it reaches the third field. They catch it, but only when it reaches the fifth field, and the count cuts off both their heads. When his horse stumbles, he orders it not to stumble again, but it does not hear him. Later, it stumbles a second time; it, too, is beheaded. The young wife is astonished at this behaviour, and asks her husband why he has treated her father's wedding gifts in such a harsh way. The count replies brusquely:

Ce dist li quens: "Por seul itant
Que trespasserent mon commant" (275-6).

[The count replied, "For the sole reason
That they disobeyed my commands."]

If this incident can be taken as humorous, the joke seems to be that the count is so fierce he punishes even those who disobey him unintentionally. A wise wife will take this as a lesson. The wife's shock at the husband's unexpected and incongruous overreaction mirrors the audience's own reaction, which results in amusement. However, it is this shocked reaction, so necessary to what little comedy can be found in this section of the poem, that provokes the question as to who is really the butt of the joke. The count has shown himself to be unreasonable: he gives his dogs an order it would be impossible for a dog to understand, commands them to do something they are incapable of achieving, then punishes them for their failure to reach an unattainable goal, all for no other reason than the assertion of his own will. What is more, in slaughtering his wedding present the young husband loses a fine set of hounds, an expensive sign of rank.

The poet places particular emphasis on the count's unreasonableness in the description of his command to the horse:

Li palefrois au conte ceste:
 "Je te comant desus ta teste,
 Dit li quens, ne ceste autre foiz!"
 Ne l'entendi li palefroiz (254-57).

[The count's palfrey stumbles:
 "I command you, on your head,
 Said the count, don't trip again!"
 The palfrey didn't hear him.]

All six manuscripts emphasise the fact that the horse does not ignore the count's order; it merely does not hear the order. What is more, the animal is incapable of obeying an order not to trip. Although the fabliau author could easily include minor infractions by both dogs and horse which would provide an opportunity for an example to be made of the animals, there is an extra effort made here to emphasise the arbitrary nature of the count's punishment.

The message communicated to the young wife is clear: if accidental disobedience by animals receives this punishment, the punishment for a disobedient wife will be dreadful. The audience sees the obvious link between horse, hounds and wife, yet a more subtle message underlies this object lesson: the count's actions are intemperate, and result in the loss of three valuable animals, animals that are markers of the

male world of the hunt, the world of courtly values, and the count's own rank and prestige. In killing them, he may well provide an object lesson for his wife, but he also presents himself as ignoble. The ambivalence of this double message suggests that the ensuing story may be less a general comment on the treatment of wives than a criticism of an individual error on the part of the husband.

When the couple arrives at the new home, the count introduces his lady to her household and announces a great banquet to celebrate his wedding, commanding his cook to make many fine and varied sauces for his guests. The wife, however, has not learned her lesson. She decides to follow her mother's advice; she commands the cook to make a fine meal, but to serve only sauces seasoned strongly with garlic. When he objects, she threatens him with punishment. After the banquet the furious count asks the cook why his orders were countermanded. The cook replies:

“Sire, fait il, gel vos dirai:
Par ma dame, sire, fait l'ai.
—Por vostre dame? —Voire, sire,
Que ge ne l'osai contredire” (337-340).

[“Sire, he said, I will tell you:
For my lady, sire, I did it.
—For your lady? —Truly, sire.
Whom I dared not contradict.”]

The cook's explanation for his misdeed is that he, understandably, fears his mistress. The kitchen is traditionally a woman's domain, and it is not surprising that it is here that a young bride should choose to assert her authority. One of the manuscripts even gives additional weight to the cook's explanation. It includes a scene in which the count introduces his wife to the court:

Segnor co est uo dame a droit
Fait li cuens nel mescrées mie
Si soit onoree (et) seruie
(Nos)tre dame uoire (par) foi
Car mis li ai l'anel el doi (60 G, vv. 361-65).

[“Lords, this is your rightful lady,”
Said the count, “believe me.

And therefore (she) must be honoured and served.
(She is) (your?) true lady, in faith
For I have placed the ring upon her finger.”]

The count gives his wife authority over the household, which could be seen as a mitigating factor in the cook's obedience to his lady; however, the cook is condemned for making the same error that she has. Just as the young wife mistakenly chooses to follow her mother's advice instead of her father's, so the unfortunate cook chooses to obey the wrong authority figure. The count's punishment is swift: he gouges out one of the cook's eyes, cuts off an ear and a hand, and banishes him. He then turns his anger on his wife: he takes a wooden club and beats her nearly to death, leaving her bedridden for three months.

Critics have commented on the count's incongruous use of courtly language during this violent attack on his wife. He addresses her as “dame,” “douce amie,” and “bele.” These words may suggest sarcasm or mock politeness on the part of the count, or they may simply indicate the use of stock formulae of address, with no particular intent. Lacy concludes that the count means precisely what he says, and that his later attention to her medical care is proof that he does indeed love his wife, and corrects her inappropriate behavior in order to ensure a happy marriage. Martin disagrees, interpreting the poem as a parody of courtly romance, and therefore the count's flowery language as merely one element of that parody. Although I agree with Martin that the count's speech is an ironic reference to the courtly ethic, I would prefer to see the irony in these references as directed by the poet at the count himself, a man whose base actions in no way permit him to consider himself “noble.”

The second part of the poem ends with the punishment for the young wife's offence, and the restoration of the natural order. It would seem possible to end the poem here, with the daughter's humiliation counterbalancing the deception and defeat of her mother. However, in the third section attention turns once again to the mother. The bride's parents come to visit, and the count takes the opportunity to set things right. He treats his mother-in-law in a manner appropriate to one whose actions are dishonourable. She is seated at a lower table, and served poorly, while her husband is seated at the high table and honoured. The next day, the count invites his father-in-law to hunt in his wood, and sends all his knights and servants to accompany him. The count himself uses illness as a pretext to remain in the castle with the women, where he has planned a joke to teach his mother-in-law a lesson.

When the men depart, the count calls for the testicles of a freshly-killed bull, and conceals them. He then announces to his mother-in-law that her outrageous pride is unnatural, and probably results from her unnatural genitalia. He and his servants restrain the mother, and, ignoring her screams, they slash open her thighs, pretending to extract the testicles the count earlier concealed. He proceeds to terrify the woman further by threatening to cauterise the wounds, and only when she gives her abject promise that she is forever cured of disobedience to her husband does the count leave her alone.

The count's brutal mutilation of his mother-in-law is certainly one of the more gruesome and unfunny practical jokes in medieval comic literature. As Charles Muscatine notes, sadistic tales of this kind are relatively rare in the fabliau, and they tend to express strong antifeminism or anticlericalism.⁵ However, concentrating solely on the misogynist elements of the poem may obscure its meaning. While it is true that the physical abuse of the mother-in-law can be taken as an example of the final defeat of unruly women and a reestablishment of the natural order, this scene raises questions about the actions and intent of the poem's principal character. For instance, why does the count send all the men of his court away, in order to commit his act of abuse in sordid secrecy? In the courtly romances that this poem makes reference to, this avoidance of male activity and preference for female company would be called *recreantise*. Martin notes the inappropriateness of the count's excuse for not going on the hunt:

[L]e prétexte fourni par le comte: "avoec ces dames remandrai: li chiés me duelt, grant mal i ai." (MR 465-66, NRCF 438-9), n'a rien d'héroïque: se serais tenté d'y voir une justification féminine, comme l'emploi momentané d'un langage inversé pour s'adresser aux représentants du Monde à l'envers" (76).

I agree with Martin that the count gives a "feminine justification," a headache, for remaining with the women. However, there is more to the count's excuse than merely another of the text's many comic inversions. A simpler explanation of this passage is that the count himself is being held up to criticism. If his actions are shabby and discourteous, then the principle that he stands for merits closer examination.

Secondly, why does the count need help to "castrate" his mother-in-law? He is a powerful and brutal man, leaving headless hounds and horses and mutilated cooks in his wake. Yet he seems to need quite a bit of assistance to subdue one woman. The

poem is quite clear on the number of strong men the count commands to stay with him:

Tuit vont chacier, n'i remaint nus
 Fors le conte et quatre serjant,
 Fort et menbruz et fier et grant (440-42).

[All went hunting, none were left
 Except the count and four men-at-arms,
 Strong and muscular, proud and tall.]

The comic process in this passage results from the incongruous contest of five strong men in combat with one scrawny old woman, and this is certainly brought out by the ironic description of the four *serjants* as courtly warriors. However, if the message of this poem is that the natural superiority of males must be upheld, these verses strike a discordant note, for they emphasise the count's inability to enforce his authority solely through his own physical strength. He needs help.

Finally, why does the count never tell his father-in-law what he has done? The poem gives no indication that the father-in-law ever learns of the count's deception, in that he immediately accepts the improbable story of his wife's "surgery."

Cil qiude que trestot voir soit,
 Por les coillons que iluec voit;
 Por la dame qu'il voit navree
 Cuide qu'ele soit amedee (551-54).

[The man soon believes it to be true,
 By the balls that he saw there;
 By the lady that he saw in a faint
 He believes she is cured.]

Since he is never let in on the supposed joke, the father-in-law never learns his lesson. His marriage transforms into a socially acceptable one; he is now the dominant spouse, but he appears not to know why. He is merely a fortunate dupe, and the real authority lies with his son-in-law. Just as the count's attempt to demonstrate his physical strength and authority is subverted by his need of help in the humiliation of his mother-in-law,

his attempt to correct his father-in-law's behaviour through trickery achieves only partial success. There is no true reversal of the situation in the first part of the poem.

The crucial scene in this fabliau is the retribution visited upon the mother-in-law; however, our repugnance at the count's actions may lead us to ignore the ambivalence that underlies this scene. The count shows himself to be an uncourtly man whose attempts to reverse a situation through trickery have incomplete results. His assertions of his authority through force also result in some unpleasant repercussions. A close examination of the poem indicates he may still have some unpleasant surprises ahead of him.

In the passage immediately following this "castration" scene, the daughter is threatened with the same fate as her mother. Her terrified response signals her capitulation, and seems to predict her future obedience:

"Nenil, par Dé
Ge ne sui pas de la nature
Ma mere, qui est fiere et dure;
Ge retrai plus, sire a mon pere
Que ge ne faz, voir, a ma mere" (516-20).

["No, by God
I don't have my mother's nature
She is proud and difficult;
I take more after my father, sire
Than I do, truly, after my mother."]

The count, it seems, has succeeded in putting his mother-in-law in her place, as well as assuring himself that his wife will never again disobey him. Yet these verses raise a question about the success of the "lesson." The young wife acknowledges her resemblance to her father. This may serve her well in the future; we know she has a will of her own, since she exercised it when she countermanded her husband's orders before the banquet. We are left to wonder if this young bride will find a way to manipulate her proud, obdurate and blindly wilful young husband, just as her father found a way to manage his own difficult spouse. Her resemblance to her father may run deeper than the meek acceptance of spousal authority that the text, on first reading, suggests.

A concern for dominance is certainly evident in this poem. The mother-in-law dominates the first section, and she is intemperate, intransigent and abusive to a husband whose only failing is to have loved her too much. Her main reason for action is the imposition of her own will, regardless of the propriety of her actions, or even of the harm she might do her child. When her husband tricks her into giving her daughter's hand in marriage to a stranger, it seems appropriate to wonder if he could have tricked her into betrothing her child to a beggar, merely to prove the extent of her mastery. Paradoxically, it is not the wife who holds the real mastery in this land: she is a foolish woman, addicted to power, and easily manipulated by her mild husband.

As the count says, the mother-in-law's actions are those of a male, which is why he chooses to trick her with the bull's testicles. Before her castration he admits this to her:

“Ge l'ai bien ve a vostre hueil
 Que voz avez de nostre orgueil;
 Vos avez coilles comme nous,
 S'en est vostre cuers orgueilleus” (467-70).

[“I can well see in your eyes
 That you have our pride;
 You have balls like us,
 Which make your heart prideful.”]

Pride was a vice in the Middle Ages, and it featured as such in the fabliaux as noted by Sarah Melhado White.⁶ White suggests that the count is acknowledging that pride is a vice common in men, but unnatural when seen in a woman. This may well be true, but the count is also acknowledging a strong identification with his mother-in-law. Pride is what they share, and it is pride that makes them both foolish.

The mother-in-law and the count are thus parallel characters: the count kills his greyhounds, the symbol of faithfulness; he beheads his noble horse; mutilates and banishes his cook; and bruises and batters his beautiful young bride, confining her to a sickbed for months—and providing him with little companionship for that time. He diminishes or loses the comfort and support provided by these animals and people. Through his actions the count hurts himself, just as the mother-in-law, by being overly authoritarian, damages her honour, negates her own authority, and risks her

child's happiness. The poem's insistence on the arbitrary nature of the count's actions tells us, perhaps, that this tale is less an exemplum about the reestablishment of the natural order than it is a meditation on good sense and right governance.

The most interesting character in the poem remains the one who has received the least critical attention. The father-in-law stays quietly and gently in the background, less concerned with his own renown than with the proper running of his property. He sees a young man who, he believes, would make a fine husband for his daughter, and he secures that marriage. It seems logical that if the father-in-law's passive behaviour is presented by the poet in such a way as to arouse the audience's criticism, then he would at least be shown the error of his ways by his own son-in-law—but this is not the case. The fabliau author goes to great lengths not to implicate him in any violent act; he is off hunting when his son-in-law commits the assault, and he never learns of the count's attack on his wife. After his wife's humiliation he makes sure she is well taken care of, and continues his loving attitude to her, even though he now has the upper hand. Patient, kind and diffident, the father-in-law is the only character in this story to remain uncompromised. If he damages his honour by according power to his wife, his life is still reasonably easy, and he shows his generosity when dealing with his defeated and injured wife. Although he remains a minor figure in the tale, the father-in-law is more than he seems.

A feminist meditation on the meaning of this fabliau must rest on the author's ambivalent attitude to power. A concern for rightful male dominance is strongly evident in the poem, yet there also seems to be censure of unthinking brute power. The young husband kills, mutilates or damages everything that gives him support or sustenance: his behaviour is not only uncourtly, but also self-destructive—it proves ineffectual. The poem ends with the suggestion that the count's sovereignty over his bride may well be brief. Like his intractable mother-in-law, he may prove manipulable. Rather than preach the traditional virtues of male dominance, this fabliau seems more to dwell on the paradox implicit in the nature of power: those who rule through trickery must give up a measure of their self-respect and autonomy, and those who strive for absolute power run the risk of being manipulated.

All this does not clear the author of *La dame escoillee* of the charge of antifeminism. It is undeniably present, even in the versions of the tale which do not contain the prologue. However, thinking about the wisdom or *sagesse* of each individual character in turn does make this a more interesting text for feminist study, and the poem's concern with the dynamics of power coincides with the central issue of feminist theory.

Violence and domination play a dishearteningly large role in medieval literature, and it is sometimes difficult to maintain a scholarly distance. The final irony of this heavily ironic text is that the feminist critic must look into the details of the violence against women in this poem, and beyond the violence into the structural patterns of the text in order to understand what it has to say about power relations in a larger context.

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Notes

1 I have used Noomen's critical edition, with some reference to his diplomatic editions of the six manuscripts, notably G (Nottingham MS. Middleton L.M. 6). All translations are my own. Though I make no explicit reference to it, the work of Katherine Gravdal inflected my thinking about this text: see her *Vilain and Courtois: Transgressive Parody in French Literature of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1989), and *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

2 See Norris Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux* (New York and London: Garland, 1993), pp. 60-77.

3 See Willem Noomen, *Nouveau Recueil complet des fabliaux*, VIII (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1994).

4 This was first pointed out by Jean-Pierre Martin, "La Male Dame, ou la courtoisie renversée," in *Comique, satire et parodie dans la tradition reynardienne et les fabliaux* eds Daniëlle Buschinger and Andre Crépin (Göppingen: Kummerle, 1983), pp. 71-80.

5 See Charles Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), p. 127.

6 See her "Sexual Language and Human Conflict in Old French Fabliaux." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24 (1982): 185-210.