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# *The Fisherman* by Anonymous

Luke J. Chambers

Western Michigan University, [luke.j.chambers@wmich.edu](mailto:luke.j.chambers@wmich.edu)

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*An Honest Man Who Rescued His Fellow Man From Drowning*

It happened that a fisherman  
Rowed out one day away from land  
And cast his nets upon the sea.  
He looked, "What's that in front of me?"  
It was a man, and nearly drowned!  
Up to his feet he leapt and found  
An iron hook. He nimbly cast.  
He pulled the line, felt it fix fast.  
He'd hooked his face, right through the eye.  
Nothing to do but draw him nigh,  
Into the boat. Waiting no more,  
He left his nets, rushed back to shore.  
He had him brought to where he dwelt  
And had him tended very well  
Until he was completely healed.  
At length that man began to feel  
That he his eye would rather have,  
All things considered. He grew mad.  
"This fishing fool fished out my eye.  
And have I ever harmed him? Why,  
I'll bring a suit against him, see,  
For all my pain and misery."  
So up he left, voiced his complaint.  
The mayor for them set a date  
When he would listen to their case,  
And on that day both came apace  
To court. The one-eyed man spoke first.  
He told them how he'd come to worst.  
He spoke so, "Lord, I am the wronged.  
This gentleman, just three days gone  
Hooked out my eye most painfully.  
Poked it right out. Just look and see!  
Do right by me, I ask no more.  
No more to say, I yield the floor."

The other spoke without delay:  
“O Lord, I don’t deny this, nay.  
His eye is out and by my hand  
But listen, now I will defend  
My deed. I swear I’m in the right.  
I pulled this man safe from his plight.  
Now he’d be drowned if not for me!  
No one should die out in the sea.  
My hook took out his eye, too true.  
But for his good! Why should I rue  
The saving of his life out there?  
I don’t know what to say. Be fair  
To me, by God’s own love, I ask.”  
The people there agreed the task  
To judge this case aright would not  
Be easy. Then a clever sot  
Spoke up: “Why is there doubt about  
This case? This gentleman, this lout;  
We should just put him in the sea  
Back where before he used to be.  
If he escapes and does not die  
That man should pay him for his eye  
That is what seems to me the best.”  
Then all as one cried out the rest:  
“You’ve spoken well. What could go wrong?”  
This judgment was passed before long.  
And when he heard that he would be  
Put back out in the wavy sea  
Where ‘fore he’d suffered cold and wet,  
For all the world he would not get  
Back in it. So he dropped his claim.  
But most still heaped on him their blame.  
This good advice is free to have:  
He wastes his time who helps a cad.  
You save a thief from gallow tree  
When he’s deserving hung to be  
And never will he thank you, no,  
Nor any gratitude you show  
If you do him a favor kind.  
He won’t recall, it slips his mind.

But rather, he'll too ready be  
To hurt you with his villainy  
If he should gain the upper hand,  
As so did learn the fisherman.

This poem, dating from the thirteenth century, is anonymous and written in octosyllabic rhyming couplets, as are most Old French fabliaux. A fabliau is generally an uncourtly kind of humorous tale which deals mostly with common people and has a simple, short, often satiric plot. “D’un preudome qui rescolt son conpere de noier” is a moralizing fabliau lacking the bawdy humor common in the most well-known examples of the genre. The subject matter of “D’un preudome” is distinctly uncourtly. The poem’s central joke, the poking out of an eye with a fish-hook, is simple and down-to-earth, and the fisherman, the one-eyed man, and the fool are all of the lower classes. The only other specifically mentioned character, the mayor, has a higher status, but he does very little in the poem besides set a date for the hearing. Furthermore, the impression the poem gives is that the ruling in that hearing is the result of majority consent, even though the mayor is actually presiding over the case. Likewise, the plot of the poem is compact and straightforward. The poem is only seventy-eight lines long (with one lacuna) and the plot moves rapidly and clearly to the climax and conclusion. The poem ends with a bit of moral advice about scoundrels, but I choose to read this advice as a sort of joke in itself, as it does not logically apply to the preceding story.

As the poem is a fabliau, I have endeavored to recreate a humorous tone in my translation. My first attempt was done in prose, and I found that the flat style of literal translation drew most of the life from the story. I resolved to make a verse translation, and since the poem is written in octosyllabic rhyming couplets, I have written mine in iambic tetrameter rhyming couplets, which is more or less the same as the Old French meter. In this translation I have taken liberties with the wording and precise sequence of ideas in the poem in order to make it fit the meter and rhyme. Yet all of my changes are slight, and in every case each change is based on material in the original. It is my hope that, though it is further from the original in literal meaning, my poetic translation better captures the comedic feel of the original, which owes much to the regular meter and rhyming couplets. Note that in order to preserve the scheme of rhyming couplets I had to produce an extra line in my poetic translation because of a lacuna in the original where the medieval scribe seems to have missed copying at least one line. This invented line is the last of the poem.