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Rethinking (Generic) Textual Identity in "The Miller's Tale"

Katrin Rupp

With his firm intention to requite the tale of the Knight, the drunken Miller announces that his forthcoming tale will be "a legende and a lyf," both terms strongly suggesting that it will actually be a hagiography. In this paper I want to examine how the generic textual identity of *The Miller's Tale* can be reassessed by placing it specifically in relation with the two saints' lives in the Canterbury collection, *The Prioress's Tale* and *The Second Nun's Tale*. Such a re-evaluation of the Miller's fabliau hinges, I shall argue, on the subversive connection that can be made between the bodies that populate the three tales.

It is well known that the Miller tells his tale to requite the Knight as he himself asserts in the Prologue: "I kan a noble tale for the nones, / With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale" (3126-27).[1] By employing the term "noble" the Miller aligns his forthcoming story with the dignified genre of his predecessor's tale, the romance, as well as with its subject matter, chivalry and courtly love.[2] However, the noble character of the tale to be told is immediately questioned by the host's remark on the Miller's drunkenness, a fact that the Miller does not try to hide.[3] Having

[1] All quotes are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson.

[2] There is no clear-cut definition of romance (nor of any other literary genre), but it is generally agreed that its subject matter includes knightly quests and courtly love.

[3] His mouth, described in the "General Prologue ""as greet [. . .] as a greet forneys" (559), suggests that he is loquacious and cannot necessarily be trusted even when he is sober, an impression that is further underlined when he is said to be "a janglere and a goliardeys" (560).

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admitted that he may therefore "mysspeke or seye" (3140), the Miller then specifies that the noble tale will actually be "a legende and a lyf" (3141), both terms strongly suggesting that the story will be a saint's life.[4] With such a generic reference the Miller may be trying to convince his audience that he can tell a religious tale just as well as the Monk, whom the Host had in fact proposed to be the next speaker. Yet the ensuing mention of the carpenter and his wife, two rather unlikely protagonists of a hagiography, begs further questions regarding the generic nature of the tale that is about to follow. Grimly suspecting that the tale will be a "lewed dronken harlotrye" (3145), the Reeve asks the Miller to shut up. However, the Miller ignores the Reeve's angry imperative as well as the Host's protest that it should be a "bettre" man's turn first. With a sigh, Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator concedes that since the Miller cannot be stopped he must needs rehearse this "cherles tale" (3169), but he famously refuses to assume responsibility for whatever the Miller will tell.

As Hines remarks, the disclaimers offered by the pilgrim Chaucer in the prelude after the Miller's outburst "serve only to remind us of the fact that we have a court poet playing first the pilgrim-narrator 'Chaucer' and then playing a churl" (110). In view of the untypical absence of any clear change of speaker between the end of the Prologue (Chaucer the pilgrim) and the beginning of the tale (the Miller), Hines continues, we are encouraged "to reflect upon how far the Miller's Tale is also Chaucer's" (110). Moreover, Kolve points out that the narrative voice of the Miller and of Chaucer are often quite close: "Chaucer makes us privy to a miller's vision, though he does not express it beyond the prologue in anything resembling a drunken miller's voice" (*Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* 158).

This particularly fluid nature of the different narrative voices arguably comes to bear on the tale's generic identity. Resorting to the tale's French models, modern scholars have conventionally and conveniently called "The Miller's Tale" a fabliau, but they have also observed that its generic boundaries appear to be much more flexible than those of the French equivalents or of non-Chaucerian fabliaux in English. Kolve, for example, maintains that "In every one of his fabliaux [the tales told by the Miller, Reeve, Shipman, Summoner and Merchant] Chaucer gives us

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[4] The *Middle English Dictionary* (henceforth *MED*) glosses *legende* as 1 (a) "A written account of the life of a saint" and 2 (a) "An account of a saint's life, or a portion thereof" and 3 (a) "A story about a person; also a collection of stories about persons" (for which the Miller's line is listed as an example). Even though this last entry proposes a more secular connotation of *legende*, the Miller's emphatic addition that it is also a *lyf* suggests that he is thinking of the religious aspects of the terms. See *MED* 5 (d) for *lif*: "a biography, life story, saint's legend." The explanatory notes to the Miller's Prologue in *The Riverside Chaucer* point out that the Miller's phrase alludes to a saint's life (see page 842).

more than the genre promises, or than most other examples had ever thought to provide" (*Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* 161).[5] And specifically of "The Miller's Tale" Hines says that it is "unsurpassed in complexity amongst the French fabliaux" (113).

Indeed, by having the Miller drop diverse and divergent generic markers, Chaucer the poet playfully invites us to think about the way the textual identity of "The Miller's Tale" is constructed. Given that "genre is such a particularly strong code in the literary system [. . .] that it organizes most other components" (Hertog 180), it strongly contributes to the making of textual identity. With genre being "characterized by both continuity and contiguity" (Hertog 182), the (generic) identity of the text can never be a fixed one, but is, on the contrary, constantly modified by virtue of its synchronic and diachronic discourse with other texts. Thus the generic terms used in the Prologue explicitly set the tale of the Miller in the context of the other tales in the Canterbury collection, most notably "The Knight's Tale" and the two saints' lives, "The Prioress's Tale" and "The Second Nun's Tale."

Critics have often commented on the contextual links between the tale of the Miller and that of the Knight.[6] Studies concerning the tale's potential connections to hagiography, however, are far less frequent,[7] which may partly be accounted for by the fact that these connections are chronologically less immediate than those between the first two of the Canterbury tales.[8] The temporal and spatial gap that emerges between the three tales if we read them chronologically makes some demands on our mnemonic capacity. Nevertheless, remembering is vital when reading *The Canterbury Tales*. As Howard points out, "Memory, central to the experience of reading *The Canterbury Tales*, is embodied in it as its central fiction and becomes the controlling principle of its form" (139). Moreover, with his *Retraction*, Chaucer explicitly encourages his readers to review the oeuvre he has just completed (if complete it is).[9] We are meant to remember and re-examine the tales we have read as we move on to

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[5] Kolve's view is modified by Cooke, who says that "'The Shipman's Tale' is very similar to the French fabliaux in its economy and symmetry; 'The Miller's Tale' develops as fully as possible all the potential in the fabliaux; and 'The Merchant's Tale' takes the genre beyond its self-imposed limits" (171).

[6] For critics discussing this link more thoroughly see, for example, Knapp and Patterson.

[7] Blechner, for instance, sees a parallel in the name Nicholas with the legend of Saint Nicholas.

[8] For the order of the tales, editors usually follow that of the Ellesmere manuscript. Thus "The Miller's Tale" belongs to Fragment I, "The Prioress's Tale" to Fragment VII and "The Second Nun's Tale" to Fragment VIII. For a more detailed account of the ordering of the Fragments (based on the authority of the Ellesmere manuscript) see Benson.

[9] For a thorough discussion of the *Retraction* as review or revision in the Augustinian sense rather than a withdrawal, see Potz McGerr.

the next and once again when we are done reading all of them. Thus we can reassess the tale of the Miller, which he so powerfully and subversively names a *legende* and a *lyf*, in the light of the two saints' lives and vice versa. Such a re-evaluation of the three tales hinges, I want to argue, on the subversive connection that can be made between the bodies that populate them.

Generally speaking, both fabliaux and saints' lives prominently focus on the body, more specifically on the fragmented body. Bloch points out that the body in (French) fabliaux "is linked to the theme of fragmentation – to detached members, both male and female" (101). By "detached" Bloch essentially means "the body's reduction to, or transformation into, its sexual member" (65), but he includes in his study some tales in which literally severed sexual members walk and talk quite independently of the rest of the body.[10]

Bloch's observation that the body in fabliaux is linked to the theme of fragmentation can easily be applied to the bodies in hagiography that equally feature detached members, even if "members" here refers to different body parts. In hagiography, the focus is on the upper parts of the body, on severed heads and cut-off breasts, rather than on its lower parts (buttocks, sexual members). Traditionally, the upper parts of the body are considered virtuous, which render them an appropriate subject for hagiography, whereas the lower parts that should be kept hidden for shame are found exposed in fabliaux.[11]

The distinctive emphasis on upper and lower parts of the body respectively contributes to a clear generic difference between bawdy fabliau and decent hagiography. However, insofar as these opposing bodily representations are ultimately also complementary (the body does consist of an upper and lower part), the two genres can be seen to parodically

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[10] Such an approach to fabliaux has come a long way since Bédier's initiation of modern fabliau studies in 1893 with his prominent description of such tales as "contes à rire en vers" (30). This definition has been criticized, most recently by Hines, who remarks that "One would readily suppose that 'à rire' means 'to be laughed at,' throwing emphasis on the author's intention, but it seems possible, too, that it could be interpreted as 'playful.' However we interpret the phrase it is too general: there are many 'contes à rire en vers' that have never been taken for fabliaux" (3). For a thorough overview on the history of critical approaches to the fabliaux see Stearns Schenck (chapter 1) and Hines (chapter 6).

[11] Resorting to classical and early medieval treatises on the human body, Bartholomaeus Anglicus (in John Trevisa's translation) describes the private parts as follows: "Also for schame þise parties hatte *pudenda* 'the schameliche parties.' And þerefore þey bene ikeuered, ihelid, and ihid so that þey haue not þe same manere of fairenes as oþir membres hauen þat ben opunliche iseye, and þerfore þey bene acountid vnhonest" (vol. 1, 261). And of the head he says: "Also þe heed is worþiere and more noble þan alle þe oþir membres, for he is gouernour and reulere of alle þe body, and 3eueþ þerto perfeccioun of vertue to do his worchinges of felinge" (vol. 1, 169).

communicate with one another. It would thus seem that Chaucer alludes to this parodic link between fabliau and hagiography when having the Miller label his tale a *legende* and a *lyf*. More particularly, he invites us to make a connection both proleptically and retrospectively with the two saints' lives of the Canterbury collection. We will see that both "The Prioress's Tale" and "The Second Nun's Tale" include certain instances of bodily representation that come precariously close to the depictions of the body in "The Miller's Tale." For a moment, the difference of bodily representations in the two genres and, by extension, the generic boundaries themselves are close to being obliterated.

The Miller himself linguistically collapses the generic difference between fabliau and hagiography by employing for his tale terms that we normally associate with a saint's life. Indeed, "The Second Nun's Tale" is called a *legende* in the Prologue to the tale (85) and *lif* at the beginning of the story (120).[12] The Miller's initial misnomer introduces a series of linguistic twists that can be found throughout his tale and that are typical of fabliaux. Moreover, a link can be made between distorted language and the fragmented lower parts of the body. As Bloch points out:

> The ubiquitous theme of bodily dismemberment [. . .] stands as the most manifest sign of a constant questioning of the sufficiency of poetic representation, which is also evident formally in the multiple linguistic disruption to be found throughout the medieval comic tale – in word play; phonological, onomastic, and semantic misunderstanding; use of proverbs and extended metaphors. (101)[13]

Hagiography, on the contrary, can be said to utilise "proper" language and to feature upper body parts that are only temporarily fragmented. As Keller succinctly puts it: "While hagiography dismembers and remembers bodies to safeguard verbal purity and tradition, the fabliau distorts bodies to indulge in representations of verbal impurity" (68).[14] On a textual level, the re-membered bodies of hagiography therefore contribute to the narrative's stability while the upside-down bodies of the fabliau destabilise the narrative throughout.

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[12] The term *lyf* with reference to Cecilia's story is also employed in *The Legend of Good Women*: "And maad the lyf also of Seynt Cecile" (F 426). See also footnote 33.

[13] Bloch makes this link yet more explicit when he concludes that "The homophony in Old French between the word for vagina [*con*] and for narrative [*conte*] (or, in English, the tail and the tale) signifies the closeness of physical and linguistic longings" (109).

[14] See also Merceron on how obscene language and exposed body parts in *sermons joyeux* mockingly relate to hagiography.

Let us first look at the bodies in the tale of the Miller and the linguistic confusion originating with them. As we have seen, the Miller says that he will "mysspeke or seye," warning us that he may speak amiss not only by outspokenly calling a spade a spade (as may actually be expected of a churl), but also by using language ambiguously. Thus, we get asses and holes in the tale, but even though these private parts appear to be named quite properly they prove to be confusing signs. In the crucial scene of the tale, bodily openings are grotesquely confounded.[15] Instead of putting his lips on what he believes to be Alisoun's mouth, Absolon notoriously "kiste hir naked ers" (3737). While the audience probably has a good laugh when it is told that Absolon has mistaken the lower hole for the upper, the would-be lover appears to remain in the dark since he does not manage to read the signs straight. For even though he "thoughte it was amys" (3736) and "wel he wiste a womman hath no berd" (3737), he cannot quite name what exactly he has kissed. It simply is "a *thyng* al rough and long yherd" (3738, emphasis added).[16] Nicholas' mocking exclamation / explanation "A berd! A berd!" (3742) underlines the linguistically ambiguous nature of the hair by suggesting a connection between the lower mouth surrounded by pubic hair and a man's upper mouth adorned with a prickly beard.[17] Of course Absolon understands whom he has to requite, yet it is, significantly, not Alisoun, but a man indeed who suffers the pain inflicted by his avenging hot coulter on his lower mouth.[18]

Both "The Prioress's Tale" and "The Second Nun's Tale" share with "The Miller's Tale" this specific confusion of the upper with the lower part of the body. We recall that once his throat has been cut, the little "clergeon" is thrown into "a pit" (571). The Prioress is keen to explain how exactly we are to imagine this pit: "I seye that in a wardrobe they hym threwe / Where as thise Jewes purgen hire entraille" (572-73). Lying in the latrine amongst excrements, the boy's noble (and singing) head is brought low indeed. Moreover, the emphatic focus on the privy makes

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[15] In Bakhtin's terms, the grotesque body is open and fluid, focusing on bodily orifices (26). It is, moreover, part of grotesque realism which essentially centers on degradation, "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (19-20).

[16] For a discussion of the term "thing" see Ad Putter's contribution in this volume.

[17] Beidler ("Art and Scatology" 92) notes that in all the analogues of the story it is actually the male who offers his buttocks for a kiss.

[18] For Burger it is significant that the male, not the female body is punished, since "The *physical* violence represented in the branding thus works to "remasculinize" the potentially effeminate behavior of the men in the tale, correcting a humoral imbalance that has resulted from their loss of control of the body. But more important for the tale's fabliau moral, the *symbolic* violence in the laughter that follows generalizes and institutionalizes this process of remasculinization" (146, his emphases).

us think of "The Miller's Tale" in which the word "privetee," referring to secrets but also to private parts (genitalia and excretory organs),[19] is used prominently throughout.[20] As if shocked by the association of the boy's head with feces, the Prioress hastens to point out that the little martyr is "sowded to virginitee" (579) and therefore not truly sullied by any contact with the lower parts of the body.

In a similar way, Cecilia is left lying "half deed, with hir nekke ycorven" (533) in the privacy of her home, more specifically in the bath (both tub and room),[21] a place that Kolve ("Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*") shows to have links with iconographic representations of brothels and hence the lower parts of the body,[22] possibly even with feces. In the bath, Cecilia, like the schoolchild, continues to make use of her vocal cords despite her severed neck, preaching the Christian faith to the crowd. Similar to the Prioress, who underlines the boy's virginity, Cecilia tries to circumvent a confusion of the upper with the lower when she insists on avoiding any carnal contact with her husband. Having sex would involve the lower parts of the body and is likely to confuse the mind. In order to be able to resist any sexual attraction to Valerian, Cecilia prays to God to keep her chaste "lest that I *confounded* be" (137, emphasis added). Moreover, Cecilia's deep-seated and probably justified fear that her pure thoughts might turn into the opposite owing to the temptation of the sexual organs – Valerian is young and presumably attractive – is made tangible by the hair shirt that she wears to mortify her flesh.

The pain this shirt's bristles causes is petty in comparison with the torments inflicted on Cecilia by Almachius' men. But even though she burns in the bath "of flambes rede" (515), she "sat al coold and feelede no wo" (521). Whereas Cecilia's body needed to feel pain in order to avert its potential lapse into carnal sin, it has now left earthly pain behind and is marked by its future sainthood. Indeed, her body cannot truly be fragmented, it remains hermetically sealed in marriage and untouched by torture. When her body *is* dismembered, through decapitation, it is only

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[19] See *MED* "privete"1 (a) "Privacy, secrecy, concealment, discretion" and 1 (g) "a sex organ; [...] external genital or excretory organs."

[20] Based on the emphasis on privacy in fabliaux in general and "The Miller's Tale" in particular, Farrell proposes a generic comparison of the latter with "The Knight's Tale": "In the *Knight's Tale*, an atypical medieval romance germane here as an inevitable point of comparison to the *Miller's Tale*, the words "pryvetee," "privy," and "prively" characterize the essential nature of Palamon and Arcite's love for Emily" (774).

[21] *The Riverside Chaucer* glosses "bath" as cauldron; the *MED* lists line 517 of "The Second Nun's Tale" ("For in a bath they gonne hire faste shetten") as an example for 2 (a) "A bathing place or room." Thus we may imagine a kind of bathtub in a bathroom.

[22] Kolve hastens to argue that Cecilia's love is spiritual rather than carnal eroticism.

symbolic as it foreshadows her future physical recollection as well as her holiness figured by her former home that is now called "the chirche of Seint Cecilie" (550) at her bidding and hallowed by Pope Urban. There is no mention of any pain that little boy in "The Prioress's Tale" might have suffered. He simply "yaf up the goost ful softely" (672) when the grain is finally removed from his tongue. This prepares the way for his fragmented body to become a "body sweete" (682) when it is enclosed in "a tombe of marbul stones cleere" (681), a memorial to his untimely death and a sign of his holiness.

Thus the two saints are symbolically re-membered[23] and eternally re-membered. Such is the matter of hagiography. But we have seen that in the tale of both the Prioress and the Second Nun the body's noble parts are momentarily and indirectly linked with its nether regions. Such a delicate, if temporary, proximity of the two saints' bodies with the bodies in the fabliau subtly and subversively ties together the three tales under scrutiny. Interestingly, a corporeal connection with hagiography is proposed by other ribald tales. Merceron examines how French *sermons joyeux* obscenely mock hagiography by approximating excrements with sacraments[24] and the other way round as well as by turning genitals into holy relics (see especially pages 336-37).[25]

As has been suggested, the ambiguous relationship between upper-lower (and male-female) in "The Miller's Tale" destabilizes the entire narrative. Indeed, the Miller's introductory warning against his prospective linguistic fallacies not only alerts us to the potentially dubious nature of the tale's subject matter but of the tale itself. We have seen that the Reeve sneeringly implores the Miller to let be his "harlotrye," a term that is shortly thereafter used again by Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator when he ironically remarks that both the Miller and the Reeve will tell "harlotrie" (3184). *The Riverside Chaucer* glosses the term *harlotry* as "ribaldry" in the first instance and as "ribaldry, dirty *stories*" (emphasis added) in the sec-

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[23] Paradoxically, the saints' earthly remains are fragmented after their death, often down to the tiniest splinter of bone, to be distributed as relics. See Walker Bynum for a thorough discussion of such practice.

[24] Another inversion of the sacred and the profane can be found in the Miller's representation of Noah's Flood. According to the Scriptures, Noah's Flood was sent to correct and control sexual sins, but in "The Miller's Tale" Nicholas' mock flood actually promotes lechery. For a discussion of this inversion see Kolve (*Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, chapter 4).

[25] It will be recalled that such a connection is also made by the Host when he shrewdly wishes for the Pardoner's (absent?) testicles to be made into (mock) relics: "I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond / In stide of relikes or of seintuarie. / Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie; / They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!" (952-55). For a discussion of this infamous equation as well as a survey of critical responses, see, for example, Gross.

ond, thus suggesting a potential conflation of the tale's subject matter and the tale itself.[26] The tale of the Miller is therefore a harlotry containing harlotries. Deriving from "harlot," originally denoting a vagabond,[27] the term's etymology moreover confirms the tale's vagrant (generic) nature.

Harlot and harlotry respectively also imply prostitution both in its general etymological sense of public exposure and in its narrower sense of offering sex to the public for hire.[28] Interestingly, the single pre-text that the latest edition of sources and analogues of *The Canterbury Tales* prints for "The Miller's Tale", the Dutch *Heile van Beersele*, features a female prostitute on which the Miller's Alisoun is allegedly modelled. Alisoun is, of course, not a prostitute, but the way she is treated by Absolon suggests that her suitor considers her tradable goods.[29] Moreover, Alisoun does prostitute her behind in the sense of exposure.

Given the link between the bodies and the generic identity of the tale, Alisoun's (and Nicholas') mobile and prostituted body parts have an impact on the entire narrative. We could say that the tale is prone to prostituting itself in the sense that it uncovers with language what is hidden or private. According to Hanning, exposing "privetee" both in its more general sense of secrets and in its more limited sense of sexual privacy is intricately linked with poetry, for "language reveals what is hidden in privetee" (111). Indeed, Nicholas' gleeful exclamation "A berd! A berd!" not only uncovers the potential semiotic confusion of the lower and the upper hair, but also implies trickery on a more general, textual level.[30] This is further underlined by Nicholas' following expression of his satisfaction that the trick has worked well: "By Goddes corpus, this goth faire and weel" (3743). Foregrounding divine and hence "proper" corporeality as well as textuality, the mention of "Goddes corpus" within the context of harlotry suggests its very opposite: an unstable text that features un-

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[26] See also *MED*, "harlotrie," 1. "Base, crude or obscene behaviour; popular entertainment; evil conduct, sexual immorality; also, a sinful or lewd act" and 2. "Low, trifling, or ribald talk; foul jesting, scurrility, obscenity; also, a dirty story."

[27] Interestingly, it also means story-teller (see *MED*, "harlot," 1 and 2), thus further underlining the Miller's ambiguous status as a narrator.

[28] See *MED*, "harlot," 3: "(a) A man of licentious habits; a male lecher, libertine, rake; (b) a female prostitute, whore."

[29] As Beidler points out, "The prostitute Heile receives money for her sexual favors. Alisoun is a wife rather than a whore, but her suitor Absolon treats her as if she were a whore by sending her barter-gifts of wine and ale and cakes" ("The Miller's Tale" 260). The text of *Heile von Beersele* follows after Beidler's introduction.

[30] See *MED*, "berd," 4a: "maken (one's) berd, maken (sb.) a berd, shaven (one's) berd, to get the better of (sb.), make a fool of, outwit." In his analysis of the French fabliau *De Boivin de Provins* Bloch similarly establishes a connection between prostitution, trickery and poetry (see pages 96-100).

settled bodies. "Goddes corpus" is a term reserved for hagiography where bodies, though fragmented and temporarily sullied in the tales of the Prioress and the Second Nun, are put back together again so as to be remembered as bodies of God (saints).

Efforts are made to re-member the bodies in "The Miller's Tale" as well, though they are, quite predictably, not successful. Such an attempt is figured by the branding with the searing coulter. When the red-hot iron burns Nicholas' bottom "for the smert he wende for to dye" (3813). Unlike the two saints, whose bodies are ultimately beyond pain and fragmentation, Nicholas has an earthly body, sexually and scatologically open and susceptible to pain. Moreover, in fabliau the body's holes do not become whole again, not even when the coulter is applied, an instrument Keller shows to be used in medieval medical treatises to seal up bodily openings such as wounds (chapter 1). As Burger points out, the application of the coulter at best creates the *illusion* of physical integrity and hence control: "The branding is ostensibly directed at Alisoun, fantasizing the impossible as possible: banish the feminine, seal up the body, and secure transcendent masculine identity" (253). That the fragmented body in fabliau cannot be mended is further and conclusively underlined at the tale's end when the carpenter breaks his arm and becomes the laughingstock in town. Such is the physical (and textual) matter of fabliau.

Conversely, the bodies of the two saints, though temporarily sharing certain aspects of representation with the tale of the Miller and thus risking a generic confusion, are completely re-membered so that the tales can be remembered as a true hagiography. There is little doubt that we remember the tales of the Prioress and of the Second Nun as saints' lives, but, as I have pointed out, we are also encouraged to recall the contexts in which they are told. Nor should we forget by whom the three tales are told. Being representatives of the religious order, the Second Nun and the Prioress are naturally endowed with some authority, albeit ambiguous.[31] Arguably, the Miller tries to ironically compete with these two women. When swearing "By armes, and by blood and bones" (3125)[32] that he will tell a noble tale he not only seems to grotesquely

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[31] The portrayal of the Prioress in "The General Prologue" shows her as being torn between secular and spiritual values, presumably inclined to follow the former rather than the latter. The missing depiction in "The General Prologue" of the Second Nun renders her an evasive figure.

[32] This phrase is glossed as "By the arms, blood and bones of Christ" in *The Riverside Chaucer*. When the rioters in *The Pardoner's Tale* swear by "Goddes armes" (692) and "Goddes digne bones" (695) they are promptly accused by the Pardoner of tearing "Christes blessed body" (709) to pieces. As Lerer puts it, the rioters "dismember the divine into the bits and pieces of the cursed. Oaths are the flip side of relics, then: bits

anticipate the detached members that will appear in his tale, but to perversely mould parts of his own body into popular saints' relics. He thus tries to invest his own person as well as his tale with austere authority, a tale he proposes is noble not only for referring to the Knight's romance, but also to the saint's life he claims he will tell.

When suggesting that his fabliau is a *legende* and a *lyf*, the Miller – and ultimately, of course, Chaucer – invites a comparison between the two genres in general and with the two saints' lives in the Canterbury collection in particular.[33] I have argued that the two genres parodically dialogue with one another if we look at the representation of the fragmented bodies that both of them feature. More specifically, the way the detached and mutilated members are depicted in the three Canterbury tales momentarily collapses generic delimitations. The bodies as well as the generic boundary are quickly re-established in the two saints' lives, but both remain open and fluid in the fabliau. Thus "The Miller's Tale" challenges any stable notion of bodily and textual identity.

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and pieces of a holy body spat out, not for healing but for harm" (The Canterbury Tales" 261). Similarly, Christ's fragmented body becomes profane in the mouth of the inebriated Miller, who (deliberately?) does not specify whose bones and blood he actually means.

[33] Chaucer also makes us think of his *Legend of Good Women*, which, like most of his other works, encourages us to remember and hence to make (literary) connections. I am not suggesting that the Miller's allusions refer to the *Legend* in the way I argue they do to the two saints' lives in *The Canterbury Tales*. But here, too, the term *legende* (not to mention the term *good*) is used in ambiguous ways.

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