

1982

## The Freiris of Berwik and Chaucerian Fabliau

R. D. S. Jack

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jack, R. D. S. (1982) "The Freiris of Berwik and Chaucerian Fabliau," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol17/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

R. D. S. Jack

*The Freiris of Berwik and Chaucerian Fabliau*



It is the thesis of this study, that a comparison between the fifteenth-century Scottish tale "The Freiris of Berwik" and its closest analogue in French fabliau, "Le Povre Clerc," reveals the Scottish author to be following many of the devices initiated or perfected by Chaucer in those of the *Canterbury Tales*, which have obvious connections with the fabliau.<sup>1</sup>

The first major distinction lies in the setting. In "Le Povre Clerc" we only learn that the clerk lived in Paris but had to leave that city and return to his country home because of poverty. Chaucer, most notably in the "Reeve's Tale," had preferred to give his fabliaux a more particularised milieu:

At Trumpyngtoun, nat fer fro Cantebrigge,  
Ther gooth a brook, and over that a brigge,  
Upon the whiche brook ther stant a melle...

(3921-3)

It is this tradition, which is followed by the Scottish author, whose tale

befel and happinnit in to deid  
Upoun a rever the quhilk is callit tweid

Quhair mony lordis hes bene of grit renoune  
 At tweidis mouth thair standis a nobill toune.<sup>2</sup>

(1-4)

The choice of the walled city of Berwick as the background for the friars' adventures provides a good deal more than a few initial descriptive passages and the sort of detail, which gives an impression of realism. The fact that it is a walled city provides the necessary motivation for the friars' appeal for shelter. They are outside the walls and fear that the gates will be closed before they reach Berwick (lines 46-50). That town is also an ideal setting for a work which derives much of its comic effect from the intense rivalry between the orders of friars. As Easson has indicated, Berwick alone of all Scottish towns did house each of the major orders.<sup>3</sup> In all probability Carmelites, Augustinians, Franciscans and Dominicans were represented there from 1270 until 1436 and Berwick's reputation as a centre for friars lasted long after that time.<sup>4</sup> But thirdly, the Scottish author has used the impregnability of the walls and gates of Berwick (historically due to that town's vulnerable position in border warfare) as an ironic counterpoint for the open walls and gates of Alesone's house and person. While Berwick is so heavily defended "that it might be of na maner of micht to win þat hous be craft or subteltie," the house of Symon Laureir is readily opened to Friar John, while Alesone's own sexual gates are explicitly referred to as being ready for "ane feist." In true Chaucerian fashion the author of "The Freiris of Berwik" not only provides a detailed setting but makes that setting integral to the whole tale.

In "Le Povre Clerc," as in the majority of French fabliaux, almost all the characterisation is derived from the action. Of the clerk we learn little beyond his poverty; the lady is well enough off to have a maid; her husband is a peasant and the philandering priest wears a black cloak. Beyond these meagre facts we are told little. They are not even named. The Scottish author, who converts the metre of the French tale into the favoured Chaucerian decasyllabic couplet, provides names. All of these have precedents in Chaucerian fabliau. The lady is Alesone ("Miller's Tale"); the travelling friars are Robert ("Friar's Tale") and Allane ("Reeve's Tale"); the black friar is John ("Reeve's Tale") and the husband Symon ("Reeve's Tale"). The author, however, proceeds in each case to give a detailed introduction again in manner strongly reminiscent of Chaucer, who after all did reserve his longest piece of female character description for Alisoun in the "Miller's Tale."

The Scottish Alesone, we are initially informed, "wes sum-thing dynk and dengerous." Her character combines sensuality, class consciousness and pride in appearance. These at one moment recall the Chaucerian Alisoun and at others the Wife of Bath and Simon's wife in the "Reeve's Tale." Prior to the arrival of her lover, the author devotes fifteen lines of internal monologue and narrational comment aimed at establishing her character and appearance:

Hir kirtill wes of silk and silver fyne  
 Hir uþer garmentis as the reid gold did schyne  
 On every finger scho weiris ringis two  
 Scho was als proud as ony papingo...  
 (145-8)

Instead of one clerk he provides us with two friars. Like most Chaucerian characters they are "the best practisit and cunnand" of their kind, being like their predecessor in the "Prologue" to the *Canterbury Tales*, especially skilled with women:

Thir silly freiris with wyffis weill could gluder  
 Rycht wondir weill plesit þai all wyffis.  
 (34-5)

The device of introducing a second, older friar also permits the Scottish author to set one against the other. Allane's age is set against Robert's youth and also provides motivation for seeking shelter:

For he wes auld and nicht not wele travell.  
 (39)

In a tale which clearly aims at presenting the travelling friars in the most favourable light possible, Allane is also occasionally shown taking a purer Christian viewpoint than his younger counterpart. Thus, when Robert is moving towards the production of the luxurious feast, Allane cheerfully accepts the simple fare before him with the words, "heir is now annuch of godis guid." He thus provides a more solid, pious background for the trickery of Robert.

Of all the characters in "The Freiris of Berwik," Symon comes closest to a particular Chaucerian original. Like John in the "Miller's Tale," he is first briefly introduced via the account of his wife's activities, an account which clearly implies future cuckoldry. Later, in his openhearted welcome of the friars and his complete failure, in the face of

glaring evidence, to suspect his wife, he follows John in balancing kindness with the sort of aggressive naivety which seems to invite gulling. Like John too he has a superstitiously religious nature and sees as little inconsistency in greeting a feast supposedly produced by necromancy with a "banedicitie" as John does in linking "Cristes passioun" and a pagan "night-spel." Robert plays upon these weaknesses just as relentlessly as Nicholas, producing the same awe for his necromantic trickery as the latter obtained for his astrologically inspired prophecies:

The gudman had grit mervell of this taill  
 And said my hairt neir be haill  
 Bot gif 3e preve that practik or 3e pairte.  
 (317-9)

Finally, the shadowy, black-cloaked priest of the French fabliau is given six lines of masterful introduction in the Scots tale. The author, again using a method perfected by Chaucer, appears merely to be recounting facts and not passing judgment. But it is clear that the emphasis on his "silver and gold," his lecherous habits and his methods of escaping from his own abbey condemn him as a false friar, untrue to the triple ideal of poverty, chastity and obedience.

A comparison between the setting and the characterisation in French and Scots thus reveals a variety of elaboration techniques in the latter, all of which have clear Chaucerian parallels. The comic situation itself is also developed in "The Freiris of Berwik" and in such a way that the strong possibility of further Chaucerian influence cannot be ignored. For example, in "Le Povre Clerc" the surprise return of the husband is passed over very briefly. The priest hides himself under a trough "sanz demorance"<sup>5</sup> and the lady opens the door to her spouse at once. The whole situation is dismissed in 24 lines. The Scots tale relates this incident first of all to the overweening pride of Friar John who, prior to Symon's interruption, has been sitting "so prelat lyk" in his chair and is now reduced to a farcical and impotent panic. This sudden contrast is accompanied by a reversal of roles. It is the 'humble' Alesone, who now takes complete control, organising both friar and maid with unhurried efficiency:

Scho closit him and syne went on hir way  
 Quhat sall I do allace the freir can say  
 Syne to hir madin spedily scho spak  
 Go to De fyre and the metis fra it tak.  
 (211-4)

This leads into another, even more effective reversal. Faced with the obvious comic advantage of her husband, she refuses to hurry and even goes to bed. From there she pretends to believe him a stranger and so refuses him entry on the ironic grounds that she is highly virtuous and her husband away from home. The transferral of power is complete and poor Symon is made to suffer much physical discomfort. Only then does she allow him in with feigned enthusiasm:

And oppinit than the zet full haistely  
 Scho tuk fra him his geir at all devyiss  
 Syne welcomit him on maist hairtly wyiss.  
 (241-3)

Although the French fabliau tradition does provide examples of the tables being turned in this way, the subtle elaboration involving a variety of character contrasts, a constant emphasis on visual detail and skilful use of irony and double-entendre are all more strongly reminiscent of Chaucer and especially of the conclusion to the "Merchant's Tale." There, too, the lady's ingenuity coupled with her husband's incredible naivety has the effect of alienating our sympathy from a gull whose stupidity seems to deserve deception.

Much humour is also derived from a wry depiction of the necromantic art, its practices and vocabulary, although there is no equivalent for this in the French analogue. It is connected with madness in the Scots story ("he granit and he glowrit as he were woid"), as was astrology in Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" ("this man is falle, with his astromye, in some woodnesse"). This parallel has already been mentioned in the comparison between Symon and Chaucer's John, but on a wider level both authors use the respective arts to introduce a satirical comment on the evils of superstition and the vulnerability of untaught men when faced with perversions of supernatural truth. In this connection, it is interesting to note the similarity between John's seriously-conducted 'night-spel,' which involves going the "foure halves of the hous aboute" and Robert's highly amusing parody of necromantic ritual, which also involves facing each direction in turn:

And to þe eist direct he turnis his face  
 Syne to þe west he turnit and lukit down et seq.  
 (323-4)

There are other ways in which the handling of the comic situation in "The Freiris of Berwik" represents a departure from "Le Povre Clerc," while sharing techniques perfected by

Chaucer. One final example may suffice. In the French fabliau after the priest has received his beating and the unfaithful wife been exposed, the work concludes with the simple moral that it is advisable to give bread to those who ask for it. If the wife had fed the clerk, he would not have wished for vengeance. The Scots author on the other hand concludes by briefly recapitulating events and stressing how each character has been given his just deserts. Finally he refers all to Christ:

Thuss Symonis heid upoun þe stane wes brokin  
 And our þe stair the freir in myre hes loppin  
 And tap our taill he fyld wes woundir ill  
 And Alesone on na wayiss gat hir will  
 This is the story that hapnit of that freir  
 No moir thair is bot Chryst us help most deir.  
 (562-7)

Although the idea of poetic justice has not been so rigorously emphasised in the Scots poem as in the "Miller's Tale" and although the particular punishment for the friar reminds one of the fate meted out to another brother in Dunbar's "Fenyeit Freir of Tungland,"<sup>6</sup> the parallel with the end of Chaucer's poem is nonetheless clear:

They seyde, "The man is wood, my leeve brother;"  
 And every wight gan laughen at this stryf.  
 Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,  
 For al his keypyng andhis jalousye;  
 And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye;  
 And Nicolas is scalded in the towte.  
 The tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!  
 (3848-54)

The gull's punishment here is mental rather than physical; the lady has been "swyved" instead of not getting "hir will" and the final religious reference is to Father rather than Son but such variations cannot conceal the similarity of basic method, a method which is employed elsewhere by Chaucer but is uncommon as a concluding 'topos' in the French tradition.

Finally and briefly we may turn to other aspects of narrative technique. W.M. Hart has noted that "rough parallels for the verses used to mark transitions may be found in the "Franklin's Tale."<sup>7</sup> The Scots author also proves himself a master of the Chaucerian device of internal monologue, using it especially with Alesone to give us comic and often bawdy insights into the true nature of the individual concerned:

And to hir chalmer so scho went in hy  
 Scho pullit hir cunt and gaif hit buffettis tway  
 Upoun þe cheikis syne till it coud scho say  
 3e sould be blyth and glaid at my requaist  
 Thir mullis of 3ouris ar callit to ane feist.  
 (138-42)

Equally, many critics have noted how Chaucer added to the fabliau material in his sources a more powerful and sustained sense of irony.<sup>8</sup> In "The Freiris of Berwik" we have already noted the ironic counterpointing of the 'gate' and 'wall' imagery and the development of ironic potential in the account of the husband's return. Throughout the author introduces ironies not present in the French analogue, as when Alesone knows she has been discovered by Robert but is expected to praise that friar by her innocent husband:

And hairtly I 3ow pray to thank this freir  
 Off his bening grit besines and cure.  
 (401-2)

Or when Robert, knowing of her infidelity, greets the husband's return with a deeply ironic comment:

And for his weilfair dalie do we pray.  
 (289)

Inevitably touches like this produce a much more sophisticated and varied type of comedy than that presented in "Le Povre Clerc." The Scottish author also delights in introducing some skilful pieces of double-entendre, such as he could have encountered in the "Merchant's Tale" in particular. Thus, when Symon has returned his wife laments, "þe misknawlege I had almaist misgane."<sup>9</sup> 'Misknawlege' refers on the surface to her supposed ignorance that the knocking was her husband's, but more profoundly to her ignorance of his return, which nearly resulted in the discovery of her infidelity. 'Misgane' likewise means at once going wrong in a practical (door-opening) and moral (adultery) sense.

This study, therefore, lends weight to the opinion expressed by C.S. Lewis, who valued "The Freiris of Berwik" as an "excellent fabliau...above all other attempts to continue the tradition of the comic Canterbury Tales."<sup>10</sup> It is hoped also that it may again draw attention towards a work which, so long as it was erroneously held to be Dunbar's, was regularly adjudged as his finest work along with "The Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo," but has now apparently

been doomed at once to anonymous authorship and critical neglect. Finally, it may help to direct Middle Scots scholarship to the comparatively rich field of the Scottish fabliau and works such as "The Wyf of Auchtermuchty," "the Talis of the Fyve Bestis" and "The Dumb Wife."

*University of Edinburgh*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>W.M. Hart, "The Fabliau and Popular Literature," *PMLA*, 23 (1908), pp. 329-74.

<sup>2</sup>Chaucer quotations are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson (London, 1968). Quotations from "The Freiris of Berwik" follow the text of the *Barnatyne MS*, ed. W. Tod Ritchie, Scottish Text Society, 4 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1928-32), IV, 261-77.

<sup>3</sup>D.E. Easson, *Medieval Religious Houses: Scotland* (London, 1957), esp. pp. 98, 105, 114, 118, 119.

<sup>4</sup>See *Letters and Papers: Henry VIII*, Vol. XIV<sup>1</sup> No. 494.

<sup>5</sup>"Le Povre Clerc" in *Recueil Général des Fabliaux*, ed. Montaiglon et Raynaud, 6 vols. (Paris, 1883), V, 110.

<sup>6</sup>Damian, Abbot of Tunghland, whom Dunbar represents as falling "in a myre, up to the ene" after his unsuccessful flight from the battlements of Stirling Castle.

<sup>7</sup>W.M. Hart, *op. cit.*, p. 369.

<sup>8</sup>Charles Muscatine, "The Canterbury Tales: Style of the Man and Style of the Work," in *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, ed. D.S. Brewer (London, 1966), p. 99.

<sup>9</sup>Compare also the "Reeve's Tale," lines 4218-20.

<sup>10</sup>C.W. Lewis, *English Literature of the Sixteenth Century excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), p. 106.