# TEN BOURDES

Edited by
Melissa M. Furrow



TEAMS
Middle English Texts Series

# Ten Bourdes

## Middle English Texts Series

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Melissa M. Furrow

TEAMS • Middle English Texts Series

MEDIEVAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS
Western Michigan University
*Kalamazoo*

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**The Library of Congress has already cataloged the paperback as follows:**

Ten bourdes / edited by Melissa M. Furrow.
pages cm. -- (Middle English texts series)
Ten Bourdes is a fresh edition of the poems found in Ten fifteenth-century comic poems (New York: Garland, 1985), with one deletion (The Feast of Tottenham) and one addition (King Edward and the Shepherd). This edition is designed for students. The earlier scholarly edition was done before the publication of the Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English (LALME) with its new information, which has now changed many conclusions about the place of origin of poems.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-1-58044-192-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. English poetry--Middle English, 1100-1500. 2. Humorous poetry, English. 3. English poetry--Middle English, 1100-1500--History and criticism. 4. Humorous poetry, English--History and criticism. I. Furrow, Melissa M., 1954- editor. II. Furrow, Melissa M., 1954- Ten fifteenth century comic poems.
PR1195.H8T38 2013
821'.108–dc23

2013001538

ISBN 978-1-58044-192-6
eISBN 978-1-58044-458-3

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a pleasant task to acknowledge the assistance that has gone into this edition, most immediately that of Peter Chiykowski, who has been deeply involved in research on *King Edward and the Shepherd*, and who has been the latest of those able assistants who have brought a combination of the perspective of a student and the abilities of a researcher and editor to work on these poems. His predecessors Alexandra Rahr and Alison Symons too were an invaluable help in the establishment of the texts and glosses.

Russell Peck first invited me to prepare this edition, and I am grateful for his interest, patience, and support, and the helpfulness of the TEAMS project staff in assembling manuscript microfilm printouts for me to do preliminary checking of texts (notably Rose Paprocki) and formatting the results (John H. Chandler). Additional thank yous go to Alan Lupack, Martha M. Johnson-Olin, Sharon E. Rhodes, and Kara L. McShane. I would also like to thank Patricia Hollahan and her staff at MIP and the National Endowment for the Humanities for funding this project.

Thanks for support received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which allowed my initial trips to England to examine manuscripts, and to a Dalhousie University Sabbatical Leave grant, which allowed trips to Cambridge and to the Huntington Library in California to examine the manuscript of *King Edward and the Shepherd* and the early print of *The Freiris of Berwik*, respectively. Research Development Grants from Dalhousie and the Sabbatical Leave grant have very much facilitated bringing this project to a conclusion.

I am grateful to the libraries housing the manuscripts and early texts concerned and to their librarians who gave me access to the texts and permission to edit and publish them: the British Library for MS Harley 78, fols. 74r–81v, *The Lady Prioress*; and MS Additional 27879 (the Percy Folio Manuscript), pp. 357–68, *John the Reeve*, and pp. 284–87, *The Boy and the Mantle*. Cambridge University Library for MS Ff.5.48, fols. 58r–61v, *The Tale of the Basin*, and 48v–56v, *King Edward and the Shepherd*. The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, for MS Ashmole 61 (Bodley 6922), fols. 59v–62r, *Sir Corneus,* and 157r–161v, *The King and the Hermit*; for S.Seld.d.45(6), *Dane Hew, Munk of Leicestre*; and for MS Rawlinson C.86 (Bodley 11951), fols. 52r–59r, *Jack and His Stepdame*. The Trustees of the National Library of Scotland for the Bannatyne Manuscript, MS Advocates' 1.1.6, vol. 2, fols. 180v–186v, *The Freiris of Berwik*. I am grateful too to the Huntington Library for permission to examine the early printed edition of *The Freiris of Berwik*.

Some of the work in this edition is indebted to *Ten Fifteenth-Century Comic Poems* (New York: Garland, 1985), and readers are referred to that earlier text if they would like to follow up on scholarly issues. I remain indebted to Elizabeth Edwards, then my research assistant and now my colleague, for her help in the preparation of that edition, particularly the glossary.

# General Introduction

*Ten Bourdes* is a fresh edition of the poems found in my earlier *Ten Fifteenth-Century Comic Poems* (New York: Garland, 1985), with one deletion (*The Feast of Tottenham*) and one addition (*King Edward and the Shepherd*).[1] The edition is completely reconceived — that was a scholarly edition; this is designed in the first instance for students. That was done before the publication of the monumental *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (*LALME*); this has been done since, with the consequence that many of the conclusions I reached earlier about place of origin of poems have had to be modified in the face of new information. In that edition two poems (*The Freiris of Berwik* and *Jack and His Stepdame*) were edited from multiple source texts by recension; in this edition all poems are based primarily on a single source, manuscript or print, and emendations even for sense or rhyme are more cautious. Like other METS texts, this edition has marginal glosses to make it more accessible to student readers, as well as the glossary at the end, and explanatory and textual notes. The earlier edition had more extensive textual notes and more information on the manuscripts and early printed versions, but that information is apt to be of interest only to scholarly researchers. This edition aims to put funny (or would-be funny) Middle English poems under the eyes of a much broader readership.

What to call this edition became an interesting conceptual problem. There are still ten poems, although two of them are incomplete. But research on *King Edward and the Shepherd* persuaded my research assistant Peter Chiykowski and me that it could be dated quite precisely to the period 1345–47, not the fifteenth century by anyone's reckoning. At the other end of the time span, poems that are preserved only in late manuscripts like *The Boy and the Mantle* in the Percy Folio Manuscript are impossible to date to the fifteenth century with complete conviction unless there are corroborating external references, as there are for *John the Reeve*, another Percy Folio poem. And "comic poems" is not medieval terminology. French had of course the genre term *fabliau* for its comic poems of the twelfth and thirteenth century, a term that is transferable readily to those of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that are clearly imitating them and what they do. But an acquaintance with the ten poems in this collection will quickly reveal that unlike a *fabliau* they all conclude with morality triumphant, provided they still have a conclusion. Wandering spouses are returned to marriages; adulterous clergy are punished and barred from returning to their adultery; at the very least, as in the Arthurian bourdes, adultery at court is exposed; a cruel stepmother is humiliated; and on the rewards side of justice, a little victim is made secure, virtue triumphs, hospitality is rewarded, and money, gifts, and food flow to the good. *Fabliaux* do not

[1] *The Feast of Tottenham* is now available edited by Kooper in *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, pp. 205–11; *King Edward and the Shepherd*, on the other hand, has not been readily available since 1930, in French and Hale's collection *Middle English Metrical Romances*, 2:947–85.

necessarily oppose morality — in them, sometimes the wicked are punished as much as the foolish are — but many a *fabliau* derives its humor from defrauding the innocent. Not so in these comic poems.

Unfortunately, if this is a genre, what is left of it is scant (perhaps a score of poems at the outside) and contemporary commentary on them is apparently nonexistent: there is no one I can find who wrote "comic poems like *The Tale of the Basin* or *The Freiris of Berwik* are a waste of time," a piece of genre criticism that would be immeasurably useful. And certainly "comic poems" is a label that would not have been used by those who wrote them. *Bourdes*, however, is potentially such a label. Three of our poems actually use the term. The earliest, *King Edward and the Shepherd*, uses the term eight times in reference to the entertaining customs of the shepherd in the poem, or to the enjoyment of others in learning of that behavior, but not in a way that makes it refer to the whole poem (see lines 214, 223, 323, 478, 487, 612, 633, and 699). *John the Reeve* describes its origins:

> As I heard tell this other yere,
> A clarke came out of Lancashire;
> A rolle he had reading.
> A bourde written therein he found
> That sometime fell in England
> In Edwardes dayes our king.
> (lines 7–12)

*Sir Corneus* proclaims

> Of a bowrd I wyll you schew
> That ys full gode and trew,
> That fell sometyme in Ynglond.
> (lines 4–6)

The word is first attested in English in the Auchinleck Manuscript c. 1330, according to *The Middle English Dictionary*, and already there it has several related meanings: an amusing story, fun, an amusing incident. As a small genre, the *bourde* is the immediate predecessor of the *merry jest*, a type discussed by Linda Woodbridge as existing for a short while during the early years of printing, from 1510 to 1534.[2] Two of our tales, *Jack and His Stepdame* (in its print version *The Friar and the Boy)*, and *Dane Hew, Munk of Leicestre*, were published as *A Mery Jest* ("Here begynneth a mery geste of the frere and the boye," "Heere beginneth a mery Iest of Dane Hew Munk of Leicestre, and how he was foure times slain and once hanged"). Like the term *bourde*, the term *merry jest* was used both to label the kind of poem and to describe its content, the practical joke, revealing deception, or humiliating exposure that the poems are built upon and that the reader, if not all the characters, is invited to enjoy. Though not all the poets whose work is included here have used the term *bourde* to

[2] She identifies nine single jests in verse, one compilation of jests in verse in 1525 (*Twelve Merry Jests of the Widow Edith*), and then six compilations in prose, in *Vagrancy, Homelessness, and English Renaissance Literature*, appendix B, English Renaissance Jest Books, p. 285.

label their work, it seems possible that all ten would have recognized it as an appropriate one. *Ten Bourdes*, then, is what we have here.

The French and English comic genres are best contrasted by how they fail to be funny. A *fabliau* fails by being excessively violent or excessively disgusting in either physical or moral ways: if the reader cannot tolerate the extremes to which a *fabliau* goes, the tale will not strike that reader as amusing. But considering the number of provocations in the genre — the rapes, beatings, castrations, and feculence — it is evident that a *fabliau* is supposed to derive its humor from being shocking enough. A bourde, however, fails by being too morally corrective. A good example would be *The Wright's Chaste Wife*, which involves a similar sort of fleecing of the predatory male to what we see in *Dane Hew, Munk of Leicestre*. But whereas there is a good deal of slapstick humor and misplaced horror in *Dane Hew*, in which no tears are shed for the lascivious monk's death, in *The Wright's Chaste Wife* there is a tedious abundance of lesson-teaching. Three lecherous men are one by one dropped through a trapdoor and forced to do women's work in order to earn anything to eat. They emerge into the custody of the lady married to the highest ranking of the three. Nothing is left concealed, nobody is blackmailed, the chaste wife still gets to keep the enormous amounts of money given to her in anticipation by her three lustful suitors, and the wright ends unscathed and indeed benefited. In a romance, let alone a *fabliau*, he would have been the sort of aged roué married to a young and beautiful woman who deservedly gets cuckolded for shutting her up in a structure that protects her from the attentions of other men. In this story he ends with a virtuous *and* wealthy wife.[3]

A signal of the genre of bourde can be understood to be the demand for laughter, expressed either as an opening signaling that laughter or merriment is expected or an internal observation that some of the characters "laughed and had good game" at others. It is there, for example, in *The Wright's Chaste Wife*, where at the end the wife of the lascivious lord reacts to the plight of her husband and his two fellows:

> The lady lawghed and made good game
> Whan they came owte alle in-same *together*
> From the swyngylle tre.
> (lines 601–03)

The lady is, however, probably the only one who laughs. Other genre signals are "Make you mery all and som" (*Lady Prioress*, line 15); "Ever they lough and had good game" (*Jack and His Stepdame*, line 175); "Ever the boye blewe and lewh amonge" (*Jack and His Stepdame*, line 253); "Tho that at souper satte / They had good game and lough therat" (*Jack and His Stepdame*, lines 346–47); "In feyth this was the meryest fytte / That I hard this sewyn yere" (*Jack and His Stepdame*, lines 413–14); "A man may dryfe forth the day that long tyme dwellis / With harpyng and pipyng and other mery spellis" (*Tale of the Basin*, lines 3–4); "When that men be glad and blyth, / Than wer solas god to lyth, / He that wold be stylle" (*King and the Hermit*, lines 7–9); "All that wyll of solas lere, / Herkyns now and ye schall here, / And ye kane understond. / Of a bowrd I wyll you schew / That ys full gode and trew, / That fell sometyme in Ynglond" (*Sir Corneus*, lines 1–6); "And ye wil listyn how hit ferd / Betwene

[3] See the edition of *The Wright's Chaste Wife* by Eve Salisbury in her collection *Trials and Joys of Marriage*, pp. 61–84.

Kyng Edward and a scheperd, / Ye shalle lawgh of gyle" (*King Edward and the Shepherd*, 10–12), and the king's promise to his nobles, "Ye shall have gode bourd, in certayne, / Yif that ye will be stille" (*King Edward and the Shepherd*, lines 612–13); "Best is mirth of all solace; / Therfore I hope itt betokenes grace, / Of mirth who hath likinge" (*John the Reeve*, lines 4–6); "The laughed, without doubt, / And soe did all that were about, / To see John on his steede" (*John the Reeve*, lines 778–80); "Heere beginneth a mery Iest of Dane Hew Munk of Leicestre" (*Dane Hew*, title; see Textual Note); "Then every knight / That was in the kinges court / Talked, lauged, and showted / Full oft att that sport" (*The Boy and the Mantle*, lines 73–76). There is no such overt generic signal in *The Freiris of Berwik*, which is rather more like a *fabliau* in the gratuitous harm done the innocent husband in the poem, who accidentally knocks himself out in the flurry of violence as the adulterous friar leaves the building, but more like a bourde in its putting a stop to the ongoing adultery between Alison and Friar John.

Obviously contemporary readers cannot have expectations of a genre unless it exists. But if the genre of bourde did exist when Chaucer wrote, one important implication is the expectation readers would have brought to his comic tales. The Miller's and Reeve's Tales would have seemed by contrast to bourdes startlingly retro, a revisiting and remaking of a genre that had existed in Anglo-Norman a hundred years in the past. Creative forms of humiliation and violence affect the cuckold, the would-be cuckolder, and the actual cuckolder in The Miller's Tale, and the swiving of Simkin the miller's wife and daughter in The Reeve's Tale is presented as a means of getting revenge on Simkin. But the Summoner's and Friar's Tales might have been experienced as tales that fit into the genre of bourde instead, a more comfortably English genre, and one in which comeuppance is highly valued and lack of compassion for the innocent is a punishable offence: a predatory summoner is sent off to hell by the poor widow's curse, a greedy and insensitive friar is given a very noisy fart by a sick peasant whose child has recently died. The Friar's Tale even has a similar generic signal ("I wol yow of a somonour telle a game" [III(D)1279]) though The Summoner's Tale rather conspicuously does not claim "they all laughed" but rather provides an amusingly deadpan reception for Jankin's solution to the problem in ars-metrik. Perhaps that pair of tales could best be considered as belonging to an English rather than a French genre, and meeting the expectations of that genre (indeed helping to shape it) rather than not fitting the other one, or any genre, very well at all. It seems more prudent, because potentially productive of fresh and more accurate insight, to assign a different generic label than *fabliau* to the comic poems of the fifteenth century in English and to follow up the implications of the different expectations such a genre would entail. It is a matter of more doubt whether the genre should be extended backwards into the fourteenth century in our current state of knowledge, given the dating of *King Edward and the Shepherd* but the lack of other similar poems from such an early date.

Readers interested in the comic tale as a genre in Middle English will find the following of use:

Brewer, Derek. "The International Medieval Popular Comic Tale in England." In *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*. Ed. Thomas J. Heffernan. Tennessee Studies in Literature 28. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985. Pp. 131–47.

———. "Introduction" to *Medieval Comic Tales*. Second ed. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996. Pp. xi–xxxiv, especially pp. xxxii–xxxiv.

Busby, Keith. "Conspicuous by its Absence: The English Fabliau." *Dutch Quarterly Review* 12 (1982), 30–41.

Cooke, Thomas. "Middle English Comic Tales." In *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500*. Vol. 9, gen. ed. Albert E. Hartung. New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1993. Section 24 Tales, pp. 3138–3328, 3472–3592, especially pp. 3151–58.

Furrow, Melissa. "The Middle English Fabliaux and Modern Myth." *ELH* 56 (1989), 1–18.

———. "Comic Tales." In *Medieval England: An Encyclopedia.* Ed. Paul E. Szarmach, M. Teresa Tavormina, and Joel Thomas Rosenthal. New York: Garland, 1998. Pp. 203–04.

Goodall, Peter. "An Outline History of the English Fabliau after Chaucer." *AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language & Literature Association* 57 (1982), 5–23.

Hines, John. *The Fabliau in English*. London: Longman, 1993.

Robbins, Rossell Hope. "The English Fabliau: Before and after Chaucer." *Moderna Språk* 64 (1970), 231–44.

Wright, Glenn. "The Fabliau Ethos in the French and English *Octavian* Romances." *Modern Philology* 102 (2005), 478–500.



## TALES OF WHITE MAGIC: INTRODUCTION

*The Tale of the Basin* is grouped together with *Jack and His Stepdame* in this edition because in both poems the plot turns on white magic. Each poem has a benign figure — an old man in *Jack and His Stepdame*, a concerned brother who is also a priest in *The Tale of the Basin* — who intervenes to help the protagonist in his domestic struggles. The brother in *The Tale of the Basin* enchants a chamberpot so that his sister-in-law's lover will not be able to put it down once he picks it up, and a cluster of those who try to help by tugging each other away cannot be broken. The old man in *Jack and His Stepdame* grants three wishes to the kindhearted little boy Jack, and two of those wishes (for a bow and for a pipe) are met with enchanted objects as well: a bow and arrows that cannot miss, a pipe that causes all who hear it to dance uncontrollably. The third wish — that Jack's cruel stepmother should fart thunderously every time she scowls at him — is harder to categorize.

For those accustomed to reading *fabliaux*, the comic tales from medieval French literature of a type made known to later English readers through Chaucer's adaptations of the genre, the husband in *The Tale of the Basin* is a peculiar figure: a hapless and ineffective husband in two senses of the word *husband*, married man and domestic manager, who is nevertheless rescued in the course of the tale by his brother's cleverness instead of ending as a comic victim of the plotting. It is the manly hunk, the adulterous priest, who is humiliated and blackmailed out of the picture, and the erring shrew of a wife is also shamed and reined in sexually and financially by the exile of her lover so that domestic harmony is restored.

The motif of the magic object to which a group of people become stuck is a widespread one in European folklore. It is discussed in an important German article on the story collected by the Grimm Brothers: *Die goldene Gans*, in Johannes Bolte and Georg Polívka's *Anmerkungen zu der Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 2, article 64. *The Tale of the Basin* seems to be the earliest of the stories in which the sticky situation arises as a punishment for adultery.

*Jack and His Stepdame* is a peculiarity, not only when read against a background of *fabliaux*, but when read against the background of medieval literature in general. Its protagonist is a child, an ordinary little boy. And the tale itself has a distinctive comic innocence about it: normally a comic plot involving a friar who is the confidant of the wife of the household would hinge upon adultery, but any suggestion of an adulterous relationship between the friar and the wife in this story is brought to it by an experienced reader, not explicit in the story itself. Instead the comedy of the tale derives from slapstick violence and from flatulence, and from the stripping of power away from the threatening figures of the stepmother, who wants to get Jack out of the household, and the friar, who is enlisted by her to beat Jack brutally as revenge for her gassy humiliation.

*Jack and His Stepdame* became a remarkably popular story. It survives in four medieval manuscripts as well as the later Percy Folio Manuscript and five early printed editions or fragments from London up to 1626. There is a longer version of the story in one of the

medieval manuscripts, in the Percy Folio Manuscript, and in all the printed texts, in which the friar retaliates against Jack by having him summoned to court to answer to the "offycyal" for necromancy. In all the printed editions the extended story is titled some variant of *The Friar and the Boy*, and that is the name under which it continued to be known for hundreds of years. It was published as a chapbook, like *Dane Hew, Munk of Leicestre*, and in chapbook form — small, cheap, and portable for chapmen to carry across the countryside for sale — it was disseminated not only from London but from other printing centers in an increasingly wide circle, up into Scotland, over to Ireland, and then to the United States. It was modernized, extended, and given a sequel, which was also widely circulated. After being read, chapbooks could serve as what was indelicately called "bumfodder"; they were a sort of value-added toilet paper. But the unbound chapbook, massprinted on paper, achieved a much more widespread circulation for *The Friar and the Boy* than the laboriously produced manuscript ever could have done for *Jack and His Stepdame*. At one extreme, the literary luminary Robert Burton alluded to it in his immensely learned *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and valued it enough to preserve his copy with some other chapbooks and leave it to the Bodleian Library on his death in 1639/40. At the other, it may have been one of few books ever read by the barely literate. Its childish appeal may mean it was one of the first books read by many.

Recent scholarship on *Jack and His Stepdame* has taken various directions. Nicholas Orme, a historian of medieval education, has written on *Jack and His Stepdame* (under the title *The Friar and the Boy*) as a rare example of medieval literature for children with a protagonist who is a child throughout the story, in "Children and Literature in Medieval England." Brian S. Lee cites Jack as a "pert" child (such children "are those self-conscious enough to be able to articulate their opposition to adult constraints") in "Seen and Sometimes Heard," p. 42. But the American folklorist Carl Lindahl has written on it as the first of the "Jack" folktales, a large group in American folklore describing the adventures of a man named Jack. He argues that folktale Jacks are off-limits to children and women because of the obscenity and scatology of their stories in "Jacks: The Name, the Tales, the American Traditions." This last observation seems better suited to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which modernized and bowdlerized versions (versions with the naughty bits taken out) of the story were circulated, than it does to the periods before or since.

Richard Kieckhefer mentions *Jack and His Stepdame* as an exception to the usual role of magic in *fabliaux*, in his *Magic in the Middle Ages*: "The power of Jack's magical pipe might be mysterious, but most magical trickery, even in the *fabliaux*, worked in natural ways" (p. 93). *The Tale of the Basin*, though not mentioned, is a similar exception in that the chamberpot is genuinely enchanted, as are the objects in the two Arthurian bourdes included in this edition. Kieckhefer's section "The Making of a Clerical Underworld" (pp. 153–56) is useful on priests practicing magic.

*The Tale of the Basin* is mentioned by Peter Goodall in "English Fabliau after Chaucer," especially pp. 9–10, and by Marie Nelson and Richard Thomson in "Fabliau," especially pp. 261–62. As *The Tale of the Pot* it appears modernized in Derek Brewer's *Medieval Comic Tales*, pp. 55–58, and is discussed by him on pp. xxxii–xxxiii. *Jack and His Stepdame* is mentioned by Goodall under the title *The Frere and the Boye*, pp. 9–10. As *The Friar and the Boy* (but in the shorter version of most of the medieval manuscripts) it appears in Brewer's *Medieval Comic Tales*, pp. 58–62, and in the discussion on pp. xxxii–xxxxiii. Both poems are mentioned in the more general generic discussions of Glenn Wright in "Fabliau Ethos in the French and English *Octavian* Romances," p. 479n3; and Melissa Furrow's "Comic Tales."

## THE TALE OF THE BASIN: INTRODUCTION

### MANUSCRIPT AND SCRIBE

*The Tale of the Basin* is found in Cambridge University Library MS Ff.5.48, fols. 58r–61v. *The King and the Shepherd*, in the current collection, is also from this manuscript. CUL MS Ff.5.48 has been of interest to a number of scholars; it has been fully described by Manfred Görlach in *Textual Tradition*, pp. 126–27. Janay Y. Downing has edited the whole manuscript as a Ph.D. dissertation, "A Critical Edition of Cambridge University MS Ff. 5.48." My earlier edition, *Ten Fifteenth-Century Comic Poems*, describes the manuscript and lists its principal contents on pp. 45–49. Thomas Ohlgren analyzes it in his chapter "'lewed peple loven tales olde:' *Robin Hood and the Monk* and the Manuscript Context of Cambridge, University Library MS Ff.5.48," in his *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, pp. 28–67.

The language of the manuscript has been analyzed by the editors of *LALME*, who find that the manuscript has two "hands" (though Hand A, the relevant one to us, is described as having similar, but not identical, language in different places, and it is my belief that there are two principal hands included in this section, A1 for fols. 2r–56v, 58r–66r, and 93r–112r; A2 for fols. 67r–78v, and 112v–the end). Hand A is said in *LALME* to be responsible for fols. 1r–78v, and 93r–135v, including the signature of the scribe, Gilbert Pylkyngton, on fol. 43r (1:67). The language of Hand A is said to be from Derbyshire. Lister Matheson has done a further analysis of the language of *Robin Hood and the Monk* from fols. 128v–135v of the manuscript, using the methodology of *LALME*, and finds the scribal language to be more specifically from West Derbyshire, near the Cheshire or Staffordshire borders. His analysis is part of an appendix to Ohlgren's *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, "The Dialects and Language of Selected Robin Hood Poems," that seeks to bolster Ohlgren's claim that Gilbert Pilkington was "Hand A"; that he was the Gilbert Pilkington ordained as a subdeacon, then deacon, then priest in 1463–65 in the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield; and that he may have belonged to a family of Pilkingtons from Mellor, Derbyshire (see pp. 194–200). The detective work on Pilkington's identity is convincing and of great interest. That Pilkington was the scribe for the whole manuscript is not probable. Ohlgren himself sees "two main scribal hands: Scribe A (fols. 2r to 78v) and Scribe B (fols. 95r to 135v)";[1] by implication, at least one more hand is involved in fols. 79r to 92v, before the missing fols. 93 and 94. I would argue that there are three principal hands and a couple of minor ones, but I accept as likely that Pilkington was involved with only a small group of people in its planning and production.

[1] Ohlgren, *Robin Hood: The Early Poems*, p. 29.

It is not surprising that *The Tale of the Basin* should have survived in a manuscript associated with a parish priest. Like other bourdes, it has a morally corrective conclusion, and the hero of the story, the one who sets matters to rights, is himself a good parish priest, even if the transgressor in the story is also a priest. The tale is lively and amusing enough to have served as attractive sermon material.

### AFTERLIFE

*The Tale of the Basin* appears, with different names as noted below, in the following early or otherwise useful editions:

1806. *The Enchanted Basyn*. Robert Jamieson, ed. *Popular Ballads and Songs*, vol. 1. Edinburgh: Constable. Pp. 272–82.

1829. *The Tale of the Basyn*. Charles Henry Hartshorne, ed. *Ancient Metrical Tales*. London: W. Pickering. Pp. 198–208.

1836. *The Tale of the Basyn*. Thomas Wright, ed. *The Tale of the Basyn and The Frere and the Boy*. London: W. Pickering. N.p.

1866. *The Tale of the Basyn*. William Carew Hazlitt, ed. *Remains of the Early Popular Poetry of England*, vol. 3. London: John Russell Smith. Pp. 42–53.

1969. *The Tale of the Basin*. Janay Y. Downing, ed. "A Critical Edition of Cambridge University MS Ff. 5. 48." Ph. D. dissertation, University of Washington. Pp. 166–75.

1985. *The Tale of the Basin*. Melissa M. Furrow, ed. *Ten Fifteenth-Century Comic Poems*. New York: Garland. Pp. 43–64.

### REFERENCE TOOLS

The motif "objects (people, animals) stick to magic object" is listed in *ATU* as 571. *The Tale of the Basin* is 571B, "All Stick Together; Lover Exposed."

*The Tale of the Basin* is *NIMEV* 2658.

*The Tale of the Basin* is addressed by Thomas Cooke in volume 9 (1993) of the *Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050–1500*, section 24 Tales [17], "*The Tale of the Basin* (also *The Enchanted Basin*)."

### POET, POETRY, AND LANGUAGE

A brief poem, *The Tale of the Basin* presents few clues as to date and origins, let alone poet. Since the manuscript is late fifteenth-century, the poem can be no later. The poem likely belongs to the North or north Midlands area, as demonstrated by the rhymes *wyfe/stryfe/fyfe* at lines 220–22. Forms of *five* with *–f(f)(e)* are found in those areas (*LALME* Q126). This localization is compatible with the third person singular verb ending *–ys* (*–is*)

seen in rhyme in lines 1–4 (*tellys/ellis/dwellis/spellis*; *LALME* Q59). The form "thou may," in rhyme at lines 148–50 (*fay/may/awey*), suggests a northern origin, though if the poet is from the North, it is surprising that far from treating descendants of Old English long *a* as rhymes with long *a* from other sources, he rhymes them instead with long close *o*.

The stanza form of *The Tale of the Basin* is the same as that of *The Lady Prioress*, rhyming *aaaabcccb*. The four-stressed *a* lines have the rhythm of alliterative long line, with a caesura between the two half-lines. The *c* lines, while they too might have as many as four stressed syllables, sound markedly different because there is no cæsura and there are fewer unstressed syllables, or dips. The *b* lines are short, usually with two stressed syllables. The overall effect of the *bcccb* part of the stanza is like that of the bob and wheel in stanzaic alliterative poetry, although the *a* lines are rhymed rather than alliterative. The poem gives a perfunctory nod to its indebtedness to alliterative poetry in the first line:

Of **ta**lys and **tri**fulles **ma**ny man **tell**ys.

But after that there is little other than occasional decorative alliteration, and there is no attempted concatenation as in *The Lady Prioress*.

## THE TALE OF THE BASIN

Of talys and trifulles many man tellys; *false stories*
Summe byn trew and sum byn ellis. *are; otherwise*
A man may dryfe forth the day that long tyme dwellis *spend; lingers*
With harpyng and pipyng and other mery spellis, *tales*
With gle and with gamme. *fun and games*
Of a person ye mowe here *parson; will*
(In case that hit soth were), *Supposing it were true*
And of his brother that was hym dere
And lovyd well samme. *And [they] loved each other well*

The ton was his fadirs eyre of hows and of lande, *The one; heir; residence*
The tother was a person as I undurstande. *The other; parson*
A riche man wex he and a gode husbande, *grew; manager*
And knowen for a gode clerke thoro Goddis sande, *through; grace*
And wyse was holde. *considered*
The tother hade littul thoght;
Of husbandry cowth he noght, *household management he knew nothing*
But alle his wyves will he wroght, *wife's desire; did*
. . . . . .

A febull husbande was he on as many ar on lyve: *feeble; one; in life*
Alle his wyves biddyng he did it full ryve. *quickly*
Hit is an olde seid saw, I swere be Seynt Tyve, *old proverb; by*
Hit shalbe at the wyves will if the husbond thryve,
Bothe within and withowte.
A wyfe that has an yvell tach, *bad habit*
Therof the husbond shalle have a smache, *touch of it*
But yif he loke well abowte. *Unless he is wary*

Of that yong gentilman was a gret disese: *cause of distress*
Aftur a yere or two his wyfe he myght not pleese;
Mycull of his lande lay to the preestis ese. *Much; served to pamper the priest*
Sche taught hym ever among how the katte did snese,
Right at hir owne wille.
He that hade bene a lorde
Was nouther at bedde ne at borde, *[one] neither; nor at table*

Ne durst onys speke a worde — *dared once*
When she bade be stille. — *quiet*

Litull of husbondry the godeman con thynke, — *about; man of the house thought*
And his wyfe lovyd well gode mete and gode drynke. — *food*
She wolde nouther therfore swete ne swynke, — *sweat or labor*
But when the baly was full, lye down and wynke, — *belly; nap*
And rest hir nedur ende. — *bottom*
Soo long this life thei ladde
That spende was that thei hadde. — *gone (spent)*
The wife hir husbonde badde
Belyfe forth to wende, — *Quickly*

"To the person thi brodur that is so rich a wrech, — *miser*
And pray hym of thi sorow sumdel he wolde slech. — *part; lessen*
Fourty pounde or fyfty loke of hym thou fech. — *see that; fetch*
So that thou hit bryng litull will I rech — *care*
Never for to white." — *repay*
To his brother forth he went,
And mycull money to hym he lent, — *much*
And also sone hit was spent: — *just as*
Thereof they hade but lyte. — *little*

Micull money of his brother he fette; — *fetched*
For alle that he broght he ferd never the bette. — *got on (fared); better*
This person wex wery and thought he wolde hym lette: — *stop*
"And he fare long thus he fallis in my dette, — *If he behaves*
And yet he may not the. — *still he can not prosper*
Betwene hym and his wife, iwysse,
A drawght ther is drawen amysse. — *The game is being misplayed*
I will wete, soo have I blisse, — *find out, as I hope for happiness*
How that hit myght be."

Yet on a day afterwarde to the person he yede — *Again; went*
To borow moné, and he ne myght spede. — *money; succeed*
"Brother," quod the person, "thou takis litull hede
How thou fallis in my dett — therof is all my drede —
And yet thou may not the. — *prosper*
Perdy, thou was my fadurs eyre — *By gosh*
Of howse and lande that was so feyre,
And ever thou lyves in dispayre. — *hopelessness*
What devell! How may this be?" — *What the devil*

"I ne wot how it faris, but ever I am behynde. — *in arrears*
For to liffe manly hit come me be kynde. — *generously; comes to me by nature*
I shall truly sey what I thynke in my mynde."
The person seyde, "Thou me telle."

"Brother," he seid, "be Saynt Albon, *by*
Hit is a preest men callis Sir John.
Sich a felow know I non: *Such*
Of felawes he berys the bell.

"Hym gode and curtesse I fynde evermoo.
He harpys and gytryns, and synges wel thertoo; *plays gittern; in addition*
He wrestels and lepis, and castis the ston also." *is a shot-putter*
"Brother," quod the person, "belife home thou goo, *quickly*
So as I thee say.
Yif thou myght with any gynne *trick*
The vessell owt of the chambur wynne, *steal*
The same that thei make watur in, *pee*
And bryng hit me, I thee pray."

"Brother," he seid blithly, "thi wil shalbe wroght,
It is a rownde basyn, I have hit in my thoght."
"As prively as thou may, that hit be hidur brought, *secretly*
Hye thee fast on thi way. Loke thou tary noght, *Hurry*
And come agayne anone." *soon*
Hamwarde con he ride; *did*
Ther no longur wolde he byde.
And then his wife began to chyde
Because he come so sone.

He hent up the basyn and forth can he fare. *grabbed; out he went*
Till he came to his brother wolde he not spare. *slack off*
The person toke the basyn and to his chaumbur it bare,
And a privé experiment sone he wroght thare, *made*
And to his brother he seyde ful blithe, *happily*
"Loke thou where thou the basyn fette, *Make sure*
And in that place thou hit sett,
And than," he seid, "withowtyn lette, *delay*
Come agayne right swythe." *quickly*

He toke the basyn and forth went.
When his wife hym saw hir browes she uphent. *raised*
"Why hase thi brother so sone thee home sent?
Hit myght never be for gode, I know it verament, *truly*
That thou comes home so swythe."
"Nay," he seid, "my swetyng, *sweetheart*
I moste take a litull thyng,
And to my brother I mot hit bryng, *must*
For sum it shall make blithe." *it will make somebody happy*

Into his chaumbur prively went he that tyde *time*
And sett downe the basyn be the bedde side; *by*

He toke his leve at his wyfe and forth can he ride. *from*
She was glad that he went and bade hym not abyde.
Hir hert began to glade. *rejoice*
She anon right thoo *then*
Slew a capon or twoo,
And other gode mete thertoo
Hastely she made.

When alle thyng was redy, she sent aftur Sir John
Prively at a posturne yate as stille as any ston. *side entrance (gate) very quietly*
They eten and dronken as thei were wonte to done *drank*
Till that thaym list to bedde for to gon, *they desired*
Softly and stille.
Within a litull while Sir John con wake,
And nedis watur he most make. *necessarily*
He wist wher he shulde the basyn take
Right at his owne wille. *Whenever he wanted*

He toke the basyn to make watur in.
He myght not get his hondis awey all this worde to wyn. *world to gain*
His handis fro the basyn myght he not twyn. *separate*
"Alas," seid Sir John, "how shall I now begynne?
Here is sum wych crafte."
Faste the basyn con he holde, *Firmly*
And alle his body tremeld for colde. *trembled*
Lever then a hundred pounde he wolde *Rather*
That hit were fro hym rafte. *taken*

Right as a chapmon shulde sell his ware *peddler; merchandise*
The basyn in the chaumbeur betwix his hondis he bare.
The wife was agrevyd he stode so long thare *aggrieved*
And askid why so; hit was a nyce fare *silly behavior*
So stille ther to stande.
"What, woman!" he seid, "In gode fay, *faith*
Thou must helpe, gif thou may, *if you can*
That this basyn were awey:
Hit will not fro my honde." *will not [move]*

Upstert the godewyfe — for nothyng wolde she lette — *Up jumped; delay*
And bothe hir hondis on the basyn she sette.
Thus sone were thai bothe fast, and he never the bette. *stuck; better*
Hit was a myssefelisshippe a man to have imette, *bizarre group; [for] anyone; met*
Be day or be nyght.
They began clepe and crye *shout; call*
To a wenche that lay thaim bye, *servingwoman*
That she shulde come on hye *in a hurry*
To helpe yif she myght.

Upstert the wench er she was halfe waked *before*
And ran to hir maistrys all baly-naked. *mistress; buck-naked*
"Alas," seid hir maistrys, "who hase this sorow maked?
Helpe this basyn wer away that oure sorow were slakyd. *Help [that]; would be lessened*
Here is a sory chaunce." *painful mischance*
To the basyn this wench she raste *rushed*
For to helpe hade she caste. *meant*
Thus were they sone alle thre fast.
Hyt was a nyce daunce.

Ther thei daunsyd al the nyght till the son con ryse.
The clerke rang the daybell as hit was his guise. *custom*
He knew his maisturs councell and his uprise. *secrets; getting up [time]*
He thoght he was to long to sey his sirvyse, *too delayed*
His matyns be the morow. *matins in the morning*
Softly and stille thidur he yede.
When he come thidur he toke gode hede
How that his maystur was in grett drede
And brought in gret sorow.

Anon as he Sir John can se he began to call.
Be that worde thei come down into the hall. *During; calling*
"Why goo ye soo?" quod the clerke. "Hit is shame for you alle.
Why goo ye so nakyd? Foule mot yow falle. *May evil befall you*
The basyn shalle yow froo."
To the basyn he made a brayde, *grab*
And bothe his hondis theron he leyde.
The furst worde that the clerke seyde:
"Alas, what shall I doo?"

The carter fro the halle dure erth can he throw, *door*
With a shevell in his honde, to make it clene, I trowe.
When he saw thaym go rounde upon a row
He wende hit hade bene folys of the fayre (he told hit in his saw).
He seid he wolde assay, iwysse. *certainly*
Unneth he durst go in for fere. *Scarcely; dared*
All save the clerke nakyd were.
When he saw the wench go there
Hym thoght hit went amysse. *It seemed to him*

The wench was his speciall that hoppid on the rowte. *girlfriend; rabble*
"Lette go the basyn er thou shalle have a clowte!" *wallop*
He hit the wench with a shevell above on the towte. *rump*
The shevyll sticked then fast withowte any dowte,
And he hengett on the ende. *hung*
The carter, with a sory chaunce, *with bad luck*
Among thaim alle he led the dawnce.

In Englonde, Scotland, ne in Fraunce
A man shulde non sich fynde.

The godeman and the person come in that stounde. *moment*
Alle that fayre feliship dawnsyng thei founde. *fellowship*
The godeman seid to Sir John, "Be cockis swete wounde,
Thou shalle lese thine harnesse or a hundred pounde. *equipment*
Truly thou shalle not chese." *you have no choice*
Sir John seid, "In gode fay,
Helpe this basyn were awey *Help [that]*
And that moné will I pay
Er I this harnes lese." *Before*

The person charmyd the basyn that it fell thaim fro;
Every man then hastely on thaire wey can goo.
The preest went out of contré for shame he hade thoo,
And then thai levyd thaire lewtnesse and did no more soo, *left; bad behavior*
But wex wyse and ware. *prudent*
Thus the godeman and his wyfe
Levyd togedur withowt stryfe. *Lived*
Mary for hir joyes fyfe
Shelde us alle fro care.

Finitur *The end*

## EXPLANATORY NOTES TO THE TALE OF THE BASIN

**ABBREVIATIONS**: ***CT***: Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*; ***MED***: *Middle English Dictionary*; **MS**: manuscript; ***OED***: *Oxford English Dictionary*; ***NCE***: *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*; **Whiting**: Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases*.

16 *Of husbandry cowth he noght*. This is true in multiple senses of the term *husbandry*: management of his household, farming his father's lands, and (punningly) being a respected spouse.

21 *Hit is an olde seid saw, I swere be Seynt Tyve*: The "olde seid saw" is first cited from c. 1470 (see Speake, *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*): "For he that cast hym for to thryve, he must ask offe his wiffe leve." See also Whiting M155 ("A Man may not wive and thrive all in a year") as a variant.

*The New Catholic Encyclopedia* lists three St. Ives, one (1253–1303) born in Brittany, the patron saint of lawyers (see "Ivo Hélory, St.," *NCE*); another (c. 1040–1116) an important canonist and bishop of Chartres (see "Ivo of Chartres, St.," *NCE*); and a third from the sixth or seventh century who purportedly left his home in Persia to act as a missionary in Britain (see "Ivo, St.," *NCE*). In addition, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* mentions an early Irish missionary, also called Ia of Cornwall (supposedly fifth or sixth century), after whom the Cornish town of St. Ives is named (see "Ives, St.," in Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 201). Ia/Ives was a woman, so perhaps that is a reason (beyond convenience of rhyme) for her invocation in this context.

30 The sole citation for Whiting C106: "To teach one how the Cat sneezes (i.e., put in one's place, bully)."

60 *A drawght ther is drawen amysse*. Under "draught" 3e, "drauen a draught," *MED* gives the meaning "to play a trick, or engage in a deceitful or sinful activity." The metaphor is from the game of chess: "a chess move is made improperly."

76 *be Saynt Albon*. St. Alban was the first British martyr, killed at what is now called St. Alban's in Hertfordshire, where a Benedictine abbey was built to commemorate him. His legend is the subject of Lydgate's poem *St. Alban and St. Amphibalus* (1439).

77 *Hit is a preest men callis Sir John*. *Sir* was a conventional courtesy title for a priest; *John* was an equally conventional name for one, particularly a lecherous one. Since the early thirteenth century, priests had been required to be celibate.

79 *Of felawes he berys the bell*. That is, like a bellwether among sheep, he is a leader among good fellows.

81 *gytryns*. The gittern was an ancestor of the modern guitar.

126 *Prively at a posturne yate as stille as any ston*. A postern gate is a side or back entrance, smaller and less conspicuous than the main public gate. The phrase "as still as a stone" can mean both "as motionless as a stone" and, as it does here, "as quietly as a stone." See Whiting S772 for many other examples of the phrase.

174 Matins in a parish church were the early morning service, before the Mass.

188 *The carter fro the halle dure erth can he throw*. The cart driver (carter) is not only responsible for carrying away material in his cart; here he is clearly responsible for arriving very early in the morning and shoveling it into the cart from where the servants have dumped it outside the door. I suspect that "earth" here is a euphemism for various organics (rushes from the hall floor, perhaps; food refuse; but most importantly body waste) and that like the carter in Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale (*CT* VII[$B^2$]3016–62) his job is to collect, very early in the morning, the last day's waste, and to take it out of town for fertilizer. Compare the quotation in *MED carter*, 1.(a) (1460) "All carterys and carmen that usyth to drawe dung out of the towne."

191 *He wende hit hade bene folys of the fayre (he told hit in his saw)*. "He believed they were performing fools (that's what he said)." Compare *OED fair* n.1., citation 1764 "Has he not . . . made himself the fool of the fair?"

208 *Be cockis swete wounde*. A euphemistic swearing by the wounds of Christ, with *cock* standing in for *God* as modern *gosh* does. In medieval Christian theology all three members of the Trinity are equally God, so Christ can be referred to as God just as God the Father can. It is not until 1618 that *OED* cites the word *cock* used with the meaning "penis" (see cock n.[1], sense 20), but the often anthologized early fifteenth-century lyric "I have a gentil cok" from London, British Library MS Sloane 2393 plays upon the reader's dawning recognition that the cock in question is not avian. The lyric may mark the early stages of the use of the term for the penis. Given that medieval poets liked to pick oaths with particular significance, *cock* may well be a pun here, with the sense "penis" playing into the following line in which the philandering priest is threatened with loss of his "harnesse." We see the same punning combination of euphemistic oath and earthy context in Ophelia's lament on sexual treachery in Act 4, scene 5 of *Hamlet*:

> Young men will do't, if they come to't;
> By cock, they are to blame.
> (lines 59–60)

On the more solemn aspect of the reference, the Five Wounds of Christ were the object of contemplation and veneration in the Middle Ages. They were the wounds in hands and feet inflicted by nails during the Crucifixion, and a lance wound in the side.

222 *Mary for hir joyes fyfe*. The Five Joys of the Virgin Mary were the Annunciation (of the coming birth of Christ), the Nativity, the Resurrection, the Ascension (of Christ to heaven), and the Assumption (of Mary herself into heaven).

## TEXTUAL NOTES TO THE TALE OF THE BASIN

**COPY-TEXT**: Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.5.48, fols. 58r–61v.
**ABBREVIATION: MS**: manuscript, here referring to the copy-text.

| | |
|---|---|
| title | No title in MS. |
| 1 | MS reads: *Off talys and trifulles many man tellys*, in very large letters and underlined, like line 75. |
| 18 | The line is missing, with no gap in MS. Some such line as "And did as she hym tolde" is called for. |
| 25 | A line is missing to complete the stanza; no gap is in MS. |
| 30 | *Sche taught hym ever among how the katte did snese*: the word *katte* is inserted above the line. |
| 47 | MS reads: *Fourty pounde of or fyfty loke of hym thou fech*. Emendation for sense. |
| 73 | The word *me* is inserted above the line. |
| 75 | MS reads: *The person seyde thou me telle*, in very large letters and underlined, like line 1. |
| 103 | MS reads: *Loke thou where the basyn fette*. Emendation for sense. |
| 121 | After line 120, line 124 appears by mistake but is canceled with a line drawn through it: ~~*Hastely she made*~~. The verse appears in its proper position as well. |
| 141 | MS reads: *Leuer then a C pounde he wolde*. |
| 168 | The word *sone* is inserted above the line. |
| 179 | MS reads: *Anon as Sir John can se he began to call*. Emendation for sense. |
| 187 | MS reads: *Alas ~~why~~ what shall I doo*. |
| 209 | MS reads: *Thou shalle lese thine harnesse or a C pounde*. |
| 222 | MS reads: *Mary for y hir joyes fyfe*. Emendation for sense. |
| After 224 | *Finitur* in very large letters, like lines 1 and 75. |