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Blind Imitation of *Aube* and Female Agency:

Conversion of Exchange in the *Reeve's Tale**

Rio FUKUOKA

The characters in the *Canterbury Tales* engage in various exchanges: verbal exchanges, commercial trade, sexual relations, abusive behaviour, acts of revenge and more. To analyse such exchanges conducted by characters both inside and outside of the tales, some recent studies adopt the gift theory, originally advocated by Marcel Mauss.¹ Robert Epstein, one of such critics, in his *Chaucer's Gifts*, developed this theory of gift exchange and adapted it to his analysis of Chaucer.² In addition to 'gift exchange', which is based on the obligation of return and is meant to maintain relationships between people for the future,³ he advocates 'commercial exchange' as the exact opposite of it. According to Epstein, commercial exchange means a one-time and equivalent transaction negotiated to avoid future trouble; moreover, there is no obligation of return in a commercial exchange, whereas a gift exchange is based on this obligation for a future relationship.⁴ He analysed the *Canterbury Tales* using this pair of

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¹ For recent studies which analyse Middle English literature quoting Mauss's gift theory, see Robert Epstein, *Chaucer's Gifts: Exchange and Value in the Canterbury Tales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018); Walter Wadiak, *Savage Economy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017); Nicholas Perkins, *The Gift of Narrative in Medieval England* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2021); Ad Putter, 'Gifts and Commodities in *Sir Amadace*', *The Review of English Studies*, 51 (2000), pp. 371–94.; Marco Nievergelt, 'Giving Freely in *Sir Cleges*: The Economy of Salvation and the Gift of Romance', in *Romance Rewritten: The Evolution of Middle English Romance: A Tribute to Helen Cooper*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald, Megan G. Leitch and Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2018), pp. 155–72.

² See above, n. 1.

³ Epstein describes that '[t]he motivations for these exchanges are various, but they are always pro-social: the ultimate purpose of gift exchange is not to produce profit for the individual transactor but to establish and maintain relationships between transactors, based on obligations of return' (p. 8).

⁴ Epstein, pp. 9–11.

opposing exchanges.

This article adopts Epstein's idea of the two types of exchanges, gift and commercial, to analyse the structure of the *Reeve's Tale*, in which various forms of exchange, or 'quittynges', are conducted by the characters. As Minnis argues, the line connecting the first three tales of the *Canterbury Tales*, including the *Reeve's Tale*, is the continuity in usage of 'quite',⁵ which also implies the significance of 'quittynges' in the *Reeve's Tale*. Although this term ranges from just an ordinary response to violent revenge, in this study, I regard 'quite' to be an act of exchange and treat it akin to revenge and retaliation.⁶ If we analyse the nature of a series of 'quittynges' in the *Reeve's Tale*, it becomes clear that this narrative shifts its tone from a commercial exchange to a gift exchange and that this shift is marked by hidden female agency. This article will argue that Malyne's act of giving corn to Aleyn can be regarded as a desire to establish a relationship with him, functioning as a gift exchange. This point has significant implications for the understanding of the structure of this narrative, which is mainly controlled by commercial value. This tale begins with an exchange of commercial value, as two students want an equal exchange to get back as many crops as have been stolen from them. The tone changes to one of gift exchange through Malyne, who is mostly marginalised in this tale. By analysing the transformation in the nature of the exchange, this article aims to clarify that Malyne's agency impinges on the course of the tale, thereby damaging the commercial exchange and changing the nature of the relationship between the male characters.

As a whole, the *Reeve's Tale* can be understood as a story designed to highlight a commercial worldview based on the principle of establishing equal relationships through

⁵ Alastair Minnis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 86: *The Knight's Tale* is the story of two men contesting for a woman's favour, which, the second storyteller, the Miller, 'quiteth' (answers), while the third teller, the Reeve, 'quiteth' (takes revenge on) the Miller because of his own personal grudge.

⁶ 'To take revenge; take revenge on (sb.), get even with, punish' (*Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. 'quiten', meaning 3-a). For this interpretation, see, for example, Lee W. Patterson, 'The 'Parson's Tale' and the Quitting of the 'Canterbury Tales', *Traditio*, 34 (1978), 331–380 (p. 375).

equivalent exchange—the exchange of what to receive as an equivalent for what to give.⁷ The aspiration that the characters have for equality is one element which makes this tale based on commercial transactions, as is the fact that economic terms (payment, easement) are repeatedly used; in fact, the narrative’s concern about commercial values and commercial exchange as its basis can be seen most clearly in the presence of students, the main characters who plan and act to achieve a commercial exchange with Symkyn. This tale highlights that they aspire for an ‘equivalent exchange’, as will be analysed below.

The main characters are John and Aleyn, two poor young students who are exploring to make a commercial exchange. They go to meet Symkyn to correct the injustice committed, which has introduced inequality—Symkyn stole the manciple’s crops while the manciple was sick. They want Symkyn to return crops equal to the amount he has stolen, and they do not ask for extra compensation in the form of either crops or money. As pointed out by Epstein, the students are not trying to take revenge on Symkyn but to establish an equal, legalistic and commercial relationship by collecting compensation for the crops which Symkyn has stolen again and again.⁸ What they want is not a transaction like a gift exchange, which would create a surplus, but the restoration of the relationship of equality. Although Epstein does not discuss it, based on the claim of the students that Symkyn is not allowed to steal the possessions of other people (ll. 4009–12),⁹ we can be certain that it is their policy to recognise excessive gain as theft and robbery. Focusing on the mill described in the scene in which the students observe the grinding that takes place in Symkyn’s house (ll. 4037–43), Epstein also says that the mill itself is the machine which brings out as much as someone puts in; thus, it embodies

⁷ As Olson points out in his analysis of *The Reeve’s Tale*, this tendency to aim for equal relationships through equivalent exchanges might be regarded as a characteristic of fabliaux, to which this tale also belongs. Paul A. Olson, ‘The “Reeve’s Tale”: Chaucer’s “Measure for Measure”’ in *Studies in Philology*, 59 (1962), 1–17, (p. 11).

⁸ Epstein, pp. 79–80: ‘They intend to re-establish equitable fair and legal commercial relations with the miller’.

⁹ *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

commercial exchange and, eventually, the *Reeve's Tale* itself. From the fact that the students stick to equality and that this ideal is emphatically represented by the description of the mill, this commercial exchange can be seen as the dominant value in the tale.

While Symkyn has stolen corn from their college, the young, naïve students neither want to take back the stolen crops nor blame him; they just want to have him mill their crops (ll. 4052–53). However, commercial negotiation breaks down as a result of Symkyn's scornful attitude towards the students (ll. 4047–56), which can be explained as the antagonism between 'town and gown'; he refuses to give refunds for the same amount of crops he has stolen. When the students meet him, Symkyn shows his contempt towards them:

This millere smyled of hir nycetee,
And thoghte, 'Al this nys doon but for a wyle.
They wene that no man may hem bigyle,
But by my thrift, yet shal I blere hir ye,
For al the sleighte in hir philosophye.
The moore queynte crekes that they make,
The moore wol I stele whan I take.
In stide of flour yet wol I yeve hem bren.
"The gretteste clerkes been noght wisest men.'" (ll. 4046–54)

As seen in the quotation above, while the students do not express hatred towards Symkyn, he clearly shows his aggression towards the students and harasses them; he releases their horses, steals their crops and insults them when they ask him for a one-night stay. Realising that their plan has failed, the students become determined to get their revenge on him instead of a commercial exchange. They decide to adopt the approach which they have not thought of at first—instead of getting back the same amount of stolen crops, they try to 'steal' Symkyn's wife and daughter, regarding this as a means not of excessive exaction but of just compensation.

However, although they plan retaliation against Symkyn as a commercial exchange, this shifts the nature of the relationship between them and him from commercial to that of a gift exchange, which sets up a sequential exchange against their will.

Consequently, John sleeps with Symkyn's wife and Aleyn with his daughter; here, the exchange between the two students and Symkyn becomes the borderline case in the transition from a commercial exchange to a gift exchange. In terms of the fact that the students have slept with women from Symkyn's family, this action functions as retaliation for the damage they experienced from Symkyn, which appears, at first glance, as a commercial exchange; however, this retaliation happens to cause the shift to a gift exchange because such violence leads to another act of violence by its victim as a form of retaliation. This type of exchange continues in the future. As Epstein argues, acts of violent retribution can be regarded as gift exchanges in that they urge the relationship to go on.¹⁰ As a choice for compensation, indeed, it is appropriate for Aleyn to aggressively steal Malyne, Symkyn's daughter, in order to rob Symkyn of his possessions. After learning what has happened, Symkyn is infuriated because Malyne, whom he and his father-in-law wanted to marry off to a noble, has been socially demoted by Aleyn. Symkyn, who is obsessed with his social position, seemingly planned to take advantage of his daughter by offering her as a bride to go up the social ladder (ll. 3046–49; 4046–54). Minnis explains why Symkyn is angry with Aleyn as follows:

The women become the means through which men pay off scores; more specifically, because they are such a source of pride to the miller, bedding them is a direct assault on what he holds most dear.¹¹

¹⁰ Epstein, p. 78: 'Gift economy is not defined by generosity, altruism or 'charite'. Rather, it is defined by a logic that sees the goal of exchange as the generation of social relations and the maintenance of obligations that ensure their continuation'. Likewise, Wadiak argues in his analysis of *Sir Cleges* that an act of violence can be counted as a gift (p. 46).

¹¹ Minnis, p. 87.

It is social degradation for Symkyn to have his wife and daughter stolen by the students. As for the significance of Malyne, Blamires also discusses this scene:

Female virginity both constituted a value in itself and also secured the blood line. [...] Readers universally respond to the mocking humiliation of Symkyn in his realization that by sleeping with her Aleyn has socially debased ('disparaged') the daughter he considers so well bred.¹²

As Blamires explains, a daughter's purity is important to protect her family's lineage, and Symkyn's response matches this way of thinking. Because the purity of female bodies is an important matter that seriously affects the continuance of a family, it can be said that the act of the students seems to function as an adequate form of revenge against Symkyn, who refused to compensate for the loss. It is noteworthy that, even if the students' behaviour is done just as compensation for the damage, it leads to problems in the future, which is characteristic of a gift exchange. As discussed in the following paragraphs, as if to emphasise this point, Malyne introduces the value of a gift, or surplus, into this narrative.

When Aleyn leaves Malyne in the morning, he recites something like an *aube* to her, which is a dawn poem used in the discourse of courtly love:

And seyde, 'Fare weel, Malyne, sweete wight!
The day is come; I may no lenger byde;
But everemo, wher so I go or ryde,
I is thyn awen clerk, swa have I seel!'
'Now, deere lemman,' quod she, 'go, far weel!' (ll. 4236–40)

The use of an *aube* is clearly not appropriate for this scene, not only because the man is virtually

¹² Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 99.

a rapist but also because an *aube* is expected to be sung by courtly lovers.¹³ Why the *aube* is used here can be explained from its function in the plot. This *aube* results in making the young, marginalised Malyne exercise her agency and return the crops that her father stole from the manciple. She makes a favourable reply, as if to take on the role of the heroine of courtly love, not a victim of rape, and asks Aleyn to bring a half-bushel of crops back to the student dormitory, implicitly expecting this gift to urge her lover to return in the future (ll. 4241–48).

However, their verbal exchange in this *aube* neither copies nor replays the manners of courtly love correctly; they use the element of courtly love in the wrong way.¹⁴ Two points show that their verbal exchange becomes a bad imitation. One of them is that the style of Aleyn's speech is mixed with elements of the Northern English dialect, as Davenport points out.¹⁵ The unnaturalness of this imitation can be seen in the fact that they sing *aube*, originally sung by noble lovers, in the Northern dialect. Furthermore, as Horobin explains, Malyne calls Aleyn '*lemman*', a term of endearment known as inappropriate for addressing a lover.¹⁶ If we consider Matsuda's comment that Aleyn's literary language is grotesque by taking the context, such as the rape, into account, Aleyn's way of addressing Malyne stands out markedly from

¹³ As Kaske summarises, the *aube* is typically a song by courtly lovers who lament the necessity of leaving. R. E. Kaske 'The Aube in Chaucer's *Troilus*' in *Chaucer Criticism, Volume II: Troilus and Criseyde & The Minor Poems*, ed. by Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1961), pp. 167–80 (p. 167).

¹⁴ Kaske, p. 168. He lists three reasons to see the scene of this tale as a parody of the *aube*: 'by the inelegant name 'Malyne'; by Aleyn's anti-climactic burst of Northernisms on the final line; and by his substitution of 'clerk' for the more conventional probability, 'knyght'.

¹⁵ 'So Aleyn, the more enterprising of the two likely lads from the north who have successfully juggled with the placing of the beds and cradle to procure sex with the overbearing miller's daughter and wife, as he bids farewell to the daughter in a pastiche of the courtly aube, the dawn song of parting lovers given a homely flavour by the touches of northern dialect (I is, awen) with which Chaucer flecks his student's speech'. W. A. Davenport, 'Fabliau, Confession, Satire' in *Chaucer: Blackwell Guides to Criticism*, ed. by Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) pp. 250–69 (p. 260).

¹⁶ 'Absolon calls Alison his *lemman*: a word which elsewhere in Chaucer is used only of women of dubious moral and social standing'. Simon Horobin, *Chaucer's Language*, 2nd edn (London: Red Globe, 2013), p. 133.

the usual progress of a plot.¹⁷ It is generally assumed that a woman will be angry or forlorn if she is raped, but Malyne is not.

In this scene, Malyne's actions are strange and unusual. Despite the description of the moment when Aleyn commits sexual assault on her, she transforms into a woman not in despair but in love. On behalf of her father, she makes an unusual move to give back the corn that Symkyn stole to the student. This is a further example of how Symkyn loses face, and it is simultaneously fortunate for the students, as the stolen crops are unexpectedly returned to them without effort, causing inequality. Epstein and Blamires interpret her decision differently. Epstein's interpretation is that a feeling of guilt motivates her to imitate a custom of courtly lovers, who send gifts to one another.¹⁸ Accordingly, the crops which Malyne gives to Aleyn can be counted as a 'gift' because they generate both the obligation to return a favour, which will expand their relationship in the future and establish an exchange imbalance between them. For his part, by paying attention to her use of a specific term of address, Blamires reads her return of the crops as the result of a retrospective pledge of loyalty to Aleyn because she changes the person to whom she shows loyalty from her father, whom she calls 'sir', to Aleyn.¹⁹ Blamires also interprets Malyne's act of giving bread to Aleyn as showing that she has transformed material flour into 'sexual *flour*', namely, her body, which she gave to Aleyn the previous night. If their interpretations have something in common, it is their understanding that Malyne's emotional response suddenly changed from supporting her father to showing

¹⁷ Matsuda Takami, *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: An Adventure across Genres* (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2019), p. 79.

¹⁸ 'She gives her 'deere lemman' the flour partly out of guilt, and partly because giving gifts at parting is what lovers do. And the reason that lovers give gifts is precisely what makes gifts distinct from commodities – because it generates obligation and disequilibrium that extends relationships into the future' (Epstein, p. 90).

¹⁹ 'I believe, that in her sentimental leave-taking from the clerk in the morning she motions him to the hidden cake made with the flour that he helped her "sire" to steal (I. 4240–6). Having committed herself retrospectively to her violator she transfers back the material flour, to complement the sexual flour she has had to yield to him' (Blamires, p. 99).

affection for Aleyn that night. Whether we accept or refuse their arguments, in this scene, the students' calculation for commercial exchange goes wrong by her agency confusing the situation, and the relationship between them and Symkyn shifts to a gift exchange. By paying attention to Malyne's act of returning the crops, we clearly understand the importance of her role in this tale.

Malyne does not appear throughout this tale and is only described at an early stage in which she is introduced as Symkyn's daughter. After that, she is marginalised until the description of her sleeping with Aleyn and the scene of the exchange of the *aube*. Although she is passive and inconspicuous, she is eventually given an opportunity to express her standpoint in the exchange with Aleyn. As night turns to day, her position changes from a 'daughter', as a member of Symkyn's family, to an autonomous participant in the exchanges conducted by men. Her only direct action as a participant is to say where the crops are. As stated before, two students are aiming for commercial exchange, but the course of this tale changes here to a gift exchange in the redundant delivery of the crops, in addition to Malyne's body, as a gift from Malyne to Aleyn.

Her agency, which influences the standpoint of each character and even the ending of the tale, can be regarded as unique, with characteristics that are not seen in other analogues. According to *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales: Vol. I*, the *Reeve's Tale* belongs to a group of literary works called 'cradle-trick stories';²⁰ among them, it is particularly analogous to *Le meunier et les. II. clers* in French, *Een bispel van. ij. clerken* in Flemish and *Decameron IX, 6* in Italian. We know from *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales* that the daughter's going out for food and drinks and her later decision to reveal the location of the

²⁰ 'One of the most popular fabliaux in medieval Europe was the story of two young men who trick their host, one by seducing his daughter and the other by making love to his wife after the shifting of a cradle containing his baby'. Peter G. Biedler, 'The Reeve's Tale' in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales: Volume 1*, ed. by Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), pp. 23–74 (p. 23).

stolen flour is the unique characteristic of Chaucer's tale.²¹ From this point, we can assume that Malyne's autonomy is distinctive compared with what is portrayed in other similar tales. How, then, should we interpret Malyne's action that Chaucer introduced—the restitution of the crops to the students while Malyne stands in as a proxy for her father? Epstein treats it as a voluntary, moral and personal action and understands it as the only moment when her agency is allowed to impinge on the tale:

It is [a] spontaneous act, moral and personal. The reader may well find her pitiable in her delusion, but this is the only moment of agency she is allowed in the tale, and it stands apart from and in contrast to the amoral competition of market forces.²²

Focusing on the point that Malyne's agency is only allowed to impinge on the tale once, we find a parallel between her act and Emily's prayer in the *Knight's Tale*, the first of the three tales in the continuum of 'quite', as I mentioned earlier. When Emily prays to Diana, the goddess of hunting and the moon, to preserve her virginity, her agency is allowed to be exercised only once in the tale (*KnT*, ll. 2304–13). However, Emily is ignored by Diana, and her wish does not come true, while Malyne's agency significantly influences the progression of the plot in the *Reeve's Tale*; unlike Emily, she actively participates in the offensive 'quite' planned by men.

The reason Malyne's agency strongly impinges on the plot is because she is the only person who is aware of her father's thievery and of the sexual assaults made by the students. However, whether she realises that their rape-like act is done as revenge against Symkyn is unclear. Given that her grandfather and father regard her body as a tool for securing the succeeding bloodline

²¹ Biedler, p. 23.

²² Epstein, p. 91.

of Symkyn's family (ll.3977–85; 4268–72), she can take advantage of her status and exercise her power even more over the power balance between men. She is aware of what her father did and the students' dirty trick, and she is the only person who knows about the situation. In this tale, some information is exclusively accessible to certain characters, whereas others are intentionally hidden and imperceptible to them. Malyne's father, Symkyn, steals the crops from the student dormitory, and then Aleyn steals her body and deflowers her in an act of revenge so that Symkyn's family suffers social demotion. All these circumstances are putatively grasped by Malyne alone; the male characters do not know everything that she knows.

This structure has the effect of making the plot of the tale complicated. That is, each character understands the same situation in his or her own way. Sarah Kay regards this structure as having an important function in fabliaux, and in her analysis of *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles*, the Old French collection which includes fabliaux-like narratives, she describes this structure as 'stage-managing the gaze':

A later group of comic tales that also rely on stage-managing the gaze is the bawdy or libertine; many nouvelles, like fabliaux, rely on what can or cannot be seen, and on discrepancies between what people think they see and what we are led to believe is really there. There is a lot of eager spying, especially by men on women, countered by much retaliatory concealment, often of men by women. And as in the fabliaux, things that are quite openly visible are often not seen for what they are, with hilarious consequences.²³

Her argument can be applied to the *Reeve's Tale*, which is usually categorised as a fabliau; in this tale, although the men watch over Malyne's behaviours visually because they blindly

²³ Sarah Kay, 'Genre, Parody, and Spectacle in *Aucassin et Nicolette* and Other Short Comic Tales' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature*, ed. by Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 167–180 (p. 176).

believe that Malyne is an available and convenient person to achieve their purposes, ironically, they are caught up in an unexpected scenario produced by her agency. It is too late for them when she suddenly begins to behave independently. Symkyn is unaware of his daughter's betrayal, while the students unexpectedly get the crops back and sleep with the women, which results in them getting revenge on Symkyn. In the *Reeve's Tale*, the structure produces differences between the characters' degrees of access to the information, resulting in an informed viewpoint that Malyne is given.

The concrete substance of all she knows becomes clear at the scene of her confession:

“Now, deere lemman,” quod she, “go, far weel!
But er thow go, o thing I wol thee telle:
Whan that thou wendest homward by the melle,
Right at the entree of the dore bihynde
Thou shalt a cake of half a bushel fynde
That was ymaked of thyn owene mele,
Which that I heelp my sire for to stele. (ll. 4240–46)

Therefore, her knowledge can be summarised as follows. First, she knows about her father's habitual theft because she was made to help him with stealing crops from the students' dormitory; second, she notices that the half-bushel of the students' crops are changed into bread by her parents, even though she is not in the scene when her parents steal additional crops (l. 4244); of course, she also knows that she has slept with Aleyn the night before. From these points, we can see that only Malyne knows all the facts, and she arranges for how the students can recover the crops that her father had stolen. This woman, who falls in love with Aleyn and grasps the situation as a whole, tries to take his side and protect the students not as a member of Symkyn's family but as an autonomous participant. By doing so, she completes the transition from a commercial exchange to a gift exchange, the transition which originally begins from

retaliation through violence.

Moreover, at the end of this tale, there is another example in which the agency of a woman works to the advantage of the students. While Aleyn sleeps with Malyne, John sleeps with Symkyn's wife. Although John tries to make a conquest of Symkyn's wife, she does not give her heart to him. When they get up the following morning, in the dim light, she tries to strike the student without hesitation despite having slept with him the night before. However, she mistakes the shaven head of her husband for John's hooded head, and, thinking she is striking John, she actually hits her husband on the head with a stick (ll. 4302–07). As a result of the misunderstanding, she unintentionally gets revenge on Symkyn on behalf of the students. They also hit Symkyn on the head, eventually achieving their purpose and taking revenge on Symkyn beyond their expectations; they have retaken the stolen crops, slept with the women and finally committed violence against Symkyn as an additional attack. In the concluding section of this scene, which functions as a slapstick by making it impossible to determine who is who in the darkness, the students, in their confusion, receive further and redundant compensation for the losses resulting from theft. We can see this as an imbalance between Symkyn and the students in the sense that Symkyn suffers from the retaliation and gets hurt by the added unintentional revenge. To sum up, when Malyne and the wife exercise their agency, their actions, whether voluntary or not, give the students further advantage and thus increase the imbalance between the male participants of the exchange, resulting in a change in the nature of the exchange between the male characters. Their acts consequently motivate the students to take revenge on Symkyn; women who newly participate in the exchange create imbalances between the men who were formerly the original participants, and the *Reeve's Tale* thus ends with the failure of commercial exchanges.²⁴

²⁴ Although this tale ends here without further narrating about the future retaliation by Symkyn, the revenge carried out by the students can still be regarded as a (negative) gift which might cause further

At the beginning of this tale, the students intend to negotiate with Symkyn based on the principle of commercial exchange. They originally try equivalent exchange, but Symkyn does not accept their offer. Following his harassment—stealing the crops, releasing the students’ horses and insulting them when they ask him for a one-night stay—they give up the idea of an equivalent exchange and choose instead to go to bed with the women in Symkyn’s family; they regard this revenge as compensation for their loss, without realising its potential to cause further violence in the future. This triggers the *aube* and, moreover, the agency of Malyne to start working. Her unusual change of mind—she behaves not for her family but for Aleyn, although she is deflowered by him—can be potentially explained by bringing to light her peculiar standpoint gained through an often-used structure in fabliaux, ‘stage-managing the gaze’.²⁵ Malyne, who gains this viewpoint as an active participant, is able to see all circumstances, and she gives a gift, the stolen flour and her own *flour*,²⁶ to Aleyn for his benefit. Moreover, although the perspective of Symkyn’s wife looks different from Malyne’s, the wife unintentionally gives the students an opportunity to take revenge on Symkyn using violence; it ends the same way as in the case of Malyne. It is an interesting point that both Malyne and the wife affect the progress of the plot, although there is a difference in what they know. Through the acts of these women, the students who want a commercial exchange with Symkyn’s family gain a windfall, and Symkyn gets hurt socially and physically; all men end up receiving what they did not expect originally. The ending of this tale also clearly explains that the students make a profit, whereas Symkyn suffers a loss (ll. 4308–17). The shift from a commercial exchange to a gift exchange is the result of the students’ approach to the women in the tale—the male characters who have given no consideration to the power of female agency. After the

violence in return. As is suggested by Reeve, this tale itself is meant to be a retaliation against the Miller (4318–24), but the students’ revenge can lead to another retaliation in the future.

²⁵ Kay, p. 176.

²⁶ ‘(d) virginity; ~ of maidenhede’ (*Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘flour’, meaning 2).

exchange, the students attract new participants unconsciously. From this action, the agency of women influences the nature of the exchange and creates chaos.

