

”I wol nat paye yow but abedde!”

Commerce, Sexuality and Audience in *Dame Sirith* and the *Shipman’s Tale*

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Introduction

The debate concerning the audience of fabliaux has been a prominent part of the academic study of the genre since the late 19th and early 20th century. The question of who enjoyed and preserved these comedic and seemingly vulgar texts, and why they did so, can help to shape our perception of the way medieval audiences engaged with literature, and could potentially influence the way in which we deal with genre as well. Fabliaux have traditionally been considered to have been primarily aimed at either bourgeois, middle-class audiences, or their upper-class gentry counterparts, but there are many spaces and many potential audiences slipping between the gaps in this more traditional view. The audience of the Middle English fabliaux thus remains a subject worth considering, especially in regards to the fabliau genre's unique position as one of the most hesitantly-studied vernacular literary genres of the late Middle Ages.

By using *Dame Sirith* and *The Shipman's Tale*, two of the oldest and most traditional fabliaux in the Middle English corpus, this thesis will examine the ways in which both the content and textual history of the narratives provide clues that help identify their intended audiences. These two texts were specifically chosen both for their relatively close position to the French fabliaux, which facilitates comparative analysis between the continental and the English audience, and because they share a thematic layer, namely that of the intermingling of commerce and sexuality. This could be read as an element of social criticism, anchoring the texts in the moral world of late medieval society. The literary space around these two texts, including the manuscripts that they are preserved in, is especially important as it provides context clues for which potential audiences these texts might have appealed to.

The specific niche in fabliau studies that this thesis will examine is, as mentioned, the debate concerning the original audience of the fabliaux, begun primarily by Bedier's analysis and continued and transformed by later generations of academics such as Nykrog and

Rychner. By examining and analysing these two texts, and by placing them in a literary-historical framework to look closely at the way in which they intersect with late medieval English literary culture, clues to the original intended audience and the potential usage of these texts may appear. The hypothesis this thesis follows is that, as proven by the later trend of manuscript analysis that will be discussed in the first chapter, both courtly and bourgeois audiences could have been the intended audience of Middle English fabliaux, and that authors could have made a conscious choice in the ways they approached and signalled to their audience. The question this thesis will thus be attempting to answer centres around the ways in which *Dame Sirith* and the *Shipman's Tale* signal to their audience in both content and textual history, and, by this analysis, to attempt to determine which intended audiences these texts had.

This thesis will begin by giving an overview of the fabliau genre, its characteristics and its general academic background, before specifically focusing on the Middle English fabliaux. This overview will provide the literary and historical context needed for the detailed analysis of the two texts this thesis will examine. After this, the thesis will proceed by looking at two Middle English fabliaux, *Dame Sirith* and Chaucer's the *Shipman's Tale*. Historical context will be provided for each text, focusing on their unique place in the literary landscape of late Medieval England. The contents of the texts will be analysed through close reading of several key passages. In the fourth and final chapter, these two texts will then be compared and contrasted. The texts will be examined using a combination of close reading techniques and literary-historical context throughout the thesis, to analyse the occurrences of audience address in each text, if present. These texts will be placed in the literary landscape of the time, and then compared side-by-side, to show potential contrasts and similarities, and to provide a full overview of the signalling and possible thematic interpretations of both texts.

Chapter 1 – History and Background

The roots of the fabliau genre lie in northern France, where these comedic, short stories were first popularised. However, their contemporary popularity and the ease with which fabliau stories could be reinvented and reinterpreted by multiple storytellers made their influence grow far beyond their point of origin. The presence of the genre is attested in the British Isles in both Anglo-Norman French and Middle English, and the genre also influenced vernacular comedic verse literature in the Low Countries, Germany and even Wales. The fabliau as a genre has proven remarkably versatile in its inspirations, often using both common folktale motifs, bawdy humour, and parodies of the more elevated courtly romances in a single text. There are certain conventions within the “characteristically brief” (Hines 3) narratives of the genre, however, that can be used to define the fabliau in a general sense, and can shed some light on the genre’s academic reception. The definition of a fabliau is generally considered to be a “short, comic narrative in verse” (Lacy, *Short* 2089). Of course, definitions of genres are always by necessity “fluid” (Lacy 2087), and while around 70 of the extant 180 fabliaux self-identify themselves as fabliaux, the term is generally only applied in hindsight. Therefore, the stress that is put on the comic and verse elements proves a perhaps broad guideline, but certainly one that covers the main stylistic and thematic elements, which define this body of texts. The comic topics in this sense range from the lowbrow and vulgar to relatively highbrow parodies of traditional courtly literature, and often provide a mixture of the two. While generally not the most sophisticated examples of comedy imaginable to a modern audience, the fabliaux remain a vivid and vital piece of the medieval literary landscape, and if nothing else, are one more argument against the popular image that the Middle Ages were drab and humourless. It is, however, precisely these comic themes of the fabliaux which led to their long-time relative disenfranchisement in the academic sphere. Scholarly discussion “lagged behind” (Lacy 2089) publication efforts, and researchers seemed unwilling to study

the contents of the fabliau despite the availability of these texts in modern editions. Its often sexual, crude humour and parody of an established literary tradition landed the fabliau genre in a virtual scholarly no-man's-land until the early 19th century, with Joseph Bedier's seminal 1893 study breaking through the taboo by examining the social and literary-historical context of the fabliaux in addition to their content. And it is here that the question of audience begins to take centre stage in discussions of the genre.

Bedier emphasised the role of emerging urban centres in the history of the fabliau genre, connecting its initial consumption and audience to a literate urban middle class in the late Middle Ages. The main support for his views were, among other things, that the rise in urbanisation in the later medieval period around 1200 coincided with the growth of urban literary consumption, and the rising sense of self-identification and urban pride in many late medieval bourgeois communities. Additionally, Bedier was of the opinion that a city-dwelling middle class appreciated the more low-brow humour of the fabliaux. This was maintained as the primary method of analysing the fabliaux, and remained the main scholarly viewpoint until the late 1950s, with Per Nykrog's opposition to Bedier's long-held views. Nykrog attempted to break down the neat and traditional division between bourgeois and noble audiences, and between fabliaux and more traditional forms of courtly literature such as the chivalric romance. Nykrog argued that some notable fabliaux, with one example being the French *Berenger au Long Cul*, relied on parody and the inversion of the traditional conventions found in romance to produce their comedic effect. These texts often quoted and directly referenced extant romances such as the works of Chrétien de Troyes, and as such the intended audience would have needed an appreciation and understanding of the works being parodied to get the comedic craft at play in these fabliaux. Multiple fundamental questions about urban literary consumption in the late Middle Ages underlie the debate concerning the fabliau audience, and they are certainly not easy questions to answer, leaving the debate in a

deadlock after Nykrog's ideas had caught on. The crux of many arguments at the time remained that it was difficult to reliably estimate how much knowledge urban middle-class audiences had concerning typical courtly literary themes and motifs. If the socially-climbing urban classes could be proven to have had reliable access to the same texts and literary knowledge as the courtly environment of the nobility, then logically speaking they would also have understood the references in the fabliaux.

However, these questions would be, in a sense, bypassed by another view on the subject. In the 1960s a study by Rychner was to shine a more nuanced light on many of the arguments surrounding the intended audience of fabliaux by examining manuscript contexts and variation between different extant versions of texts. Within multiple attested copies of fabliaux, Rychner observed that there were differences between versions of texts in different manuscripts. While in itself not a shocking discovery, Rychner concluded that these variations went beyond the level of variant spellings or word choices, but were alterations to the thematic and literary core of the stories. Different fabliaux were, in a sense, marketed towards different audiences by shifting the focus of the tale either towards a more elevated style, including direct references to known romance literature, or shifting their focus to a more vulgar style of comedy. This could be taken as evidence that the fabliau authors were aware of, and knew how to adapt to, the diverse and often contradictory audiences their work appealed to. Continuing in this vein, more recent fabliau studies such as Norris Lacy's 1993 *Reading Fabliaux* and much of Brian Levy's research have taken an approach that emphasises the conscious role of the fabliau authors, their use of language, and the way in which they, in a sense, marketed their work to specific audiences. It is this more general school of thought that the present thesis will continue to explore. While the work of Rychner helped to bring fabliau studies into a new frontier, one more focused on the possibility that multiple audiences might be serviced by multiple different versions of a text, the noble-bourgeois and city-court

binaries still persist in much of the discussion on fabliaux and their place within the medieval literary world.

And this binary is also at the forefront of one of the largest mysteries in fabliau scholarship, namely, the apparent lack of extant English fabliaux. The fabliau tradition was especially popular in France, with estimates ranging around “at least 127” extant French fabliaux attesting to this popularity (Hines 1). While the use of surviving copies to prove popularity is always non-conclusive, considering the amount of attrition and loss of medieval literary material over time, it can still be considered a generally valid approach. With some caveats in place, the surviving number of copies could illustrate the spread of a certain text. Furthermore, it could hint at the lasting popularity of the genre by illustrating how many copyists and text collectors found the fabliaux worthy of inclusion in their manuscripts. Another point that can support this is that the genre had its equivalents in many continental vernacular literatures, such as German, Italian and Middle Dutch (Hines 216), and its comic verse forms were clearly effective enough to cross both linguistic and regional borders.

The relative scarcity, then, of extant fabliaux in Middle English comes as a surprise to any scholar. If the genre was so successful in France, and considering the often lively literary enterprise and appetite for genres such as the fabliau at the Anglo-Norman courts (Hines 40) and in the literature of the expanding urban centres and “aspirant bourgeoisie” (Buxby 39), then from a logical standpoint the genre should have crossed the Channel with ease, and become ingrained in the growing tradition of English vernacular writing. Instead, we find only six extant Middle English fabliaux, the majority of which are contained in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and one, *Dame Sirith*, by an anonymous author, presumed to also be the author of the later comedic play *Interludium de Clerico et Puella* (Hines 65). This essay will focus specifically on *Dame Sirith* and the *Shipman’s Tale*, found in the *Canterbury Tales*.

Several explanations for this scarcity have been suggested. One such suggestion has

been put forward by R.M. Wilson, who argues that that the Middle English fabliaux were transitive and not written down due to their “popular” nature (Busby, *Conspicuous* 1). However, a more convincing argument may be presented by the fact that Anglo-Norman fabliaux, in the distinctive French dialect spoken by the Norman-descended nobility in England, are extant in much greater numbers than Middle English ones are. The Middle English fabliau texts occupy much of the same space as the Anglo-Norman fabliaux, and indeed, to Busby, this is a sign that the English fabliaux were scarce simply because they may not have been needed by the audience that could read them. The fabliau might have been perceived by the aristocracy as a French-language genre, “more appropriately expressed” (Busby, *Conspicuous* 37) by the Anglo-Norman dialect. Busby also bases his argument on the surviving reworkings of French romances into Anglo-Norman and Middle English. These reworkings tend to dispense with much of the emotional and character depth found in the French originals, and the same principle may apply here; the Anglo-Norman fabliaux might have been adapted to a specific Anglo-Norman audience, who had no need for Middle English works to fill this niche. The earliest English fabliaux might in this case even be a “bridge” (Hines 42) between literary groups, given their references to French locations, translating the genre into another vernacular, but on the other hand making it clear that an Anglo-Norman audience could simply have used their own language for the composition of fabliau literature. Busby, however, does concede that this argument only holds water if one considers that the fabliaux have a primarily courtly audience. However, no matter what the suggested reason, their relatively small number makes the Middle English fabliaux an interesting and intriguing part of the medieval literary corpus. They are comic, vernacular texts that coexist with, or perhaps in the shadow of, a more numerous Anglo-Norman corpus of the same genre, distinct from the French originals, and as Busby suggests, enjoying some overlap with elements of Middle English and Anglo-Norman romances as well. The specific ways in which the

Shipman's Tale and *Dame Sirith* form a part of the rich intermingling of Anglo-Norman, English and Latin literature in medieval England shall be explored in this thesis as well. The paper's main focus, as previously mentioned, will be a consideration of intended audience, but in the course of this research, topics such as performativity and manuscript culture will also be touched on. This thesis operates from the assumption that answers to questions concerning who these texts were made for and who read them will not only be found in the texts themselves, but will only be fully answered by observing their larger literary-historical context as well. As such, taking a broad view of both literary works will be a vital and key component to the analysis. The first text that will be looked at is the oldest Middle English fabliau on record, *Dame Sirith*.

Chapter 2 – *Dame Sirith*

The anonymous *Dame Sirith* is a unique part of the Middle English fabliau corpus not only because of its own virtues as a comic and entertaining text, but also because it is the only English fabliau that is not a part of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It survives in the multi-lingual miscellany BL MS Digby 86, dated to the 1270s (Corrie, *Compilation* 236), and its position in this manuscript will be examined in more detail below. The plot and general structure of *Dame Sirith* follow predictable folktale and fabliau guidelines. A sly clerk, Wilekin, attempts to seduce a married woman, Margery, while her husband is away on a business trip. Wilekin enlists the help of a cunning old woman, the eponymous Dame Sirith, for this purpose, and promises her a handsome reward if she can assist him in his amorous advances. She, through a cunning plan involving a weeping dog, who Sirith swears is her daughter transformed by Wilekin's sorcery, manages to convince Margery to sleep with the clerk to avert his wrath. However, this relatively simple plot hides a surprising complexity. This depth is not necessarily expressed at the narrative level given the story's straightforward plot and generally bawdy, sexual humour, but *Dame Sirith* nonetheless contains several surprising elements that make it a valuable source with which to examine the intended audience and usage of English fabliaux. First, the tale's theme of commerce and sexuality will be explored, then the performative aspect of the text will be looked at, and finally, its manuscript context will be examined to provide potential hints at its audience.

Dame Sirith's light-hearted plot should not detract from the fact that the tale conveys a sense of social criticism. The interplay between commerce and sexuality seems to crop up throughout the narrative. For example, Wilekin exhorts Sirith to put the money he pays her towards *sep and swin* (*Dame Sirith* l. 273), "sheep and pigs"¹. Wilekin thus encourages the older women to purchase animals with the same money that he has used to acquire Margery

¹ Middle English to Modern English translations supplied are my own.

(Hines, 57). This perhaps obvious analogy between the selling and buying of different types of meat nonetheless identifies a common thread throughout the tale from beginning to end. Sirith and Wilekin both see love as an exchange of goods and services, one that Wilekin buys into through his 'purchase' of Margery, and which Sirith profits from. The lack of a concrete moral to the tale seems to imply this viewpoint is not challenged. Wilekin obtains the woman he wants through his trickery, and Sirith vigorously encourages him to take full advantage of this, before turning to the audience to imply she can secure the same success for them. And even the omniscient narrator becomes a participant in, and a key component of, the story's use of comedy to highlight this theme. While the narrator curses Sirith for her deceit with colourful oaths, these "moral apostrophes" (Hines 63) take on more playful light as the narrator's outrage leads to nothing. For all the narrator's bluster, such as letting out a shocked *Bi houre Drightte!* (DS l. 408), "By our Lord!" at the proceedings, this moral outrage only seems to heighten the comedy in the tale. The narrator "draws attention to himself" (Hines 62), winking to the audience through these exaggerated and thus insincere-sounding moral judgements in the same way Sirith turns to the audience to offer her help. The presentation of these characters and even the narrator himself as "glib [and] hypocritical" (Mill, *Oaths* 128) only contributes to the picture of a thoroughly profane society, wherein human bodies are traded for the price of farmyard animals, and where, with enough money and a clever trick, anyone can be bought. Mill and Hines diverge on this point. Whereas Hines does not assign a large moral meaning to the tale, and sees the oaths merely as a playful wink, to Mill they are more than that: they are a self-conscious indication of the narrator's complicity in a morally dubious, increasingly sexualised and commercialised world. Dame Sirith may be comedy, but, as with other fabliaux, it may have more to say about medieval society than one would expect at first glance. Especially the complicity of the narrator in drawing attention to these critical

elements in a comedic way stands out, though of course it is debatable whether or not the original authors would have intended this reading.

The narrator in *Dame Sirith* is a distinct entity from the tale's performer, and it is here that we discover a dimension of the tale that goes beyond simple text on a page. *Dame Sirith* proceeds not so much as a conventional descriptive narrative, but rather as a "well set-up series of dialogues" (Hines, 61), with each character, including the narrator, given a speaking role. This is a rare occurrence among English fabliaux, given that all of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* output is narrated and structured as a conventional descriptive narrative. This focus on dialogue makes *Dame Sirith* a text that hints towards its primary mode of delivery, namely, an oral performance that brings out the comedic elements. The nature of *Dame Sirith*'s structure and its heavy reliance on dialogue to further the plot makes it eminently suitable for performance, and Sirith's turn to the audience at the end of the text makes this even more apparent. When the text is placed in a historical context, however, Sirith's interactions with the audience reveal themselves to be but one way in which this performative aspect is conveyed. The performance and, more specifically, what audiences would have listened to this performance are a vital step in attempting to recreate the literary landscape in which this text flourished. The way in which performances of literature in the Middle Ages took place is a contentious topic, but many, especially French, fabliaux would have been performed by *jongleurs*, skilled oral storytellers and performers (Müller, *Performance* 1040). It is likely that English examples would have followed this French model as well. As such, the 'turn to the audience' Sirith uses to market her skills as a matchmaker is a typical example of audience interaction, though this text is the only English fabliau that explicitly acknowledges this happening and which uses it as comedic leverage. Brian Levy's article on the history behind the public performance of fabliaux sheds further light on how to interpret and understand this turn to the audience, and the way in which fabliau performers engaged with their audience.

Though some performers used fabliau elements in a much different way from Dame Sirith's comedic final note, which forms one of the rare examples of a literal audience interaction, the way in which storytellers used both thematic elements such as irony and comedy, and physical elements such as miming, body language and character voices to appeal to audiences forms the bedrock of his article. Levy cites the use of fabliau elements in sermons to appeal to the "lay public" (Levy, *Performing* 123) as one avenue of performance and performative elements, drawing on "common performative skills" (124) for both the religious and secular uses. While, as in the *Shipman's Tale*, the ending on "a brief moral" (Hines 62) is a common trait of fabliaux, the preachers and clergymen who integrated fabliau plots into their sermons adapted these often ironic "mock homilies" (Levy 123) into a recognisable moral lesson. This moralising use of fabliaux would, however, still have competed and existed alongside the more traditional secular performers, who told them with a much "different intent" (123). The plurality of ways in which medieval narratives were performed thus makes it difficult to infer a set audience from any text, but for now we will assume that *Dame Sirith* would have been performed before a secular audience of mixed gender. Levy also offers a description of how this performance would have looked, based on both contemporary descriptions of *jongleur* performances and some creative interpretation. The fabliau performer, it must be said, would have most likely been a professional, trained in oral recitation and able to bring both his voice and body language to bear to fully act out the fabliau in question, "bring[ing] to life" (131) the comedic text. In short, the performer used "word and gesture combined" (133) to make an effective performance, and to enthuse the audience. While the "echoes" (124) of the word, and the use of the voice to act out the roles of Wilekin, Margery and Sirith still suffuse *Dame Sirith*, the gesture is irretrievable from its manuscript form. But based on records of other fabliau performances, a text like *Dame Sirith* would most likely have been performed by a single performer, acting out the characters' voices and gestures and directly interacting with

their audience. It may also be interesting to look deeper at this audience, particularly as it is being addressed by Sirith as she makes her final appeal. Whoever cannot *geten his levemon* (*Dame Sirith* l. 447), “get his lover”, would be free to take the old woman up on her offer, and for a fair price, she would help any man in attendance. But if this performance was public, as Levy implies was the case for many jongleur performances, the audience would possibly have been a mixed one and Sirith does not explicitly address the women in the crowd, using only the pronouns *his* and *him* in her closing statement. While Levy cites multiple fabliaux centred on female characters, and ones which “address women as well as men” (134) in the text directly, this does not seem to be present in *Dame Sirith*. Based on the historical context, it would be rare to find there were no women in the audience to address, however. It could be that the joke would have been explicitly aimed at male audience members, perhaps jokingly offering Sirith’s services to ‘trade up’ their current partner for a more attractive one. But, of course, the joke may be aimed both ways, as Margery also gains a new lover, in the form of Wilekin. While she is fooled by Sirith’s trick, ultimately, both parties gain something in the transaction. Thus, the possibility of the joke applying to the entire audience is not an impossible stretch, even though it is not explicitly stated in the text. Whatever the specific intent of the joke, however, it remains a key part in the narrative, for it conclusively proves there was an audience in attendance, no matter how this was composed, and this helps us place *Dame Sirith* in the performative, oral literary culture that flourished at the time. It is clearly a self-conscious text, where the performer is encouraged to engage with the audience in both word and body language to create an entertaining performance piece, ending in a direct interaction with the audience that shows to what extent medieval performers would go to entertain and amuse. While traces of the peculiar way in which fabliau performers would act out characters and bring them to life remain, it is difficult to reconstruct a potential audience from *Dame Sirith*’s text alone, given, for example, the mismatch between the jokes

aimed at a male audience implied in the ending, and the historical facts that present mixed-gender audiences as the norm. Perhaps, in this case, looking at external clues may assist in narrowing down the potential audience.

The context in which *Dame Sirith* is preserved in manuscript form could also form a clue towards the audience of the text. The only manuscript that holds this fabliau is BL MS Digby 86, a multilingual collection of both “practical” and “verse texts for edification or entertainment” (Corrie, *Compilation* 237) dated to the late 13th century. *Dame Sirith*, located in the second part of the manuscript, stands alongside other Middle English, but also Latin and French texts, thus illustrating the wide linguistic and literary variety that typifies medieval England, in addition to showing the tastes of the manuscript’s compiler. In two studies of the Digby 86 manuscript, Marilyn Corrie identifies that the section of verse texts, while diverse in its use of different languages, does not generally attempt to mix texts of different languages, and to put these languages side-by-side. The manuscript instead presents the verse texts in “linguistically homogenous” (Corrie 238) order, where sections of Latin, French and English material occur grouped together, creating distinct ‘blocks’ of each language within the manuscript. Thus, Corrie concludes that the linguistic-based ordering of verse texts in Digby 86 was the result of a “methodical” (289) approach to ordering these texts, suggesting a certain programme and reasoning behind these groupings. John Scahill supports this view as well, stating that the end product that remains today represents the “final intention” (Scahill, *Trilingual* 25) of its compiler. There may be multiple reasons for this, with scholars such as Parkes and Schann claiming that the compiler intended it for private use (Scahill, *Trilingualism* 26). This would, at first glance, be at odds with the way *Dame Sirith* is presented. After all, the dialogue tags present in the manuscript copy, indicating which characters speak when, would suggest the copy would be useful as a guideline to have “on hand” (Levy 136) for performances. But the context of the other texts surrounding *Dame*

Sirith, and the nature of the collection of verse texts within Digby 86, show a different story. The wide array of texts copied within the manuscript suggests to scholars such as Hines that Digby 86's collection was intended to collect and display a number of diverse textual genres, with *Dame Sirith* forming a prototypical example of the fabliau genre in English (Hines 64). In this light, the mismatch between the manuscript context that the text survives in and its possible use as a performance piece can be easily addressed. If MS Digby 86 were a collection of texts that was aimed at showing the literary and linguistic diversity of 13th-century England, explicitly assembled to reflect the tastes of its compiler, as Scahill and Corrie suggest, then *Dame Sirith* would fill the role of "representation" (Hines 63) of the Middle English fabliau. Add to this the fact that, in the view of Schann and Parkes, the *Dame Sirith* text was copied from an outside source (Scahill 25), and this hypothesis becomes even more convincing. *Dame Sirith*'s role in the Digby 86 miscellany itself is to represent the Middle English fabliau genre in a collection that displays, and perhaps even shows off, the literary variety available to its compiler. However, it is likely that other copies of *Dame Sirith* would have been extant, used as parts of extensive fabliau repertoires. The text's structural hints and its explicit use of audience interaction show beyond a doubt that it was a part of performers' repertoires, and was only later transcribed into the form that it now takes in Digby 86. Thus, the manuscript context of *Dame Sirith* may tell us something of the way the tale was regarded in its time, and the way in which it came to represent the pre-Chaucerian English fabliau, but it does not necessarily reveal anything about the intended audience of the text.

In conclusion, while *Dame Sirith* is a relatively small text, it is nonetheless a remarkable part of the corpus. It is not only unique in being the only non-Chaucerian part of the Middle English fabliau corpus, but its most remarkable aspect is the way in which the text retains the structure of a piece made to be performed, even when committed to writing. Not

only are the explicit dialogue markers a clue towards its intended use, but the way in which its dialogues are set up contribute to this as well. They are clearly meant to act as an aid, supplying almost nothing but the dialogue, pointing towards a context such as a public performance where embodying the characters and lively speech would have been more important than detailed narration. Furthermore, the way in which the self-conscious narrator and protagonist Dame Sirith playfully interact with the audience make this text truly sing. While the potential moral of the tale is contentious, the themes of commerce and sexuality are clearly brought forward in an audacious and comedic manner. A possible audience for this text would thus have been able to pick up on these nuances and critiques. We may thus be looking at an audience who would have been familiar with these concerns from their own everyday life. This would have to be one of the urban audiences of the late Middle Ages, who were able to recognise the rise in commercialisation, the lax attitude to sexuality and a cynical outlook on life, as shown in the text. The storytellers who performed *Dame Sirith* would most likely have found the largest audience in the growing urban centres of late medieval England, and the fact that one did not need to be literate to listen to a performance makes the potential audience of *Dame Sirith* that much broader. In short, several clues point to the audience being mixed in class and gender, with the lower classes, who were likely the audience for public performances of this type, making up the main body of the audience. However, the text was also appreciated enough by upper-class audiences to be featured in compilations such as MS Digby 86, alluding to a wider range of appreciation. Nevertheless, its original intended audience would have been that of the storyteller in a public, urban environment; the lower-class city dwellers, who saw the increasing overlap between commerce and sexuality happening, and could recognise the story's allusions to this topic.

Chapter 3 – *The Shipman's Tale*

With *Dame Sirith* providing the only non-Chaucerian fabliau in the Middle English corpus, it is impossible to look further into Middle English fabliaux without encountering at least one of the *Canterbury Tales*, dating from the late 14th century. Unlike *Dame Sirith*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* fabliaux have very little trace of performative roots, and indeed, lack many of the more explicit elements that connect it to oral storytelling traditions that could be found in *Dame Sirith*. Chaucer's fabliaux, instead, find their basis in the specifically literary cultural space. Chaucer's fabliaux often draw on folktale motifs, such as the *senex amatus*, or old lover, archetype epitomised by John the carpenter in the *Miller's Tale*, and the old knight January in the *Merchant's Tale*. They also, however, provide some self-consciously literary elements of high style, such as the appearance of classical deities in the later parts of the *Merchant's Tale*, who seem to control and alter cuckolded January's perceptions as they see fit. But the *Shipman's Tale* dispenses with classical references, and is at its core a well-constructed tale that hinges on deals, backroom negotiations and the everyday business life of the merchant classes. In this sense, the *Shipman's Tale* is quite an odd member of the Chaucerian fabliau group in a number of ways. For one, it is the only one of the texts explicitly set in France, specifically in the market town of St. Denis. Furthermore, its narrative, as with most fabliaux, is relatively small-scale. A wife, tired of her husband's apparently miserly attitude, borrows money from a monk to pay the debts she has accrued, in exchange for a night with him. However, the money she borrows was, in turn, borrowed from her husband by that same monk. The monk promptly leaves after a night with the wife, leaving both wife and husband a hundred francs poorer than they had started. The wife, in a spur of quick thinking, decides at the end that she will not repay the hundred francs in coins, but will use her body instead, solving both her financial and relationship problems at once, forming a satisfying conclusion. The prominence of the female character, as well as several

references to the legal system, to the affairs of the mercantile middle classes, and to the intermingling of commerce and sexuality make this fabliau one of Chaucer's most complex, but compact, stories in the *Canterbury Tales* collection, and the relative lack of attention paid to the *Shipman's Tale* is a greater shame because of it. By examining the possible roots of the story, as well as its frequent references to the legal system, commerce, and the social critique this brings with it, the *Shipman's Tale* may explain more about who would have found these themes relevant, and what insight this provides into a potential audience.

The possible origin of the narrative of the *Shipman's Tale* has been discussed by multiple scholars, including Peter Nicholson and John Hines, but one of the main threads has been its descent from the common Lover's Gift Regained folktale motif. In this motif, a woman trades away goods to an adulterous lover in exchange for intimacy, and is later found to be tricked by him, often through the method of having her gifts or goods later sold back to her husband. The one who profits is the adulterer, and the wife and husband are both left as the duped parties. This folktale motif may explain the ultimate source of the narrative in the tale. There may be a popular, oral origin for the *Shipman's Tale*, which may also be, as Hines argues (Hines 72), based on a French original. This opinion is supported by a number of factors. The first being, quite obviously, that the *Shipman's Tale* is the only Chaucerian fabliau set in France, thus reinforcing the connection with the French origins of many well-known fabliaux. Some scholars have claimed that the *Shipman's Tale* is closer to the "pure fabliau type" (*Riverside* 910), citing its relatively simple plot as evidence. They also doubly bring into focus the closer connections to France than to the English setting of many of the other stories to support the conviction that the story might somehow predate or be sourced from a different original than many of the other fabliaux in the *Canterbury Tales*. To a certain extent, these claims may hold some water. However, another possible origin has been suggested in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which resembles the *Canterbury Tales* structurally in

its successive series of narrators telling different stories. The closest analogue to the motif is in the second story of the eighth day, where scholars have been able to trace the “exact form” (Nicholson 202) of the narrative back to popular Latin epigrams. Given the exactitude with which we can determine Boccaccio’s original source, it may be tempting to place the *Shipman’s Tale* as a direct descendant of the version in the *Decameron*. But, while plausible, some scholars have also considered that Chaucer’s knowledge of Boccaccio’s work cannot be “conclusively proven” (Nicholson 219) and have brought up an alternate origin. In an attempt to synthesise the folktale motif with the French connection, scholars have claimed an unknown French fabliau, which took inspiration from the Lover’s Gift Regained motif, as a source for both Chaucer and Boccaccio’s stories (Nicholson 220). The most important consequence of the possibility that both tales might trace back to a common folktale motif is that it would make the inspirations behind these narratives drawn from popular, most likely oral literature. In this case, the *Shipman’s Tale* might represent the literary variant of an orally-transmitted motif. However, as opinions remain divided on this issue, it is perhaps a more prudent decision to look more closely at the *Shipman’s Tale* in isolation, and to see how it may differ from its origins in ways that would appeal to Chaucer’s audience. After all, while the issue of textual history is intriguing, the *Shipman’s Tale* had its own audience to consider. And in this respect, it has made some significant departures from both Boccaccio’s *Decameron* text and from the general Lover’s Gift Regained motif.

The first major change is the shift in viewpoint of the wife character. Nearly all the adaptations of this motif are critical of the wife, portraying her as an “avaricious” (Benson 278) character who seems to fully deserve her fate. But, twisting this plot around, Chaucer’s version ends with the wife coming out as victorious, with her needs, both material and conjugal, well-provided for (278). The Host, in the epilogue, confirms this, as he seems to blame Don John for perpetrating the *jape* (ST l. 439), but seems to overlook the wife’s agency

in the dealings and her clever solution. Thus, in the Host's view, both the merchant and his wife are the duped parties, fallen victim to an avaricious clergyman who deserves nothing more than a *thousand last quade year* (l. 468), or, a "cartload of bad years" (*Riverside* 208). Indeed, the narrative seems to side with the wife in more ways than one. The merchant's wife opens the fabliau, and introduces an articulate critique of the lack of care and the miserly attitude the merchant displays in the tale. Especially the phrase *he moot us arraye* (ST l. 12), "he must dress us" jumps out through the sudden switch to a first-person plural. All readers of the text are, in this way, encouraged to identify with, or at least examine the viewpoint of, the female speaker in this passage. The active and opinionated speaker presents her case by explaining the practical and financial dimensions of furnishing a lifestyle, and impresses on the reader the dangers and pleasures of a luxurious lifestyle that is, nonetheless, transitory, in which the polite courtesies of the merchant classes pass away like a *shadwe upon a wal* (l. 9), "a shadow on a wall". Generosity, then, seems to be connected to personal honour. A show of wealth confirms that the merchant can supply his house and family with the luxury goods they need to maintain their high-class lifestyle. And if the merchant fails to provide, his wife is forced to the "perilous" (l. 19) route of letting others pay for them, or borrowing the money themselves. The opening to the *Shipman's Tale* seems to set the blame for the eventual fooling of both the merchant and his wife on the merchant's shoulders. If he had been a bit more generous, and had paid more attention to the needs of his wife in both a physical and material manner, she would not have been forced to rely on outside sources such as Don John for her money, or her physical satisfaction. The fact that the female speaker expresses herself so clearly is not found in the folktale motif the *Shipman's Tale* takes some inspiration from, and as such, it is most likely an original twist by Chaucer himself, building on the track record of well-characterized and active female characters in the *Canterbury Tales*, such as the Wife of Bath. In short, though the *Shipman's Tale's* origins most likely lie in original Chaucerian

invention, it includes echoes of a folktale motif, and some sections of it may have taken inspiration from Boccaccio's *Decameron* or an earlier, now lost, source. However, textual history aside, Chaucer makes the tale his own through the deft reversal of the typical gender roles in the narrative, specifically by not assigning blame to the greedy wife but instead having the Host blame the deceitful monk, and by adding a deep layer of social critique. The merchant's wife is given some agency and, through her clever offer, substitutes the cash debt she would have incurred with her own body, repaying her debt in the bedroom and solving both her financial and marital problems in one move. This, combined with the speaking role of the wife in the first verses of the text, may be a sign that she was intended to be a character the audience could relate to and support. If, as the story suggests, the world is corrupted, and sexuality and love are both for sale with the temporary, transitory method of money, then the wife works cleverly to turn the tables on her husband without judgement from the text itself. And, most importantly, perhaps without judgement from the audience as well. The audience is not only shown a comedic story, but a way in which a motivated, clever woman can extract herself from both financial and marital difficulties. The clever reversals and twists throughout the tale are one of its strengths, and many of these twists come into play in the area of laws and legal concepts.

The *Shipman's Tale* would, in effect, nearly seamlessly connect with Joseph Bedier's view on the origins of the fabliau. It speaks to the sensibilities and commercial worldview of the urban bourgeoisie, who would most likely be able to recognize a, perhaps slightly unflattering, portrait of their own behaviour in the many negotiations, deals and loans being made in the narrative. And indeed, considering the "deep concern with and wide knowledge of law" (Braswell 302) that many of the middle-class merchants and the upper-class landed gentry had, it would be likely that the legal dimensions and allusions in the story would be well-known and recognized by a potential audience. This gives us some basis to go on when

attempting to determine the audience of the *Shipman's Tale*: They would likely have been able to recognize and contextualise the many legal terms in the story.

Furthermore, the tale shows the intermingling between commerce and sexuality that *Dame Sirith* also skillfully uses. The opening of the *Shipman's Tale*, with its explanation of the way in which the expenditure of wealth supports the merchant's *owene worshipe* (ST l. 13), his "own honour", and the way in which spending this wealth is necessary to maintain status, quickly turns to a bawdier tale once the merchant is away on his business trip, leaving his wife and Don John alone to make their agreement. His wife confides in the monk that she is unhappy, claiming that no woman in France has *lasse lust* (l. 117), "less pleasure" in her life, and this lack even makes her consider, in an impassioned plea, to *make an ende* (l. 122) to her life. Furthermore, despite her husband's earlier claims of generosity and keeping a good house, his wife claims that the thing about him that *greveth moost* is his *nygardye* (l. 172), his "greed" and reluctance to part with his money freely thus "grieves" his wife "sorely". She then continues, claiming her husband fails the six demands that *women naturely/ Desiren* (l. 173-174): He is not vigorous, not wise, not rich, or generous with what he has, he is not obedient toward his wife, and lastly, does not perform adequately in the bedroom. This list of failings reads as if the wife is accusing her husband of several serious faults and shortcomings in the course of their marriage. This accusatory nature of her speech is given even more force by the fact that she officially *make[s] an ooth*, an oath, upon a *portehors* (l.131), a "breviary". In essence, she is swearing on a holy text, before a clergyman, hypocritical as he perhaps is; a serious legal weight is being brought to these accusations in this case. The "financial obligations and restrictions" (Braswell 303), and the laws surrounding them, are even impinging on the grounds of love and marriage. Commerce, greed, and a lust for individual gain surround the characters, and the wife uses all the legal force she can muster to convince Don John of her plight. The characters cannot escape either the strict laws or the financial

agreements that they govern. In short, Chaucer seems to be creating, as the author of *Dame Sirith* might have, a world of corruption and lust, where the mixture of sexuality with commerce means that love can be paid for and bought, in the case of Don John and the wife's night of passion, for as much as a hundred francs. It is also a world in which the legal system, and the laws that govern this commerce, are called into action in interpersonal or even marital disputes, using a holy book as something only useful for swearing on. However, Chaucer's close focus on the character of the wife, and the attempted identification with her, may lead to a slightly more nuanced reading. It may be that the *Shipman's Tale* takes place in a corrupted world, but the wife manages to extract herself from her problems with a clever trick. This appreciation for quick thinking, while still presenting social critique, may be able to guide us to a more cohesive view on the audience of the *Shipman's Tale*. The tale supposes an audience that is explicitly literary, as many of the signs of oral performance that were found in stories like *Dame Sirith* are gone from the *Canterbury Tales*' fabliau group. Furthermore, the audience is expected to know their way around the complicated legal and financial systems of late Medieval England, as the tale's plot heavily hinges on laws, promises, loans, and negotiations. In addition to this, the quick thinking and sly solution of the wife may specifically appeal to a female audience, unlike the audience interaction at the end of *Dame Sirith*, where women seemingly did not explicitly exist as part of the audience, and may only be an implied presence. This would make the tale a natural fit for the experience of the merchant classes in the rising urban centres, but also would reflect badly on some of their behaviour. Additionally, the knowledge of laws was also a necessary component of life for the gentry, as Braswell puts forward. Thus, a merchant audience would likely not be the only one who would appreciate the legal dimension to the story. In the end, it may be that the *Shipman's Tale* could appeal to both an upper-class and middle-class audience for entirely

different reasons, but the surprising addition to the audience may be a focus on female readers, who could appreciate the clever solution the wife thinks up.

Ultimately, the *Shipman's Tale* remains a difficult story to pin down. From its clear deviation from the folktale motif, to multiple possible influences, its textual history is difficult to pin down clearly. However, its themes of corruption, the shifting lines between love and commerce, and the legal elements in play make it clear that the story would primarily be recognisable to an urban audience, who would have recognised these influences as part of their daily life in a late Medieval city. Interestingly, one of the major departures from the norm that Chaucer adds to this tale is a female lead who takes the initiative and has agency in the matter of solving her debt problem. She is not content to simply be a passive observer, or the one who is tricked and cannot do anything but suffer the consequences. Instead, she recognises she has been tricked, and works to provide a quick solution that solves both her problems at once. This may be a sign that the tale would have been attractive specifically to a female audience. However, the use of 'us' and 'we' in the prologue hint that any reader might, and perhaps should, identify with the female speaker. In short, the *Shipman's Tale* remains a relatively mysterious entry in the Chaucerian canon, with its textual history and French connections setting it apart from the rest of the pack. What is clear, however, is that the tale would have appealed most to an audience that was familiar with its financial and legal focuses, and who could recognise these elements in their daily life well enough to know the comedic and critical purpose they were used for in the story.

Chapter 4 – Discussion

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, identifying the audience of fabliaux not only requires a researcher to examine the texts themselves, but also to identify the social and historical contexts of the texts, and to examine how they were preserved in manuscripts. This final chapter discusses and summarises the findings of this thesis, and will attempt to define some common ground between both texts to arrive at a detailed outline of which intended audiences both *Dame Sirith* and the *Shipman's Tale* may have had.

Dame Sirith is the only non-Chaucerian entry in the Middle English fabliau corpus, and it certainly stands out through both its use of audience interaction and the performative aspects it highlights. As mentioned in the second chapter of the thesis, *Dame Sirith* was likely performed by a single storyteller operating in a public setting, using the script-like style of the text as a guideline for a series of well-crafted dialogues, with very little actual narration. The characters were likely voiced by the same performer, acting as a one-man show, and their stereotypical attributes and characterisation would have made it easy for the audience to identify the cast of speakers based on the performer's body language and vocal mannerisms. One can easily imagine a crowd being drawn by the exaggerated, comedic style of the performer. The narrator himself, however, also interjects and undercuts this performance with ironic and witty asides, that show a slightly more nuanced and critical angle. *Dame Sirith* excels in bringing forward the performative and audience-oriented aspect of medieval literature, and serves to illustrate the ways in which the reception and performance of literature were integrated. The concept of orality in medieval literature is at the forefront of this, as the piece was both performed and heard as a physical performance, which was only later included in the manuscript in which it now survives. With its inclusion in Digby 86, likely as a representative text for the fabliau genre in English, *Dame Sirith* shows a meeting of two worlds: Book culture, which made sure the story was included in the historical record as

an iconic genre piece, and that of oral performance, in which its origins lie. Of these two, the original audience of the oral performance was considered the more pertinent, as the text's inclusion of Digby 86 would likely have been after it had already made the rounds in the repertoires of travelling *jongleurs*. Thus, while examining the manuscript context of a work can add vital context, it is not always guaranteed to provide more insight. As in this case, the text was written down at a later time, and as such only provides a clue towards its reception history. Despite the text's relatively simple origins, however, *Dame Sirith* includes some light, comical touches of social criticism, for example, hinting that the money Wilekin uses to 'purchase' a night with Margery is used by Sirith to buy pork and mutton, an entirely different type of meat. These blunt comparisons are further underscored by the ironic voice of the narrator, whose exaggerated moral outrage carries a satirical tone. The narrator, however, is not the only one engaging with the audience in a playful way. Sirith's turn to the audience is one of the more significant elements of the play. Direct audience interaction is only rarely attested in texts, and must usually be inferred, but it is quite clearly visible at the climax of this story. Her promise that she can do for the men in the audience what she has done for Wilekin is a fitting finisher to the tale, but this interaction nonetheless summons up a thorny question. While only men are explicitly mentioned and referred to in the closing statement and in Sirith's offer, it is nonetheless possible that a female audience could have appreciated the joke as well, seeing as Margery also gains a new lover in the transaction. It is thus likely, considering the facts established about the types of storytellers that would have had *Dame Sirith* in their repertoire, that the text would have been performed before relatively mixed audiences, in public urban spaces. Thus, it is likely that women would have been in attendance. And this may even be part of the joke, making the men in the audience uncomfortable as Sirith suggests taking advantage of her skills to help them, perhaps, trade their wife in for a different lover; likely to embarrass if one's family were also in attendance.

Sirith's final remark, therefore, while vital to establishing the basis of audience interaction, may not be entirely reliable for the purposes of determining the audience that would have been interacted with. However, we cannot fully interpret from the textual evidence available whether this performance had a solely male audience, or whether women were in attendance as well. Based on the surrounding context and the tale's likely method of performance, we can only assume the audience was mixed between men and women of various ages. In short, the public nature of the jongleur's performance meant the audience of texts such as *Dame Sirith* is relatively unpredictable. We must assume that its narrative of low-brow comedy mixed with some social critique would be accepted and recognised by much of the audience, as well. *Dame Sirith* laughs both with and at its audience, though who exactly this audience was is difficult to pin down beyond the general outline of an urban audience of all genders, who could recognise some light satire.

In contrast to this, Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale* is part of a consciously literary collection, where interplay between multiple tales, fragments and thematic elements creates a rich narrative. However, looking at the relatively little-studied *Shipman's Tale* in isolation is the option presented here, and in this sense, the tale shows signs of its audience in multiple subtle ways. Chaucer's focus in the tale on laws and deals make it hew close to the everyday reality of many members of the rising middle class and the gentry. While some scholars have pointed the tale out as an adaptation of the Lover's Gift Regained folktale motif, wherein a greedy woman accepts a loan and repays it by spending the night with the loaner, unbeknownst to the fact that the loan itself has been borrowed from her husband. Thus, the couple is cheated out of money, the husband is cuckolded, and the trick goes unpunished. Looking too closely at its muddy origins in folktale adaptations, however, might do the tale a disservice. The *Shipman's Tale* in some ways exceeds many of its contemporary translations of the Lover's Gift Regained motif, including the one in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, by

including a clever twist on the formula in its conclusion. By letting the wife solve her own problems in a creative way, Chaucer shows a clever character, who is capable of thinking on her feet and turning a bad situation around. The wife of the *Shipman's Tale* exists in the vein of other well-presented female characters in the *Canterbury Tales*, such as the Wife of Bath, and the reader is even encouraged to identify with the female speaker in the opening through the use of pronouns such as *we* and *us*. Whether this was an intentional attempt at identification, or an unforeseen result of a tale original assigned to the Wife of Bath being reshuffled as the Shipman's tale, however, does not matter for its role in the finished product, as it still encourages the reader to look at the wife in a sympathetic light. The possible audience for this identification, however, is made slimmer by the fact that the *Shipman's Tale* in its original form only seemed available within the larger confines of the *Canterbury Tales*. This by definition excludes audiences who were either illiterate, or were not able to obtain the text, either in isolation or as part of a larger collection. The *Shipman's Tale* is thus a text designed and written for an explicitly literary audience. From these facts, we can infer some general attributes of the intended audience of the *Shipman's Tale*. This audience would likely have been literate and urban readers who could afford to purchase texts. Additionally, they would have to be familiar with the commercial and legal realities of medieval city life, and should be able to recognise the many references to this in the *Tale* to give these references the proper thematic weight. Given the legal system's reliance on oaths and promises, the fact that the wife swears on her breviary and lists her husband's flaws as if they were an accusation makes the tale relatively faithful to many aspects of the day-to-day legal proceedings. These factors combine to sketch a relatively clear picture of the intended audience, one that is more difficult to define for *Dame Sirith*, considering the nature of public performance and thus the necessarily varied nature of its possible audience. It is also necessary to note that this focus on the law does not limit the appeal of the text to merely a middle-class audience or merchants,

as might be expected. As Braswell notes in her article, knowledge of the law and the ability to engage with legal matters was a vital skill for both the merchant classes and the upper-class gentry. In short, the *Shipman's Tale's* more explicitly literary aspects make it a slightly more exclusive text than *Dame Sirith*, as it precludes both literacy and a knowledge of the medieval legal system, but it is by no means a text meant to be relatable to only one specific audience.

Both texts share some similarity in theme and tone. While *Dame Sirith's* jokes often push the boundaries of conventional morals more than those found in the *Shipman's Tale*, both texts still show themselves as being concerned with the intermingling of romance, sexuality, and commerce. They both take place in a world where lust and love do not necessarily overlap, and where the body seems to be quite literally on sale. Whether it is Wilekin, handing over money to Sirith to sleep with Margery, or the monk Don John conning a merchant and his wife out of a hundred francs, and having the wife offer to repay the debt with her body, instances of the equation of intimacy and economy are commonplace. The fabliau world of *Dame Sirith* and the *Shipman's Tale* is one where the worldly, everyday concerns of cash, sexuality, and deals seem to be the most important, and where even the clergy seem more interested in pursuing their carnal desires than reaching for any lofty religious goals. This stark portrayal of the more unsavoury elements of everyday medieval life would likely resonate with many audiences who saw such practices. Indeed, these same concerns may plague a rural audience as well, but there are a few textual elements that explicitly call out to an urban audience. For instance, the locations mentioned in both texts, St. Denis for the *Shipman's Tale* and Boston for *Dame Sirith*, are important market towns, which would lend credence to the central role commerce plays in the tales. While the location for *Dame Sirith* may be variable, as different performers may mention different cities, the setting of St. Denis for the *Shipman's Tale* is a solid reminder of where to locate the focal point of interest, both for author and audience. Furthermore, urban centres provided a much

larger audience for performers, and while the tale of *Dame Sirith* is applicable to many different locations due to its lack of narration and focus on dialogue, it would make sense that popular fabliaux would flourish where-ever a concentrated audience could be found. Thus, especially an urban audience, such as the gentry residing in cities, or the middle and lower classes attending public performances, would likely recognise these elements from their daily life, exaggerated to bawdy, over-the-top heights for comedic effect. Thus, the audience for the *Shipman's Tale* and *Dame Sirith* both is likely to be found in the cities, among a literate, mostly middle- or upper-class audience in the case of the former, and in the repertoire of public performers, drawing a diverse crowd, for the latter. These texts could be seen to hold up a comedic and exaggerated mirror to the concerns of everyday life in the expanding urban centres, for any of the varied social classes that reside within the sphere or city life.

Conclusion

The present thesis set out to explore two related research questions. The first, concerning which ways the two texts signalled to their intended audiences in both content and textual history, is perhaps the easiest to answer. Textual history, in the case of *Dame Sirith*, proves that the intended audience may not be the audience that would necessarily end up preserving a text. However, the text's very direct audience interaction, as well as its form, shows that *Dame Sirith* was likely originally performed as part of a storyteller's repertoire, and as such shares an intended audience with many other primarily oral fabliaux. The performer's audience and the intended audience of the text are one and the same; likely that of the urban crowds of mixed class and sex that would gather to watch these performances. However, *The Shipman's Tale* is more distinguished, and offers a potential audience hints within the text itself. It signals, through certain thematic elements, word choice, and by invoking elements of the legal system, to a literate audience of the merchant classes and the gentry, who would be familiar with the legal language used. The audience of Middle English fabliaux, therefore, was quite clearly signalled to in different ways depending on the audience it wished to target. Whether through direct interaction or the use of specific jargon and themes, authors could quite accurately make statements that would resonate with particular audience groups.

With regard to the second part of the original research question, concerning the ways in which textual evidence can provide information on the intended audience, this thesis may conclude with a small summary of themes and topics discussed. Across this thesis, multiple major themes have played a role in attempting to determine the original audience of a text. Orality, and the shifts a text makes between manuscript and performance are a major element in analysing *Dame Sirith*, as the audience it had as an orally performed text would have been quite different, or at least more diverse, than the audience it would attract as a written work. This also ties in with the textual reception, and its place in the Digby 86 collection. If, as

Hines and Scahill argue, *Dame Sirith* was intended to function as an example of the English fabliau genre, it is certainly a step up for the text with regards to status. The literariness of a text, however, can also have the effect of limiting the possible audience. As seen with the *Shipman's Tale*, its collection in the *Canterbury Tales* makes it more likely that only a literate audience would have read it. Furthermore, while tantalising opportunities for identification with the female speaker are offered in its introduction, its very form makes this identification by necessity limited. Its subject matter, in addition, deals with financial and marital matters, which would have been relatable for many audiences, but uses the languages of loans and negotiations to express its themes. Once again, it is a limiting factor, that speaks most to audiences who would be able to contextualise these elements during their reading. Textual evidence, and analysis of the context of a literary text, can thus provide insights into the intended audience in a variety of ways. By isolating facts and delineating the possible audiences of texts, we may be able to focus our understanding of what the audience of a text may have been, or we can instead broaden the net of possible audiences by looking at the ways in which an audience could have been exposed to a text.

Both the *Shipman's Tale* and *Dame Sirith* are rewarding, unique members of the Middle English fabliau corpus, and both texts have unique insights and stories to tell beyond what is on the page. With some imagination, and thorough research, one may come closer to the original audience, and consider new insights into what it may have been like as an audience to experience literature in the Middle Ages, whether it be written or oral. Further avenues of research in this vein could include analyses of the entire Chaucerian fabliau group of the *Miller's*, *Reeve's*, *Summoner's* and *Merchant's Tales*, and examining their potential audience, as well as the way in which these stories interrelate in the structure of the larger *Canterbury Tales* collection. The compact size of the Middle English fabliau corpus means that, most likely, any further research will focus more heavily on material in the *Canterbury*

Tales, barring any new discoveries in the field. If the scope of research allows it, another avenue of approach would be to examine the most plausible sources for each of the Chaucerian fabliaux, or seeking out connections with French or especially Anglo-Norman fabliau texts. For example, one could look at the folktale motifs or literary texts that may have inspired these stories. However, as seen in the analysis of the *Shipman's Tale*, this may be a less rewarding exercise due to the often relatively distant relations, and the difficulty in assigning clear textual descent. As such, it is most likely more rewarding to focus on the material as it is presented in the *Canterbury Tales* as-is, and to examine the Chaucerian material in the specific context of late medieval England.

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