

Medieval Comic Tales

Derek Brewer (editor)

Boydell & Brewer 1996

**Cuckolds, Clerics, and Countrymen:
Medieval French Fabliaux**

John DuVal + Raymond Eichmann (editors)

translated from the Old French by John DuVal

The University of Arkansas Press 1982

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2001 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

While medieval comic literature was predominantly oral, much survives in collections, both medieval and later. *Medieval Comic Tales* attempts to give a representative sample from that, with stories from the Spanish, French, Italian, English, German, Dutch, and Latin (but excluding beast fables and stories by Chaucer and Boccaccio that need no publicity).

Cuckolds, Clerics, and Countrymen focuses on a particular genre, the Old French *fabliaux*, comic verse from around the thirteenth century. The stories included are of interest as part of the Western literary tradition and for their insight into social history, but many are also entertaining in their own right. The most common plots involve contretemps between husbands and wives and lovers which could be transplanted without much difficulty to Hollywood comedies.

Some themes and elements in the stories are strange to the modern reader — most obviously those dependent on aspects of the social setting such as the class structure. Others are not as foreign as one might think: while mocking the handicapped, putting down women, and laughing at death may no longer be generally acceptable, they are still surprisingly common in demotic jokes. And while there are certainly misogynist elements in the medieval stories, many involve clever, powerful women with whom the audience is clearly expected to identify, and complaints about "the perfidy of women" often seem more formulaic than heartfelt. Also notable is the robust skepticism of the majority of the tales: supernatural elements are usually clearly fantastic, or feigned in order to mock the credulous.

Combined with a pronounced anti-clericalism, this makes these stories a useful antidote to stereotypes of medieval society as superstition-ridden.

Both volumes have introductions which consider some of these themes. *Comic Tales* also touches on general theories of comedy, classical precursors and Renaissance and later descendants, sub-genres (such as the Till Eulenspiegel/Howleglass trickster stories), and regional themes. *Cuckolds* enters into debates over the quality of the *fabliaux*, their origins (the result of a "specifically Gallic genius", a derivation from Oriental originals, or confused reworkings of Latin comedies of Plautus and Terence?), the context in which they were performed (by travelling *jongleurs*, but to which social class or classes?), and their antifeminism and anti-clericalism. It also includes separate introductions to the individual *fabliaux*, looking at their language, plot, and relationships to other stories.

For those interested in the stories themselves rather than their literary analysis, *Comic Tales* offers considerably more meat, with over fifty stories and a score of anecdotes against just ten *fabliaux* in *Cuckolds*. On the other hand, the verse translations in the latter (in parallel with the original Old French) are much livelier than the prose in *Comic Tales*. As an example, here's the shortest (and unfortunately the least interesting) of the *fabliaux*:

The Villager and His Two Asses

Once there lived in Montpellier
A villager who every day
Gathered dung which he wrapped in packs
And bore on two fine asses' backs.
One day, as soon as he had loaded
His asses with manure, he goaded
Them into town and drove them through
The narrow streets with much to do.
He shouted, "Git up! Move along,"
So loudly that before too long
They reached the spice retailers' quarter.
Apprentices were beating mortars
And when he smelled the fragrant spice,
A world of gold could not entice
The man to take one step ahead.
He fell, and lay there looking dead.

The people there then felt a great
Uneasiness at the man's fate
And murmured, "For the love of Pete,
Look at that dead man in our street."
Not one could tell another why.
The asses meanwhile were standing by
In the middle of the road, for such
Is an ass's nature. It won't budge
Unless it feels its master's goad.

A man who was standing up the road
Had seen the driver have his stroke.
He sauntered down the street and spoke
To those who stood around the man.
"Sirs," he said, "If no one can
Or wants to cure this man, I will
For what he gives me when he's well."
To this a citizen replied,
"Cure this man, and I'll provide
Twenty sous from my own pocket!"
— "Thanks," said the other man, "I'll take it."
At that he took the driver's fork,
Which was used to drive the beasts to work,
And forked some dung the size of a rose
And brought it to the stunned man's nose.
As soon as the flavour of manure
Had made the spice smell disappear,
He blinked his eyes and up he sprang.
"I'm fit as a fiddle now," he sang.
Happy now and overjoyed,
He made a vow that he'd avoid
Forever the avenue of spices.

The moral's clear, and my advice is:
Though you be humble as manure,
Stick to your nature. Pride is sure
To make you sick, but Nature cures.

And one of the brief Latin anecdotes from *Comic Tales*:

The Fasting Abbot

I heard about a certain abbot who was accustomed, before his promotion, to frequent fasting on bread and water. When, however, he was made an abbot, he began to eat huge meals. When he was asked about this extremely sudden change, he replied, "I fasted for a long time as the vigil to this feast; for that reason I ate small fish so that some day I'd be able to eat big ones."

These lack the plot and character interest of the longer stories — the *fabliaux* range up to a thousand lines in length, while *Comic Tales* devotes fourteen pages to the famous Latin piece "Pamphilus".

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