



Turnabout is Fair Play:
Cross-Dressing and Female Tricksters
in Medieval French Texts

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In examining Old French literature of the Middle Ages, a significant change occurs with the birth of courtly narrative. As medieval narrators become more complex and self-reflective, as they begin to explore underlying psychological motives, there is a concomitant flowering of the idealized courtly lady—constructed both in the medieval period, and often in modern literary criticism, as an archetypal representative of the pure and perfect woman. These remote ‘courtly ladies’ are held up as the standard against which more ‘earthy’ feminine types, such as the *pastourelle* peasant girls and most particularly the *fabliaux* women are compared and found wanting.¹ These latter women, along with the literature they inhabit, are often viewed as parodies of more ideal and romantic types—the characters and the genres are juxtaposed.

It would be easy to assume that since these characters occupy opposing categories; their traits would naturally be similarly conflicting. In this view, less elevated tales such as the *fabliaux* provide opportunities for feminine characters to possess active wit, cunning, and cleverness while the romantic and idealized heroines of the courtly literature are not characterized in this way. Instead, these latter *Dames* demonstrate passivity, nobility, purity, and beauty.

In this paper I don’t wish to criticize or negate the existence of these important divisions which can certainly be seen to accurately characterize much of medieval literature. Instead, I will examine similarities between genres and types, shifting focus from the usual binary oppositions between the courtly lady and the virago, the romance

and the *fabliau*, Eve or Mary, virgin or whore. Rather than viewing the characters in the *fabliaux* as dialectical opposites contextualizing and providing low counterparts to those of the elevated *romans*, I particularly want to focus upon medieval feminine agency as it is revealed through a tertiary type—a woman who appears at the margins and between the boundaries, is found in a number of genres, and can be characterized as intelligent, often striking, and very resourceful and capable.²

A Lady in Breeches

I will be examining a very particular version of this woman. In each case she appears, at least for a time, in disguise, in male garb. Whether she emerges from an obscene and humorous *fabliau*, an uplifting and noble *roman*, or even from a religious tale of a saint's life, she can be seen as willfully utilizing her skills and gifts to overcome hardships, abuses of power, and social restraints and proscriptions, while achieving specific changes which can ultimately be viewed from within the medieval literary and social context as just outcomes.

It is fascinating that in such a variety of medieval French literary genres one can find women donning men's clothes in defiance of Biblical edict: "woman shall not wear that which pertains unto a man; neither shall a man put on a woman's garments" (Deuteronomy 22:5). This proscription, along with sumptuary laws which very specifically elaborated (so to speak) upon discussions of appropriate adornment, served to reinforce medieval gender and class roles. Considering the pervasive influence of the Church at the time, and the prevailing misogynistic attitudes toward women, it is surprising to find so many heroines subverting or flouting gender roles not only in costume but in action. Possible reasons for this are explored below.

Cross-dressing and sexual inversion functioned in several paradoxical dimensions at once. Looked at in one light, transvestism provided women with opportunities to exercise social and psychological agency and mobility. At the same time, it also served to reinforce medieval gender roles by emphasizing that the resourceful female must adopt male characteristics in order to realize her goals. However, the cross-dressed woman is able to determine her own actions while the more typical romantic heroine is still subject to conventional hierarchical limitations—she is idealized, frail, ornamental, and in need of rescue. Cross-dressing and representations of female agency and feminine intelligence in medieval texts also reveal underlying tensions about sexuality, particularly as they are depicted in *fabliaux* settings. Cross-dressing women often seek redress from a world of oppression, abuses of power, and deception.

These tales also reveal a sort of trickery, which, when morally employed in a quest for the restoration of honor, virtue, or good, lauds the abilities of weaker elements of society. As these characters negotiated the difficulties of their time, their strategies and successful outcomes, while often funny and entertaining, also served to encourage a good-natured and encouraging sense of social worth and solidarity among similarly vulnerable listeners to their tales. Women, as marginalized beings, have often been required to resort to trickery. This is not only to realize some modicum of independence but to simply survive the difficulties facing them. Their female wiles emerge directly from independent thought, deception, curiosity and resourcefulness.

These are primary attributes of the trickster—an important character in both classical mythology and folklore from all over the world. Well-known tricksters such as Coyote from Native-American lore, Exu or Anansi from African tales, and Hermes or

Odysseus from Greek myths all share a number of characteristics and occupy similar literary and anthropological niches. An examination of the traits and activities of tricksters—their complex and particular qualities and the specific activities in which they engage—can shed light upon the tricks and qualities of their medieval French sisters.³

Tricksters are often motivated by a desire to seek redress from transgressions imposed by social limitations. Often their clever ruses are a circuitous response to oppression and restraints which cannot be addressed through more direct methods. Tricksters are ambiguous and marginal—they “walk between worlds”; they occupy the edges and straddle the boundaries of normal social categories. Tricksters conflate oppositions by simultaneously displaying characteristics which normally do not mix. In this way tricksters can, at the same time, be heroic and obscene, sacred and profane, tragic and hilarious, masculine and feminine, foolish and clever, delightful and dangerous.

Tricksters are dangerous precisely because they *are* delightful. As they engage in absurd or socially proscribed activities, violating norms, laws, and everything previously considered “right” and “normal”, they often provoke laughter. In the process they expose evil, right wrongs, overturn assumptions, and ridicule status, hierarchy, and power. They are often entertainers with theatrical, musical and verbal virtuosity, the trickster’s linguistic savvy is persuasive and provocative; their theatrical abilities enable them to utilize disguise to hide or transform their appearance. Their stories and musical talents allow them to inspire or soothe; often the stories they tell or the tunes they perform have magical or unexpected consequences. This is not surprising as tricksters are often imbued with magical characteristics or natures; they may be gods, demigods, healers or possessed

of spiritual talents and insights which normal mortals do not have. Alternatively, they may have a special relationship with gods or other magical beings.

Persuasion and disguise in tricksters allow them to confuse, confound, and lie successfully. Tricksters embody ambiguity often possessing physical skills that approach or include the ability to shape-shift. This talent facilitates the trickster's assuming the outward appearance of the other gender, and tricksters are often characterized as androgynous from the start. In some folktales female tricksters are forced to assume male identity to avoid danger or confinement, while in other stories they cross-dress to facilitate a quest for sovereignty or influence. The ability to conflate gender attributes, possessing feminine insight while simultaneously exercising masculine authority, is often the means by which tricksters bring about social change and their ambiguous talents inspire awe and surprise, encouraging thought and consideration of their tactics and rationale. Their literature is sociological, political and often subversive. In each type of tale they resist the usual state of affairs; they manipulate and subvert canon and authority; they advance and realize their desires; they express and demonstrate their agency. With their talents they move their fellow characters, as well as the audience, to laughter and to tears while through their very rule breaking, rebellious themes, and topsy-turvy natures, they frequently restore the social balance.

*Fox hom ne puet nul sens trover
Fors le gros sens c'on puet taster;
Li sages de quanqu'a sos ciel
Trait sens, com ex trait d'erbe miel.*

The foolish man can't find any sense

Apart from the crudest sense that one can touch;
The wise man takes sense from everything beneath the heavens, like drinking honey from
the herbs.

—*Le Roman de Partonopeu de Blois* (my translation)⁴

Of all the Medieval French genres the *fabliaux* are the best examples of stories falling into the larger category of Trickster folktales. *Fabliaux* share characteristics with their heroes or heroines—they are a literature of the marginal. They are seemingly foolish tales which set reality upon its end, and they expose the absurdity and frailty of the social traditions they mock.

Like the tricksters who so often occupy a central role in the *fabliaux*, these tales are often vulgar, utilizing language in ways both shocking and yet clever and effective; they often carry an explicit (so to speak) moral message, while at the same time giving voice to the *carnavalesque*. The *fabliaux* also resemble trickster tales in that they mimic authority, satirizing and parodying the serious. *Fabliaux* tricksters set themselves (and their genre) up against the courtly, the genteel, and the privileged, and in the process, as often as not, they are also setting themselves up for an illustrative fall.

Both the *fabliaux* and tricksters are topsy-turvy—they are playful and reversed, grotesque and at the fringes. In these tales the great are brought low, men become women, both may sprout multiple genitals, the world is stood upon its head, and women wear the pants, often gaining the upper hand. The erotic emerges from the shadows, nonsense become sensible, and Misrule holds sway.⁵

Many of the *fabliaux* perpetuated and delineated the more repressive and misogynistic aspects of the world in which these women lived. Tales such as “*Le chevalier qui fist parler les cons*” (The knight who made cunts speak) portrayed women as stupid, erratic, difficult, thoughtless, empty, and long-winded; often just the bearers of

genitalia. Of course, this it isn't quite so simple; these tales often have multiple, conflicting underlying meanings, but even so, it is certain that many *fabliaux* do not treat with the clever female trickster who is the subject of this paper.

On the other hand, characters such as “*Berengier au lonc cul*” (Berengier of the Long Ass) save the day. “His” story addresses several of the points mentioned above including feminine cleverness, classic trickster characteristics, sexual inversion, parody, and ultimately, setting to right the topsy-turvy social imbalance which resulted in the heroine's inverted actions in the first place. In this tale, the social injustices addressed include a forced marriage motivated by usury. This results in debt to a cowardly husband who in every way is “beneath” the main character, who comes from a knightly family. In the passage below, translated from the critical text version in *Nouveau Recueil Complet des Fabliaux*⁶, the social problem is clearly identified as greed defiling lineage (my translation here and throughout):

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| 24 | Ensi lo bon lignage aville, Et dechiet tot et va a honte, Que li chastelain et li conte Se marient bas por avoir; | This is how good lineage is belittled and totally besmirched and brought to shame as castellans and counts marry low for what they can get; |
| 28 | Si doivent grant honte avoir Et grant damage, si ont il: Li chevalier mauvais et vil Et coart issent de tel gent, | So they deserve to have great dishonor and great damage, and so they do: Vile and poor knights and cowards issue from such people |
| 32 | Qui miauz aiment or et argent Que il ne font chevalerie. Ensi est largesce perie, Ensi dechiet enor et pris! | who prefer loving gold and silver To acts of chivalry Thus does largess perish, So honor and reputation are besmirched! |

The lazy and cowardly husband in this tale is clearly just such a product of low breeding and contempt for *chevalerie*:

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|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 44 | Li chevaliers amoit repos; Il ne prisoit ne pris ne los, Ne chevalerie deus auz: Tartres amoit et flaons chaux, Et mout deisoit gent menue. | The knight loved repose; He didn't prize either reputation or praise, Nor did chivalry matter: Tarts and hot flans were what he loved and he really despised the underprivileged. |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

This provokes our main character. It is here, with a bit of close reading, that we first see that she is unusually perceptive: “Donc set ele bien sanz dotance” (Thus she knew quite well), and that over sloth she prefers martial skill and activity, which is associated with nobility: “A sejourner ne pris je rien” (Reclining doesn’t impress me at all); “Ne estraiz de gentil lignaje” (Nor did he come from noble lineage).

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|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 48 | La dame s'est aperceüe Que ses sires est si mauvais Que pires de lui ne fu mais Por armes prendre ne baillier: | The lady became aware that her lord was so awful that next to him never was anyone so poor at taking up or using arms |
| 52 | Miaus enmoit estraïn et paillier A menoier qu'escu ne lance. Donc set ele bien sanz dotance, A ce que il ert mout parliers, | He found straw and hay preferable To carrying a shield and lance. Thus she knew quite well, since he was always talking, |
| 56 | Qu'il n'est pas nez de chevaliers Ne estraiz de gentil lignaje. Don li remantoit son paraje O tant a vaillanz chevaliers, | that he was not born of knights Nor did he come from noble lineage. She reminded him of her parentage which had so many valiant knights |
| 60 | Et as armes et as destriers: “A sejourner ne pris je rien.” | skilled at arms and warhorses “Reclining doesn’t impress me at all” |

The story goes on to tell how, shamed before his wife, the lazy knight decides to fool her by setting out into a nearby wood and bashing up his own weaponry to appear that he has triumphed in battle. It is interesting to note that by this very action, by taking his wife’s criticism so seriously, he is already voluntarily abnegating his own authority and in essence, placing her in the position of dominance. The world is already topsy-turvy. By damaging his own weaponry to feign having engaged in battle, the message he is essentially trying to convey is: ‘you should have seen the other guy’.

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| De sa lance tint un troçon, Et de l'escu n'ot c'un carier 112 Qu'il avoit porté tot entier. | Of his lance he only took a sliver and of his shield he had naught but a corner ‘though before he’d brought it all whole. |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

At this point the story has already described the disruption of the social order and initiated the theme of trickery—there is no ‘other guy’—and so far *it is the husband who is responsible for both the inversion and the trickery*. As the story unfolds however, on the knight’s third forest journey to cement his knightly “*pris*”, his already suspicious wife sneaks after him and witnesses the trick. Proving to be both resourceful and capable, she garbs herself for knightly combat and she takes up arms, mounts a horse, and pursues him into the woods, where, finding him again hacking at his own armor hung upon a tree she confronts him. In her knightly disguise, she remarks:

Vostre escu por qoi peçoiez,
Qui ne vos avoit rien mesfait?
200 Mout avez or neü fol plait,
Que a lui avez gerre prise.

Why are you hacking at own shield,
which never did you any wrong?
You’ve now engaged yourself in a foolish plight
By making war on it.

At this point we see not only her clever humor, but also the gender inversion, both in terms of her disguise and her confident martial actions. Our heroine’s inverted exploits clarify the social and gender structure of the time while providing for the release of social tensions.⁷

As is often the case in medieval tales, Berengier’s lazy husband fails to recognize her. This failure raises several important points. It begs the question as to whether Berengier is really such a great trickster that she can successfully impersonate a knight simply by wearing his clothing, or whether her clothes somehow make the ‘man’. It is also questionable whether the propensity to be fooled by women in disguise reveals more about contemporary women and gender, or actually addresses medieval men’s’ discomfort or unfamiliarity with women and their bodies. Finally, the ease of inversion raises questions about contemporary sociological perceptions that are at play, i.e., is the issue of lineage or class the important factor here—does our Lady’s *gentil* blood, despite

her gender, naturally confer skills which a lower born man could not hope to match? To varying degrees, all of the above factors are at play in this tale, but I digress, as Berengier's author says:

36 Mais a ce que je ai empris
Repaireré por traire a chief.

But it would be better that I
return to my story to bring it to a head.

The lazy and cowardly husband, frightened of this bold knight that he has encountered in the woods, reveals his unworthiness when he is too frightened to face her in combat. She calls herself *Berengier au lonc cul*, in parody of contemporary epic and romantic names and in reference to her longer than usual (for a man) anus. She presents her husband with two choices: to fight, or to 'kiss his opponent's ass'. He chooses the latter, exposing, so to speak, yet more *fabliaux* motifs—through his actions he sets the ritual of vassalage on its head in a topsy-turvy kiss placed *way* too low. At the same time, he shows himself to be quite deserving of the cuckoldry which follows. Upon her return home, his disgusted but triumphant wife casually takes a lover and when her husband objects, she threatens him with her knightly protector, Berengier. It appears that she will be able to wear the pants in her household from now on. In this story we see that despite the Church's predictable stance on adultery, or the usual expectations of women to be docile and to submit to the will of their husbands, that "Berengier" legitimately escapes this fate and gets away with the transgression.

294 Et cele fait sa volanté,
Que ne fu sote ne vilaine

And she did her will,
As she was no fool or peasant

This tale is significant and meaningful not only for sociological reasons, but also for its moral and ethical insights, and it must have been perceived as very relevant. This

more hardcore fabliau might clash with the norms or sensibilities of courtly narrative, but in the “end” the heroine of the story provides a satisfying solution to the dilemmas resulting from the transgressions of greed and usury as well as laziness and cowardice.

Fabliaux by no means provide the only examples of stories in which the “bottom” is placed on top and the order of things is inverted. While *fabliaux* inversions grotesquely externalize psychosocial tensions with humorous language, conflicts and events, they are restrained by the brevity and the vulgarity of the genre.

Neither of these limitations is at play in the *roman*, and yet our more courtly tricksters do still raise questions about disguise and deception, norms and ethics, love and loyalty, and contemporary views of gender, sexuality and morality.

Or chante, or pense, or rit, or pleure;
Moult mue son cuer en pou de heure

Now she sings, now thinks, now laughs, now cries
Her mood will change, in only a little while.⁸

As in the *fabliaux*, social injustices inform and motivate *gentil* characters as well. Their tales offer additional windows onto contemporary social, sexual and economic conflicts.

In the late twelfth century *chanteable*, *Aucassin et Nicolette*⁹, Aucassin, the son of the Count of Beaucaire falls in love with a well-raised Saracen servant in the possession of a viscount in the neighborhood. She is considered to be an inappropriate match due to her low-born background and the Count tries to keep the lovers apart by imprisonment, threats, banishment, etc. Escaping, the lovers cross the sea to Torelore, are captured by pirates and separated. Aucassin eventually returns home to succeed his father who has died in the meantime, while Nicolette, transported to Carthage, discovers she is the daughter of the king. Restored to her birthright, she is placed in a situation in which she must escape yet again, or marry against her will. Nicolette demonstrates a number of

trickster traits: musical ability, mastery of disguise, ambiguous gender, and unorthodox cleverness and resourcefulness in the face of social restraints which are not of her making. Taking up the viol, she successfully disguises herself as a minstrel and goes back to Beaucaire in search of Aucassin, eventually marrying him at the end of the tale.

Once again, we see that the feminine trickster is located within a tale which also bears topsy-turvy characteristics and settings. For example, a central problem resulting from Aucassin's love for Nicolette is his refusal to do his knightly duties due to his obsession with his "*tres douce amie*" (his so sweet love): "*mais si estoit soupris d'Amor, qui tout vaint, q'il ne voloit estre cevalers, ne les armes prendre, n'aler au tornoi, ne fare point de quanque il deust.*" (But he was so overwhelmed with Love, who vanquishes all, that he didn't want to be a knight, or take up arms, or go to the tourney, or do any of the things he should.)

Racial traits are also reversed: the Saracen Nicolette is light, and must darken her complexion to assume her false identity. Comedic and farcical elements are present in the story, located in the midst of very serious tensions which include imprisonment, war, and the repeated threats of immolation Nicolette faces. The actions and traits of the King and Queen of Torelore are also inverted: the King is laid up in childbed, while the Queen leads an army that fights with rotten fruit. The inversions go so far as Aucassin's unusual declaration that he prefers an entertaining hell to a boring heaven.

Nicolette, clad in male attire, with darkened visage, and in the role of a traveling entertainer, fools her captors, and sails back to her love in disguise in much the same way that the classical Greek trickster Odysseus does at the end of his voyages. She too, first fools her spouse, getting the lay of the land before she eventually reveals herself and

resumes a more traditional socially prescribed role as his wife. In the unfolding of this tale we see that for love of his Nicolette, Aucassin has taken up arms, has successfully fought his father's enemies, and eventually he becomes worthy, he gains his beloved, order is restored; essentially she resumes a more traditional feminine role and he becomes a man.

Similarly, in *Erec et Enide*, Enide rights the topsy-turvy in her tale.¹⁰ While she loves Erec, by lamenting her husband's refusal to pursue acts of chivalry—essentially his act of inversion—she sets him on the path to make efforts to prove himself to her and clearly, to himself. Once again, it appears to be Enide who is the more resourceful, observant, and clever. While Enide does not go so far as to cross-dress or take up arms, it is she who exhibits an inversed martial awareness of the dangers of the trail through the forest. Her warnings, motivated by love and repeatedly expressed even against the demands from her husband Erec to keep silent, eventually bring them both to safety.

As tricksters challenge prevailing social restraints and gain meaningful control over their lives, as they carve out new roles for themselves, they often utilize their facility with language. It is interesting then to consider how silence and language are treated in these contexts, as, for example, when Enide repeatedly breaks with her husband's insistence to remain silent. Power of speech is frequently associated with the gabby fabliaux ladies, as well as with gender role rule breaking, and with the loquacious trickster motif.

While an in depth analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, an examination of the significance of language and silence in the tale of Silentius/ia in "*Le Roman de Silence*", might shed more light upon the relationship between language and agency in

the tales of French feminine tricksters.¹¹ Silentius, another trickster character, is again responding with gender inversion brought about as a result of social injustice. In this case, the ambiguous and clever Silentius is actually raised as a boy to protect “his” family fortune after the king has prohibited women from inheriting. Once again we see that disguise and garb confer “*vaillanz*” and “*chevalerie*”—it would seem that in assuming the guise of men, trickster heroines are suddenly able to excel at martial arts. We also again see an association between the trickster and music and entertainment. When she escapes, she, like Nicolette, becomes a traveling entertainer, a *jongleur* who is so proficient at singing that other poets conspire to kill her.

In more secular genres, cross-dressing is repeatedly and overtly associated with sexual transgression. Particularly in the *fabliaux*, heroines will cross-dress to spy upon their husbands’ fidelity and in the process, they advance the most topsy-turvy and scandalous examples of inversion. Cross-dressed women can also be found however, in a number of tales of saint’s lives where other aspects of feminine agency are important.¹² In many ways, these women can also be considered tricksters, although they tend to exhibit the trickster’s beneficial and healing traits while humorous characteristics are downplayed. Despite the more serious nature of their tales, however, they display a number of traits in common with the noble *Dames* of romance, and the witty women of *fabliaux*.

In the more secular genres women often cross-dress to address a wrong or to reverse dishonor done to them, or their loved ones. Once this wrong has been addressed, they generally, although not always, return to women’s dress when the broader social

inversion has been righted. Exceptions to this reversion include Blancadine who becomes Blancadin¹³ and Yde who becomes Ydé in *Yde et Olive*.¹⁴

Gender inversion is usually *not* temporary in the saint's lives and many transvestite saints only reveal this ultimate trick upon their deaths. Their stories, mostly but not always fictional, do not treat with women's desire for their "sweet loves"; instead, these tales usually involve women escaping unwanted marriages, sexual assaults, incest, or abandonment. This is achieved by their cutting their hair, donning men's garb, and assuming the guise of monks. Unlike most of their *fabliaux* or *roman* sisters, these women then live the rest of their lives as men, in some cases even rising to leadership roles in their monasteries. Despite the permanence of their inversion and the more serious mien, these women still do resemble their secular sisters in several significant ways. Again we see that by the act of assuming male garb women seem to be able to successfully perform previously impossible masculine acts; they are suddenly imbued with masculine characteristics. In the stories of these transvestite saint's lives male qualities are internalized to the point where these women are said to have "male souls" a characteristic term of praise in many of the tales. Despite the Biblical and religious transgressions involved, it is interesting that these women all become recognized as *saints*, their subversive acts are therefore clearly legitimized in the most elevated manner possible by the ecclesiastical authorities. Subsequently, these saints are therefore able to act as direct intermediaries between medieval women (and men) and God.

As in other medieval French manuscripts which treat with transvestism, medieval discourses addressing the lives and actions of cross-dressed female monks can be seen to shed light upon two conflicting possible outcomes. Cross-dressing can be seen to

facilitate escape from traditional sex roles while simultaneously reinforcing the contemporary gender hierarchy. On the one hand, these women appear to achieve a gender mobility denied to them in their women's guise, and on the other hand, by hiding and repressing their femaleness in an effort to "pass" as men, they embody contemporary associations between ideal spiritual asceticism and masculinity. This would be in keeping with a medieval theology which viewed women with male traits as rising above secular concepts of gender.

Tales of the quiet and ascetic cross-dressed female monks are overshadowed and contrasted by the flamboyant and dramatic late medieval life of Jeanne Darc who did not conceal her gender when she cross-dressed. It is significant that when a historic woman behaves like some of her contemporary fictional heroines, she meets a different fate. The tolerance allowed heroines in farce or *roman* does not extend to *la Pucelle*. Ultimately, her execution for heresy was directly attributed to her "relapse" into wearing male garb. While Jeanne argued that there were theological arguments defending her choice to wear men's clothing, particularly because it was motivated by necessity—in protection of her chastity¹⁵, her arguments were overruled and she was burned at the stake.

Despite her fate, however, Jeanne shares a number of characteristics with less holy heroines such as Berengier, Silentius, and Nicolette. *La Pucelle*, like Berengier and Silentius, acquires martial abilities in the simple act of donning her military garb. The cleverness of the trickster can be found in her demonstration of a surprising facility with military strategy and she leads a huge army of veteran soldiers. Like the trickster, she too is marginal, and she bears a number of other trickster traits: the Maid straddles and defies gender roles, she crosses social boundaries, she speaks with supernatural beings, she is

used by God: the weak is sent to confound the strong. Her very specific prophesies are fulfilled, she demonstrates an amazing ability to convince wily politicians, and she outmaneuvers learned theologians. She calls into question both the church and secular authority: “Vous dictes que vous estes mon juge, je ne sçay si vous l’estes; mais advisez bien que ne jugés mal, que vous vous mectriés en grant danger; et vous en advertis, afin que se nostre Seigneur vous en chastie, que je fais mon debvoir de le vous dire” (“You say that you are my judge, I don’t know if you are; but you would be well advised not to judge poorly, because you place yourself in great danger; and you are warned, so that if our Lord chastises you, I will have done my duty by telling you.” My translation)¹⁶

In medieval French literature there are many examples of cross-dressing females who exhibit characteristics of the trickster. There is “*Le dis dou chevalier à la mance*,” in which the heroine cross-dresses to go in search of her love in the Holy Land¹⁷. In *La Chanson de Floovant* we meet a character similar to Nicolette. This Saracen princess, Maugalis, cross-dresses as a knight and a minstrel, and like Nicolette, she escapes. In this case she flees to be with her Christian lover, Floovant.¹⁸ There is Marsebille who also cross-dresses, and yet again, like so many of her sisters, she too escapes to find her love Florent in *Florent et Octavien*.¹⁹

When we examine the actions and subtextual conceptions in the examples of cross-dressed women from the various genres discussed above, we find that they are not so far apart. Common threads run through them all. Medieval French literature’s trickster heroines operate as justified rule breakers working within a divine or ultimately legitimate system. Regardless of genre, these heroines defy social gender prescriptions through refusing and crossing the boundaries imposed upon them by medieval society.

Tales of successful cross-dressing women challenged contemporary notions about gender and sex, possibly even prompting medieval musings about the extent to which assumptions about sexuality and ability actually depended upon gender identification. Furthermore, in many cases the seemingly immoral or anti-religious actions of these women actually served to reinforce contemporary morality by indicting power and corruption (whether clerical or class-based) and righting social and religious wrongs.

Women in these genres demonstrate their actual power and strength in what often appears to be a negative way, in response to events in which society “goes wrong”. Despite misogynistic depictions and assumptions about women’s abilities, actual events in these tales often reveal an acknowledgment that women *can* be strong and capable, they *can* defend their own and their family’s honor in a fashion which exhibits both *pris* (honor) and *vaillanz* (bravery). Often, the socially prescribed roles as dictated by the Church or secular authorities are subverted by the inversive acts of these heroines. These rejections and the masculine inversions often provide the initiating events that provoke or motivate the topsy-turvy actions of the female tricksters. A major factor then is restoration of the masculine norm through tales that explore the power, agency, and abilities of women.

It bears noting that in *Aucassin et Nicolette* as in *Berengier*, the male protagonists reject their traditional masculine roles. In some sense it could be argued that they choose emasculation by refusing their social duties. This is also true in the tale of *Erec et Enide* when, like Aucassin, it is for love that Erec gives up his knightly pursuits to revel in bed with Enide. It can also be seen as the case in Jeanne Darc’s story. Here, the masculine roles of religious and military leadership have been abdicated, leading a seventeen-year

old to assume successful supreme command over a disintegrating French army, just as the English were preparing to utterly annihilate it.

Regardless of genre, tales of cross-dressing women provide similar insights into medieval French outlooks, morals, and beliefs. In each case, society itself can be seen to be threatened and the actions of these women are attempts at renewal—efforts to set things ‘straight’ through their topsy-turvy and destabilizing antics.

As we’ve seen, medieval tales often licensed temporary linguistic insubordination, as in the *fabliaux*, which, while vulgar and exhibitionistic, also release the tension of linguistic repression. In the *fabliaux*, medieval listeners must have reached a sort of bawdy catharsis—as the frustrations and limitations of the period were temporarily suspended through eroticism, vulgarity, humor and ultimately, a much hungered for justice. When exercised these tales then allow a return to a more refined, correct and clear speech which is renewed and made lovelier by virtue of the disorder with which it has been compared.

In the medieval French world, tales such as the *fabliaux* did not occur in a vacuum. They were combined with other genres both in terms of how they were transcribed and compiled in various manuscripts, and in their telling. An evening’s entertainment could very well see a *fabliau* intermingled with other more “lofty” and courtly tales, less scatological fables, and poetry or songs, although my guess is that the *fabliaux* came later in the evening.

Rational order and the normal assumptions of everyday medieval life were often destabilized through festivals, holidays, and celebrations which often included storytelling. Narratives and tales such as those mentioned in this paper are literary

contributions to the larger celebratory and temporary destabilization of the mundane. They could not have always been well received and certainly the church and other authorities must have sometimes greeted these rebellious fictions with censure. On the whole however, topsy-turvy festivities and tales must have been tolerated as ultimately stabilizing forces. This would explain both the prevalence of the tales and the concomitant lenience. These tales acted to relieve potentially destructive acts and to seek redress from injustice through humor, pathos and entertainment. This is at the heart of the trickster's role in the folkloric landscape.

Notes

1. By *fabliaux* ladies and *Pastourelle* peasant girls I am referring to representations of women in these two genres, specifically: depictions of women in *fabliaux*, the short humorous works described in greater detail in this paper under the section of the same name; depictions of women in *pastourelle*, short tales characterized by their pastoral setting, the presence of a man and a young woman, usually a shepherdess, with narrative events which include a (sometimes successful) attempt at seduction.
2. For a more in depth discussion of the oppositions between these genres as well as how they might impact literary criticism due to a "type-anti-type" approach, see Adams, Tracy, "Crossing Generic Boundaries: The Clever Courtly Lady," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 21, 2004: 81-96. For a discussion about feminine duality in literature of the period, see Fries, Maureen, "Feminae Populi: Popular Images of Women in Medieval Literature," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 14: 1 1980: 79-86.

3. For an interesting further discussion of tricksters in a female context with an expanded look at the anthropological literature including international comparisons/examples, see Jurich, Marilyn, "The Female Trickster—Known as Trickstar—As Exemplified by Two American Legendary Women, "Billy" Tipton and Mother Jones," *Journal of American Culture*, 22:1 1999: 69-75. For general discussion of the trickster motif see, Thompson, Stith. *Motif-Index of Folk Literature. A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends*. Rev. & enlarged ed. 6 vols., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955-1958.
4. "Le Roman de Partonopeu de Blois" ed., Librairie Générale Française, Le Livre de Poche, Collection 4569, Série : *Lettres Gothiques*, 2005 vv 117-20.
5. For further discussion of Misrule as social inversion in the context of Medieval France, see Davis, Natalie Zemon, "The Reasons of Misrule" *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Stanford University Press, 1975: 97-123. Also applicable to this discussion are the insights into medieval and early Renaissance misrule and inversion that can be found in Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington, Ind., 1984; Also see Chambers, E. K. *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols., London, 1903, vol. 1, especially the chapters on the Feasts of Fools, of the Boy Bishop, of the Ass, and other New Year celebrations.
6. *Nouveau Recueil Complet des Fabliaux*, ed. Willem Noomen and Nicolas van den Boogaard, vol. 4, Assen/Maastricht, 1988: 247-77.

7. Davis, Natalie Zeomon explores how comic and festive inversion both undermine as well as reinforce gender roles in “Women on Top”, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Stanford University Press, 1975: 130-151.
8. Fiero, Gloria K., ed., “Le Contenance des Fames”, *Three Medieval Views of Women*, Yale University Press: 1989.
9. *Aucassin et Nicolette*, Duforenet, Jean, ed., Paris: 1984.
10. de Troyes, Chretien, “Erec et Enide,” in *Romans*, Classiques Modernes, La Pochoteque, Librairie Generale Faracaisse, France, 1994: 55-283.
11. For a more detailed look at *The Roman de Silence* and the importance of language see Block, R. Howard, “Silence and Holes: The Roman de Silence and the Art of the Trouvere”, *Yale French Studies*, No. 70, 1986: 81-99.
12. For an interesting examination of this topic see Davis, Steven J., “Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10:1, 2002, 1–36.
13. *Tristan de Nanteuil: chanson de geste inédite*, ed. Sinclair, K. V. Assen, 1971.
14. *Yde et Olive: Esclarmonde, Clarisse et Florent, Yde et Olive, drei Fortsetzungen der chanson von Hugh de Bordeaux*, ed. Schweigel, M., Ausgaben und Abhandlungen aus dem Gebiete der romanischen Philologie, 83, Marburg: 1889.
15. St. Jeanne was referring to exceptions to the cross-dressing rule found in the *Summan Theologica*, specifically: “Nevertheless this may be done sometimes without sin on account of some necessity, either in order to hide oneself from

enemies, or through lack of other clothes, or for some similar motive.” *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Second and Revised Edition, 1920, Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province; Knight, Kevin, 2003, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/316902.htm>. St. Jeanne was also drawing upon the same exception found in the twelfth century, *Scito Vias Domini*, “Scivias” by St. Hildegard von Bingen: “Men and women should not wear each other’s clothes except in necessity. A man should never put on feminine dress or a woman use male attire... Unless a man’s life or a woman’s chastity is in danger; in such an hour a man may change his dress for a woman’s or a woman for a man’s... ” Bingen, St. Hildegard von; *Scivias*; Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (translators); Paulist Press, New York, 1990: Book II, Vision 6, 77.

16. Quoted in *The Trial of Jeanne d’Arc*, ed. W.P. Barrett, 1931.
17. *Dits et Contes de Baudouin de Condé et de son Fils Jean de Condé, Publiés d’après les Manuscrits de Bruxelles, Turin, Rome, Paris et Vienne et Accompagnés de Variantes et de Notes Explicatives*, ed. Auguste Scheler, 3 vols: vol. 2, *Jean de Condé, première partie*, Brussels, 1866.
18. *La Chanson de Floovant: Étude Critique et Édition*, ed. Bateson, F. H., Loughborough, 1938.
19. *Florent et Octavien*, ed. Laborderie, Noëlle, Paris, 1991.