

Genre in Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird*

Sanne de Laat

S. Chardonens

Radboud University Nijmegen

ENGELSE TAAL EN CULTUUR

Teachers who will receive this document: S. Chardonnens & Linne R. Mooney

Title of document: Genre in John Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird*

Name of course: BA Thesis

Date of submission: 11 June 2017

The work submitted here is the sole responsibility of the undersigned, who has neither committed plagiarism nor colluded in its production.

Signed

Name of student: Sanne de Laat

Student number: s4330145

Abstract

The Churl and the Bird is definitely not John Lydgate's best known text. While the text is not well-known, it remains an intricate piece of writing, especially since it has not been researched extensively. Its genre has not been researched yet, but genre in itself is a difficult subject in the Middle Ages. This thesis will focus on genre in *The Churl and the Bird*, analysing the text to see if it can be classified as a beast fable, fabliau, or *exemplum*, or if it fits neither of these genres. Several works from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* will be analysed as well in order to establish the characteristics of those genres.

Keywords: John Lydgate, *The Churl and the Bird*, Chaucer, beast fable, fabliau, *exemplum*, genres, medieval genre theory

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Chapter 1: Beast Fable	8
The Nun's Priest's Tale as a beast fable	8
The Churl and the Bird as a beast fable	11
Chapter 2: Fabliaux	17
The Summoner's Tale as a fabliau	19
The Churl and the Bird as a fabliau	21
Chapter 3: Exemplum.....	25
The Pardoner's Tale as an exemplum.....	26
The Churl and the Bird as an exemplum	29
Conclusion.....	32
Bibliography.....	35
Primary Sources.....	35
Secondary sources	35
Appendix 1: The Churl and the Bird.....	38
Appendix 2: Stearns Schenck's "Functions of the Fabliau"	48

Introduction

The Middle Ages are still a well of knowledge for those interested in the age, and often new texts are found which provide new insights into modern views on the time period. Genre is one of those modern views that might need reconsidering after looking at a medieval text in depth, which is something that will feature heavily throughout this thesis. The medieval text of which the genre will be analysed here is John Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird*, which is not a popular text anymore, but used to be widely read.

The Churl and the Bird deals with the story of a Churl and a Bird, as the title suggests. The Churl catches the Bird because he loves her songs, but the Bird does not sing in captivity. She wants to be set free, but the Churl does not want to let her go, afraid that she will not sing for him anymore. Finally, the Bird offers the Churl three wisdoms if he sets her free, and after threatening to cook her instead (and the Bird replying that she is very small and would not yield much food), he sets her free. The Bird provides her three wisdoms: do not believe anything you hear, do not covet what you cannot have, and do not cry over spilt milk. When she has told the Churl the three wisdoms, she starts talking about the stone in her entrails that should give the owner all kinds of powers, and the Churl immediately believes her. He wants to own the stone and cries that he should never have let her go, and that he has now lost this valuable item. The Bird scoffs that he is a fool, because he just believed her on her word without considering the truth value of her speech, then wants to have the stone and cries over what he cannot have. In the end, the Churl has not learned the Bird's wisdoms at all.

John Lydgate lived from approximately 1370 to 1451, and he wrote and translated many texts during his life. Some of his popular work includes the *Book of Troy* and *Fall of Princes*, but *The Churl and the Bird* has remained out of sight. While the text has seen many copies and reprints in the past (fifteen manuscripts from before 1536 are listed in the *Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, and it was printed seven times (Simpson 134)), research on

the text is virtually non-existent. This might have something to do with the fact that the previous edition of this text, a facsimile, was published in 1906 by Francis Jenkinson and was not easy to obtain. There were only 250 copies of the book and there is no possibility of any reprints, as explained in the note by P. Dujardin at the beginning of the edition. Previous research on John Lydgate has skimmed over the man at worst, and at best it discusses a few texts he has written. James Simpson is one of the few researchers who dipped their toes into interacting with the text, and he has certainly been the only one to provide a summary of previous research on the text. However, previous research on the text has mainly dealt with its source (“The source of John Lydgate’s *The Churl and the Bird*” by Neil Cartlidge), or it only provides a few pages on the topic, such as in Dorothy Yamamoto’s *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* and in Derek Pearsall’s *John Lydgate*. Helen Barr has more to contribute about the text itself, but she does not deal with the question of genre in *The Churl and the Bird*. The version of *The Churl and the Bird* used for this thesis is the recently transcribed edition by Professor Linne R. Mooney (University of York). This edition is still unpublished, but she does use it in a classroom setting. While *The Churl and the Bird* might not be widely available, it is an enjoyable and intricate piece of writing sadly lacking scholarship. The fact that there is little to no research on the topic means that there is a relatively blank slate when it comes to answering any questions about the text.

Unlike *The Churl and the Bird*, Chaucer’s work has always been of interest to researchers, and this research is easily available. Trying to list previous research on his work could form a thesis of its own, and since this thesis focuses specifically on the text by Lydgate and its genre, previous research on Chaucer will not be mentioned. In this context, Chaucer and his work are used as a more researched backdrop for Lydgate’s *The Churl and the Bird*, especially because genre theory in the Middle Ages is intricate as it is, and most genres are hardly well-defined. Genre theory is one of the important factors in this thesis. Unfortunately,

genre theory in the Middle Ages is virtually non-existent, since there were only three actual genres in the Middle Ages: *historia*, *argumentum*, and *fabula*, which will be further discussed in the conclusion.

The few texts that mention *The Churl and the Bird* do not go into its genre, while this is one of the most complex points of the text. Simpson says its genre is the fable (142), but he mainly uses it to show that there is no underlying meaning in the poem. In order to demonstrate its appropriateness as a genre, the fable should be further defined. While the beast fable is a possible genre for the text, this genre alone does not lend itself well to a complete thesis, and so the fabliau and *exemplum* are examined as well. Not only will this thesis deal with the aforementioned genres, it will also argue, by examining the beast fable, fabliau, and *exemplum* within the context of *The Churl and the Bird*, that genre was perceived differently in the Middle Ages. Wim Tigges' proposed idea of mixed genres, as mentioned in his article about *The Fox and the Wolf*, serves as a starting point for this theory. Every chapter deals with one of Chaucer's texts, which is analysed using secondary literature on the genre in question, and which is then applied to *The Churl and the Bird*. The conclusion features additional information on medieval genres and how they compare to our modern views of genre.

The relevance of this research is the contribution of additional research for a text that has barely been researched before, but it also paints a clearer picture of the boundaries of genre in the Middle Ages. It also deals with the issue if medieval texts should be assigned a modern genre such as beast fable, fabliau, or *exemplum*, especially because neither of those genres fit, and the Middle Ages only dealt with three 'genres', *historia*, *argumentum*, and *fabula*.

Chapter 1: Beast Fable

When reading *The Churl and the Bird* by John Lydgate, the first thought is often that the story is remarkably like a beast fable. Upon closer inspection, however, one might start to doubt this. While the story includes characteristics clearly alluding to the genre, it does not fully work. However, the beast fable is the most obvious choice for the story since *The Churl and the Bird* fulfils most of the requirements for the genre. As explained in the introduction, the characteristics of the genre are introduced alongside one of Chaucer's texts, the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, which is the best known example of the genre, instead of providing its definition. After the exploration of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, *The Churl and the Bird* is analysed.

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* as a beast fable

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is the clearest example of the beast fable written by Chaucer, and thus the characteristics of the beast fable are clarified with the help of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* does make most sense. Helen Cooper calls it “a beast-fable [...], a story with a moral in which the animals stand in some kind of exemplary relationship to humans” (340) in her chapter on the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Beast fables are relatively short and easy to understand. The precursors to the medieval genre, Aesop's fables, were usually between ten and twenty lines, with twenty lines being absurdly long. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is definitely longer than that with its 626 lines, but one might argue that the actual beast fable starts around in the middle of the tale (line VII.3167), if the discussion between Chauntecleer and Pertelote about Chauntecleer's dream is treated as an introduction to the main story.

The story of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is simple and straight-forward, dealing with the story of the cock Chauntecleer. Chauntecleer dreams of an attack from a beast looking remarkably like a fox, and discusses this with Pertelote, eventually deciding to ignore the

dream. These 350 lines are a prediction forming the introduction to the actual story, which starts with a fox, Russell, spying on the hens. When Chauntecleer spots the fox, he immediately wants to flee. However, the fox compliments the cock's crowing to make him stay and asks him to sing for the fox, which he does. Chauntecleer "stood hye upon his toos,/Strecchyng his nekke, and heeld his eyen cloos" (VII.3331-2). Russell then grabs Chauntecleer by the neck with his teeth, and runs off. Everyone runs after Russell, including the widow, her daughters, and the farm animals, and Chauntecleer coaxes the fox into yelling something, resulting in Chauntecleer's freedom. The fox tries to trick Chauntecleer again, but Chauntecleer does not fall for it anymore. The final moral is "Lo, swich it is for to be recchelees/And necligent, and truste on flaterye" (VII.3436-7).

The first and most straightforward characteristic of the beast fable is the moral. This may sound plain, but as far as definitions of the beast fable go, scholars at least agree that a fable should have a moral. The moral can be either at the beginning, called the promythium, or at the end of the story, the epimythium – or in both positions. The traditional or classic form of the fable includes both the story and a separate moral (Mann 29). In the case of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, there is no separation of the moral and the story. Instead, Chaucer has the Nun's Priest simply end his story with the moral. Here, the moral takes the form of an epimythium.

The second characteristic of the beast fable are animals as the main characters. It is one of the distinctive characteristics, and it is also one that is easily identified. The characters with an active role in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* are all animals: the cock Chauntecleer, the hen Pertelote, and the fox Russell. However, there is more to it than just animals featuring as characters in the story. One of the other characteristics of an animal fable, which also hinges on animals being the main characters, is animals representing a human characteristic. As Solopova says: "the characteristics of animals are given human dimension and used for

entertainment, parody, satire, and instruction” (154), which Mann adds to by saying that the animals “lack human complexity” (30). Chauntecleer represents pride (which is also how the flattery gets to him so easily) and the fox is sly (VII.3215), but none of them are more complex than that. Rather, they only possess one single human characteristic.

The beast fable should also exclude references to specific time periods (Mann 18-9). In other words, there should be no mention of the story being set in a specific year. While the *Nun's Priest's Tale* does mention that the story with the fox is set on a specific day, namely “syn March [was gon], thritty dayes and two” (VII.3190), it does not say in which year, and throughout the tale, there is no clear era or century as its setting. It is rather timeless.

Mann mentions another thought-provoking point in her book, which is the fact that animals are not supposed to learn in fables. She posits that if an animal learns “the lesson is only a retrospective summation of the preceding narrative episode”, and that it is not meant for future improvement, because the animals not learning provides a stronger moral for the tale (36-7). However, this condition is not met in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. In this case, Chauntecleer *does* learn from his mistakes, but the moral still reflects on the tale. He does not fall for the fox's tricks again, and he also learns that dreams could be predicting the future. The question remains if the fox learns from his mistake, but that is not answered in the tale.

One of the final characteristics Mann mentions has to do with words in the fable. As has already been established, the fox manages to trick Chauntecleer into trusting him and closing his eyes to sing, which the fox uses to grab Chauntecleer. Chauntecleer later uses a similar method: he persuades the fox to yell, and when the fox opens his mouth he escapes. Both of these instances are characters trusting the words of the other, about which Mann says that “only fools place any trust in words, whether they take the form of flattery, boasts, threats, promises, or arguments” (41). This means that both Chauntecleer *and* the fox are painted as the fools in this tale.

In conclusion, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* scores high as a beast fable: it includes animals as main characters, features a moral, and while the date is known, there is no year mentioned, so the setting is still not historical. However, Chauntecleer does learn from his mistakes, which is one of the only non-fitting features. Now that the features of the beast fable are determined, those will be applied to *The Churl and the Bird* to see if that is a beast fable as well.

The Churl and the Bird as a beast fable

The story of the Churl and the Bird deals with the appearance of morals, which is the first characteristic of the beast fable. There are even three morals, and there is even a fourth in the last lines in the *envoy*, the actual moral of the story. In Lydgate's other fables, he starts by introducing a summary of the moral of the story, following the classic fable style (Wheatley 136). In *The Churl and the Bird*, the moral becomes gradually clear through the three wisdoms given by the Bird, which are 'think before assuming something for truth', 'do not covet what you cannot have', and 'never cry over spilt milk'. When the Bird provides the Churl with three wisdoms, the Churl elects to ignore them and then immediately proves this by not using the wisdoms. "O dull chorle! wysdoms forto lere/That I the taught, all ys left behynde,/Rasyd away and clene out of thy mynde", is what the Bird says – the lessons (the morals) are lost on the Churl (Lydgate 299-301). In the final moral of the story, the three wisdoms are once again repeated and slightly summarized compared to the Bird's long-winded versions. However, Lydgate also includes a second stanza in which he introduces a moral centred around freedom, which was important to the Bird:

"A chylde byrde and a knaves wife

Have oft sythes gret sorow and myschaunce.

Who hathe fredom hath suffisaunce;

Bettyr ys fredom with lytyll in gladnes

Than to be thrall with all worldly ryches.” (Lydgate 374-8)

So he says that it is better to have freedom and be unhappy than be a slave and be showered in riches. It remains unclear if this should be treated as a moral to the story or if it is just a piece of wisdom Lydgate wants to pass on: it is not phrased like the main morals, but rather explains why the Bird wants to be free in the story. The introduction of these lines is paired with the word “proverbe” (Lydgate 372), so it might just be a proverb instead of an actual fully-fledged additional moral to the story. However, there is definitely a moral included in the story, meaning that this is a characteristic in favour of *The Churl and the Bird* being a beast fable.

A second characteristic of the beast fable is the use of animals as main characters. In *The Churl and the Bird*, the Bird is one of the two main characters: she is the one that is caught, and she is the one providing the wisdoms. However, the Churl is human. Lydgate could have done this on purpose, to have the Churl be a human interacting with a Bird, but there is no proof for this. The text is analysed under the assumption that the Churl just is a human, and that there is no motivation behind this character. The Churl is therefore a human with human characteristics and human complexity – even though this is not very clear in the story itself, as the Churl is rather plain, and is even called “a verrey naturall foole” by the Bird (Lydgate 225).

While not all main characters are animals in *The Churl and the Bird*, there is also another issue. As mentioned in the paragraphs on the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, the animals should not have human complexity. However, the Churl definitely lacks human complexity in the story: he is dull and does not learn the morals the Bird teaches him. The Bird, on the other hand, is rather smart and self-aware. The characterisation of the Bird and the Churl as beast

versus human, can easily be viewed as a role reversal: the Bird is superior to the Churl, and it is more human than the Churl. As most humans view themselves as more intelligent than animals, this is a startling idea: the animal attempts to teach the human but the human does not learn. Considering the idea of the animals taking on human characteristics but not human complexity in this light, one might say that the Bird does not function as an animal in this story, as she possesses both human complexity and human characteristics, while the Churl is behaving like an animal, with only one human characteristic being highlighted: his dumb-wittedness. So while *The Churl and the Bird* might have an animal as a main character, it does not fully fulfil either of the two characteristics mentioned in the previous two paragraphs, especially if we consider the Churl as behaving like an animal and the Bird being a human.

Fables and beast fables are also known for their “brevity and simplicity” (Wheatley 100). If there is one thing that we can easily use to disprove that *The Churl and the Bird* is a fable, it is its length. *The Churl and the Bird* is 386 lines long, which is not short at all by fable standards. Even though only roughly 322 lines are the actual story – since the first 42 lines are introduction, and the final 22 lines are the moral of the story and a *verba translatoris*. However, compared to the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, John Lydgate’s story is not long: *The Churl and the Bird* is half the length of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*.

Not only is *The Churl and the Bird* relatively long, the story is also far from simple. Even if there are just two characters, there are many details in the story, such as the description of the Churl’s garden (twelve lines, lines 45-56) and the description of the Bird and her song (eighteen lines, lines 58-75). Also, the Bird’s speeches are rather elaborate – her words account for 243 out of 386 lines, which is more than half of the poem. This line count includes the introduction and the final moral of the story. In addition to the long descriptions and the Bird’s previously mentioned long-windedness. As mentioned, the story itself also has multiple layers. The Bird deceives the Churl in order to prove her right – the Churl did not

remember her wisdoms. The simplest form of the tale (the most fable-like) would just have been the Bird tricking the Churl into thinking that there was a precious stone in her entrails. The wisdoms are the moral and in a true fable, they would have been mentioned in the pro- and/or epimythium, and not necessarily in the story itself. So, the complexity and length of *The Churl and the Bird* point towards the story not being a fable.

Another characteristic of the beast fable is that there is no specific era or time in which the story is set. This is something *The Churl and the Bird* does adhere to: there is no mention of a specific time in which the story is set. The actual story starts with “Whylom ther was in a small vylage” (Lydgate 43), meaning “Once there was a small village”. This does not set a historical time in which the story takes place. Lydgate goes one step further, even, and also excludes a specific place. It is just a small village, but remains unnamed. Even though the garden is well-described, it is possibly something Lydgate created himself. So, *The Churl and the Bird* does at least fulfil the characteristic of being timeless.

Animals not learning from their mistakes was, as mentioned before, another characteristic of the beast fable. As established above, the Churl behaves more like the animal than the Bird does, and the Churl definitely does not learn from the wisdoms the Bird teaches him. This results in him making the mistake of thinking that the jewel in the Bird’s entrails is really there, leading to the Bird telling him that he has forgotten the morals, and when the story ends, the moral is clear. The fact that it is the *Churl* who does not learn the wisdoms and not the Bird does support the idea that the Churl is the animal in this story rather than the Bird. Moreover, the Churl not learning might help the moral along, just like Mann says in the quote. If he had learned the wisdoms, the outcome would not have worked quite so well. So, the Churl, as the animal, does not learn the moral, and therefore ticks another box in favour of the beast fable.

The Churl simply assuming that the jewel the Bird tells him about is real is not only a moral of the story, but also one of the characteristics of the beast fable. As mentioned before, one of the characteristics of a beast fable is that fools trust words, as Mann says. This characteristic is very prevalent in *The Churl and the Bird*. The Churl is the fool who trusts words, and he even makes this mistake several times. The first time is when the Bird asks to be set free, otherwise she cannot sing. The Churl gives her two options (sing or die) but the Bird uses reason to talk to him, and offers him three wisdoms as a reward for setting her free. She says then: “Trust me well, I shall the nat deceve” (Lydgate 162), and when the Churl asks for the wisdoms first, she says he can trust her. The Bird makes clear that she will not be caught again – “And now that I soche daung[ers] am scapyd,/I wyll be ware, and afore provide,/That of no fowler I wyll no more be japyd” (Lydgate 190-2). So the Churl cannot catch her again, and the Bird teaches him the wisdoms. Even though there is no guarantee for the Churl that he would even get his wisdoms, he lets her go. When she talks about the stone in her entrails, however, she deceives him, and the Churl believes her, to which she says: “Taught I the nat thys wysdom in sentence:/To every tale brought to the of new/Nat hastyly to yeve therto credence” (Lydgate 302-4). So while the Bird treats it as one of the wisdoms the Churl disobeyed, it can also be viewed as fitting into one of the characteristics of the beast fable.

Before moving on to the conclusion to this chapter, it should be noted that John Lydgate has translated and adapted several fables in his life. His fables always open with a summary of the moral, but he does not do this in *The Churl and the Bird*, as mentioned before. According to Wheatley, Lydgate was “unwilling to give multiple independent meanings to a fable character” (Wheatley 139), so both the Bird and the Churl are rather out of character for the fables written or adapted by Lydgate. If “Lydgate understood the curricular fable tradition” (Wheatley 147), then why does *The Churl and the Bird* not fit in

with the other fables he has written? This makes for an intriguing question on which an entire thesis could be written, but unfortunately, there is no real answer to this question as of yet.

So, in conclusion, there are several reasons why *The Churl and the Bird* could be a beast fable. It features the moral (multiple morals), there is no reference to a specific time or period in the story, and the animal (the Churl, in this case) does not learn the moral in the story itself. Some of the characteristics do not fully fit in with the story, such as animals being the main characters, animals having human characteristics but not human complexity, and the story being short and simple. Most of these characteristics are partially met but not completely; the story includes some of it but not everything. Therefore the conclusion is that *The Churl and the Bird* is not a fully-fledged beast fable, but it might be one of the best fits, as will be demonstrated in the next chapters on the genres of *fabliaux* and *exemplum*.

Chapter 2: Fabliaux

The second genre up for discussion is the fabliaux. This Old-French genre has been brought back to life by Chaucer – and that is one of the few reasons why we know about this genre in English. The standard definition of the genre is that it is a short, narrative poem dealing with the ‘lower’ humour (that being faeces, sex, and food as the main topics). Solopova adds to this basic definition that they were comic and “often set in a middle-class setting” (155), while Tony Davenport says that the stories feature both middle and lower class characters and that fabliaux often have a simple plot (154). According to Muscatine, approximately “two-thirds of the fabliaux contain some sort of moral or proverbial setting” and most of these morals or wisdoms are “wisdoms of practical experience, mingling securities of profit and pleasure with a shrewd and ironic awareness of the uncertainty of almost everything” (*Medieval Literature* 167; 168). Brewer points out that while the base definition of the fabliaux is as mentioned above, Chaucer played with the set definitions of the genre. For instance, he says that “the traditional fabliaux are anti-feminist and anti-clerical; Chaucer’s are not” (Brewer 261), even though some of Chaucer’s fabliaux are easily read as anti-clerical, which will be addressed in the section on the *Summoner’s Tale*. Brewer is also the one to point out that “Chaucer’s fabliaux are the grandchildren of the originals, and must be expected to differ” (248).

Still, determining if a story is a fabliau on the basis of the previously mentioned characteristics remains difficult considering the fact that both the beast fable and the *exemplum* share a considerable amount of characteristics with the above-mentioned definition of the fabliau. In addition to those characteristics, Stearns Schenck’s approach to dissecting the fabliaux is followed, too. In her paper, she categorises nine different basic functions “which encapsulate all of the significant action” (Stearns Schenck 42). Her approach is based on the corpus set up by Bédier and Nykrog, and includes 165 Old French fabliaux, which are

analysed to see which characteristics are most often present in the fabliau (Stearns Schenck 17). Appendix 2 includes a scan of her original figure, which is also added below.

F-1	<i>Arrival</i> a arriving b returning
F-2	<i>Departure</i> a departing b going on errand
F-3	<i>Interrogation</i> a questioning/challenging b propositioning/offering c requesting/summoning
F-4	<i>Communication</i> a informing/answering b proclaiming c giving/receiving object
F-5	<i>Deception</i> a lying/fabricating a story b hiding c disguising/substituting d cheating e playing on words/riddling f using magic
F-6	<i>Misdeed</i> a disobeying b attempting/committing adultery c seducing d insulting/embarrassing e stealing f cheating g tricking h assaulting
F-7	<i>Recognition</i>
F-8	<i>Retaliation</i>
F-9	<i>Resolution</i>

Fig. 1. The Functions of the Fabliau (Stearns Schenck 40)

The different main categories are “arrival F-1, departure F-2, interrogation F-3, communication F-4, deception F-5, misdeed F-6, recognition F-7, retaliation F-8, and resolution F-9” (Stearns Schenck 42). F-1 and F-2 can occur in different orders or multiple times throughout the tale, F-6 always precedes F-8, and the order F-3 through to F-9 is ideal but in reality rarely seen. The fabliaux should always include the deception (F-5) and the misdeed (F-6). Some functions have different forms in which they can occur, as seen above.

So, instead of basing the analysis of Chaucer’s *Summoner’s Tale* and Lydgate’s *The Churl and the Bird* on just the standard characteristics, it will also feature Stearns Schenck’s functions of the fabliau to determine whether or not it is a fabliau.

The *Summoner’s Tale* as a fabliau

Chaucer’s *Summoner’s Tale* is a reply to the *Friar’s Tale*, the tale before it. In the *Friar’s Tale*, the Friar talks about a naive summoner, and the Summoner feels the need to retaliate in the *Summoner’s Tale*, which deals with a greedy and easily angered friar. This can easily be read as being anti-clerical; Chaucer pointing out how greedy friars are. The plot of the tale is rather simple: the friar, John, tries to get the ill man, Thomas, to give him money. Thomas doesn’t comply easily, and instead complains about how he has not been cured yet, and that he is unsure if he should even give the friars anything as so far, it has not helped. Finally, Thomas decides to give friar John a gift if he promises to share it with the other friars. Friar John accepts that and then Thomas farts – which is his gift to John. The friar is angry because he cannot share the fart, but luckily this is solved with a twelve-spoke wheel in the end. This proves that the tale is a narrative, dealing with the friar’s practises and Thomas’ reply to that. The appearance of a fart as a primary theme in the story speaks of the lower humour which is one of the characteristics, but would the story still qualify as a fabliau after looking at Stearns Schenck’s functions?

The first lines of the *Summoner's Tale* (III.1709-60) form an introduction for the Summoner's friar, after which the actual Friar interrupts to call the Summoner a liar. The Host has to step in for the Summoner to continue (or actually start) his tale (III.1961-4). At the start of the tale, friar John just arrives at Thomas' house, a house where he thinks he can get more "than in an hundred placis" (III.1767). Arrival is, according to Stearns Schenck, one of the functions of the fabliau, so F-1 has already been in action. Now, moving on, friar John talks about a lot but much of it is meaningless. Some of his lines can be interpreted as being interrogation (F-3) or communication (F-4), such as lines III.1954-65, where he tries to convince Thomas to give him everything, which can be taken as an offer to pray for Thomas, or a proclamation of why Thomas is not yet healed.

From line 2099 onward, friar John tries to convince Thomas to give him "thanne of thy gold" to supposedly save the friars (III.2099). Thomas is angry at that, and this is where he devises a master plan to trick the friar. He says that "somewhat shal I yive/Unto youre hooly covent whil I lyve" (III.2129-30). This is the deception, F-5: Thomas uses his words to set the friar up for the main trick. Stearns Schenck says that "the duped person is fed unreliable information which he accepts for one reason or another" (Stearns Schenck 51), and in this case the friar accepts because he wants the reward, thinking it is going to be gold. Even when Thomas continues and says that the friar should "put in thyn hand down by my bak,/[...] and grope wel hihynde. Bynethe my buttoke there shaltow fynde/A thing that I have hyd in pryvetee" (III.2140-3), the friar does not falter. It is only when Thomas farts on the friar (the misdeed, F-6) that friar John recognises (F-7) that he is being tricked. He then threatens to retaliate (F-8; "Thou shalt abyge this fart, if that I may!" (III.2155)), but does not actually fulfil this threat. The fact that the friar goes to a lord to solve the 'riddle with the fart', might either be a resolution (F-9), since it tries to solve the conflict, or it might be the friar being stupid

and trying to solve the issue with the division of the fart amongst twelve friars (which the lord's servant does: use a twelve-spoke wheel to divide the fart).

So, the *Summoner's Tale* deals at least with arrival (F-1), deception (F-5), misdeed (F-6), and recognition (F-7). There is a threat of retaliation (F-8) and maybe even a hint of resolution (F-9), and the division between interrogation and communication (F-3 and F-4) is slightly unclear but both could be present. Considering the aforementioned idea that there should be at least deception and a misdeed in a fabliau, the *Summoner's Tale* qualifies as a fabliau.

The Churl and the Bird as a fabliau

The Churl and the Bird is an entirely different case. The story is once again a narrative (telling the story of the Churl and the Bird) but it is neither short nor particularly humorous, and even if it could be viewed as humorous, the base humour most often associated with fabliaux is definitely absent in *The Churl and the Bird*. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the low humour would include faeces, sex, and food (and sometimes money), but none of these topics is discussed in *The Churl and Bird*. As opposed to the *Summoner's Tale*, this tale does have a moral (three even, as discussed in the previous chapter on beast fables), and so it is part of the two-thirds of the fabliaux that has a moral or a proverbial setting, as Muscatine said. The plot to the story is rather simple – the Bird is caught by the Churl and offers the Churl three wisdoms in exchange for her freedom, and then she uses those a trick prove that the Churl has not learned anything at all –, and the Churl can be viewed as a lower-class character in a middle- or lower-class setting, as Solopova and Davenport suggest is the case in fabliaux.

Like with the *Summoner's Tale*, the total amount of functions of the fabliau that can be attributed to *The Churl and the Bird* is analysed to determine if the story functions as a

fabliau. Instead of discussing how many of Stearns Schenck's functions are included in the tale, they will be pointed out as they happen in the story. As mentioned in the discussion of the *Summoner's Tale* and in the introduction to this chapter, the order (F-1 through to F-9) is not a set order, with the only rule being that misdeed (F-6) has to come before retaliation (F-8).

The first 76 lines can be seen as a general introduction without any of the previously mentioned fabliau characteristics or functions. Line 77, however, might be viewed as an arrival (F-1) of sorts. The line reads "The byrd was trappyd and caute with a pentere", and while the Bird does not physically arrive, it is her first appearance in the story. However, this take on the 'arrival' is rather far-fetched, and it is unclear if this would be well-sustained evidence for the fact that *The Churl and the Bird* is a fabliau.

Moving on to the first time that the Bird is talking is more promising. While the distinction between interrogation (F-3) and communication (F-4) is not always clear, the bird talks for 55 lines (lines 85-140) about how she wants to be free, and it might be seen as a request to be set free, which is, in Stearns Schenck's table, is F-3c. Her refusal to sing is a way of bargaining for her freedom, and even though her request is not the "specific demand for help in the form of food, money, or lodging" that Stearns Schenck mentions in her description of the request, it is a "candid request [...] for cooperation" in granting the freedom the Bird deserves (Stearns Schenck 48). In reply, the Churl answers the Bird's question (F-4a) in lines 141-7, and proposes to eat her instead. Stearns Schenck mention that "the most common form of communication, F-4a, answer a question or offers unsolicited information" (48). The Bird's request for freedom is rejected by the Churl, but instead he offers to eat her. So rather than just answering, he also proposes a counter to the Bird's offer.

What happens after is the start of the set-up of the actual trick. The Bird, whose request for freedom has been rejected, and who is now not in the best of positions, says that

“Yef I be rostyde other bake in paste,/Thow shalt of me have a full small repaste” (Lydgate 151-2). She means to say that he will not enjoy it very much, and instead offers the Churl “thre gret wysdoms” (159) if he lets her go. This counteroffer can once more be seen as the fabliau function of interrogation (F-3), but instead of her previous request, this is more of an offering (F-3b) of her wisdoms in the hopes to entice the Churl to granting her request this time around. The Churl replies “tell on, anone let se” (164), which is a proclamation (F-4b) and also proves that he does not trust the Bird just yet. The Bird then says that it does not work that way, and that she does not mean to betray the Churl but she needs to be free to teach him (165-6). The Churl says that he will set her free, which he does. This conversation can once more be seen as F-4 following F-3, and it is clear that while the Bird keeps proposing or interrogating, the Churl only communicates back, never actually initiating any ideas. All he does is reply to the Bird.

Now that the Bird is set free, she flies away from the cage, and this is a departure, F-2. Her being freed leads to a long monologue about her freedom, but she also offers the three wisdoms she promised. From line 173 onwards she first talks about her freedom, and starting at line 195, she finally provides the Churl with the wisdoms she promised, which takes until line 217, where she starts singing about how glad she is to have escaped. Her whole speech can be viewed as an answer to the Churl’s request for information even though she offered it herself, so this is F-4a once more. The story up until this point has been a setup for the Churl being tricked or being lied to, showing that he really does not learn the three wisdoms the Bird offered.

In line 225 the Bird concludes that the Churl was “a verrey naturall foole” because he cannot get the jewel inside of her body since he has let her go. This is clearly a trick. The reader already knows that the Bird does not have a jewel inside her body and is thus lying or fabricating a story (deception, F-5a), because she told the Churl that cooking her would “full

small repaste” (Lydgate 152) – it would be unsatisfying. However, the Churl has a completely different reaction to the Bird telling him that there is a jewel inside of her body. He does not apply her wisdoms and just assumes that what she tells him is the truth, leading to him being tricked, which is misdeed F-6g. Afterwards, the Bird even insults him (F-6d) with the words “O dull chorle! wysdoms forto lere/That I the taught, all ys left behynde,/Rasyd away and clene out of thy mynde” (299-301). The fact that the Bird points out that she has tricked him might lead to recognition on the side of the Churl (F-7), but he is not given any time to process the Bird’s misdeed as the tale ends with the Bird talking about him being tricked and his stupidity (Lydgate 302-61). Finally, she says that she is leaving the Churl on his own, implying another departure, which is F-2 (Lydgate 362-4).

In conclusion, the different functions of the fabliau are definitely present in *The Churl and the Bird*. While it does not completely follow the order set by Stearns Schenck, it does include both the deception and the misdeed, which were the most important functions. There are several instances of interrogation and communication, and there might also be an attempt at recognition although not made explicit. There are also instances of departure and maybe even arrival. By just looking at Stearns Schenck’s functions of the fable, this story might very well be called a fabliau. However, the best-known characteristics of fabliaux (the ribald humour), and the themes sex and money and other lower humour are conspicuously absent from this story. So while this text might be a fabliau with regards to Stearns Schenck’s functions, it is still not a fully-fledged fabliau. The beast fable is a better fit for *The Churl and the Bird*, still, and in the next chapter the *exemplum* is discussed as a possible genre.

Chapter 3: *Exemplum*

The third genre to be discussed in the light of *The Churl and the Bird* is the *exemplum*. While there are some varying and often vague definitions of this genre, it is mostly used as an umbrella term incorporating several other genres such as the fable and the fabliau. The *exemplum* is thus more than a simple genre.

Before analysing Chaucer and *The Churl and the Bird*, two definitions will be introduced: one by Mosher and one by Scanlon. Mosher simply defines the *exemplum* as “a short narrative used to illustrate or confirm a general statement” (Mosher 1). He also points out that critics have widely varied definitions of the *exemplum*, notably on the topic of the inclusion of other genres such as the fable, bestiary material and parables. What they do agree on, however, is the “narrative element” of *exempla* (Mosher 2). According to him, it shows that the term ‘example’ is generally applied to “figures of speech and analogies, even after the *exemplum* had become a well-defined form in religious and didactic literature. It is quite likely that some writers considered any illustration whatever an *exemplum*” (Mosher 5). According to him, the *exemplum* is always *implying* a moral, even though it does not necessarily have to be explicitly stated.

Scanlon provides a slightly different definition in his work *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*. Scanlon starts with Mosher’s basic definition coined in 1911, and says that the description is still wide-spread. The definition in question is already provided in the previous paragraph. However, Scanlon immediately moves on to the problems it poses. He says that “the *exemplum*’s function is entirely determined by an external “general principle” whose own discursive is assumed to be immediately obvious and unproblematic” (Scanlon 4), implying that this is not the case. Scanlon continues by saying that there are two types of *exemplum*: the public (or classical) *exemplum* and the sermon *exemplum*. The use of the latter and its themes are clear from the

term itself: they are used in sermons. The public *exemplum*, according to Scanlon, “addresses issues of lay authority”, “had a propensity towards evil example, toward narratives which demonstrate the efficacy of their *sententiae* by enacting violations of them”, and the authority behind the tale is the monarch rather than the Church (81). Scanlon tries to solve the problems in Mosher’s simple definition by providing these two categories which are more clearly defined than the *exemplum* on its own.

Now that there are two different definitions introduced, Chaucer’s story can be analysed. Only one text is continually named as the tale which has most in common with the *exemplum*: the *Pardoner’s Tale*. This is the story in which the Pardoner tells the story of three young rioters in Flanders who go on a quest to kill Death, and are all killed by each other over a heap of money. The one question that still needs answering is how the *Pardoner’s Tale* is an *exemplum* before going to examine how and if *The Churl and the Bird* is an *exemplum*.

The *Pardoner’s Tale* as an exemplum

Looking at the previously provided definitions, the *Pardoner’s Tale* would only meet a few of the criteria of the *exemplum*. The narrative is not short – ignoring the Pardoner’s preaching at the beginning and the end, the actual story is approximately 230 lines (lines VI.661-888), which does not qualify as short, exactly. It is a story, so that is something the *Pardoner’s Tale* has in common with the *exemplum*. There is a moral to this story, namely *Radix malorum est Cupiditas* (“Greed is the root of all evil”) which is also clearly exemplified in the story. In order to determine more characteristics and define the genre further, previous research is included to see what the defining characteristics of *exemplum* are, and how the *Pardoner’s Tale* fits this genre.

The *Pardoner’s Tale* does not actually function as an *exemplum* until line VI.660. While the Pardoner starts introducing the setting of his story right at the beginning (“In

Flaundes whilom was a compaignye/Of Yonge folk that haunteden folye...” (VI.463-4)), he then goes on to preach the sin of gluttony first, and in line VI.660, he says that he is going to “telle forth my tale”. He then simply continues with “Thise riotoures thre of whiche I telle”, assuming that everyone still knows that he has already introduced them. Apparently, this is not the case. In their introduction to the *Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale*, Coghill and Tolkien say that, at this line, “his congregation finds itself unexpectedly *in medias res*, like a man waking up in the middle of the sermon, not quite sure how much he has missed, yet feeling with some relief that he can begin here” (Coghill & Tolkien 31). The Pardoner ends his story with another sermon to ensure everyone understood the moral of the story.

According to Scanlon, lines VI.435-8 of the *Pardoner’s Tale* “repeat almost verbatim one of the fundamental claims of clerical commentary on the sermon *exemplum*, namely, that narrative is a subordinate form characteristic of lay culture and open to clerical exploitation” (194). The lines in question imply that old stories can be used to teach ignorant people important lessons. The implication that this concerns religious lessons, and that it is exploited by clerical people, is clarified by means of the Pardoner’s example: he preaches using a story he moulds to his own interest.

One of the reasons why the *Pardoner’s Tale* is so easily identified as an *exemplum* is because the other *exempla* featured in the tale by providing the examples of Lot (VI.485-7), Herod (VI. 488-91), Seneca (VI.492-6) and Adam and Eve (VI. 505-11). So the tale starts off with a few *exempla* already, which provides a rational and logical explanation for assuming the *Pardoner’s Tale* is the same genre.

The general statement which will be proven is *Radix malorum est cupiditas* (“Greed is the root of all evil”). This is exactly what the Pardoner preaches, and he introduces this statement in his Prologue, addressing his audience as follows: “My theme is alwey oon, and evere was –/*Radix malorum est Cupiditas*” (VI.333-4). One of the characteristics of the

exemplum is that “it will have stated in plain terms the general truth which it intended to demonstrate even before the narrative has begun” (Burrow 92). About the accompanying tale Scanlon says that “the *exemplum* illustrates a moral because what it recounts is the enactment of that moral. The moral does not simply gloss the narrative” (Scanlon 33-4). Burrow simply says that “the narrative itself should be pointed accordingly” (Burrow 92). The Pardoner’s story is entirely steered towards proving that Greed is indeed the root of all evil. The fact that the three rioters kill each other over some gold clearly demonstrates this point, so it is clear what the Pardoner wants to prove and how he does this.

Burrow also touches upon one of the other fascinating and slightly conflicting characteristics of the *exemplum*. He says that the characters in the *Pardoner’s Tale* remain nameless – they are only called “the proudeste” (VI.716), “the worste” (VI.776), and “the yongeste” (VI.804) – which bolsters the idea that the theme or moral is more important than the story. He continues by saying: “many *exempla* concern named persons, whose historical and legendary stories lend authority to the general truth they illustrate; but the nameless type, to which the *Pardoner’s Tale* belongs, is equally characteristic of the genre. The very absence of names in such tales claims for them an unrestricted relevance” (Burrow 87). The rioters in the story are nameless, and this illustrates that it is a universal cautioning tale, exactly what an *exemplum* should be. Another characteristic which helps the stories appeal to a more general public is the fact that characters are often “common types, ‘average’ figures in likely situations” (Tony Davenport 58). Davenport also says that *exempla* need to be “recognizable and transferable” to be effective, and that this sometimes conflicts with the “storyteller’s tendency to pick up extraordinary and dramatic tales” (Tony Davenport 59). The *Pardoner’s Tale* has a very strong moral, but the fact that the men go after the literal person of Death instead may be far-fetched, and can definitely be counted as dramatic and extraordinary, while the character remain nameless and can be easily identified with.

It is clear that the *Pardoner's Tale* is, in fact, an *exemplum*. It might not be a short story, but it is a narrative, has a moral that is announced at the beginning of the story, and the story is clearly steered towards realizing that moral. However, the *exemplum* is still a rather elusive genre, even in the light of the previous statements by different researchers. With the help of this analysis of the *Pardoner's Tale*, it is easier to apply the characteristics of this genre to *The Churl and the Bird*.

The Churl and the Bird as an exemplum

The Churl and the Bird is a completely different text from the *Pardoner's Tale*. While the *Pardoner's Tale* is clearly meant to be an *exemplum*, it is more difficult to say the same about *The Churl and the Bird*. As mentioned in the first and second chapter, the story is not short at all, and it is clearly a narrative. With its 386 lines, it even surpasses the *Pardoner's Tale* in length, and the storyline in the tale is clear, which means that at least one characteristic can be applied for the *exemplum* as the genre for *The Churl and the Bird*. However, there are several other characteristics that might be present *The Churl and the Bird*, all of which are mentioned in the previous section.

In one of the previous paragraphs, Burrow is quoted saying that the moral is often stated before the tale, to make sure that its moral is clear before reading the story. In the case of *The Churl and the Bird*, this does not happen. Lydgate only writes that “Thys tale, whyche I make of mension,/In grose reherseth, pleynly to declare,/Thre proverbys payd for raunsom/Of a fayre byrd that was take in a snare” (36-9). He gives away the plot here, and he does include that three proverbs will be given, but Lydgate does not expressly mention which three wisdoms or proverbs are provided by the Bird in exchange for freedom. According to Burrow, this would mean that the moral is not stated beforehand. However, there is something intriguing about the whole tale, as there is to be a tale within a tale, which is already

mentioned in the chapter on beast fables. The division between the tale and the tale within the tale would start at line 218, when the Bird takes up the plan to trick the Churl for his misdeeds. Looking at the tale as if it is an *exemplum* within an *exemplum* – the Bird challenging the Churl to use his three wisdoms is a test which exemplifies the morals once more – the story is clearly an *exemplum*: the Bird has already mentioned the three morals before she tests the Churl on them. Dividing the tale into an *exemplum* and a mini-*exemplum*, as it were, means that the moral is stated before the story in the case of the mini-*exemplum*, and that, in turn, means that the moral not being stated before the actual story does not mean that the tale is not an *exemplum*.

Scanlon and Burrow also mention that the story should reenact the moral. This means that the narrative should naturally lead to the moral without having to include other plot points to further clarify the moral. This does happen in *The Churl and the Bird*, especially if we take the approach of there being a tale within a tale; in that case the mini-*exemplum* where the Churl is tested definitely follows the morals. The Churl *does* simply assume that the stone in the Bird's entrails is real, and he *does* covet wheat he cannot have, and finally, he *does* cry over spilt milk, which is when the Bird says that he cannot be taught (Lydgate 281-301). The Bird being captured contributes to the formation of the inner *exemplum* but it does not help the story work towards the moral as well as everything happening in the mini-*exemplum* does. However, in the case of the mini-*exemplum*, the criteria for moral are definitely met, and it depends on our view of the tale if the moral is included at the beginning or not. For *The Churl and the Bird* as a whole, this characteristic is not met.

Like the *Pardoner's Tale*, *The Churl and the Bird* does not start with the story of the Churl and the Bird, but rather discusses why the text has authority first. Lydgate states that he has translated it "out of the Frensshe" (34), implying that it is not his own text. There is no long sermon before Lydgate starts on *The Churl and the Bird*, like the *Pardoner's Tale* has,

but the authority of the text is important, too. The clerical sermon-introduction the Pardoner uses is clearly a way to claim his authority, but since *The Churl and the Bird* is not a sermon *exemplum*, but, following Scanlon's division, rather a public *exemplum*, it cannot glean its authority from Lydgate. Instead, the writer talks about the origin and how he is only retelling or translating it, implying that there is already authority to the text.

According to professor Mooney's notes on *The Churl and the Bird*, a Churl is a "fellow", and it is just a general term. This ties in neatly with the notion Tony Davenport introduced, namely that the characters in the *exemplum* are likely common types, or at least average, so that people can easily identify with them and the *exemplum* gains effectiveness. The Churl is thus used as the neutral and common person. Burrow mentioned the fact that the characters can easily be nameless in the *exemplum*, which also ties in with the universality of the tale. The characters in *The Churl and the Bird* remain just that: a Churl and a Bird. Neither are named and are thus still anonymous (and easily relatable).

In conclusion, it is, even after this analysis, still rather unclear if *The Churl and the Bird* is an *exemplum*. It is not short but it is a narrative, just like the *Pardoner's Tale*. The moral is not introduced before the entire tale, but if the story is split into two, an encompassing story and an inner story, or mini-*exemplum*, the inner *exemplum* does have its moral introduced before the story. The encompassing *exemplum* leads up to the inner *exemplum*, thus the story does follow the moral. The inner *exemplum* reenacts the moral better, and it is immediately clear where the story is going. Both the Churl and the Bird remain nameless (or are just the Churl and the Bird), and the Churl is a common, normal person. While the Bird is not as relatable, since she is an animal, I would say that we can tentatively call *The Churl and the Bird* an *exemplum*.

Conclusion

In the previous three chapters, three different genres were discussed as the best ones for *The Churl and the Bird* by John Lydgate. As concluded in the first chapter, there were several reasons why *The Churl and the Bird* could be called a beast fable. There are several morals, it excludes references to a specific time period, and the animal does not learn the moral. Some of the characteristics were not fully realised in the story, or were only a partial fit, such as animals being the main characters, animals having human characteristics but not human complexity, and the story being short and simple. Therefore the conclusion is that *The Churl and the Bird* is not a fully-fledged beast fable, but it might be one of the best fits.

The second chapter, on fabliaux, concluded that the different functions of the fabliau are definitely present in *The Churl and the Bird*. While Stearns Schenck's order of functions is not fully followed, it does include the most important functions: the deception and the misdeed. As already discussed in the chapter, the story might very well be called a fabliau by just looking at Stearns Schenck's functions of the fable. However, the best-known characteristics of fabliaux (the ribald humour), and the 'lower' themes are absent from the story. So while this text might tick the most important boxes in the proposed functions, it is still not a fully-fledged fabliau, just like the beast fable.

The third chapter, on the *exemplum*, concludes with the statement that it is still rather unclear if *The Churl and the Bird* is an *exemplum*. As already posed in the chapter, it is not short but it is a narrative, like Chaucer's tale. The moral is not introduced before the entire tale, but if the story is split into two, an encompassing story and an inner story, or mini-*exemplum*, the inner *exemplum* does have its moral introduced before the story. The encompassing *exemplum* leads up to the inner *exemplum*, thus the story does follow the moral. The inner *exemplum* reenacts the moral better, and it is immediately clear where the story is

going. The namelessness of the characters is also still present. So *The Churl and the Bird* could tentatively be called an *exemplum*.

The final conclusion is, interestingly, still inconclusive, seeing that neither of the genres fully fit with *The Churl and the Bird*, as concluded at the end of each chapter. This can be contributed to the fact that in the Middle Ages, genre was differently defined compared to our modern views. Wim Tigges already posited this in his article on the *Fox and the Wolf*, where his “interpretation depends on the assumption that *The Fox and the Wolf* is really a composite of several genres” (79). As W.A. Davenport mentions in *Chaucer and His English Contemporaries*, genre definition is not based on actual characteristics in the Middle Ages, but mainly on the plot and its probability: “an account of actual past events (*historia*), or a fictitious, hypothesised but plausible set of events (*argumentum*), or an account of fantastic, unlikelike events (*fabula*)” (53). Burrow calls this distinction “types of narrative” (17) rather than genres, to which Panzarella adds that the *historia*, *argumentum*, and *fabula* do not work according to “literary concepts such as the structure of a narrative, its recurring themes, motifs and conventions, or the expectations with it arouses in its readers or listeners” (119) as our modern views of genre do. Or, in short: “Genre distinctions in the Middle Ages were not as clear and well-defined” (Panzarella 25).

Panzarella, Burrow and Davenport are not the only ones to discuss the problems with genre distinction in the Middle Ages. Charles Muscatine points out that genres are “created not by nature but by people. [...] So we cannot describe the genre with scientific precision nor determine once and for all which of the eligible works are truly fabliaux and which are not” (Muscatine *Old French Fabliaux* 3). Burrow discusses the overlapping qualities between the *exemplum* and fabliau, saying that “the lack of clear distinction between fabliau and *exemplum* serves as a reminder [...] that the genres of Middle English literature are not to be

regarded as a fixed set of sharply distinguished categories in which all texts can be comfortably fitted” (88-9).

If the narrative categories *historia*, *argumentum*, and *fabula* are the ‘genres’ of the Middle Ages, it is immediately clear why all three discussed genres are so similar. Looking at the etymology of both *fabliau* and *fable* clears up why they are related to the *fabula*. Both words are derived from the same Latin root, and both mean, respectively French and English, ‘tale’, as does *fabula*. The *exemplum* would be the hardest to explain in this context, since the etymology of *exemplum* does not relate back to *fabula*. However, as explained in chapter three, *exemplum* are often used by preachers to teach their flock about morals, which is of course done by means of stories.

So the distinction of genre is not as clear cut as is currently believed it is, and one of the many mistakes current research often makes is that it tries to apply modern theories to medieval concepts and assume that they will work as well as on the modern works they are applied to. However, this is definitely not the case, as is shown in this thesis. None of the genres work fully for the text, but there are definitely some overlapping qualities, as pointed out in the previous paragraphs, and the only actual conclusion that can be drawn from this thesis is that the story is definitely a *fabula* in terms of medieval genres. While the conclusion to this thesis might thus be disappointing, since none of the proposed genres work fully, it serves as a reminder that medieval genres do not work like modern genres, and that this should definitely be taken into consideration before starting research on the genre of a specific text.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Chaucer, Geoffrey, and Larry D. Benson. *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd edition, Oxford University Press, 2008.

Lydgate, John. *The Churl and the Bird*. Edited by Linne R. Mooney, 2008. *Love, Sin and Deceit in Medieval Literature (autumn term 2016)*. University of York Yorkshire Virtual Learning Environment.

Secondary sources

Barr, Helen. *Socioliterary Practice in Late medieval England*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

Brewer, D.S. "The Fabliaux". *Companion to Chaucer Studies*. Ed. Beryl Rowland. Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 247-67.

Burrow, J.A. *Medieval Writers and Their Works: Middle English Literature 1100-1500*. 1982. 2nd edition. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Cartlidge, Neil. "The source of John Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird*". *Notes and Queries*, vol. 44, 1997, pp. 22-4.

Coghill, Neville, and Christopher Tolkien. Introduction. *The Pardoner's Tale*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, George G. Harrap & Co Ltd, 1958.

Cooper, Helen. *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*. 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 1996.

Davenport, Tony. *Medieval Narrative: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Davenport, W.A. *Chaucer and His English Contemporaries: Prologue and Tale in The Canterbury Tales*. Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998.

Lydgate, John. *The Churl and the Bird*. Edited by Francis Jenkinson, Cambridge University Press, 1906. archive.org/details/cu31924029496456

- Mann, Jill. *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Mosher, J.A. *The Exemplum in Early Religious and Didactic Literature of England*. 1911. AMS Press, inc., 1966.
- Muscatine, Charles. *Medieval Literature, Style, and Culture: Essays*. University of South Carolina Press, 1999.
- . *The Old French Fabliaux*. Yale University Press, 1986.
- Panzarella, P.J. "Chaucer and Literary Genre". Dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1977.
- Pearsall, Derek. "John Lydgate (1371-1449): A bio-bibliography." *English Literary Studies*, vol. 71, 1997, pp. 80-4.
- Scanlon, Larry. *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Simpson, James. "'For al my body ... weieth nat an unce": Empty Poets and Rhetorical Weight in Lydgate's *Churl and the Bird*." *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*. Eds. Larry Scanlon and James Simpson. University of Notre Dame Press, 2006, 129-46.
- Solopova, Elizabeth & Lee, Stuart D. *Key Concepts in Medieval Literature*. Palgrave Key Concepts series. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Stearns Schenck, Mary Jane. *The Fabliaux: Tales of Wit and Deception*. Purdue University Monographs in Romance Languages, vol 24. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1987.
- Tigges, Wim. "*The Fox and the Wolf*: A Study in Medieval Irony." *Companion to Early Middle English Literature*. Eds. N.H.G.E. Veldhoen and H. Aertsen. Second edition, VU University Press, 1995, 79-101.
- Wheatley, Edward. *Mastering Aesop: Medieval Education, Chaucer, and His Followers*. University Press of Florida, 2000.

Yamamoto, Dorothy. *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Appendix 1: The Churl and the Bird**The Churl and the Bird**

by John Lydgate

from Trinity College, Cambridge, MS R.3.19, folios 9-11^v
 ed. Linne R. Mooney, © 2008

**The tale of the byrde and the chorle
 of thre notable & gret wysdoms
 groundyd uppon these ii verses folowyng,
 that ys to wete,
*Nemenis omissa doleas, nec omne quod audis
 Credas, nec optas id quod habere nequis.***

[P]roblems of olde lykenes & figures, Whyche are provyd fructuos of sentence And haue auctory groundyd in scripturs By resemblance of notable apparence, With moralytes concludyng on prudence: Lyke as the Byble reherseth by wrytyng, How trees somtyme chese hemsylf a kyng;	5	fruitful of important statements authority based tells chose....themselves
Furst in theyre choyse they namyd the Olyve To regne among hem, <i>Judicum</i> doth expresse; But he hymself gan excuse blyve: He myght nat forsake hys fatnes; Ne the fyg tre hys amerous swetnes, Nor the Vyne hys holsom fresshe tarage, Whyche yeveth comfort to all maner of age;	10	[the Book of] Judges excuse himself quickly taste/savor
And semblably poetes laureate, By derke parables full convenient, Feynyn that byrdes & bestis of estate (As royall egles & lyons) by assent Sent out wryttes to holde a parlement, And made decrees brefly for to say, Som for to have lordshyp & som to obey.	15 20	similarly dark/obscure feign; of [high] rank agreement briefly
Egles in the heyre hyst to take theyre flyght, Powere of lyons on the grounde ys seene, Cedre among all trees hyghest ys of syght, And the lawrer of nature ys ay grene, Of flowres all Flora ys goddesse & quene; Thus of all thyngis ther byn diversytees, Som of estate & som of lowe degrees.	25	air to see laurel by nature...always are [high] rank

Poetes wryte wondyrful lykenes And undyr coverte kepe hem-sylf ful cloos; They take bestys & foulys to wytne, Of whos feynyng fables furst aroos— And here I caste unto my purpoos Out of the Frensshe a tale to translate, Whyche in a paunflet I red but late.	30	description secretly... silent fowls feigning...arose take as my task
Thys tale, whyche I make of mension, In grose reherse, pleynty to declare, Thre proverbys payd for raunsom Of a fayre byrd that was take in a snare, Wondyr desyrous to escape out of her care— Of myn auctor folowyng the processe So as hit fell, in ordre I shall expresse.	35	read recently
Whylom ther was in a small vylage— As my auctor maketh rehersayll— A chorle whyche had lust & gret corage Withyn hymself, by dylygent travayll, To aray hys gardeyn with notabull apparayll, Of lengthe & brede ylyche square & long, Hegyd & dychyd to make hit sure & strong.	40	In short By...caught Very...trouble Just as it happened
All the aleyse were made pleynt with sande, The benches turvyd with turves grene, Swete herbes with condutes at hande, That wellyd up ayene the son shene, Lyke sylver stremes as any crystall clene, With burbly wawes in theyr up bolyng Round as byrall theyre beames out shewyng.	45	Once...village tells small landowner...desire...wish labor noteworthy plantings equally Hedged and ditched
Myd the gardeyn stood a fresshe laurer, Theron a byrde syngyng, day and nyght, With sonnyshe fedrys bryghter then gold wyre, Whyche with her song made hevy hertis lyght, That to beholde hyt was an hevynly syght How toward hevyn and in the dawning She dyd her peyne most amerously to syng.	50	alleys/paths...smooth turfed...turfs conduits toward...bright
Esperus aforsyd her corage, Toward eve, when Phebus gan to weste, Among the braunches to her advantage, To syng her complyn and then go to reste, And at rysyng of the quene Alceste, To syng ayene, as hit was her dew, Erly on morow the day-ster to salew.	55	boiling/bubbling beryl
Hit was a verrey hevynly melody Even and morow to here the byrdes song,	60	laurel tree sunny feathers evening tried her hardest
	65	Hesperus (Venus) Phebus (the Sun)
	70	Compline Alceste (Venus) was due to her salute/greet

And fresshly syng with lusty notis clere Under thy chambre or afore thyn hall, Every season when thou wylt me call.		pleasant notes
"To be shut up and pynynd undyr drede Nothyng acordeth unto my nature; Though I were fedde with mylke and wastell brede, And swete cruddis brought to my pasture, Yet had I lever to do my besy cure Erly on morow to shrape in the vale To fynde my dyner among the wormes smale.	120 125	 fine white bread curds...eating I would rather...best attempt scrape/scratch
"The laborer ys gladdyr at hys plough Erly on morow to fede hym on bacon, Then som man ys that hathe tresour ynough, And of all deyntees, plente and foyson, And hath no fredom, with hys possession, To go at large, but as a bere at stake To passe hys bondes, but yf he leve take.	 130 	 treasure enough dainties...abundance unless he ask leave
"Take thys answer for full conclusion, To syng in pryson thou shalt me nat constreyn, Tyll I have fredom in [woodes] up and downe To flee at large on bowes rough and pleyn; And of reson thou shuldest nat dysdeyn Of my desyre, but laugh and have game, But who ys a chorl wold yche man were the same."	135 140	 fly reasonably celebrate wishes each
"Well," quoth the chorl, "syth hit wyll nat be That I desyre, as by thy talkyng, Magre thy wyll thou shalt chese oon of thre: Withyn a cage meryly to syng, Or to the kechyn I shall thy body bryng, Pull thy fedys that be so bryght and clere, And aftyr roste, or bake the to my dynere."	 145 	 since it Against litchen
Then quoth the byrde: "To reson sey nat nay, Towchyng my song a full answere thou hast, And when my fedys pullyd byn away, Yef I be rostyde other bake in paste, Thow shalt of me have a full small repaste; But yet yef thou wylt wyrke by my counsell, Thow mayst by me have passyng gret awayle.	 150 	 follow my counsel advantage
"Yef thou wylt unto my rede assent, And suffre me go frely from prison Without raunsom or any other rent, I shal the yeve a notable gret guerdon, Thre gret wysdoms acordyng to reson, More of valew—take hede what I do profer—	155 160	 to my advice reward Of greater value

Then all the good that ys shut in thy cofer.		coffer
"Trust me well, I shall the nat deceve, Who that shall teche, of reson must go fre." "Well," quoth the chorle, "tell on, anone let se." "Nay," quoth the byrde, "thou must afore conceve, 165 Hyt sytteth a master to have hys liberte, And at large to teche hys lesen, Have me nat suspecte, I mene no treson."		teach, logically now let's see first conceive It is proper for
"Well," quoth the chorle, "I holde me content; I trust the promyse whyche thou hast made to me." 170 The byrde fly forthe, the chorle was of assent, And toke her flyght up to the laurer tre. Than thought she thus: "Now that I stonde fre, With snares, panthers, I cast nat all my lyfe, Nor with no lyme twygges any more to stryfe. 175		flew...allowed it I shall not have to do
"He ys took that scapyd ys daunger, Hathe broke hys fetters and fled ys fro pryson, For to resorte, for brent chyldre dredyn fyre; Eche man beware, of wysdom and reson, Of sugour strewyd, that hydeth false poyson; Ther ys no venym so perlyous of sharpnes As when hit hathe of tryacle a lyknes.		has escaped fetters To go back, for burned for wisdom and reason's sake 180 strewn treacle (=like molasses)
"Who dredeth no perell, in perell he shall fall; Smothe watyrs byn oft-sythes depe; The quayle pype can most falsly call, Whyle the quayle under the net doth crepe; A blere-yed [fowler] trust nat, though he wepe, Eschewe hys thombe, of wepyng take non hede, That smale byrdes can nyp by the hede.		often times 185 quail bird-caller bleary-eyed avoid his thumb...heed grab...head
"And now that I soche daung[ers] am scapyd, I wyll be ware, and afore provyde, That of no fowler I wyll no more be japyd, From theyre lyme-twyg I wyll fle ferre asyde, Where peryll ys, gret peryll ys to abyde. Com nere thou chorle, take hede to my speche, 195 Of thre wysdoms that I shall the teche.	190	such...have escaped by no...fooled
"Yeve nat, of wysdom, to hasty credence To every tale, nor to eche tydyng, But consider, of reason and prudence, Among many tales ys many grete lesyng; Hasty credence hathe causyd gret hyndryng, Reporte of talys and tydynges brought up new Maketh many man to be holde untrew.	200	Give not...too a great lie be thought untrue

"For oon party take thys for my raunsom; Lerne the secund, groundyd on Scripture: Desyre thow nat, by no condicion, Thyng whyche that ys impossible to recure; Worldly desyres stond all in aventure, And who desyreth to clymbe to hygh aloft, By sodeyn torne felyth oft hys fall unsoft.	205	one part [of three] have/procure at chance too high turn [of Fortune] feeleth
The thridde ys thys—beware, bothe eve and morow, Foryete hit nat, but lerne thys of me: For tresour lost make never to gret sorow, Whyche in no wyse may recuryd be; For who taketh sorow for losse in that degre, Rekene furst hys losse and aftyr reken hys payne; And of sorow, he maketh sorowes twayne."	215	too recovered two
Aftyr thys lesson the byrde began a song, Of her escape gretly rejoysyng, And she, remembryng also of the wrong Doon by the chorle, furst at her takyng, Of her affray and her emprisonyng, Glad that she was at large and out of drede, Seyd unto hym, hovyng above hys hede:	220	Done fear hovering
"Thow were," quoth she, "a verrey naturall foole, To suffre me departe, of thy lewdenes, Thow owtest of ryght to compleyn and make doole, And in thy hert have gret hevynes, That thou hast lost so passyng gret ryches, Whyche myght suffyse by valew in rekenyng To pay the raunsom of a myghty kyng.	225 230	allow me to...ignorance ought rightly...dole suffice in value
"There ys a stone whyche ys callyd Jagounce, Of olde engendred withyn my entrayle, Whyche of fyne golde peyseth a gret unce, Cytryne of colour, lyke garnettes of entayle, Whyche maketh men victoryous in batayle, And whoever bere on hym thys stoon, Ys full assuryd ageyn hys mortall foon.	235	weighs...ounce Yellow in color...quality against...foes
"Who hathe this stoon in possessioun Shall suffre no povert, ne non indigence, But of all tresure have plente and foyson, And every man shall do hym reverence; And hys enemyes shall do hym noon offence. But fro thy handes now that I am goon, Playne yef thou wylt, for thy part ys noon.	240 245	abundance Complain if...portion
"Hit causeth love, hit maketh men gracious And favorable in every mannys syght,		It

Hit maketh accorde atwene folk envyous, Comforteth sorowfull, maketh hevy hertes lyght, Lyke topasion of colour sonnyssh bryght. I am a foole to tell [the] all at onys, Or teche a chorle the pryce of precyous stonys.	250	between the opasion (=?opal) at once
"Men shuld nat put a precious margaryte, As rubies, saphyres and other stones ynde, Emeraudes, ne rounde perles whyte Tofore rude swyne, that love draf of kynde; For a sow delyteth, as I fynde, More in foule draffe hyr pygges for to glade Then in all the perre that cometh out of Garnade.	255	pearl blue stones In front of gladden precious stones...Granada
"Eche thyng draweth to hys semblable: Fysshe in the see, bestys on the stronde, The ayer for fowles of nature ys covenable, To a plowman forto tyll the londe, And to a chorle a mukforke in hys honde; I lese my tyme any more to tary, To tell a bover of the lapidary.	260 265	is attracted to...likeness land air...naturally is suitable lose/waste husbandman/farmer
"That thou haddyst thou getest no more ageyn, Thy lyme twygges & panteris I defy. To let me go thou were foule overseyn, To lese thy rychesse only of foly. I am now free, to syng and to fly Where that me lysted and he ys a foole at all That gothe at large and maketh hym-sylf thrall.	270	fouly out-talked lose...out of folly pleases thrall/slave
"To here a wysdom thyn eres be full defe, Lyke an asse that lystneth on an harpe, Thow mayst go pipe in an yvy lefe; Bettyr ys to me to syng on thornes sharpe Then with a chorle in a cage to carpe, For hit was seyde of folkys yore agone, A chorles chorle ys oft woo begone."	275 280	deaf ivy leaf talk/hold conversation long ago
The chorle felt hys hert part on tweyne For verray sorow, and a-sondyr ryve. "Allas," quoth he, "I may well wepe and pleyne As a wreche never lyke to thryve, But for t'enedure in povert all my lyve, For of foly and of wyfulnys I have now lost all holly my ryches.	285	break in two very...break asunder weep likely to endure out of wholly
"I was a lorde—I cry, 'Out [on] fortune!'— And had gret tresour late in my kepyng, Whyche myght have made me long to contynue With that stone to have lyvyd lyke a kyng,	290	lately lived

Yef that I had set hit in a ryng,
 Born hit apon me, I had had good ynowgh,
 I shuld no more have goon unto the plowgh!"

If
 enough

When the byrde sawe the chorle thys morne,
 And howe that he was hevy of chere,
 She toke her flyght and gan agayn torne
 Towardes hym and seyde as ye shull here:
 "O dull chorle! wysdoms forto lere
 That I the taught, all ys left behynde,
 Rasyd away and clene out of thy mynde.

295 make this mourn
 heavy-hearted
 then turned back

300 learn
 thee
 Erased

"Taught I the nat thys wysdom in sentence:
 To every tale brought to the of new
 Nat hastyly to yeve therto credence,
 Into tyme thou knew that hit were trew?
 All ys nat gold that sheweth goldys hew,
 Nor stones all by nature, as I fynde,
 Be nat saphyrs that shewyn colour ynde.

305 give
 Until the time

blue

"In this doctrine I lost my labour,
 To teche the suche proverbys of substance.
 Now mayst thou se thy lewde blynde errour:
 For all my body, peysyd in a balance,
 Weyeth nat an unce; rude ys thy remembraunce,
 I to have more peyse close in my entrayll
 Then all my body set for the contretayll.

310 teach thee
 see thy ignorant
 weighed...scale

315 weight enclosed
 counter-balance

"All my body weyeth nat an owncce,
 Howe myght I than have in me a stone
 That peyseth more as dothe a gret jagounce?
 Thy brayne ys dull, thy wyt ys almost gone:
 Of thre wysdoms thou hast foryetyn on,
 Thow shuldest nat, aftyr my sentence,
 To every tale yeve hasty credence.

weighs
 320 forgotten one
 give

"I bade also, beware bothe eve and morow
 For thyng lost of sodeyn aventure
 Shuld never man make to moche sorow,
 When thou seest thou mayst hit not recure:
 Here thou faylest, whyche dost thy besy cure
 In thy snare to cache me ayeyn;
 Thow art a foole, thy labour ys in veyne.

325 chance
 too
 recover

"In the thridde also thou dost rave:
 I bade thow shuldyst in no maner wyse
 Covet thyng whyche thou mayst nat have,
 In whyche thou hast foryete myn enpryse,
 That I may sey, playnly to devyse,
 Thow hast of madnes forgotyn all three

330
 forgotten my effort
 plainly speaking
 335 out of

Notable wysdoms whyche I taught thee.

"Hit were but foly with the to carpe
Or to preche of wysdomes more or lesse,
I holde hym madde that bryngeth forthe hys harpe
Thereon to teche a rude, fordullyd asse; 340
And mad ys he that syngeth a foole a masse;
And he ys most mad that doth hys besynes
To teche a chorle termes of gentylnes.

It would be...talk
best effort

"And semblably in Aprylle and in May,
When gentyll byrdys most make melody, 345
The cucko than syng can but oo lay,
In other tewnes she hath no fantasy;
Thus every thyng, as clerkes specifie,
As frute on trees and folk of every age,
Fro whens they come they take a tarage. 350

similarly
can then sing but one song
taste/characteristic

"The vynter treteth of holsom wynes,
Of gentyll frute bosteth the gardener,
The fyssher casteth hys hookes and hys lynes
To cache fysshe in every fresshe ryver,
Of tilthe of londe treteth the bover, 355
The gentylman treteth of gentry,
The chorle delyteth to speke of rybaudry.

vintner knows about wholesome
boasts
tilling...knows the farmer
knows about gentility
ribaldry

"All unto the a fawcon and a kyte,
As good an owle as a popinjay,
A donghyll doke as deynte as a snyte; 360
Who serveth a chorle hathe many a wofull day.
Adew, Sir Chorle, farewell, I fle my way.
I cast me never hensforthe in my lyvyng
Afore a chorle any more to syng!"

All the same to you
duck...dainty...snipe
Adieu...fly
intend...during my life

L'envoy

Ye folke that thys fable shall se and rede, 365
New forgyd talys yt counseylyth yow to flee,
For losse of good taketh nat to gret hede,
Bethe nat to sorowfull for none adversytee,
Coveteth nothyng that may nat be,
And remembreth, wherever that ye go, 370
A cherlys cherle ys alwey woo-bego.

read
too...heed
Be not too...any
woe-begone

Unto purpos thys proverbe ys full ryfe,
Rad and reportyd by olde remembraunce:
A chylde byrde and a knaves wyfe
Have oft sythes gret sorow and myschaunce. 375
Who hathe fredom hath suffisaunce;
Bettyr ys fredom with lytyll in gladnes

For a purpose...very full
often times...bad luck

Than to be thrall with all worldly ryches.

Verba Translatoris

Go, lytell boke, and recommede me		little book
Unto my master with humble affeccion;	380	
Beseke hym lowly, of mercy and pyte,		beseech...out of...pity
Of thy rude makyng to have compassion;		
And as towchyng thy translacion		in regard to
Out of the Frensshe, however that the Englyssh be,		
All thyng ys seyde under correccion,	385	to be corrected
With supportacion of your benygnyte.		If supported by your good will

Explanatory Notes

The story of *The Churl and the Bird* has several French and Latin analogues, but no direct source. Here, John Lydgate seems to have put aside his usual prolixity and written a light, straightforward morality. Scholars have commented on the Chaucerian influence on tone, description, and dialogue in this work.

This text is taken from the copy in Trinity College, Cambridge manuscript R.3.19, folios 9-11^v. Modern rules of punctuation and word-division have been applied. The letters "v" and "u", "i" and "j," have been altered to modern usage. Medieval letter, thorn, has been altered to "th." Abbreviations, including ampersand, have been silently expanded.

Title. **chorle**: a fellow [not with derogatory connotation as today]; **wete**: know (here with meaning, 'say'); **[Latin]**: You should not mourn for anything that is lost, nor believe everything that you hear, nor wish for that which you cannot have.

[please suggest phrases or words that you do not understand, even when you know the meaning, for explanatory notes here]

Textual Notes

- 43. **Whylom**: [w]hylom
- 136. **woodes**: wordes
- 187. **fowler**: foulyd
- 190. **daungers**: daungerous
- 251. **the**: *om.*
- 288. **on**: of

Appendix 2: Stearns Schenck's "Functions of the Fabliau"

F-1	<i>Arrival</i> a arriving b returning
F-2	<i>Departure</i> a departing b going on errand
F-3	<i>Interrogation</i> a questioning/challenging b propositioning/offering c requesting/summoning
F-4	<i>Communication</i> a informing/answering b proclaiming c giving/receiving object
F-5	<i>Deception</i> a lying/fabricating a story b hiding c disguising/substituting d cheating e playing on words/riddling f using magic
F-6	<i>Misdeed</i> a disobeying b attempting/committing adultery c seducing d insulting/embarrassing e stealing f cheating g tricking h assaulting
F-7	<i>Recognition</i>
F-8	<i>Retaliation</i>
F-9	<i>Resolution</i>

Fig. 1. The Functions of the Fabliau