The One-Eyed Monk Who Got an Eyeful:

A Reading of the Second Tale of the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*

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Introduction

Loosely inscribed within the tradition of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, a collection of tales dating from approximately 1460, each ascribed to a member of the inner circle of Philippe le Bon, Duke of Burgundy, inevitably gravitates to sexual topics—naïve cuckolds, adulterous wives, lecherous monks, lascivious women from all walks of life, acts of seduction, improbable feats of sexual prowess, unexpected pregnancies, impotence, castration, and other related topics. The deceptive simplicity of these narratives with their strong penchant for obscenity, cruelty, violence, and the grotesque, often disguises a surprisingly complex and revealing subtext related to male perceptions of female sexuality. The second tale of the collection proves especially rich in this regard. Curiously, despite its highly unusual content and its privileged position at the front of the *Cent nouvelles*, enabling it to carry out an important thematic function and to introduce narrative elements that will appear repeatedly throughout the collection, the second *nouvelle* has never attracted any significant critical attention.

A beautiful and gifted adolescent girl in London, the pride of a wealthy merchant and his wife, courted by many suitors, develops an alarming case of hemorrhoids. A midwife attempts various herbal remedies, but the problem only worsens. The parents then summon numerous physicians, but none is able to effect a cure. Finally an elderly, one-eyed friar, famous for his medical knowledge, is summoned to the house. The girl is positioned on her stomach, exposing the affected area, which the friar proceeds to inspect at great length and with great interest. The girl's buttocks are then covered with a sheet, leaving only a small opening for the treatment. The friar inserts a tube through the opening in the sheet, and administers a medicinal powder. He then peers into the tube. At this point the girl turns around, and seeing the one-eyed practitioner's face

contorted by the act of intense squinting, she bursts into a violent fit of laughter, which subsequently provokes a powerful bout of flatulence that expels the powder from the tube into the friar's eye, leaving him permanently blinded. He later attempts to sue the girl's father, claiming that the incident has left him seriously disabled. The suit eventually reaches the London Parliament, much to the amusement of all involved. (The resolution of the case is not recorded.)

Commentary on First Section of Tale

The presentation of the girl in the opening of the narrative stresses her virtuous nature, the reputation of her character and beauty, and the parental love that she inspires. The mere appearance of an attractive adolescent girl at the beginning of any tale in the *Cent nouvelles* immediately signals her role as an object of male desire, a role that is now accentuated in a reference to potential suitors: "Dieu scet si pluseurs gens de bien desiroient et pourchassoient sa grace par pluseurs et toutes fassons en amours acoustumées . . ."[1] The conjunction of the verbs *désirer* and *pourchasser*, especially in light of the ironic use of "gens de bien," given the penchant for irony and antithesis evident throughout the *Cent nouvelles,* clearly foreshadows an attempt at sexual exploitation. This expectation is subtly reinforced by the narrator's increasing emphasis on the girl's physical attributes. Although he initially subordinates beauty to moral qualities ("*car de bonté, beaulté, genteté, passoit toutes les filles* …"[2]), her physical appearance quickly achieves dominance, with the rapid succession of *tresbelle* and *celle belle fille* effectively effacing any mention of virtue, once the element of male desire has been introduced.

Having now clearly established the girl as the sexual focus of the tale, the narrator begins to prepare his audience for a mock tragedy, using a register of language normally associated with catastrophic occurences. By deferring the culminating moment in which he actually specifies the nature of the calamity, he skillfully builds suspense:

> *Advint toutesfoiz, ou car Dieu le permist, ou car Fortune le voult et commenda, envieuse et mal contente de la prosperité de celle belle fille, ou de ses parens, ou*

[1] Franklin Sweetser, ed., *Les Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, Champion: Paris 1966, 31.
[2] Sweetser 1966, 31.

> *de tous deux ensemble, ou espoir par une secrete cause et raison naturelle, dont je laisse inquisition aux philosophes et medicins . . .* [3]

Given the somber tone of the sentence, and the familiar discourse on mysterious forces of destiny that often foreshadows the announcement of a tragic event, the audience would normally be led to expect the worst. The narrator, however, united with his audience (at least the original audience) by a collusive understanding that the ultimate purpose of his stories is amusement, especially through irony, mockery, and outright vulgarity, now adds the finishing touches to the prefatory statement that appears to be leading inevitably to the disclosure of a fatal illness, "…*cheut en une desplaisante et dangereuse maladie* .."[4] It is precisely at this point, having carefully prepared a tragic dénouement, that the narrator suddenly undercuts all of his grim and somewhat stilted language with a quick twist of vulgarity, bluntly exposing the nonfatal, untragic, and highly embarrassing nature of the girl's ailment "…*que communement l'on appelle broches*."[5] The jarring juxtaposition of the tragic and the grotesque hits with the force of a carefully prepared punch line.

The mock tragic tone is sustained throughout the early part of the tale, as we witness the anguish of the distraught parents (the father tears out his hair in a gesture of anger and grief). Continuing to play on the analogy of a family death, the narrator summons relatives, friends, and neighbors who arrive at the home in show of support for the bereaved parents:

> *Or viennent les parens, amis, voisins de ce dolent hostel visiter et conforter la compaignie; mais pou ou rien y prouffite, car de plus en plus est aggressée et oprimée la pouvre fille de ce mal.*[6]

The arrival of the "mourners" marks the first act of violation, to be followed by other acts of increasing intrusiveness. At one level the sudden entry of a crowd of relatives, friends, and neighbors into the home reflects a violation of domestic space, but, more importantly, it also compromises the family's privacy, for now the girl's secret illness has been revealed. The line between the

[3] Sweetser 1966, 31–32.
[4] Sweetser 1966, 32.
[5] Sweetser 1966, 32.
[6] Sweetser 1966, 32.

private and the public will be crossed repeatedly in various ways throughout the story, and it is precisely the shifting demarcation of these zones that provides one of the central sources of tension and humor.

The girl will now undergo a series of examinations, each more intrusive than the last. In an effort to minimize her discomfort and protect her privacy, the parents first turn to a *matrone*, a midwife:

> *Or vient une matrone qui moult et trop enquiert de ceste maladie; et fait virer et revirer puis ça, puis la, la tresdolente patiente, a tresgrand regret, Dieu le scet, et puis la medicine de cent mille fassons d'herbes*…[7]

The *matrone*'s responsibilities often extended beyond her knowledge of the birthing process, covering various disorders related to the female reproductive system. She often relied heavily on herbal remedies, and it is not surprising, therefore, that this is the first treatment chosen to treat the girl's problem.[8] While the decision to consult a midwife seems entirely consistent with a desire to protect the girl from unnecessary and uncomfortable male intrusion, it also initiates a chain of rather subtle associations that gradually transform the girl from a patient suffering from a well-defined medical condition into an object of sexual desire. The *matrone*'s expertise, after all, is theoretically limited to various conditions related to female sexuality. In this case, therefore, she is exceeding her legitimate domain, and usurping to a certain extent the prerogatives of male doctors. By the same token, her examination of the patient, whom she turns from one position to another, scrutinizing her body with great attention, violating her privacy and causing the girl obvious embarrassment if not physical discomfort, may be seen as a foreshadowing of various forms of male intrusion that we are about to witness.

The unsuccessful intervention of the *matrone* marks a turning point in the narrative, reflecting a double failure. First, and most obviously, there is the inability of the midwife to cure the girl's ailment. Rather than diminish her

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[7] Sweetser 1966, 32.

[8] In her thesis, *La parturiente en hôpital français*, Sarah David broadly outlines the medical expertise of the medieval midwife, "La matrone médievale, également appelée 'ventrière', était une femme plus âgée ayant déjà assisté plusieurs femme en couche de la communauté. Elle inspirait confiance. Grande utilisatrice de plantes et recettes médico-religieuses, son savoir se transmettait de mère en fille." (*Mémoire de Maîtrise d'Ethnologie*, Département d'Anthropologie, Université Paris 8: Saint-Denis 2004.)

suffering she only adds to it, for we are told that the girl's condition only worsens after multiple herbal remedies have been administered. More important, however, is the failure of the parents to protect their daughter's privacy. Now that female intervention has totally failed, their only remaining alternative is to turn to male intervention, a decision which will subject the young girl to the attentive and somewhat less than professional scrutiny of various doctors who will now be summoned for consultation. The failure of the midwife and the parents to heal the daughter discreetly is, of course, an outcome that the immediate audience could easily anticipate. If the initial intervention were successful, the impetus for continuing the story would be abruptly removed. Clearly, much of the play between the narrator and the audience is based on the understanding that each intervention will ultimately prove unsuccessful, thus requiring a more invasive effort, entailing a greater degree of violation.

The next logical step would be to summon a single male physician. In an unexpected twist, however, the narrator has the desperate parents immediately summon every doctor in the city, and even those from the surrounding area:

> *C'est force que les medicins de la ville et d'environ soient mandez, et que la pouvre fille descouvre son trespiteux cas. Or sont venuz maistre Pierre, maistre Jehan, maistre cy, maistre la, tant de phisiciens que vous vouldrez, qui veullent veoir la patiente ensemble, et les parties du corps au descouvert ou ce maudit mal de broches s'estoit, helas! longuement embusché.*[9]

Now that the parents' efforts to protect their daughter's privacy have completely failed, she finds herself abandoned to the curiosity of the entire medical profession practicing in the area of greater London, where the story is set. The humor of the passage resides in the juxtaposition of the quasi-professional behavior of the doctors, who ostensibly wish to examine the girl together in order to consult one another on her condition, with a crude male curiosity, seeking to exploit this opportunity for lustful purposes. The desire of the male doctors, and the vicarious desire of the male audience is presumably heightened by the girl's discomfort and her futile efforts at resistance:

[9] Sweetser 1966, 32-33.

> *Ceste pouvre fille, autant prinse et esbahie que si a la mort fust adjugée, ne se vouloit accorder nullement qu'on la meist en fasson que son mal fust apperceu . . .*[10]

Her parents, however, intercede, forcing her to acquiesce, and to submit to the will of her doctors. The resulting medical examination represents nothing less than the fulfillment of a male fantasy, one that will recur in various forms throughout the *Cent nouvelles*, the privilege of gazing without impediment at a very attractive and vulnerably exposed female body:

> *Et fut mise sur une cousche, les dens dessoubz, et son corps tant et si tresavant descouvert que les medicines virent apertement la grand meschef qui fort la tormentoit*.[11]

The words *descouvre/descouvert/decelé* have now appeared four times within the space of twenty lines, and the girl's forced exposure to her male viewers is clearly the center of narrative interest. Beneath the veneer of professional disinterest the doctors are now able to contemplate their subject with full impunity, and even, one may presume, with the approbation of the concerned parents. Their pleasure may be further heightened by the girl's obvious discomfort, and by the collusive nature of this act of pure voyeurism, bonding them through the collective fulfillment of male desire.

When the physicians fail to effect a cure, the family, now in a state of total desperation, turns to a Franciscan friar who is reputed for his knowledge of medicine:

> *fut rencontré ung ancient Cordelier qui borgne estoit, et en son temps avoit veu moult de choses, et de sa principale science se mesloit fort de medicine . . .*[12]

The lecherous friar, of course, belonging to a series of favorite anticlerical targets, represents a stock character in medieval satire. From the moment of his appearance in the tale, the audience can immediately and legitimately assume that that the mendicant friar will not succeed in any endeavor he undertakes,

[10] Sweetser 1966, 33.
[11] Sweetser 1966, 34.
[12] Sweetser 1966, 34.

but will, on the contrary, end up as a subject of scorn and ridicule. Elderly, facially deformed, socially marginalized by his religious status, he simply has nothing in his favor, and the audience has no reason to assume that he will triumph where so many others have failed. Even as he introduces the friar into the tale, the narrator inserts a subtle note of mockery, immediately following the observation on his defective vision with a parenthetical bit of irony, "*et en son temps avoit veu mout de choses*,"[13] clearly implying that his experience of the world extends far beyond the spiritual dimensions of his existence, while simultaneously mocking his deformity, the field of vision reduced to one working eye, which nevertheless "*avoit veu mout de choses*." The combination of medical and ecclesiastical functions is not unusual for the period, as Nancy Sarasi explains:

> Medical practitioners came from a variety of backgrounds. In northern France and England, and doubtless elsewhere, many literate practitioners were beneficed clergy and clergy in major orders. Members of the secular clergy frequently combined medical practice with their ecclesiastical activities.[14]

With the entrance of the lecherous one-eyed friar/physician, the tale becomes connected to erotic and voyeuristic interests, rather than simple obscenity. Both obscenity and eroticism are prevalent throughout the *Cent nouvelles*. Nicola McDonald, in *Medieval Obscenities*, points out that the line of demarcation separating these two aspects of medieval literature is not always clear cut:

> Key to all discussion are, of course, questions of definition and category, of where the sexual and erotic ends and the obscene begins, whether such a distinction is actually productive, and indeed whether the obscene, as we understand it today, is a category that finally illuminates more than it obfuscates. Most of the authors agree that the obscene is designed to shock…[15]

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[13] Sweetser 1966, 34.
[14] Nancy G. Sarasi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1990, 25.
[15] Nicola McDonald, 'introduction', in Nicola McDonald ed., *Medieval Obscenities*, York Medieval Press: York 2006, 1–16 at 12.

If the essence of obscenity is its capacity to shock, offend, or repulse the audience, and if the essence of eroticism is an appeal to sexual interest or an arousal of sexual desire, then the narrative in question squarely situates itself within the context of eroticism rather than obscenity. The voyeuristic framework within which the narrative unfolds and which underscores its erotic nature actually resides in a three-part construction. First there is the lecherous friar who, exploiting various layers of concealment—his professional privilege as a member of the medical profession, the sheet with the conspicuous opening, the girl's inability to see what is happening behind her—manages to at least partially gratify his sexual curiosity. Second, there are the male physicians gathered in the room, witnessing the scene, either vicariously enjoying their colleague's pleasure or mocking the absurdity of the grotesque scene unfolding before them. Finally, there is the audience, whether the small circle of acquaintances to whom the story was originally recounted or later readers of the text, who find themselves watching the entire scene—the group of physicians watching the one-eyed friar, who in turn is gazing with fascination at the fragment of a female body that has been left exposed for his contemplation and enjoyment.

On one hand, the girl has now been thoroughly transformed from a patient, the victim of relatively minor but extremely unpleasant illness, to a sexual object, the target of collective male curiosity and desire. It is clear that the one-eyed friar has no more professional interest in her medical condition than do the physicians who have just examined her. On the other hand, she, unlike many of the female victims of the *Cent nouvelles*, has not been completely objectified, insofar as the narrator repeatedly emphasizes her persistent discomfort both with her physical condition and with the increasing scrutiny that it elicits: "*La pouvre fille, de ce grand mal toute affolée, ne scet sa contenance que de plourer et souspirer . . .*",[16] "*La tres dolente patiente a tresgrand regret . . .*"[17], "*Ceste pouvre fille. . . amoit plus cher morir que ung tel secret fust a nul homme decelé*."[18]

It should be noted again that the narrator's insistence on the girl's discomfort clearly sets her apart from the vast majority of her female counterparts in the *Cent nouvelles*. I would argue that the repeated references to the girl's physical and psychological distress are intended to heighten the

[16] Sweetser 1966, 32.
[17] Sweetser 1966, 32.
[18] Sweetser 1966, 33.

vicarious, voyeuristic pleasure of the male audience. At the same time, the narrator, by highlighting the girl's sense of helplessness, prepares the unexpected twist in the tale that will culminate the series of medical examinations and treatments.

In preparation for the friar's much anticipated medical intervention, the girl is positioned on her stomach, while midwives (who appear to have been brought in to prepare the girl for the procedure) cover her buttocks almost completely, leaving exposed only the affected area:

> *. . . et son derriere descouvert assez avant, lequel fut incontinent par matrones d'un beau blanc drap linge garny, tapissé et armé. Et l'endroit du secret mal fut fait ung beau pertus, par le quel damp cordelier le pouvoit apertement choisir*.[19]

The ostensible reason for covering the girl's buttocks is to protect her privacy, preserving at least a modicum of modesty during the humiliating procedure that she is about to endure. The covering of the girl's buttocks may also be taken as an intertextual reference to the first tale in the collection, immediately preceding the present narrative, in which a tax-collector intrudes into his neighbor's bedroom and finds the latter in bed with a woman. The neighbor, grabbing the sheet, immediately covers the woman's body completely, except for her buttocks, thus simultaneously concealing and revealing her identity, for his unexpected visitor finds that the exposed portion of the woman's anatomy bears a strange resemblance to that of his wife, and returns home perplexed and haunted by the scene he has just witnessed. The suggestion of intertextuality is supported not only by the juxtaposition of these two tales, but by the fact that no other narratives in the collection contain any similar scenes. Although the first and second tale are constructed around very different plotlines, they do briefly converge at this point. In both stories, the act of covering simultaneously conceals and reveals. If the strategic covering of the woman's body has a reductive function in the first *nouvelle*, the reductive effect in the second *nouvelle* is even more extreme, since the buttocks are covered almost completely, leaving only the "*beau pertus*," the "beautiful hole" exposed. At this point in the narrative the girl has been essentially objectified and sexualized, reduced to a simple orifice, which now becomes the focal point of

[19] Sweetser 1966, 34–35.

collective male desire—that of the elderly friar, any physicians who may be present in the room (a point to which I will return a little later), and the male audience to whom the story is directed. The partial covering of the buttocks, then, far from protecting the girl's privacy, actually focuses male attention on the "*secret mal*" which is the very source of her physical and psychological discomfort.

Medical background

The treatment that the friar attempts to administer appears to be based on established medical practice of the period. A medical treatise from the thirteenth century includes a powder compound among a list of remedies for hemorrhoids.[20] John of Arderne, the most famous doctor of Chaucer's day, describes various treatments in his treatise, *Fistula in Ano*, including the use of a tube, perforated at one end, similar to the one that the friar employs in his procedure.[21] The comic force of the scene resides in the juxtaposition of truth and appearance. On one hand, the friar is performing a publicly witnessed and somewhat delicate medical procedure. From a reference later in the tale it will become clear that the friar is not alone with the patient. We are told that the father and others are present during the procedure. The identity of the unidentified witnesses is left to the speculation of the reader. Since the father and mother are virtually inseparable throughout most of the narrative, can one reasonably assume, for example, that both parents are present? Do the midwives, who prepare the girl for the procedure, remain as witnesses? Are some of the unsuccessful physicians present? The earliest manuscript of the *Cent nouvelles*, providing an illumination to illustrate each tale, demonstrates how one of the early readers of the narrative imagines this particular scene, and we will return to this revealing visual representation shortly.

On the other hand, there is the private purpose of the friar, which is anything but professional. Once the audience has been alerted to the friar's real intentions, and has connected him with the familiar figure of the lecherous monk, all of his actions will inevitably be associated with sexual desire. This

[20] Monica H. Green, *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia 2001, 161.
[21] D'Arcy Power, ed., *Treatises of fistula in ano, haemorrhoids and clysters*, (Early English Text Society), Kegan Paul: London 1910, 10.

connection is firmly validated by the use of the verb, *besoigner*: "*Et quand vint l'heure qu'il voult besoigner et la paciente mediciner*…"[22] The term, with its strong and well attested sexual connotations, nicely marks the ironic convergence of the friar's professional responsibilities and his overriding sexual interest in the patient.[23] Knowing his true intentions, but keeping in mind the veneer of professional integrity under which he freely operates, the audience is able to appreciate the thoroughness of the medical exam to which the friar subjects his patient:

> *Il regarde ce mal, puis d'un costé, puis d'aultre; maintenant le touche d'un doy tant doulcement, une autre foiz y souffle la pouldre dont mediciner la vouloit. Or regarde le tuyau dont il voult souffler ladicte pouldre pardessus et dedans le mal ; ore retourne arriere et gette l'œil de rechef sur ce dit mal, et ne se peut saouler de assez regarder*.[24]

The verb, *se saouler*, appearing at the end of the passage, adds an ironic twist to the account, effectively undercutting the pretense of medical professionalism by suggesting a gradual loss of self-control as the friar allows himself to publicly engage in an extended contemplation on the female body. Again, the narrator plays with the line of demarcation separating the public from the private. The obvious desire of the friar, the vulnerability of the girl who has now been transformed into a purely sexual object, the inescapable sexual connotations of the tube that the friar manipulates during the medical examination and treatment, all mimic, or at least strongly suggest, a sexual encounter whose intimacy is publicly witnessed by all those present in the room.

Medieval medical opinion validates the salutary effects of sexual intercourse as a remedy to certain maladies brought on by prolonged abstinence. Joan Cadden, in her essay, *Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy* provides an example:

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[22] Sweetser 1966, 34.
[23] In Tale 21, for example, the term is used in this sense: "Adonc furent mandez moynes, prestres et clercs, qui trouverent bien a besoignier; et le feirent si tresbien que madame l'abbesse fut en pou d'heure rappaisée". Sweetser 1966, 144.
[24] Sweetser 1966, 35.

> One anonymous thirteenth-century treatise on intercourse cites the authority of several ancient medical greats and remarks, "We have seen some people who, for love of chastity and the admiration of philosophy, did not wish to obey nature, and retained a lot of seed," whose symptoms include headaches, weight loss, and melancholia.[25]

The *Cent nouvelles* includes several narratives in which the act of intercourse provides an effective remedy for various ailments. The most dramatic of these is the fifty-fifth tale, in which an adolescent virgin, stricken with the bubonic plague, takes a series of lovers who contract her highly contagious disease with fatal results, but who ultimately provide the means for her complete recover. At the outset of the narrative, speaking to a female neighbor who will eventually become the go-between between the girl and a series of sexual partners, the plague-stricken adolescent intuitively senses the salutary effect that will be produced by these sexual encounters:

> *Et a verité, ma bonne voisine, il me semble si je peusse quelque pou sentir avant ma mort ma fin en seroit plus aisée et plus legiere a passer et a mains de regret. Et que plus est, mon cueur est a cela que ce me pourroit estre medicine et cause de garison*.[26]

The intervention of the friar-physician plays against this concept, and the humorous effect of the scene resides to some degree in the audience's ability to juxtapose the friar's intended remedy with the restorative power of intercourse. The irony of the failed intervention and the subsequent devastating injury suffered by the friar is heightened by this mental connection.

There is another juxtaposition that is much more subtle, and probably not within the immediate grasp of the fifteenth-century audience, lacking at least a certain rudimentary medical knowledge. Without necessarily positing the requisite medical expertise on the part of the narrator, one can at least appreciate the irony of the following observation connecting flatulence and ejaculation:

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[25] Joan Cadden, 'Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy', in Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage eds., *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, Garland Publishing: New York 1996, 51–80, at 58.
[26] Sweetser 1966, 348. See Fein, David A., *Displacements of Power: Readings of the Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, University Press of America, Lanham 2003, 39–52.

> While they [medieval medical authorities] state that the process of reproduction brings into action a spirit or *pneuma*, the term 'flatulence' often seems to them more adequate as a means of describing the mechanism of erection and ejaculation . . . The term 'flatulence' suggests, rather than a noble vapour like spirit, a by-product, a sort of gas whose nature is not clearly defined.[27]

Ironically, the 'flatulence' that should function as the primary force provoking male arousal and gratification, is appropriated by the female body and ends up undercutting male desire with highly destructive results.

The illumination accompanying this narrative in the only existing fifteenth-century manuscript of the *Cent nouvelles* suggests an interesting perspective on the tale. In the center of the image one finds the friar, leaning over the patient, administering the powder by blowing through a tube. Three men appear in the background, apparently the father and two physicians. One of the male figures, presumably the father, is raising both hands, his mouth open, in what might easily be interpreted as a gesture of protest, apparently unwilling to allow any further discomfort and humiliation to be inflicted on his daughter. The other two men, both turned toward and addressing the third male figure, while one of them gestures in the direction of the friar, appear to be attempting to defuse the father's outrage, explaining the necessity for the procedure, persuading him to let the friar continue with his treatment. Especially revealing is the notable absence of any female figures in the room, other than the patient. The mother and the midwives, who have been present at various points in the tale, and who might reasonably be expected to remain in the room in order to alleviate the girl's increasing apprehension, are nowhere to be seen. Instead we see a girl, vulnerably exposed, surrounded by four men. It is quite revealing that the artist, who also happens to be one of the earliest readers of the *Cent nouvelles,* chose to eliminate any mediating female presence in his depiction of the scene, even though there is no explicit textual support for this decision.

[27] Sirasi 1990, 79.

The Male Gaze

Just at the point when the victim appears to be the most vulnerable, and without the slightest hope of escape, the story takes a strange twist:

> *Et comme il regardoit tresententivement et tresprès par ce pertus et a l'environ le destrasseux mal de la pouvre fille, si ne se peut elle contenir, voyant l'estrange fasson de regarder a tout ung oeil de nostre Cordelier, que force de rire ne la surprint, qu'elle cuida longement retenir*.[28]

Ironically, she transforms the act of looking, the very act that has oppressed her and caused her so much discomfort, into a weapon to be used against the lecherous friar with devastating results. In reversing her status from that of an object of scrutiny to that of spectator watching the one who is watching her, the girl finally transcends her suffering and becomes aware of the absurdity of this grotesque scene, an awareness that leads inevitably to a forceful and liberating bout of laughter. Here she merges for a moment with the audience, the latter having reached the same realization long before she did. To frame the same observation in slightly different terms, this is the point in the story when the audience's laughter actually penetrates the narrative, and finds voice in the victim's unexpected hilarity.

Laura Mulvey recalls Freud's interest in scopophilia (pleasure in looking) as "one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones."[29] Freud, she reminds us, associated scopophilia with control, with the viewer "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze." Although her own interest is centered on narrative cinema, her general observations on the pleasures of looking, supported by Freudian theory, may shed a little light on the tale under discussion. Mulvey differentiates between the male and the female side of the process, coining the term, "male gaze," now widely used in feminist criticism.

[28] Sweetser 1966, 35.
[29] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington 1989, 16.

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure…[30]

Mulvey's paradigm, of course, has proven extremely influential and controversial in feminist criticism. The dichotomy she establishes between the male viewer/voyeur and the female body, as object of the male gaze infused with desire, is taken up by Mary Ann Doane in her essay, *Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body*:

> For the cinema, in its alignment with the fantasies of the voyeur, has historically articulated its stories through a conflation of its central axis of seeing/being seen with the opposition male/female.[31]

While it may appear somewhat anachronistic to apply feminist scholarship to a late medieval tale, the parallels concerning the male/female dichotomy are evident. Like the spectator of a film, the friar is allowed to enjoy the view of the female body from a position of partial concealment (until the moment that the body is transformed into a person). Thus, the friar, like the movie viewer, is empowered by the gaze itself, a phenomenon described by Ann Kaplan in her essay, *Is the Gaze Male*?

> . . . men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession that is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act on it.[32]

The ironic twist in this particular tale, of course, is that the girl does indeed "receive and return" the gaze, and although the act does not carry "the power of action and of possession," it does unexpectedly empower her to liberate herself from the domination of the male gaze by violently and very effectively destroying the source of the gaze, i.e. the friar's remaining good eye.

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[30] Mulvey 1989, 19.
[31] Mary Ann Doane, 'Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body', in Ann E. Kaplan ed, *Feminism and Film*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2000, 86–89 at 86.
[32] Ann E. Kaplan, 'Is the Gaze Male?', in Ann E. Kaplan ed., *Feminism and Film*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2000, 119–138 at 121.

Mulvey's term, the male gaze, heavily freighted with psychological implications concerning male exploitation of women, has provoked a strong response from certain quarters of feminist criticism. Some critics are troubled by the implied passivity associated with the female object of male desire. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis finds Mulvey's concept somewhat limited, if not fundamentally flawed.

> Yet while Mulvey's critique of patriarchal modes of vision made the issue of sexual difference central to any discussion of spectatorship, her argument in fact reinforces a repressive binarism, one which is locked into conventional associations of masculinity with activity, femininity with passivity. Therefore, where this conception implies the undeniable coincidence of looking with masculine control and mastery, some feminists have urged a more nuanced model of spectatorship . . .[33]

The scene in which the friar closely examines the girl, in effect, appears to conform closely to Mulvey's paradigm, with the female body assuming an objectified status, passively allowing itself to be scrutinized by the desire-driven male gaze. A sudden reversal of power takes place when the girl turns around to look at her examiner, when the female gaze unexpectedly engages the male gaze. Two important transformations take place at this moment. First, the girl abruptly ceases to be an object, a passive focus for male desire. This is the first and only moment in the tale when we see her move, and her motion, significantly, is not away from but toward the immediate source of her discomfort. Her movement represents an act of confrontation, if not provocation. Her laughter further reinforces the humanization process. Objects do not laugh. Aristotle, of course, finds laughter an element that differentiates the human from all other animals. Aristotle and Plato share the view that laughter arises from a sense of superiority, a concept that was developed by Hobbes, and which is now commonly known in humor study as "the superiority theory." This leads us to the second important transformation. Through the liberating act of derisive laughter the girl breaks the grip of scopophilic oppression, and appropriates the element of pleasure associated

[33] Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema*, University of Illinois Press: Urbana 1990, 6.

with the act of looking, at the same time depriving the male gaze of its control and superiority.

It is the ability to distance herself from her discomfort, and the ensuing release of humor, that empowers the girl, enabling her to triumph over the effort to violate her privacy. Unfortunately for the friar, the explosion of humor results in another more dangerous release:

> *. . . ce ris a force retenu fut converty en un sonnet dont le vent retourna si tres a point la pouldre que la pluspart il fist voler contre le visage et sur l'œil de ce bon cordelier, lequel, sentent ceste doleur, habandonna tantost et vaissel et tuyau: et a peu qu'il ne cheut a la renverse, tant fut fort effrayé.*[34]

The Fabliau Tradition

On one level, the girl's unexpected bout of flatulence may be seen as simply another example of the crude humor associated with certain bodily functions in the *fabliau*. Numerous tales in the *Cent nouvelles* are strongly reminiscent of the fabliau tradition, and some represent a direct reworking of fabliau material. One of the most obvious connections between the *Cent nouvelles* and the fabliau, pointed out by Roger Dubuis in his excellent study of the *Cent nouvelles*, is the abrupt displacement of power from the person attempting to exercise control, manipulation, or abuse to the intended victim who thus becomes unexpectedly empowered.

> *On pourrait, en empruntant le terme aux débuts du cinéma, l'appeler le thème de "l'arroseur arrosé." C'est toujours, en effet, le même "scénario" qui se répète: le médecin victime de son propre remède, le piégeur pris à son propre piège, le farceur victime de sa propre farce, le trompeur trompé.*[35]

With the example of "le médecin victime de son propre remède", Dubuis no doubt has in mind the one-eyed monastic doctor of the second tale. The reversal of fortune in the fabliau often revolves around sexual desire, and more specifically, the unexpected and highly frustrating thwarting of this desire.

[34] Sweetser 1966, 35.
[35] Roger Dubuis, *Les Cent nouvelles nouvelles et la tradition de la nouvelle en France au Moyen Age*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble: Grenoble 1973, 71.

Here again, the *Cent nouvelles* resonates with a feature of the fabliau pointed out by Thomas D. Cooke:

> Fulfillment of pornographic fantasies is one of the principal narrative modes of the fabliaux . . . Moreover, the fabliaux very frequently, after fulfilling the fantasy, turn around and destroy it before our very eyes.[36]

Whether or not the friar actually fulfills a pornographic fantasy, of course, is debatable. One could argue that the fantasy never reaches the point of fulfillment, since the voyeuristic act is abruptly and violently interrupted, with devastating results. On the other hand, one might also argue with equal justification that the voyeuristic act is itself the fulfillment of a sexual fantasy, one which the friar is free to pursue with perfect leisure and impunity, and indeed this aspect of the tale, skillfully drawn out and elaborated by the narrator, provides a rich source of humor in the narrative.

Charles Muscatine, in his important study of the fabliaux, highlights another feature of the genre that will resonate strongly in the *Cent nouvelles* :

> If there is a single dominant tone in the overt moralism of the fabliaux, it is that of irony, the irony of surprise, of reversal, of a justice that is fashioned by chance or by oneself.[37]

In the second *nouvelle* Muscatine's entire inventory of irony comes into play. To say that the friar is taken by surprise would be a gross understatement. As for second element of irony—reversal—we witness not only a figurative but a literal reversal, as the medicinal powder is violently expelled into the friar's overcurious eye. The last of Muscatine's categories—the irony of justice—again manifests itself on two levels in this tale. First, there is a justice connected with the natural order. The abuse of authority with an eye to violating the girls' bodily privacy eventually brings about its own destruction. The second level of irony concerns the friar's decision to seek legal recourse for his debilitating injury. Rather than achieving any measure of compensation, his effort simply

[36] Thomas D. Cooke, 'Pornography, the Comic Spirit, and the Fabliaux', in Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt eds., *The Humor of the Fabliaux: A Collection of Critical Essays*, University of Missouri Press: Columbia 1974, 137–162 at 152.
[37] Charles Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux*, Yale University Press: New Haven, 1986, 104.

results in further humiliation, advertising the embarrassing incident, and bringing the plaintiff nothing but public scorn and mockery.

Another aspect of this particular tale that connects it firmly to the fabliau tradition is the tendency toward fragmentation of the body, an aspect of the fabliau pointed out by Howard Bloch:

> We have seen how closely the representation of the body in the fabliaux is linked to the theme of fragmentation—to detached members, both male and female; to actual and metaphoric castrations . . .[38]

As we have already seen, the covering of the girl's body with a sheet, leaving only the affected area exposed, represents a reductive process by which the girl is essentially fragmented, objectified, and sexualized as the focus of male desire. As for Bloch's reference to metaphoric castration, we will shortly examine possible Freudian connotations connecting the loss of vision to the loss of sexual potency.

The friar/physician, heavily invested with medical and ecclesiastical authority, becomes a perfect target for ridicule. The girl in the story, by contrast, does not take on any distinguishing identity. There is little evidence of any antifeminist intent in this particular tale. Here again, the *nouvelle* parallels a certain fabliau tradition in which women appear as almost incidental characters. Norris Lacy reminds us that not all fabliaux are necessarily shaped by misogynist sentiment:

> Having considered a number of cases in which fabliau women appear as temptresses, corrupters, or corrupt, we should remind ourselves again that a great many fabliaux are not antifeminist—or profeminist, or even essentially about women.[39]

The girl, partially covered by a sheet and lying face down throughout the humiliating examination, never speaking at any point in the tale, is simply a female body, a kind of prop, allowing the story to focus on the central narrative interest, the thwarted sexual desire of the friar.

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[38] Howard R. Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1986, 101.
[39] Norris J. Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, Summa Publications: Birmingham 1999, 76.

One may easily find resonances of two particuliar *fabliaux*: *Des Trois Meschines* and the more famous *Le Pet au Villain* by Rutebeuf. In the first story, a magical powder is accidentally dispersed by a sudden attack of flatulence, flying into the eyes of one of the girls who witnesses the scene, but without serious injury. The second *fabliau* is built around a series of obscene images associated with the devil. A demon is sent from Hell to collect the soul of a dying peasant, and places a sack on the man's body for this purpose:

> *Un sac de cuir au cul le pent,*
> *Quar li maufez cuide sanz faille*
> *Que l'ame par le cul s'en aille.*[40]

The peasant, suffering from acute indigestion after a meal of beef and broth, does in fact release something from his body into the sack, which the demon promptly carries back to Hell, believing that he has accomplished his objective, but he is in for a nasty surprise:

> *En enfer gete sac et tout,*
> *Et li pes en sailli a bout.*
> *Estes vous chascun des maufez*
> *Mautalentiz et eschaufez,*
> *Et maudient ame a vilain.*[41]

Valerie Allen in her recent study, *On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages*, finds the scene a farcical parallel to the practice of blowing on a catechumen during the rite of baptism, in effect, a kind of exorcistic ritual.

> The act of hissing or blowing sharply is referred to as exsufflatio. In the "scrutinizes"—Latin masses dating from as early as the third century, during which exorcisms were performed on those preparing for baptism—"exsufflation" occurred when the priest blew into the

[40] John DuVal and Raymond Eichmann eds., *The French Fabliaux* 2, Garland Publications: New York 1985, 242.
[41] DuVal and Eichmann 1985, 244.

> catechumen's face. Exorcism remained a part of the baptismal rite in the Middle Ages.[42]

The act that results in the blinding of the friar may be taken as loosely connected to the practice of exsufflation. If the friar maintains a kind of visual/sexual possession of the girl's body with his transgressive gaze, then her act of "exsufflation" may be taken as a form of exorcism, effectively expelling, or at least neutralizing certain forces that have aggravated her discomfort.

The erotic dimension of the narrative, however, has nothing whatsoever to do with hemorrhoids or flatulence. The real focus of this story, and many of the other tales included in the collection, is simply female sexuality. The friar, driven by sexual curiosity and desire, is attempting to invade the secrecy of the female body. In a series of transformations, the girl becomes an object of sexual desire, the male-initiated examinations thinly veil an obvious sexual curiosity, and the final medical intervention of the friar, as clearly noted by the ambiguous use of "besoigner," becomes a kind of metaphoric representation for the desired and ultimately unsuccessful phallic penetration. The violent and totally unexpected reaction of the female body, with its highly damaging consequences, reflects a prevalent perception in the *Cent nouvelles* of female sexuality as a dangerous and unpredictable force.[43]

Concluding section of the tale

Given Freud's observation that the fear of blindness reflects a fear of castration, the friar's loss of the offending organ, his one good eye, suggests a sexual loss that emerges as a central source of male anxiety in a number of tales from the *Cent nouvelles.* The friar's mutilation is arguably self-inflicted, Oedipal-like, insofar as he allows himself to be overpowered by his sexual curiosity, and is thus responsible for the tragic outcome. While we may see the scene through a Freudian lens, a fifteenth-century audience would likely find in the episode a Biblical subtext, heightening the irony of the friar's downfall: "And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out . . ."

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[42] Valerie Allen, *On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages*, Palgrave MacMillan: New York 2007, 91.

[43] See David Fein, 'The Dangerous Sex: Representations of the Female Body in the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*', *Romance Notes* 39 (1999), 195–205.

One of the most surprising features of this narrative is that it continues for so long beyond the point where it could reasonably be expected to end. Other tales from the collection almost invariably (and often abruptly) terminate once the story has reached its humorous culmination, and the punch line has been delivered. After this point any effort to prolong the tale would seem counterproductive, detracting from the narrative economy that characterizes the *Cent nouvelles*, and weakening the comic impact of the ending. One would logically expect, therefore, that this narrative should end almost immediately after the blinding of the friar, rather than with the lengthy dénouement that follows. The complete loss of vision occurs over a period of several days. The friar, subsequently returns to the house where the accident occurred, and those who are guiding him arrange a meeting with the girl's father. The friar then petitions for a monetary settlement in compensation for the damage he has suffered, couching the request in legal terminology, ". . . *requerant, ainsi que droit le porte, qu'il luy baille et assigne, ainsi que a son estat appartient, sa vie honorablement*."[44] The girl's father, while expressing regret for the friar's pitiful condition, denies all responsibility in the affair. In an effort to appease the plaintiff, the father offers a small sum of money, as much as he would have paid the friar for a complete cure, while making it clear that he is under no obligation to pay anything whatsoever. The friar refuses the offer, demanding that he be provided a regular income, claiming that his inability to perform normal clerical functions will reduce him to a life of extreme destitution. Confronted by the father's steadfast refusal, the friar resorts to legal intervention. A date is set for the hearing, and the parties are summoned to present their argument. The case, owing to its highly unusual character, attracts a large crowd of spectators. In order to maximize the entertainment value of the lawsuit, the judges decide to extend the proceedings, and as of the present moment of narration, no verdict has yet been announced.

Given the disparity between the ending of this tale and the more abrupt conclusion that typifies the vast majority of tales in the collection, it is difficult to find a narrative function for the extended epilogue that comprises a quarter of the entire story. The unsuccessful negotiation for a legal settlement, and the friar's rather elaborate justification in support of his request do not appear to be intrinsically related to the narrative core. One possible explanation is that both

[44] Sweetser 1966, 36.

the episode and the legal conflict it produced rest on some sort of factual basis.[45]

Edgar De Blieck in his study of the *Cent nouvelles* draws attention to the last sentence of the *nouvelle*:

> *Et par ce point celle qui auparavant par sa beauté, bonté et genteté congneue estoit de pluseurs gens, devint notoire a tout le monde par ce mauldit mal de broches, dont en la fin fut garie, ainsi que puis me fut compté*.[46]

De Blieck, finding the sentence especially significant, highlights its irony by pointing out that while her beauty, goodness and gentility had been known only by several people (*pluseurs gens*), the notoriety of this unfortunate incident became a matter of public knowledge (*devint notoire a tout le monde*). The healing of the girl, with which the narrator concludes the tale, is undercut by a more serious and more permanent form of damage:

> The ending reminds the reader that the disease was only partly to blame for the girl's misfortune: the point is not that there was a happy ending, but that the damage had been done by the time she was cured of her physical ailment: her good name was destroyed, and she would never be free of the association with haemorrhoids and farting.[47]

In DeBlieck's view the central issue of the tale, at least for its original audience, is the loss of one's good reputation. He suggests that the father is to blame for the humiliating exposure of his daughter to public ridicule, for if he had settled with the friar out of court, the case would never have been widely publicized. Without detracting from the validity of De Blieck's observations, I would argue

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[45] While many of the tales contained in the *Cent nouvelles* are obviously imaginary or richly influenced by the fabliau tradition, there is at least one example in the collection of a bizarre incident leading to a court case, which is independently attested by a historical source. Tale 53 relates a confusion during a multiple marriage ceremony in Brussels, performed on an early winter morning in a state of near total darkness, resulting in two mismatched couples (an elderly man and a young woman, an elderly woman and a young man, the intended couples having become accidentally separated in the dark). Georges Chastellain in his *Chronique* relates essentially the same story, with minor variations, characterizing the incident as *moult estrange*.

[46] Sweetser 1966, 37.

[47] Edgar DeBlieck, *The Cent nouvelles nouvelles, Text and Context: Literature and History at the court of Burgundy in the Fifteenth Century*, Diss., University of Glasgow, 2004.

that the portion of the tale dealing with the legal consequences of the friar's injury is relegated to an anticlimactic status, an amusing and ironic twist to a very bizarre tale, but that the effective culmination of the story (and, hence, the scene that the illuminator chose to represent) comes with the "private" rather than the public exposure of the daughter.

Conclusion

One could argue that at its deepest level this is not really a story about an adolescent girl with an embarrassing medical condition, which makes her vulnerable to the sexual curiosity of numerous male physicians, and one lecherous old friar, in particular, but essentially a reflection on the power and dangers associated with the transgressive gaze, the act of looking that somehow violates the intimate space of a stranger. In the beginning of the tale, it is the domestic space, the protective privacy of the family's home that is compromised by the invasion of outsiders who have heard about the girl's embarrassing ailment. Next, it is the intimate space of the girl's body that is exposed, first by the scrutiny of the midwife, then by the collective examination of the male doctors, and finally by the probing examination of the lascivious one-eyed friar, each level of scrutiny, more invasive than the last.

The twist in the tale comes when the victim turns to look back at the viewer, thus, in a sense, violating the intimacy of his private voyeuristic pleasure, an act that empowers her with a sense of detachment and a keenly felt awareness of the absurdity generated by this grotesque scene. This realization leads in turn to the sudden, violent, and liberating fit of laughter that will yield such catastrophic results for the poor friar. But the story does not end here. There is yet another twist. Once the incident is brought into the public domain with the court case that eventually reaches the London Parliament, the most intimate details of the unfortunate episode now become public knowledge, and the privacy of the girl and the friar is victimized by the unwanted exposure.

This tale, like many in the collection, is driven by a rapid and unpredictable series of events, marking successive displacements of power. At the outset of the narrative, power (or, at least, the potential for acquiring power) is concentrated in the figure of the girl, whose beauty, good character, and other assets enable her to attract a wide array of suitors. With the advent of her unfortunate ailment, however, we see the center of power shift, first into the

hands of her distressed parents, then into those of the midwife to whom they entrust their daughter, then to the contingent of male physicians, and finally to the elderly friar, summoned as a last resort. The dramatic turning point of the tale, of course, coincides with the girl's unexpected re-establishment of control. The locus of power shifts yet again, however, with the friar's suit against the girl's family, an effort that places the resolution of the conflict squarely within the legal domain of the courts. Ultimately, however, the locus of power falls by default to the audience, in the absence of any decision by the court.

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