

Destruction as Creation: A Violent Gloss in the Auchinleck Manuscript

The multidisciplinary scholarly significance of the Auchinleck Manuscript (National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1) can, in many ways, be attributed to what the Manuscript does *not* contain. The absence of works in Latin or Anglo-Norman French is a salient feature, as during the early fourteenth century, when the manuscript was made (Pearsall vii), England was still a trilingual nation. Auchinleck also lacks practical literature, such as, medical treatises, recipes, charms and prognosticatory material, all of which were quite common in late medieval miscellanies. These “missing texts” can lead to valuable scholarly inferences about the readership of the manuscript; for example, the monolingual nature of the manuscript and the texts it contains marks it as one of the earliest extant collections “specifically designed for enthusiasts of literary and historical texts in the English language” (*The Auchinleck Manuscript*).

Continuing on in the tradition of scholarly interpretation through textual absence, this essay will act as a brief introduction to another conspicuous lacuna in the Auchinleck manuscript, that of an elusive, yet imaginatively stimulating text known, perhaps erroneously since 1884, as *þe Wenche þat Loved þe King*.¹ This text along with its miniature appears on f. 256vb and is continued on the following folio, now a stub labelled f. 256a (Furrow 440-1).² It is of interest for a variety of reasons but most pertinent is the fact that a reader has deliberately and violently scratched both the text and its accompanying illustration from the manuscript. Moreover, the remaining visual and textual evidence presents the possibility that this is (or was) an English vernacular fabliau. Its “presence”, therefore, is significant, as it doubles the grand total of “known” pre – Chaucerian English Fabliaux to two (Furrow 441), one of which has been destroyed.³

There are two positions one could take in this matter: either the fabliau can be ignored or written off as ruined and therefore of no scholarly importance; or the censorship can be seen as an active response by a reader and, therefore, valid, albeit dramatic, textual commentary. Camille argues that:

“We tend to associate creation with construction, not destruction, but the selective obliteration of parts of an image surely constitutes not merely editing and expurgation. . . but an

¹ The title in the MS is longer by about three words; they appear between “Loved” and “King”, if indeed these words are correct in the first instance (Furrow 441).

² For a visual of facsimile see <http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/wenche.html> and for an analysis and “edition” see “*þe Wenche*: The Fabliau and the Auchinleck Manuscript” in *Notes and Queries* 239: 440-443.

³ The other pre-Chaucerian English fabliau is *Dame Sirip* from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86. This figure tends to fluctuate depending on the prevailing generic definitions of fabliaux; the highest number of possibilities posited, however, is that there are two or three known pre-Chaucerian English fabliau, not including *þe Wenche* (Lewis 242).

embodied response” (140).

While the above quote is concerned with images, it is worth noting that in this instance the text and its illumination are inextricably linked in the mind of the censor-reader, as both were carefully and laboriously removed from the manuscript. Only the centre of the illumination has been scratched away, the area that may have portrayed something obscene. A bed with blue bedcovers can still be discerned and the remnant of two hands, too far apart to belong to the same character, suggests two figures. Furrow points out that, “Other illuminations from late medieval manuscripts show a similar design, with the occupants of the bed more or less chastely covered, more or less lasciviously busy” (Furrow 441-2).⁴ Whatever state in between lasciviousness and chastity the couple in question were in, it is clear that text and image, undoubtedly commenting on and reflecting each other, as with the other Auchinleck texts and miniatures, created something counter to the sensibilities of a reader(s) and they acted accordingly. It is even possible that it was the bawdy illumination that attracted destructive attention initially and the text was merely seen as a continuation of (or accomplice to) the unacceptable image.

If this is indeed a Middle English fabliau – and it seems plausible, from analysis of what remains of the text and miniature, that it is - then the expurgation can be read as an example of a physical and hostile commentary on a genre that, in turn, poses ironic and parodical commentary on the lofty ideals of romance. As Furrow explains, “Fabliaux exists in a sort of adversarial relationship to romance . . . romances take a deliberately high view of life and the fabliau a determinedly low one” (7). It is significant then that a miscellany containing eight romances should contain a fabliau that may have created an ironic and humorous disjunction between the two literary registers, especially within a manuscript that potentially reflects the literary milieu that bred a young Geoffrey Chaucer,⁵ whose *Canterbury Tales* ultimately exploits this type of literary exploration, interpretation and commentary through juxtaposed texts and hybridized genres.

Whatever commentary (perceived or otherwise) that the presence of this effaced fabliau made on the other texts within the Auchinleck manuscript was clearly offensive to some reader(s); the trouble is that it is difficult to establish with any certainty who mutilated the text and image, when they did it and why it was done. The text immediately following *þe Wenche*, another “comic tale” entitled *A Peniworb of Witt* (f. 257ra–259rb), contains such fabliau-like themes as adultery and trickery, yet it remains untouched. This is perhaps due to its morally didactic ending, something that is quite distinctly lacking in fabliaux. The fact that the passages containing trickery, frivolous mistaken identity and premarital sex

⁴ To view the Auchinleck image go to, <http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck/mss/wenche.html>

⁵ Mary Hibbard Loomis, in her essay ‘Chaucer and the Auchinleck MS’ in *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown* (New York, 1940 11-28), even goes as far as to posit that Chaucer knew of this manuscript. While this has been dismissed as a “romantic” view by Pearsall (XI), it is still likely that Chaucer knew of similar manuscript miscellanies also containing, what seem to be today, awkwardly matched genres.

between the young lovers in *Floris and Blancheflour* (f. 100ra-f.104vb) also escaped the reader's violent literary criticism, further suggest that this text must have been even more bawdy and scatological than other Auchinleck texts and without any redeeming moral significance whatsoever.

As a consequence, *be Wenche* has been read and interpreted with what is arguably a visual gloss. As Camille states in an essay on medieval censorship:

“Just as we now see commentaries added to the margins of medieval manuscripts as accretions and glosses to the multiple meanings of the never-finished, always open texts of the period, should we not consider these acts of taking away also as glosses?” (145)

It may be significant that the censor-commentator left enough clues as to the kind of objectionable material that has been removed, perhaps in order to demonstrate to subsequent readers what was deemed unacceptable reading and viewing. He or she scraped patches of the material raw rather than remove the pages completely (as others have done) in order to imbue a text with a moral lesson that did not originally contain one. “For once you rub something away, you tend to draw attention to what was there before the obfuscation” (Camille 145-6).⁶

Of course the temptation is always there for the subsequent reader to “project whatever she or he wants the poem to read” onto the vellum of the Auchinleck MS that once contained the lines of *be Wenche* (Furrow 441). Not enough of the text survives to uncover, or even guess at, potential analogues, so we are left with a frustrating and tantalizing lacuna that contained a fabliau that Chaucer – whose enhanced and perfected fabliau-like tales resulted in bawdy material being accepted into the English canon – may have known in English. In this regard the text and its thankfully rare form of commentary may never yield anything of value; it may, however, shed some light on the debate as to whether the distinct scarcity of bawdy tales in Middle English can be attributed to the fact that there never were any in the first instance (at least in writing), or that they may have existed but met with the same fate as *be Wenche*.

⁶ Camille also posits a time period when the censorship of medieval illuminated manuscripts may have occurred (although not referring directly to the Auchinleck MS): he argues, “it is in the fifteenth century that we see the beginnings of prurience in representing the sexual act and its intentional obfuscation . . .” (151). He also draws attention to the fact that it was in 1400 that Christine de Pisan launched her heated objection to the *Roman de la Rose*'s use of ‘foul’ words (151).

Works Cited

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Alan J. Foley,
Department of English,
UCC.