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### **Sex and the (hetero) erotic in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde**

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**SEX AND THE (HETERO) EROTIC IN CHAUCER'S  
*CANTERBURY TALES AND TROILUS AND CRISEYDE***

By

Majed R. Kraishan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in Medieval English Literature

School of English, Bangor University

December 2013

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## **ABSTRACT**

The present study investigates Chaucer's use of the erotic in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. The study addresses an oversight within Chaucerian scholarship. Scholars have largely ignored his use of the erotic as a literary device. The thesis argues that his use of the erotic allows for both a celebration and a critique of the often conflicting mores of his days.

The study argues that, by subverting traditional literary genres, and inventing new ones, Chaucer provided alternative life-views. These alternatives served as subtle but powerful critiques both of institutional hegemony and of the power structures the hegemony protected.

The study locates Chaucer in relation to a number of ancient and medieval currents of thought in which, by the late Middle Ages, questions of sexuality, agency, and autonomy had come to intersect. It also examines Chaucer's sources for the construction of erotic relationships in his poetry. The study's viewpoint is that, if one is to understand Chaucer, one needs to understand the culture in which he lived.

The scope of the study is broad. It draws together cultural, historical, psychological, philosophical, and literary material to offer both depth and breadth in its arguments. It is hoped that this will stimulate new debate about the relationship between eroticism and genre in Chaucer's poetry.

## INTRODUCTION: TERMINOLOGY AND TAXONOMY

The present study investigates the erotic in the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400). In doing so, it concentrates on his *Troilus and Criseyde* and seven of his *The Canterbury Tales* (four *fabliaux*—*The Miller’s Tale*, *The Reeve’s Tale*, *The Merchant’s Tale*, and *The Shipman’s Tale*—and three romances—*The Knight’s Tale*, *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, and *The Physician’s Tale*).

The intention of the thesis is to show how Chaucer used erotic poetry, not only for humorous and story-telling purposes, but also for exploring fourteenth century mores. His erotic poetry not only questions the sexual ethics taught by the Roman Catholic Church during his era, but also the era’s broad societal norms, particularly those pertaining to gender and chivalry.

The justification of the study is twofold. First, no one seems to have specifically addressed the overall eroticism in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, though some authorities have investigated eroticism in individual tales. This could be because Chaucerians, as Allman and Hanks argue, “have averted their gaze or become distracted with their notes when Chaucer’s characters leap into bed”.<sup>1</sup> The present study aims to rectify this omission by exploring Chaucer’s use of the erotic in his major late works, and by placing it in a cultural and social context. In doing so, it examines the sources of the eroticism in Chaucer’s poetry and his audience.

Second, Chaucer—especially in *The Canterbury Tales*—presents a broader spectrum of life within the High Middle Ages than do his contemporaries; in doing so, he not only switches between genres; he also increases each genre’s subtlety. Because of this, his works reflect the conflicting attitudes toward sexuality within England during his era. Regardless of Chaucer’s worth as a poet, his works are also of social and historical interest. Chaucer was a major poet of High Medieval Europe. He was

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Allman and Dorrel Thomas Hanks, ‘Rough Love: Notes towards an Erotics of *the Canterbury Tales*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 38 (2003), 36–65 (pp. 38, 39).

acknowledged as such by his English contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> As is argued in Chapters four and five, he was also arguably superior to his continental contemporaries. Because of this, understanding how Chaucer used the erotic is a subject worth considering in its own right.

The choice of the four *fabliaux* is justified in that they are by definition stories that deal with erotic themes, and that do so in a ribald manner. Because of this, they offer fertile ground for exploration of erotic themes; they often deal “with some sexual activity [in which] the characters are usually portrayed realistically, speaking an earthy dialogue, performing ‘natural’ acts, and exhibiting, uncensored, their needs and desires with grace, lust and enjoyment”.<sup>3</sup> One could not therefore discuss eroticism and sexuality in Chaucer without discussing his *fabliaux*. *The Miller’s Tale*, *The Reeve’s Tale*, *The Merchant’s Tale*, and *The Shipman’s Tale* are by far the most bawdy of *The Canterbury Tales*. The four *fabliaux* selected for discussion have been selected because they are the only of his *Canterbury Tales* that are both erotic and complete. *The Friar’s Tale* and *The Summoner’s Tale* are not discussed because they deal with corruption more than the erotic, and *The Cook’s Tale* is not discussed in depth because it is incomplete.<sup>4</sup>

The choice of the three romances in the *Tales* and of *Troilus and Criseyde* is justified in that romances, like *fabliaux*, are erotic, albeit in different ways from *fabliaux*.

Medieval romances allow modern readers to:

. . . test for themselves familiar but dubious generalisations about medieval literature, including the unsustainable assertions that erotic love is always adulterous, that women are wooed and never wooers . . . that French

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<sup>2</sup> In his *Regement of Princes*, Thomas Hoccleve (1412) refers to Chaucer as “flour of eloquence” and “universel fadir in science”. John Lydgate (1420) praises Chaucer’s “Excellence / In rethorike and in eloquence” and the humour of his writings. See Corinne Saunders, ‘The Development of Chaucer Criticism’, in *Chaucer: Blackwell Guides to Criticism*, ed., by Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 5–21(p. 5).

<sup>3</sup> Sidney E. Berger, ‘Sex in the Literature of the Middle Ages: The Fabliaux’, in *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*, ed., by Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982), pp.162–175 (p. 162).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.



romances appealed to elite sensibilities while those in English addressed a bourgeois or lower class audience”.<sup>5</sup>

The idealized, usually virginal, women of courtly romances and the libidinous women of the *fabliaux* each may be viewed as different aspects of the same story: each reveals, albeit in different ways, an interest in eroticism. Moreover, in Chaucer’s hands the two genres, while superficially distinct, merge. His romances have earthy elements; conversely, his *fabliaux*, with the exception of *The Shipman’s Tale*, have noble ones. Chaucer’s romances thus highlight the tensions and the gap between the chivalric ideal and the reality of medieval life.

The present thesis highlights the degree to which eroticism enhances Chaucer’s plots, and how Chaucer’s eroticism reflected fourteenth century English values. The thesis argues that Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde* are seditious, and that this sedition arguably reflected the turbulent times in which Chaucer lived. The thesis also argues that this sedition was not only a critique of medieval views of sexuality but also of medieval values as a whole, particularly those regarding gender relationships.

### **Background literature**

The study contributes to current debates about the ways in which medieval people viewed erotic experience and sexual love. It offers a historical as well as a literary analysis: it explores this material in its historical context.

A number of recent studies address, directly or indirectly, medieval eroticism. These studies include Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz’s (editors) 1997 collection, *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*; Kim Phillips’s 2003 work, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540*; Ruth Mazo Karras’s 2005 work, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*; Sue Niebrzydowski’s 2006 work *Bonoure and Buxum: A Study of Wives in Late*

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<sup>5</sup> Nancy Mason Bradbury, ‘Popular Romance’, in *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, ed., by Corinne Saunders (Oxford, UK: Blackwell. 2010), pp. 289–307 (p. 289).

*Medieval English Literature*; and April Harper and Caroline Proctor's (editors) 2008 collection, *Medieval Sexuality: A Casebook*. Moreover, interest in medieval eroticism has enjoyed something of a vogue. This is witnessed by Robert Bartlett's 2008 TV series *Inside the Medieval Mind: Sex*, and by conferences on medieval eroticism, such as the Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies's *Erotica and the Erotic in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (February 2012).

A good starting point for the study of medieval eroticism is Amanda Hopkins and Cory Rushton's *The Erotic Literature of Medieval Britain*. This comprises a variety of essays, focusing largely on British romances. It includes treatment of Arthurian legends (e.g., the *Alliterative Mort d'Arthure* and *Sir Launfal*), and some treatment of other genres—*The Alphabet of Tales*, *Ancrene Wisse*, *The Mabinogion*, and the *Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale*. Perhaps because they deal with romances, many of the essays focus on rape. Thus, for example, Thomas Howard Crofts, in "Perverse and Contrary Deeds: The Giant of Mont Saint Michel and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*" discusses the rape of the duchess and the nurse; and Michael Cichon discusses rape in "Eros and Error: Gross Sexual Transgression in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi". Much of the analysis is inspiring. Sue Niebrzydowski's "'So wel koude he me glose': The Wife of Bath and the Eroticism of Touch", for instance, with its analysis of the Wife's sensuality and, to modern minds, latent feminism, points to different views of eroticism and female roles from those taught by the Church of Chaucer's period. Similarly, Corinne Saunders's "Erotic Magic: The Enchantress in Middle English Romance" points to the prevalence of pre-Christian, pagan erotic throughout the Middle Ages.

Powerful and useful though *The Erotic Literature of Medieval Britain* may be, the essays within it arguably focus too much on romances. They scarcely touch on Chaucer, except for coverage of the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, and do not cover his *fabliaux*. Neither do they cover—indeed, they scarcely mention—such authors as John Gower, William Langland, Robert Henryson, and Thomas Hoccleve. This is important because the romances as a genre tend to be "clean"—such sexuality as exists within them tends to be disguised, or, as Kathleen Coyne Kelly describes, as existing in a "hole"—so much so that Kelly criticises Simon Meecham-Jones's essay

“Sex in the Sight of God: Theology and the Erotic in Peter of Blois’ ‘Grates Ago Veneri’” in *The Erotic Literature of Medieval Britain* for aestheticising “beyond recognition the rape at the center of the poem”.<sup>6</sup> In any event, there was more to medieval eroticism than courtly love and acts of daring-do, if only because the majority of the population of the period were neither rich nor courtly, and neither were the rich and powerful, as the rape instances suggest, *that* courtly.

Another aspect of *The Erotic Literature of Medieval Britain* is that it does not define the term *erotic* other than through a dictionary definition.<sup>7</sup> This omission can be seen both as a strength and as a weakness. It is a strength in that, as is explained below, it is impossible to exactly define the terms *erotic* and *pornographic*, particularly as regards differentiating between them. It is a weakness in that, given the admitted ambiguity of the term *erotic*, some delineation of what the terms *erotic* and *pornographic*, regardless of “rough edges” between them, would have helped. Related to this, one needs to consider the audience of erotic art and literature. What is erotic to one person need not be erotic to another.

Another good starting point is April Harper and Caroline Proctor’s (editors) *Medieval Sexuality: A Casebook*. The essays in this collection differ from those in *The Erotic Literature of Medieval Britain* in that they focus less on literature than on history. Thus, for instance, Samantha Riches’s “Virtue and Violence: Saints, Monsters and Sexuality in Medieval Culture” tells us of erotic mysticism during the Middle Ages, and Dominic Janes’s “Sex and Text: The Afterlife of Medieval Penance in Britain and Ireland” tells of the—seemingly draconian—penances demanded of people who performed sex acts that, today, many would consider normal, including oral sex and *coitus more ferarum*. That these penances were

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Coyne Kelly, ‘The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain (review)’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 30 (2008), 372–375 (p. 374).

<sup>7</sup> Amanda Hopkins and Cory Rushton, ‘Introduction: The Revel, the Melodye and the Bisynesse of Solas’, in *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, eds., by Amanda Hopkins and Cory Rushton (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), pp. 1–17 (p. 4).

imposed and that the penances were severe suggests that many people during the era were happily enjoying oral sex and *coitus more ferarum*.<sup>8</sup>

A third starting point is Albrecht Classen's (editor) *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme*. This collection of essays, as its title suggests, like *Medieval Sexuality: A Casebook*, takes a historical perspective. However, certain of its essays—for instance, Alexa Sand's "Inseminating Ruth in the Morgan Old Testament Picture Book: A Romance of the Crusades"—use literary sources as a pointer to the history of the Middle Ages. Also, Sand's essay in particular points to the importance of considering the visual arts of the period. Critiques of medieval literature, in other words, cannot ignore the global artistic environment of the era: what visual artists were doing in the Middle Ages often coincided with what writers of the era were doing.

Yet these books, helpful as they are, are limited. The various essays in Hopkins and Rushton, as indicated, largely ignore *fabliaux*. Those in Harper and Proctor concentrate on history, not literature. And Classen's *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, although it includes the word *anthropological* in its title, fails to include, in any of its essays, reference to any leading anthropologist, and the only psychologist mentioned in detail is Freud.

There are also gaps in history. Nowhere in the three critiques of medieval sexuality is there much mention of how appalling (not just by modern standards, but by medieval ones, too) the fourteenth-century was. To take Classen's *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times* as an exemplar, only one essay within it alludes to the profound impact the Black Death on fourteenth century medieval life, including sexuality. In Sara McDougall's "The Prosecution of Sex in Late Medieval Troyes", she states, "The elevation of marriage and sexual relations within it may have also arrived as a response to the population loss and disruptions of the famines,

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<sup>8</sup> Amanda Hopkins, *Sex, the State and the Church in the Middle Ages: An Overview* (Guide prepared for the Medieval to Renaissance Literature course: University of Warwick, 2005).

plagues, and warfare of the fourteenth century”.<sup>9</sup> This is an understatement. The Black Death peaked in Europe between 1348 and 1350, with sporadic outbreaks continuing in the following decades, and in the process killing at least one-third of England’s (and Europe’s) population.<sup>10</sup> Chaucer lived through this, and though a child when the first outbreak hit, he would have remembered it and would have been familiar with the subsequent spontaneous outbreaks (there were several, the first of which occurred in 1361, killing the queen of France<sup>11</sup>—indeed, plague was present at least somewhere in Europe for every year of the period 1346–1671<sup>12</sup>). The plague may have led to a more fatalistic view towards death in the population, a fatalism witnessed in, for example *The Pardoner’s Tale*; attempts to enjoy life while it lasted, an enjoyment witnessed by Chaucer’s *fabliaux*; and increased suspicion of the clergy, a suspicion witnessed in several of Chaucer’s tales, including *The Miller’s Tale*.<sup>13</sup> Consequences of the plague included greater power, and wealth, to the peasantry, an increase in wages, and greater peasant mobility; Philip Ziegler argues that the ultimate upshot of these, in England, was the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381,<sup>14</sup> an uprising of which Chaucer would doubtless have been aware. The plague also changed marriage patterns, with marriage rates rising and many men marrying orphans simply for the money; subsequent litigation and fraud multiplied, a situation made worse by the dearth of notaries.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the Hundred Year’s War, the opening stages of which Chaucer witnessed first-hand, was brutal. The main tactic used by the English was not pitched battle but *chevauchée* (rape and pillage of the enemy, including

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<sup>9</sup> Sara McDougall, ‘The Prosecution of Sex in Late Medieval Troyes’, in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme*, ed., by Albrecht Classen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 691–714(p. 693).

<sup>10</sup> See Joseph P. Byrne, *The Black Death* (London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Papermac, 1995), p. 196.

<sup>12</sup> J. N. Hays, *The Burdens of Disease: Epidemics and Human Response in Western History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> See especially Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, pp. 92–125.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (London: Folio Society, 1997), p. 202.

<sup>15</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, pp. 116–117.

destruction of crops, livestock, and property).<sup>16</sup> The main victims of medieval warfare were the peasantry.<sup>17</sup> The aristocracy, by contrast, far from being killed, tended to be ransomed. At the Battle of Poitiers (1356), for instance, contemporary estimates suggest that some 65 barons were captured (for ransom), together with a total 1500 nobles, clergymen, and townspeople (also for ransom), but only 800 were killed.<sup>18</sup> The captives included the King of France, Jean II (1319–1360), who was eventually ransomed for the then staggering four million *écus* (gold coins). Chivalry served to ensure only that the aristocracy lived while the common people died.

This brutality of knights was appreciated as early as the eleventh century. St Bernard (1090–1153) spoke of knights as “impious rogues, sacrilegious thieves, murderers, perjurers, and adulterers”;<sup>19</sup> moreover, although he visited France during the Hundred Years’ War, it is improbable that Chaucer witnessed pitched battle. He is thought to have entered France only in 1359 or 1360, which was after the Battle of Poitiers, and the next pitched battle, that of Agincourt (1415), occurred long after Chaucer had died. Insofar as Chaucer was personally acquainted with war, he would mostly have been acquainted with *chevauchée*.

It is plausible that the horrors of *chevauchée* influenced Chaucer’s depictions of war in *The Knight’s Tale*, particularly in his description of the Temple of Mars. In any event, as Barbara Tuchman observes, by the end of the fourteenth century, chivalry had become a “fiction”, and was seen as such by writers, including Mézières, who, in 1388 mocked the French nobility for their victory at Roosebeke over fullers and weavers.<sup>20</sup> If Chaucer was a critic of the mores of his era, he was not alone.

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<sup>16</sup> John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 85.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 169, 188.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Given-Wilson and Françoise Bériac, ‘Edward III’s Prisoners of War: The Battle of Poitiers and Its Context’, *The English Historical Review*, 116, (2001), 802–833 (p. 802).

<sup>19</sup> As cited in Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*, p. 76.

<sup>20</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 439.

### **Attempting definitions of medieval erotic and pornographic**

The *Concise OED* defines *erotic* as an adjective “relating to or tending to arouse sexual desire or excitement.”<sup>21</sup> It defines *pornography* as a noun, meaning “printed or visual material intended to stimulate sexual excitement”. This is not helpful. Except that *erotic* is defined as an adjective and *pornography* as a noun, the two definitions are indistinguishable.

This is unsurprising. There is widespread acknowledgement that precise definitions of the erotic and pornography are difficult. Thus, for example, Brulotte and Phillips tell us:

When consulting existing reference works and dictionaries on the subject, and the very few specialized histories of the genre, one is struck by the difficulty scholars have encountered in differentiating erotic literature from pornography or from love stories containing sexually explicit passages.<sup>22</sup>

Sarah Toulalan likewise acknowledges the difficulty:

Attempts at defining pornography vary enormously. There is little argument that pornography is visual or literary representation of “sex”, but it is the quality and nature of the representation that gives rise to significant dispute.<sup>23</sup>

Despite such difficulties, eroticism can be defined, in part, by what it is not. It is not, for instance, mere carnality. The term *carnality* need pertain only to the flesh, particularly to sexual organs; thus one may have *carnal desire* (a desire for sex), for example. Neither is eroticism mere *indecenty*. Few people would consider Michelangelo’s (1475–1564) *Last Judgement* (Plate I.1) in the Sistine Chapel erotic,

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<sup>21</sup> Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, *Concise OED: Luxury edition.*, 11th edition (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Gaëtan Brulotte and John Phillips, ‘Introduction,’ in *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, eds., by Gaëtan Brulotte and John Phillips (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. ix–xiii (p. x).

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Diane Toulalan, *Writing the Erotic: Pornography in Seventeenth-century England* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of London, 2001), p. 13.

for instance, yet Pope Paul IV, clearly viewed it as indecent, for he ordained that the original nudes in the painting be supplied loincloths—this, a mere generation after Michelangelo had completed the original.<sup>24</sup>



Plate I. 1. Michelangelo, *The Last Judgment* (Fresco) (1537–1541; Sistine Chapel, Rome)

The same applies to obscenity. Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516) depicted human defecation (in, e.g., his *Hell* in the *Garden of Earthly Delights* Triptych—Plate I.2); such images are arguably (save possibly to a minority) not sexually arousing.



Plate I. 2. Hieronymus Bosch, *Hell* (detail) (c. 1504; Museo del Prado, Madrid)

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<sup>24</sup> George Williamson, 'Daniele da Volterra', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 15* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912.) <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15504a.htm>> [accessed 20 March 2012]



This suggests that “obscenity”—even in scatological work—does not preclude art.

A feminist view, especially associated with the works of Andrea Dworkin, has it that pornography is associated with violence, especially to women, or with degradation (again, especially of women).<sup>25</sup> This view was succinctly expressed by Robin Morgan, who wrote “pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice”.<sup>26</sup> There is little doubt that *some* pornography is associated with violence against women. There is also little doubt, incidentally, that some pornography facilitates sexual crime.<sup>27</sup>

A similar view to that of Dworkin is held by Catherine MacKinnon, who writes: “Pornography turns a woman into a thing to be acquired and used”.<sup>28</sup> In this view, pornography is morally reprehensible because it dehumanises women. MacKinnon continues, “Pornography participates in its audience’s eroticism because it creates an accessible sexual object, the *possession and consumption* of which *is* male sexuality” (emphases added).<sup>29</sup> MacKinnon identifies an aspect of male sexuality that was appreciated by Chaucer, particularly in his *fabliaux*. In *The Merchant’s Tale*, for instance, Januarie initially treats May as a sex object. Moreover, as is explained in Chapter three, Chaucer’s *fabliaux* are replete with food and acts of consumption being associated with sex. However, MacKinnon implies that the possession and consumption of women are the *only* aspects of male sexuality. She appears not to appreciate that an *aspect* is not a *definition*.

MacKinnon further states “Obscenity is more concerned with whether men blush, pornography with whether women bleed—both producing a sexual rush”.<sup>30</sup> It is

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<sup>25</sup> Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women’s Equality* (Minneapolis: Organizing Against Pornography, 1988), p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Robin Morgan, *Going too far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (London: Vintage, 1978), p. 169.

<sup>27</sup> Michael C Seto, Alexandra Maric and Howard E. Barbaree, ‘The Role of Pornography in the Etiology of Sexual Aggression’, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 6 (2001), 35–53 (pp. 35–36).

<sup>28</sup> Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 199.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

unclear what MacKinnon is trying to say here: some women, doubtless, blush at obscenity, and not all pornography depicts women bleeding, so, presumably, MacKinnon is speaking metaphorically. If so, however, she is begging the question: she assumes that pornography degrades women, so all pornography depicts them as “bleeding”.

Another difficulty with the Dworkin–MacKinnon viewpoint is that some art is arguably erotic and is definitely violent, but is not in everyone’s view pornographic. Some might regard Rubens’s (1577–1640) *Massacre of the Innocents*, for instance, as art, not as pornography, yet it portrays violence, nudity, and degradation of women (Plate I.3). A feminist viewpoint, however, would categorise it as pornography.



Plate I. 3. Peter Paul Rubens, *Massacre of the Innocents* (c. 1611; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto)

The same may be said of some of Chaucer’s poetry—the “rapes” in *The Reeve’s Tale* (Chapter three), for instance, and Troilus’s dream in *Troilus and Criseyde* (Chapter five).

Another difficulty with equating pornography with violence to, or degradation of, women is that it excludes much material that could be considered pornographic—photographic depictions of male homosexual behaviour (e.g., sodomy), for instance.

Nonetheless, the Dworkin–MacKinnon viewpoint receives some support from psychological literature. Pornography is mainly geared to men. Steven Pinker, for instance, writes:

The closest mass-market equivalents to pornography for women are the romance novel and the bodice-ripper, in which the sex is described in the context of emotion and relationships rather than as a succession of bumping bodies.<sup>31</sup>

Pinker also reports of studies that suggest that men are more sexually aroused by neutral images of women than women are by images of nude men.

Some argue that pornography may be distinguished from the erotic in that the former is designed only to sexually arouse but the latter has loftier aspirations. In such a view, pornography is an aid to masturbation, and there is something shameful about it. However, much erotic art is clearly designed to titillate. Boucher's (1703–1770) boudoir portrait of Marie-Louise O'Murphy (Plate I.4), for instance, may be regarded as an eighteenth century pin-up, yet it is art.



Plate I. 4. Francois Boucher, *Portrait of Marie-Louise O'Murphy* (1752; Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne)

Consideration of Boucher's art casts doubt on the view, expressed, for example, by Peter Webb, that "The difference between eroticism and pornography is the difference between celebratory and masturbatory sex."<sup>32</sup> It is easy to view Marie-Louise O'Murphy as a masturbation image for Louis XV of France (she was one of his mistresses).

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<sup>31</sup> Steven Pinker, *How the mind works* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), pp. 472–473.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Webb, *the Erotic Arts*, (London; New York: Secker & Warburg, 1975), p. 2.

Other boudoir paintings are more subtle. Consider, for instance, Fragonard's (1732–1806) *The Swing* (Plate I.5).



Plate I. 5. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The swing* (1767; The Wallace Collection, London)

The eroticism of the picture derives largely from consideration that eighteenth century French women did not wear underwear. The reclining man in the picture therefore has a clear view of the lady's crotch, and seems delighted (or astonished) by what he sees. Also, the swing, with its toing and froing motion, is reminiscent of coitus. Erotica need not depict; they need only suggest.

There is a view that the erotic is elitist, but pornography is not. John Phillips states:

The difference here is clearly perceived on an artistic level, and has absolutely nothing to do with sex. Eroticism, says Angela Carter, is simply the “pornography of the elite”.<sup>33</sup>

Carter's view, as reported by Phillips, is subjective. Also, to most people's minds, there is something “higher” in Boucher's and Fragonard's art than anything found in a pin-up in, say, *Men Only* magazine, and this is plausibly why many people who are

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<sup>33</sup> John Phillips, *Forbidden Fictions Pornography and Censorship in Twentieth-Century French Literature* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), p. 6.

not members of the elite visit art galleries. From this one may infer that the view that “elitist art” is art only because it appeals to “the elite” is itself elitist.

There is also the view that pornography can only be understood in terms of context. This is the view favoured by Sarah Toulalan. She states:

The peculiar and distinctive quality of pornography as a type of representation is that it is not only a “thing”—it is also thought to do something. It thus becomes something which is judged to have a social effect, and therefore about which moral judgements can be made. The intention of the producer of pornography takes on significance, and, for some, becomes as important as the content and nature of the text itself in deciding whether or not a work is pornographic.<sup>34</sup>

While stating that what constitutes pornography is in part subjective, Toulalan argues that pornography is defined, in part, by what it does (namely, facilitate masturbation), and by the intention behind its creation.

There is also the view, deriving from Freud, that pornography is distinguished from the erotic in that pornography depicts perverted sex. Freud wrote:

Perversions are sexual activities which either a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim.<sup>35</sup>

A problem with this view is that it would regard of movie of a copulating couple using the missionary position as not being pornographic. Also, as is explained below, there is much that is wrong with Freudian theory. Against this, MacKinnon observes

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<sup>34</sup> Toulalan, *Writing the Erotic*, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality in the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans., by James Strachey (London, Hogarth Press, 1953), pp. 149, 150.

that much pornography is perverted, and such perverted sex is distasteful. She writes of pornography in which:

—Black women, Asian women, Latin women, Jewish women, pregnant women, disabled women, retarded women, poor women, old women, fat women, women in women’s jobs, prostitutes, little girls—distinguishes pornographic genres and subthemes, classified according to diverse customers’ favourite degradation. Women are made into can coupled with anything considered lower than human: animals, objects, children, and (yes) other women.<sup>36</sup>

Some authorities combine Freudian theory, feminism, the view that eroticism is art, and the view that eroticism is culturally acceptable pornography. Katarzyna Wieckowska and Przemyslaw Zywiczynski, for instance, state:

In the context of contemporary academia—and, as we argue, also in contemporary cultural context—the erotic occupies the space of the sanctioned sexually explicit text: *an objet d’art*, its function is no longer to stimulate sexual excitement, but rather to give aesthetic delight.<sup>37</sup>

And:

Pornography, originally a description of prostitutes, sends us back to the antagonism between sexual instinct and culture and, at least in the movies selected for this paper, to the position of women. The connection between pornography and women has been succinctly summarised by Andrea Dworkin who states that “the idea that pornography is ‘dirty’ originates in the conviction that the sexuality of women is dirty and is actually portrayed in

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<sup>36</sup> MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, p. 138.

<sup>37</sup> Katarzyna Wieckowska and Przemyslaw Zywiczynski, ‘The Erotic and the Pornographic: an Interdisciplinary Perspective’, in *The Erotic: Exploring Critical Issues*, ed., by Koen De Temmerman (Oxford, UK: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2004), pp. 53–56 (p. 53).

pornography; that women's bodies (especially women's genitals) are dirty and lewd in themselves."<sup>38</sup>

It is true that the term *pornography*, etymologically, derives from descriptions of prostitutes, and it is true that the early Church viewed women's bodies as "dirty". However, as indicated, Boucher's art could easily have been designed to titillate.

A more helpful view, related to the view that the erotic is art but pornography is not, comes from George Steiner. Steiner argues that the erotic is characterised by what is left out—vivid descriptions combined with depictions of sexual body parts and sexual activities—and what is put in their place (symbols, metaphors, idioms . . .).<sup>39</sup> Pornography, by contrast, leaves nothing to the imagination. Paradoxically, this leads to the erotic leading to freedom, for readers and viewers can use their imagination to "fill in the gaps", and to pornography leading to "enslavement", because readers and viewers are denied the use of imagination.<sup>40</sup> Steiner's point appears sound, for pornography appears addictive, and, like other addictions, it changes neural structures.<sup>41</sup>

Steiner's view is helpful in two ways. First, it provides a degree of objectivity in distinguishing between eroticism and pornography (the copious sexual symbolism in Chaucer's *fabliaux*, for instance—discussed in Chapter three—is clearly erotic, but the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, for example, is close to, or is, pornography). Second, Steiner's distinction allows for a distinction between art and "non-art".

Whilst the present study takes the view that there is merit in the views of all authorities cited above, it also takes the view that all are limited. Instead, it takes the view that pornography and eroticism lie at different ends of a continuum, with some

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>39</sup> George Steiner, *On Difficulty, and other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber, 1985), p. 99.

<sup>41</sup> See Donald L. Hinton and Clark Watts, 'Pornography Addiction: A Neuroscience Perspective', *Surgery Neurology International*, 2 (2011)

things being unambiguously pornographic and others unambiguously erotic, but with much lying between. The border between eroticism and pornography is *fuzzy* (the term is technical).<sup>42</sup> The present thesis therefore views eroticism and pornography as fuzzy concepts. Although erotic art may be viewed as the more sophisticated and suggestive, and the extremes of eroticism and pornography are easily identified, the borderline between the two is unclear. For the purpose of this thesis, eroticism is the artistic representation of the sexual, which is usually more suggestive than depictive. Pornography, by contrast, is merely the depiction of sexual content; it is exclusively intended to arouse sexual desire. Obscenity, meantime, is the gratuitous depiction of scatological or similar material regardless of whether the depiction is intended to arouse sexual desire.

Naturally, the distinctions between eroticism, pornography, and obscenity are blurred. Nonetheless, the distinctions provide a broad framework for what follows.

### **Methodology and modern trends in literary criticism**

The present study draws on four influences: Freudian theory, postmodernism, feminism, and the new historicism. Although these influences are sometimes seen as twentieth century developments, particularly as regards literary criticism, their origins are older. Sometimes the ideas in each overlap; at other times they contradict each other.

#### ***Freudian theory***

Freudian theory stems from the work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). The theory has it that people, from birth onwards, are motivated by sexual desire. A key aspect of Freudian theory is that much of human motivation is unconscious—or, as Freud maintained, governed by the *subconscious*; as used by Freud, the subconscious is a *noun*, not an adjective, and it is instinctive, mostly pertaining to sexual desire.

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<sup>42</sup> See especially Bart Kosko, *Fuzzy Thinking: The New Science of Fuzzy Logic* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), p. 70.



Because adults are embarrassed by their subconscious desires, they *sublimate* them into socially acceptable forms.

Freudian theory has had an immense influence on literary criticism. However, this influence is controversial. Freudian theory is now mostly discredited.<sup>43</sup> The theory *does not* accurately describe childhood development; boys *do not* suffer castration anxiety because they fear their fathers; girls *do not* suffer penis envy; the theory *does not* explain adult personality; psychoanalysis is of *no use* in the treatment of the mentally ill—in his celebrated case studies of neurotic patients (e.g., Little Hans, The Wolf Man, Dora); Freud *fabricated* evidence (Freud, contrary to his claims, never cured anybody). There is a plausible case that Freud developed his theory only because he suffered from cocaine induced psychosis (he was an addict).<sup>44</sup>

Jill Mann observes that Freud is discredited everywhere except in literary studies. She states:

But I remain unconvinced that psychoanalysis can be valid for literature when it is not valid for life (of which “cultural productions” are certainly part). And the circularity of psychoanalytic criticism is evident . . . if psychoanalysis derives its language and modes of thought from literature, it is not surprising that psychoanalytic critics often have very perceptive things to say about literary texts.<sup>45</sup>

Mann possibly overstates the case against Freud. Not everything in Freudian theory is nonsense, and Freud was not as original as he claimed to be. This is acknowledged by Hans Eysenck, who is arguably Freud’s harshest critic. Thus:

No one familiar with Ancient Greek and Roman literature, or medieval plays and texts, can have any doubt about the prevalence of sexual symbolism, or

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<sup>43</sup> See especially Eysenck.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth M. Thornton, *Freud and Cocaine: The Freudian Fallacy* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1989), pp. 45–46.

<sup>45</sup> Jill Mann, *Feminising Chaucer* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002), p. xiii.

the fact that it was known to practically everyone. To imagine for a moment that such symbolism was discovered by Freud is as absurd as to imagine its use in dreams was discovered by him; the use of symbolism in dreams also has a long history, going back to the beginning of written language. It is not the use of symbols in dreams that is novel in Freud's account, but the *particular* [emphasis original] use he makes of them, and the interpretation he gives of the purpose of symbolism. *Here, as everywhere, what is new in his theories is not true, and what is true in his theories is not new* [emphasis added].<sup>46</sup>

Thus, Freud took old ideas—that knives could represent penises, for instance, or that containers could represent vaginas—coupled them with other old ideas, and then dressed them all up in a largely bogus psychology. One can therefore use the term *Freudian symbol* without having to commit oneself to the specifics of Freudian theory, and without having to believe Freud was the first to recognise sexual symbols for what they are.

As regards the present study, a notable feature of the theory is that people's subconscious sexual desires are mediated through symbols. Thus, for example, sexual intercourse may be thought of as a train entering a tunnel; a handbag may represent a vagina; a cigar may represent a penis. The range of such sexual symbols is vast, and may be interpreted by a *psychoanalyst* through noting an individual's slips of the tongue (*paraplexes*); the content of his or her dreams; the nature of his or her free associations; the nature of his or her artistic and literary creations; and so forth.

Similar may be said of the notion of unconscious mental processes, and even motives. The idea of unconscious mental processes developed centuries before Freud. Eysenck comments:

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<sup>46</sup> Hans J. Eysenck, *Decline and Fall of the Freudian Empire* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004), p. 123.

Freud had hundreds of predecessors who postulated the existence of an unconscious mind, and wrote about it in great detail. . . . It would have been very difficult to find any psychologist who did not postulate some form of unconscious in his treatment of the mind.<sup>47</sup>

Again, the only problem concerns the specifics of Freudian theory—boys' castrations anxiety, for instance; girls' penis envy. This should not prevent one from talking of unconscious processes. To speak of unconscious mental processes does not commit one to using the term *unconscious* as a noun; it may equally be an adjective: also, the distinction between conscious and unconscious is arguably fuzzy.

Certain of Freud's *defence mechanisms* (means by which the conscious mind defends itself from unwholesome desires) may also have validity, though Freud's suggested mechanisms for them may not. This particularly applies to sublimation, the expression of socially unacceptable desires in socially acceptable ways (e.g. through art and literature); and, to *projection*, the attribution of one's own faults to others.

Freudian theory is apposite to Chaucerian criticism because, as Eysenck notes, sexual symbols permeate medieval art and literature. Freudian imagery particularly permeates *Troilus and Criseyde*. Moreover, Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson argue that feminist medievalists are challenged by psychoanalysis because it takes male sexuality to be the norm.<sup>48</sup> Gail Ashton argues similarly, citing Jacques Lacan's views as being inherently sexist.<sup>49</sup> Such authorities are arguably unfair to psychoanalysis, for through Freudian psychology is male-centred, some of Freud's

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 33

<sup>48</sup> Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson, 'Introduction' in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and all her sect*, eds., by Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–20 (p. 11).

<sup>49</sup> Gail Ashton, 'Feminisms', in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed., by Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 369–382 (pp. 369–370).

followers were not. Karen Horney (1885–1952), in particular, criticised Freud for his male chauvinism, and developed a “feminist” psychoanalysis.<sup>50</sup>

### ***Postmodernism***

There is no universally accepted definition of postmodernism. The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines it as “a late 20<sup>th</sup> century style and concept in the arts and architecture, characterized by a general distrust of theories and ideologies as well as a problematic relationship with the notion of art”.<sup>51</sup> There is some merit in postmodernism in that it encourages an eclectic approach to the study of the arts and history.

The present study distances itself from two viewpoints closely associated with postmodernism, *linguistic relativity* and *cultural relativism*. Linguistic relativity pertains to the view that language determines thought—so, taken to extremes, if one does not have a word for something, one cannot think about, or even experience, it. Cultural relativism pertains to the view that different cultures have different values—so one cannot use the values of one’s own culture to pass judgement on the values of another. If different people have different moral codes, one cannot pass ethical judgement on them unless one understands their moral codes.

The notion of linguistic relativity comes from Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), who popularised it.<sup>52</sup> It is sometimes referred to as the *linguistic relativity hypothesis*, or the *Sapir–Whorf hypothesis*. Popular examples of linguistic relativity deriving from Whorf include the notion that, because Eskimos have more words for snow than have Europeans, Eskimos *see* snow in different ways than do Europeans, and that because they see snow

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<sup>50</sup> See Gilbert Schacter and Daniel Wegner, eds., *Psychology* (Cambridge: Worth Publishers, 2011), p. 180.

<sup>51</sup> Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, *Concise OED: Luxury edition.*, 11<sup>th</sup> edition (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> Steven Pinker, *The language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007), p. 46.

differently, they *think* about it differently, too.<sup>53</sup> Another example concerns Hopi Native Americans. Whorf stated that the Hopi language contains:

no words, grammatical forms, constructions, or expressions that refer directly to what we call “time,” or to past, or future, or to enduring or lasting.<sup>54</sup>

So Hopi people had:

no general notion or intuition of time as a smooth flowing continuum in which everything in the universe proceeds at an equal rate, out of a future, through a present, into the past.<sup>55</sup>

Linguistic relativity thus implies that language determines thought. Hopi Native Americans could not experience time as we know it because their language did not permit them to. This suggests, as regards the present study, that it is impossible for us to understand medieval views on erotica and pornography because medieval people did not use the same vocabulary as us. There is no word, for instance, in Middle English that precisely translates to “erotic”, so medieval people did not think in the same way as us about erotica.

The linguistic relativity hypothesis takes other forms. Lacan, for instance, reworked Freudian theory to state that the unconscious has the structure of a language. Therefore, he claimed, words pertaining to gender, power relations, authority figures, and so forth affect how people see the world and therefore how they behave within it. Thus, for example, such things as trivial as the signs on lavatory doors force us to see ourselves as being primarily gendered.<sup>56</sup> Lacan’s views have been immensely

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp. 46–47.

<sup>54</sup> Whorf, cited in Pinker *The Language Instinct*, pp. 52–53.

<sup>55</sup> Whorf, cited in Pinker *The Language Instinct*, p. 52.

<sup>56</sup> Patricia Clare Ingham, Psychoanalytic Criticism, in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed., by Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 463–478 (pp. 467–468).

influential, particularly as regards feminism. As Joan Scott says, “for feminists [he is] the key figure”.<sup>57</sup>

Linguistic relativity has also influenced literary historians. Julie Peakman, for instance, argues that, until the eighteenth century, the distinction between eroticism and pornography did not exist in England:

One person’s smut is another person’s sensuality. Similarly, distinguishing between erotic [*sic*] and pornography has been a topic of great debate among historians of sexuality. Problems with defining the material, to a large extent, result from attempts to fit the material into a cultural and sociological pigeonhole which did not exist when it was written.<sup>58</sup>

So:

Certainly, the eighteenth-century reader did not use the same *categorising faculty* [emphasis added] that we use today. No boundary was made between pornographic, erotic, libertine, gallant or licentious images, or differentiation from other forms, such as philosophical, political or moral genres.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, according to Peakman, before the eighteenth century people could not distinguish between what we call pornography and what we call erotica—they did not have the same “categorising faculty” (i.e., ways of thinking).

Many linguists and psychologists are sceptical about linguistic relativity. Steven Pinker, in particular, is scathing. It is a debatable point, he says, whether Eskimos really have more words for snow. And:

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<sup>57</sup> Joan W. Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’, *The American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 1053–1075 (p.1062)

<sup>58</sup> Julie Peakman, *Mighty Lewd Books: The Development of Pornography in Eighteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

Linguistic relativity came out . . . as part of a campaign to show that nonliterate cultures were as complex and sophisticated as European ones. But the supposedly mind-broadening anecdotes owe their appeal to a patronizing willingness to treat other cultures' psychologies as weird and exotic compared to our own. As Pullman notes,

Among the many depressing things about this credulous transmission and elaboration of a false claim is that even if there *were* [emphasis original] a large number of roots for different snow types in different Arctic languages, this would *not* [emphasis original], objectively, be intellectually interesting: it would be at most a mundane and unremarkable fact: horse breeders have various names for breeds, sizes, and ages of horses; botanists have . . .<sup>60</sup>

On Hopi language, Pinker provides the following translation from Hopi:

Then indeed, the following day, quite early in the morning at the hour when people pray to the sun around that time then he woke up the girl again.<sup>61</sup>

Pinker reports that Ekkehart Malotki, the linguist who provided the translation, also showed that Hopi language allows for copious ways of expressing time, including tense, specific vocabulary (including days of the week, season, and year), and metaphor.<sup>62</sup> Malotki is the main editor of the Hopi Dictionary Project.<sup>63</sup>

Nonetheless, despite Pinker, there is evidence that language affects on thought, but only in very mild, what Pinker would call trivial, ways. There has been much work on colour perception. Languages differ in their colour classification. Greek, for

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<sup>60</sup> Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, p. 47.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Hopi Dictionary Project, (University of Arizona Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology) (1998). *Hopi dictionary: Hopiikwa Lavàytutuveni: A Hopi-English dictionary of the Third Mesa dialect with an English-Hopi finder list and a sketch of Hopi grammar*. Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press.

instance, has two words for blue: *ble* for dark blue and *ghalazio* for light blue. In a perceptual study, Panos Athanasopoulos showed that the degree to which Greek–English bilinguals tend to classify “blue” in an “English” way is a function of their proficiency in English and their degree of acculturation in English speaking countries.<sup>64</sup>

From such studies as those of Athanasopoulos one can conclude that, because of differences in language, there might have been a different perceptions of eroticism and pornography in medieval times to those of today, but any such differences would have been slight, or even trivial. History provides some support for this conclusion: the copious religious proscriptions of diverse forms of sexual activity, prevalent throughout the Middle Ages, suggest that medieval people were fully aware of what was acceptable and unacceptable sex. That medieval people lacked specific terms does not suggest that they did not recognise eroticism and pornography for what they are and that they did not distinguish between the two. This is not to say that language does not facilitate thought—doubtless it does. It is to say that the specifics of the language used for thought seem not to matter, much.

Linguistic relativity implies cultural relativism, because, if different cultures use different languages and if linguistic relativity holds, it should be impossible to fully understand a different culture without understanding its language. However, the converse does not hold. It is possible to believe in cultural relativism without committing oneself to linguistic relativity. This is because there are so many differences between cultures—in political structure, in wealth, in warfare, in gender relations, in religion—that, a cultural relativist would say, it would be senseless to not to take such factors into account when trying to understand a culture. Thus, Kathleen Coyne Kelly comments in her review of *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*:

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<sup>64</sup> Panos Athanasopoulos, ‘Cognitive Representation of Colour in Bilinguals: The Case of Greek Blues’, *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 12 (2009), 83–95.



What constitutes the erotic is of course culturally specific, realized in local representational practices and personal expression. Thus to attempt to historicize the erotic and erotic experience is ambitious indeed, especially with respect to the Middle Ages.<sup>65</sup>

Cultural relativism appears valid insofar as standards change. One can see this in people reactions to Chaucer. Chaucer's works have been repeatedly banned or expurgated.<sup>66</sup> As late as 1986, a US school board in Lake City, Florida, for instance, withdrew *The Miller's Tale* from the school curriculum, despite parental objection to the ban, and the board's decision was later upheld by the US District Court.<sup>67</sup>

Donald Green makes a number of observations on changing attitudes to Chaucer in the centuries after the poet's death. From the sixteenth century onwards, Green states, many critics ignored Chaucer's moral purpose; instead, they viewed him as an author only of bawdy tales.<sup>68</sup> Green cites Thomas Campion's preface to the *Fourth Book of Ayres* (1617):

If any squeamish stomachs shall check at two or three vain ditties at the end of this book, let them pour off the clearest and leave those as dregs in the bottom. Howsoever, if they be but conferred with *the Canterbury Tales* of that venerable Poet Chaucer, they will then appear toothsome enough.<sup>69</sup>

Green points to Victorian squeamishness about Chaucer's *fabliaux*. He quotes Coleridge, for instance, as stating:

I dare make none [no excuse] for the gross and disgusting licentiousness, the daring profaneness, which rendered the *Decameron* of Boccaccio the parent

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<sup>65</sup> Kelly, 'The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain (review)', p. 372.

<sup>66</sup> Jonathon Green and Nicholas J. Karolides, *Encyclopedia of Censorship: New Edition* (New York: Facts on File Inc., 2005), p. 91.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Donald Green, 'Chaucer as Nuditarian: The Erotic as a Critical Problem', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 18 (1983), 59–69 (p. 60).

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Campion, Preface "to the Reader" of *the Fourth Book of Ayres*, as cited in Green, 'Chaucer as Nuditarian', p. 60.

of a hundred worse Children, fit to be classed among the enemies of the human race; . . . which interposes a painful mixture in the humour of Chaucer.<sup>70</sup>

However, to describe how people's reactions to Chaucer have differed over time suggests only the trivial truth that tastes differ. Moreover, leaving aside individual difference in sensibility, Green overstates his case. His quotation from Coleridge, for instance, is selective. Here is what Coleridge wrote of Chaucer elsewhere:

I take increasing delight in Chaucer. His manly cheerfulness is especially delicious to me in my old age. . . . I cannot in the least allow for any necessity for Chaucer's poetry, especially *the Canterbury Tales*, being considered obsolete. . . . [slight changes of text to render it more comprehensible] may well be pardoned, even by the black-letterati, for the purpose of restoring so great a poet to his ancient and most deserved popularity.<sup>71</sup>

Coleridge not only venerated Chaucer; he also thought that his works should be read in their entirety, preferably with no (or as few as possible) changes to Chaucer's original text.

There is also the problem, for literary scholars and historians alike, that if one maintains that, if people in the fourteenth century had such different value systems from those held today, one could not say *anything* about them. As regards sexuality, Ruth Karras sums up the situation neatly:

A historian is trapped in a dilemma here. . . . We have to attempt to find a balance between assuming that medieval people experienced sexual desire in much the same ways and in the same kinds of circumstances as modern

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<sup>70</sup> Green, 'Chaucer as Nuditarian', p .61.

<sup>71</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Henry Nelson, eds., *Specimens of the Table Talk of the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: John Murray, 1835), pp. 297–299.

people do, and assuming that they were so radically different that we cannot know anything about them.<sup>72</sup>

Karras may overstate the dilemma. Although people in Chaucer's England undoubtedly had a different worldview from that of people today, the things that concerned them, most likely, were the same things that concern people today: falling in love, caring for their children, and providing for old age. Some Chaucerian scholars agree. Jeffrey L. Forgeng and Will McLean, for instance, note the similarity between Chaucer's English people and English people today. Parental love of children, for instance, appears to have been much then as it is now. Forgeng and McClean state:

It is a popular myth that medieval parents responded to the high rate of child mortality by investing little emotion in their children, but contemporary evidence suggests otherwise.<sup>73</sup>

In addition, although it is a trivial truth that cultures differ—often extremely so, as is explained in the discussion of new historicism—human nature does not.

### ***Feminism***

Feminist philosophy is broad, and encompasses politics, art and literary criticism, historical analysis, and psychology. In politics, it asserts that women have lower status in society in terms of pay, vocation, and status; in art, literary, and historical criticism, it questions male judgements of value; in psychology, it questions biological explanations of gender differences. Women have a lower status in society, not because of their genes, but because of how society operates.

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<sup>72</sup> Ruth Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), p. 148.

<sup>73</sup> Jeffrey L. Forgeng and Will McLean, *Daily Life in Chaucer's England* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), p. 48.

Although feminism is mostly associated with movements in Europe and North America from the 1960s to the present day, its origins go back further. Some modern scholars have named Christine de Pizan (1364–c. 1430) as an early exponent of the rights and abilities of women.<sup>74</sup> Other pre-twentieth-century protofeminists include Mary Astell (1666–1731); Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797); the American Margaret Fuller (1810–1850); and the English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). There were also, of course, the suffragettes, who came to prominence at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Feminism today is a diverse, sometimes contradictory, philosophy. As indicated, while anti-pornography feminists, such as Dworkin and MacKinnon, are hostile to pornography, pro-sex feminists, such as Gayle Rubin, Susie Bright, and Naomi Wolf, are not. Indeed, not only do they allow for pornography; they also allow for sadomasochism, lesbianism, butch-femme, and other “deviant” sex.<sup>75</sup> In this context, some feminist thought now embraces aspects of *queer theory* and Freudian psychology. Queer theory may be defined as “all nonnormative gendered and sexual experience, including bisexuality, polyamory [having several sexual partners with mutual consent], and transgenderism”.<sup>76</sup> While feminists challenge the centrality of male-dominated spaces in politics, literary criticism, historical analysis, and psychology, queer theory rails against the centrality of heterosexual characters and heterosexuality-dominated spaces.<sup>77</sup> Thus, queer theory attempts to deconstruct stable concepts such as “natural sex” and “true” gender identity.

Despite the similarities between the political effects of both theories, the queer community has often railed against “Mother feminism”; the criticism of feminism

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<sup>74</sup> Earl Jeffrey Richards, ed., *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992), pp. 1–2.

<sup>75</sup> Chris Beasley, *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), pp. 123–124.

<sup>76</sup> Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, p. 580.

<sup>77</sup> Martha Albertson Fineman, ‘Introduction: Feminist and Queer Legal Theory’, in *Feminist and Queer Legal Theory: Intimate Encounters, Uncomfortable Conversations*, eds., by Martha Fineman, Jack E. Jackson, and Adam P. Romero (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), pp. 5–21 (pp. 5, 4).

revolves around two main points. First, queer theorists believe that the term *women* itself denotes a common “socially constructed” identity, pointing out that feminist theory has a limited contribution to their case in that it refuses to illuminate existing identities and social structures.<sup>78</sup> Second, queer theorists accuse feminists of advocating the “use of censorship and other forms of state repression in order to contain sexual violence against women”.<sup>79</sup>

This raises the issue of what is normative and what is deviant. As regards “deviant sex”, including pornography, Beasley observes that, “such practices were not simply an imitation of the heterosexual prescriptive norm or of patriarchal relations of dominance and subordination”,<sup>80</sup> and he cites Gayle Rubin as saying, “I looked at sex deviants and frankly they did not strike me as the apotheosis of patriarchy”.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Gail Ashton observes that, today, feminism “is no longer a ‘woman’ question”.<sup>82</sup> Ellen Willis, in an article for *Village Voice*, states “the claim that ‘pornography is violence against women’ was code for the neo-Victorian idea that men want sex and women endure it”.<sup>83</sup> Ironically, in 1994 the Canadian authorities confiscated *Bad Attitude*, a lesbian magazine of erotica; the magazines were sold in about one quarter of Canada’s feminist bookstores.<sup>84</sup>

The claim that there are “long-standing, dominant, male, phallogocentric ideologies . . . [and] patriarchal attitudes” in society,<sup>85</sup> in that it suggests that women, throughout history, have been relatively powerless is also a subject of dispute. Although the Church often portrayed women as second-class citizens, the reality of the age could

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> Elisa Glick, ‘Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression’, *Feminist Review*, 64 (2000), 19–45 (p. 22).

<sup>80</sup> Beasley, *Sexuality and Gender*, p. 124.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ashton, ‘Feminisms’, in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, pp. 369–382 (p. 270).

<sup>83</sup> Ellen Willis, ‘Lust Horizons: the ‘Voice’ and the Women’s Movement’, *Village Voice* (2005) <<http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-10-18/specials/lust-horizons/>> [accessed 15 August 2013].

<sup>84</sup> Anonymous, ‘Censor Censored: MacKinnon Law Stops Friend’s Book’, *Worker’s Solidarity*, 41 (1994) <<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/ws94/censor41.html>> [accessed 15 August 2013].

<sup>85</sup> Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, p. 273

have been more balanced. The Cathars, who flourished in the twelfth-century in the South of France, preached a relative egalitarianism in all matters; they even allowed for male and female “priests” (*perfecti*).<sup>86</sup> There were also the Lollards, who flourished in the fourteenth-century. Women were accorded greater status in Lollard communities, and this is plausibly one of the attractions for the movement’s attraction to women.<sup>87</sup>

Some women also achieved very high status, even among men. Such women included Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), abbess of Disibodenberg and author, philosopher, composer, mystic, and polymath;<sup>88</sup> Honor Plantagenet Lisle (c.1476–1563), wife of Arthur Lisle, Governor of Calais; and Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–c.1656), the first female painter elected to Italy’s Accademia di Arte del Disegno.

To assert that women have been systematically oppressed for millennia is to underestimate women. Of the eight works examined in depth in the present study, two—*The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*—explicitly empower women, three—*The Knight’s Tale*, *The Physician’s Tale*, and *The Reeve’s Tale*—present masculinity at its most violent, and three—*The Merchant’s Tale*, *The Shipman’s Tale*, and *The Miller’s Tale*—present women getting the better of their husbands. This indicates that Chaucer’s audience was more egalitarian than Church lore suggests.

As regards literary criticism, Ashton argues that the contradictions and diversity of feminism are a strength. They work against conservatism and help ensure a diversity of views.<sup>89</sup> In any event, feminist criticism has performed an immense service. Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, for example, in a thesis about the gendering of literary activities in the Middle Ages in relation to key texts of Chaucer

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<sup>86</sup> Michael D. Costen, *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press), pp. 199–201.

<sup>87</sup> Jana S. Pisani, ‘Gender and Heresy: Women and Men in Lollard Communities, 1420-1530’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 28 (1997), 681–683 (p. 681).

<sup>88</sup> Judith M. Bennett and Warren C. Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), p. 317.

<sup>89</sup> Ashton, ‘Feminisms’, in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, pp. 369–382 (p. 372).

and his critics, argues that Chaucer is deeply interested in exploring beyond “reading like a man” by feminising the reader or by privileging female figures as readers to an unusual degree. Dinshaw, Gail Ashton states, “presents Chaucer as an author who celebrates the feminine through his investigation of reading and writing practices”.<sup>90</sup> There is also Jill Mann’s *Feminizing Chaucer*, which calls attention to Chaucer’s often sympathetic portrayal of women, and how, frequently, the woman is the betrayed not the betrayer. An example is her analysis of Dido in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*.<sup>91</sup> The point here is not that men could not have made similar points; rather, it is that, prior to feminism, few did. Feminist literature has thus broadened our appreciation of Chaucer’s art. This viewpoint is well illustrated by Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson in their “Introduction” to *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and all her sect*. The editors state:

In the late 1960s and 1970s, when feminism as a political movement was beginning to have an impact on the academy, there were two dominant paradigms in the study of medieval literary texts: a Robertsonian exegetical hermeneutic, whereby all fictional narratives, no matter how secular, were read as moral allegories, ultimately revelatory of Christian caritas; and the paradigm of empirical scholarship, in which an almost-fetishism for uncovering the “facts” about a text rendered questions about the political significance of those facts irrelevant or simply not of concern to medievalists. Both the Robertsonian and the scholarship approaches are inherently conservative; together their hold on the institution of medieval literary criticism . . . has made it deeply resistant to new critical methods and to the intellectual challenges posed by the newer disciplines, including feminism.<sup>92</sup> (emphases original)

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>91</sup> Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 8, 9.

<sup>92</sup> Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson, ‘Introduction’ in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and all her sect*, eds., by Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–20 (pp. 6–7).

Evans's point is illustrated by Elizabeth Ann Robertson's work, which points to the systematic indifference to women in the court of Richard II by literary scholars prior to the rise of feminism—the scholars, it appears, were mainly interested in the men in Richard's court, and male issues—and, similarly, scholars systematically ignored Lollard views on female equality.<sup>93</sup> This failure to recognise the women in Richard's court is all the more severe because, as is argued later, his court was arguably the most “feminised” of medieval English monarchs.

Not all feminists, incidentally, see Chaucer in the same light as do the likes of Jill Mann. Elaine Hansen, for example, writing of the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, argues that the Wife—and other female character in Chaucer's works—reaffirms traditional male values.<sup>94</sup> Related to this, Amanda Hopkins complains of the tendency of some feminist critics to view “*all* [emphasis original] heterosexual encounters at all times” in terms of rape, and notes that doing so requires a “form of tunnel vision”.<sup>95</sup> She is particularly forceful on this point that feminist thought is not always “biased” to Chaucerian criticism. She states:

Evelyn Burge Vitz characterises blatantly politicised feminist approaches as “plagued by a tendency toward naive, anachronistic, and inappropriate readings of literary works, high levels of indignation and self-pity, and a pervasive hostility to men” (1997: 1). As Corinne Saunders points out, many feminist critics who have written on the Middle Ages have no specialist knowledge of the period, and their readings, whether through ignorance or wilful reinterpretation, ignore the fact that rape in the Middle Ages was an issue for both law and public debate, which “could be acutely sympathetic to women as well as misogynistic” (2001: 14).<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth Ann Robertson, ‘Medieval Feminism in Middle English Studies: A Retrospective’, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 26 (2007), 67–79(p. 73).

<sup>94</sup> Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 12, 26, 27.

<sup>95</sup> Amanda Hopkins, *Chaucer and the Fabliau* (Transcript of lecture for the Medieval to Renaissance Literature course: University of Warwick, Autumn 2005), p. 11.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.



Thus, for instance, Angela Jane Weisl, in her ““Quiting” Eve: Violence against Women in *The Canterbury Tales*”, argues that Chaucer normalises violence against women in every genre in *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>97</sup> Weisl ignores the fact that in *The Miller’s Tale* John falls and breaks his arm; Nicholas is penetrated by a hot coulter; in *The Reeve’s Tale*, both Symkyn and Aleyn end up beaten and bloody.

Hopkins further observes that feminists, in their “tunnel vision”, have, ironically, sometimes ignored the plight of women. She speaks of feminist analysis of Malyne in *The Reeve’s Tale*:

Malyne’s lack of opportunity to seek maternal or sexual fulfilment, and the social status conferred by marriage, is not a point that has bothered, or even occurred to the feminist critics; yet Chaucer makes it perfectly clear that, between her father’s menacing violence and her grandfather’s delusions of grandeur, Malyne has not had much fun in her life.<sup>98</sup>

Hopkins’s views notwithstanding, the present study recognises the importance of feminist theory to scholarship on medieval sexuality, especially in recovering the voices of women in the Middle Ages from a variety of perspectives: how they were represented, and how their speech was adopted in literature and public discourse. However, the study shies away from “biased” feminist readings.

### ***Michel Foucault and New Historicism***

To Michel Foucault (1926–1984), sexual behaviour is a form of cultural discourse; it is a “power game” in the same way that law and religion are power games. Sexuality thus comprises a set of sanctions and incentives that are enshrined in culture. Culture does not repress or channel desire so much as express it in ideals of love, family, and

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<sup>97</sup> Angela Jane Weisl, ““Quiting” Eve: Violence against Women in *The Canterbury Tales*”, in *Violence Against Women in Medieval Texts*, ed., Anna Roberts (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), pp. 115–136 (pp.116, 177).

<sup>98</sup> Hopkins, *Chaucer and the Fabliau*, p. 10.

heterosexual propriety, and as distaste for aberrations from norms. Foucault's aim is to historicise and denaturalise sex, to make us think of it not as an irresistible drive that owes its truth to an inherently natural quality, but as a product of cultural tactics that makes it continuous with power and politics. Sex is part of power politics.

Foucault's key idea is that power circulates through all social strata. It does so through the exchange of goods and services, barter, taxation, theft, ideas, marriage, other sexual relationships—indeed, anything that can possibly be exchanged.<sup>99</sup> Because Foucault is mainly interested in power, there is some influence of Marx. However, because Foucault sees power as emanating from factors other than just control of the means of production, Foucault can hardly be viewed as a Marxist. Also, unlike Marx, he does not attempt to explain the causes of social change; instead, he attempts to help us understand practices in terms of the times in which they occurred. For example, the public quartering of Robert-François Damiens (1715–1757) for the attempted regicide of Louis XV (1710–1774) of France, which Foucault describes in hideous detail,<sup>100</sup> while it may seem like senseless cruelty to people today, made total sense to people in eighteenth century France. In this regard, Foucault is non-judgemental. Similar may be said of sexuality. As Joan Scott observes, to Foucault, “Sexuality is produced in historical contexts”.<sup>101</sup>

There are two problems with Foucault's view. First, in stressing the cultural aspects of human behaviour, he possibly overstates the differences between different cultures and understates their similarities. Indeed, as is argued above, there appear to be human universals, and many of these pertain to gender and sexuality. Second, Foucault's analysis of sexuality is mainly male. Like Freud, Foucault was something of a male chauvinist. Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks observes:

Feminist analysts point out that, although Foucault's studies of sexuality are studies of male sexuality, female sexuality has generally been of greater

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<sup>99</sup> Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (New York: Routledge 2006), p. 284.

<sup>100</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 3–5.

<sup>101</sup> Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’, p. 1060.

concern to authorities throughout history. Feminists have thus turned their attention to the construction of female sexuality by intellectual, religious, and political authorities (who were usually men), and to women's understanding of their own bodies and sexual lives.<sup>102</sup>

Such caveats aside, Foucault did much valuable work.<sup>103</sup> He advocated a holistic approach to understanding sexuality, both past and present. Hence, in discussing the work of Foucault, Classen states in "The Cultural Significance of Sexuality":

In addition, the history of sexuality requires, because of its enormous cultural historical complexity, an interdisciplinary approach, inviting historians and art historians, literary scholars and sociologists, anthropologists and theologians to the same table.<sup>104</sup>

It is difficult to disagree with Classen. It is necessary to "get under the skin" of people in the past when studying their attitudes. When doing so, the use of every conceivable resource is both sensible and, arguably, necessary. Therefore, if we are to understand the past, we should draw on a range of academic disciplines.

New historicism, insofar as it draws on a range of disciplines, follows from Foucault's work. It developed in the 1980s through the work of Stephen Greenblatt, which gained prominence and influence in the 1990s. It deals "directly with sources and particulars rather than pre-given totalities such as world-picture and ideology".<sup>105</sup> The theory concerns itself with relating the idea of a text to other key concepts: culture, discourse, ideology, the self, and history.

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<sup>102</sup> Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 7.

<sup>103</sup> See Michel Foucault, 'An Introduction', *The History of Sexuality. Vol. I*, trans., by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

<sup>104</sup> Albrecht Classen, 'The Cultural Significance of Sexuality in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and Beyond. A Secret Continuous Undercurrent or a Dominant Phenomenon of the Premodern World? Or: The Irrepressibility of Sex Yesterday and Today' in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, pp. 1–142 (p. 12).

<sup>105</sup> Claire Colebrook, *New Literary Histories: New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 24.

In this regard, the main distinction between new historicism and “old historicism” is that the former “promises a new relationship to the literary past” and an engagement with contemporary theories and debates, such as post-colonialism, postmodernism, and feminism.<sup>106</sup> Unlike, old historicists, new historicists “mistrust” history in that they believe “it is treacherous to reconstruct the past as it really was—rather than as we have been conditioned by our own place and time to believe that it was”.<sup>107</sup> For them, “history” can be objective because it is constantly written and rewritten.

New historicists have acknowledged their indebtedness to feminism and postmodernism. Feminists have contributed in a crucial way to perspectives that have been largely popularised as new historicism, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt believe that:

Women’s studies, and the feminism that motivated its formation, as served as an important, if little acknowledged, model for new historicism in that it has inspired its adherents to identify new objects for study, bring those objects into the light of critical attention, and insist upon their legitimate places in the curriculum.<sup>108</sup>

New historicism, which reflects a concern with the period in which a literary text is produced, is more open to discussion of the roles of women, attitudes toward women, and power and gender relationships with a special emphasis on literature as a cultural text. New historicists are often sceptical toward any “universalizing” claims or assumptions about women, focusing rather on the ways in which examples of the culturally prevalent gender powers of the time are represented.

As did Foucault, new historicists are willing to incorporate historical analysis; this may include analysis of historical context and potential bias of text. Thus, new

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<sup>106</sup> Brook Thomas, *The New Historicism: And Other Old-fashioned Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>107</sup> Steve Golden, *The Influence of Postmodernism, Part 4: New Historicism*, (February 27, 2013), <[http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/aid/v8/n1/influence-of-postmodernism-new-historicism#fnList\\_1\\_1](http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/aid/v8/n1/influence-of-postmodernism-new-historicism#fnList_1_1)> [accessed 15 July 2013]

<sup>108</sup> Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, eds., *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), p. 11.

historicists tend to be slightly sceptical of the value of literature in the understanding of history, particularly if the literature is examined only as literature. This may be obvious, but it is nonetheless necessary. Shakespeare's *Richard III*, for instance, was written as Tudor propaganda, and the play cannot be fully appreciated unless one allows for this; it is poor history.<sup>109</sup>

As regards Chaucerian England, the culture was very different from that of today. For one thing, it was more violent. The crime rate was much higher. In fourteenth century Oxford, for example, modern estimates suggest there were 110 murders per 100,000 people per year; this compares with a murder rate of less than one per 100,000 in London during the mid twentieth century, and the murder rate everywhere in England appears to have been at least 10 per 100,000 per year.<sup>110</sup> Murder rates today, incidentally, correlate highly with rates of other types of crime: rape, burglary, assault, and so on; one can therefore suspect that rates of other crimes were much higher in the fourteenth century, too.<sup>111</sup> Sports were also different. Medieval "sports" included bear baiting, in which a bear was torn to pieces by dogs; nailing a cat to a post and then having two men, with their hands tied behind their backs, batter it to death with their heads; cock fighting; and men battering a pig to death with clubs.<sup>112</sup> These were spectator sports.

Manners, if medieval etiquette books are to be believed, were likewise different. The books advised their readers not to do such things as urinate on the floor, in closets, or on wall hangings; remove clothes in public when preparing to defecate; blow one's nose on a tablecloth or into one's hands; spit into the bowl when washing one's hands; and make noises like a pig when eating.<sup>113</sup> These books were written for adults.

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<sup>109</sup> Richard P. Wheeler, 'History, Character and Conscience in "Richard III"', *Comparative Drama*, 5 (1971), 301–321 (p. 304).

<sup>110</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking Adult, 2011), p. 60.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>112</sup> Barbara Tuchman, *A Distance Mirror*, p. 135.

<sup>113</sup> Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, pp. 69, 70.

Nonetheless, during Chaucer's lifetime things were changing, especially among the rich. The English murder rate was substantially lower at the end of the fourteenth century than at the beginning; moreover, it fell steadily throughout the century, even during times of plague and the Hundred Years' War.<sup>114</sup> Cruelty to animals was declining. Good etiquette was on the increase, as is witnessed by Richard II's invention of the handkerchief; indeed, Richard's aesthetic sensibility is thought to have been a major part of his downfall.<sup>115</sup>

Chaucer's Prioress exhibits this new sensibility. In the *General Prologue* we hear:

At mete wel ytaught was she with alle;  
She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,  
Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;  
Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe  
That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.

In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest. (*The General Prologue*, 127–132)<sup>116</sup>

The Prioress was not alone, for Chaucer tells us she tried to imitate the manners of court (And peyned hire to countrefete cheere / Of court, and to been estatlich of manere, 139–140). She was kind to animals, too.

She was so charitable and so pitous  
She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous  
Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.  
Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde  
With rosted flessch, or milk and wastel-breed.  
But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed, (*The General Prologue*, 143–148)

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>115</sup> George B. Stow, 'Richard II and the Invention of the Pocket Handkerchief', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 27 (1995), 221–235 (pp. 222–223).

<sup>116</sup> All quotations from *The Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Parlement of Foules*, *The Legend of Good Women*, *The House of Fame*, and *The Book of the Duchess* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed., by Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Unlike Shakespeare's Richard III, Chaucer's Prioress, although presumably fictional, seems to reflect accurately historical reality.

Because Chaucer did not write in a vacuum, this thesis takes a broadly new historicist approach. It draws on a wide range of sources to construct an understanding of medieval eroticism. The thesis first outlines attitudes towards sexuality in late medieval England and their origins; thus, it traces the religious and cultural roots of medieval attitudes, their accommodation within medicine, philosophy (especially Platonism), literary discourse, and the impact of Middle Eastern scholarship on medieval thought. It also examines the tumultuous times in which Chaucer lived. The thesis then moves to textual analysis of the seven *Canterbury Tales*, with each tale given separate treatment, and of *Troilus and Criseyde*. This textual analysis makes references to Chaucer's contemporaries and their works, and standard literary critiques.

The diversity of source material has encouraged an interdisciplinary approach to the subject, so that in addition to new historical approach, the thesis is informed by feminist theory, psychoanalytical theory, anthropology, art history, psychology, history, and the techniques of literary criticism. In this, it develops the approach of Lara Farina, who has combined feminist, economic, and psychoanalytic thought in her analysis of erotic discourse in early English religious writing.<sup>117</sup>

### **Scope and organisation**

Because the present study is concerned with heteroeroticism in Chaucer's poetry, it does not much discuss homosexuality. Although some references are made in Chaucer's work to possibly homosexual persons (e.g., the Pardoner) and there are elements of homoeroticism in his poems (most notably in *The Knight's Tale*), the actual depiction of erotic and sexual encounters are mainly heterosexual.<sup>118</sup> This

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<sup>117</sup> Lara Farina, *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>118</sup> Julie Peakman, 'Sexual Perversion in History: An Introduction', in *Sexual Perversions, 1670–1890*, ed., by Julie Peakman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–49 (p. 1).

could be, as Ruth Karras argues, because heterosexuality both in the Middle Ages and today tends to be the default category.<sup>119</sup> In this regard, Glenn Burger states that heterosexuality is central to Chaucer's narratives.<sup>120</sup>

For this reason, the present study mainly excludes aspects of queer theory, except insofar as it allows for sadomasochistic elements in Chaucer's poetry, and for voyeurism. The only exception to this is the bestiality implicit in the dream sequences in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Thus, the present study is concerned mainly with relatively "normal" heterosexual behaviour.

The thesis is structured into two parts. The first (Chapters one and two) provides the conceptual background to the thesis. Hence, it addresses such issues as symbolism in medieval art and literature, philosophical and religious influences on Chaucer, medieval attitudes to eroticism, and the broad philosophical outlook employed in the thesis. The sequence, where historical issues are involved, is broadly chronological. As indicated under Methodology, the second part (Chapters three, four, and five) provides textual analysis. The sequence comprises, first, analysis of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales fabliaux*, then of the *Tales* romances, and finally of *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Chapter one discusses the background to medieval views on eroticism. It starts with those classical ideas, particularly those of Plato, Aristotle, and Galen, that pervaded medieval thought. The chapter then progresses to the Bible. This is treated in two parts: the Old Testament and the New. Discussion on the New Testament focuses especially on the changes made to the faith by St Paul.

The next section focuses on the Fathers of the Church. Here, the focus is on those Fathers whose teachings especially impacted on sexual matters; the most important of whom for purposes of the present study are Jerome, and Augustine. The discussion then moves to views on sexuality during the High Middle Ages,

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<sup>119</sup> Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, p. 8.

<sup>120</sup> Glenn Burger, 'Queer Theory', in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed., by Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 432–447 (p. 432)



particularly as articulated by Thomas Aquinas. Here attention is given to the difference between medical opinion of the era and that of the Church. Attention is also given to the Islamic influence, particularly the medical and philosophical writings of Ibn Sina, whose works reached the West during the twelfth century.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of medieval erotic symbolism. It is argued that erotic symbolism pervaded art and literature during the medieval period. In consequence, much of the discussion concerns the visual arts. This discussion on symbolism provides a background to Chaucer's use of symbolism, for, as is argued in subsequent chapters, Chaucer's symbolism is similar to that used by other writers during the Middle Ages, and this symbolism is much the same as that employed by painters and other artists during the High Middle Ages and beyond.

Chapter two discusses Chaucer's sources and his audience. Four main sources are considered: the French *fabliaux*, medieval romances, the love poetry of Ovid, and Boccaccio; all were both sources for and influences on Chaucer.

The discussion of the French *fabliaux* provides brief outlines of example *fabliaux* plots; this is to illustrate their nature and to enable the reader, in later discussion of Chaucer's *fabliaux*, to appreciate how his *fabliaux* differed from the French *fabliaux*. The discussion on medieval romances, including *The Romance of the Rose* and the Arthurian legends points to their central features; again, this is to enable the reader to see how Chaucer both drew from them but altered their form. The discussion on Ovid is present because, not only was it popular in medieval Europe; it was also a major influence on Chaucer, particularly in his *Troilus and Criseyde*. The chapter then turns to the works of Boccaccio—who was an undoubted influence on Chaucer and a source of some of his works, though how much of an influence is disputed.

The discussion then turns to Chaucer's audience. It argues that, whereas Chaucer probably intended *Troilus and Criseyde* to have a largely courtly audience, he probably intended *The Canterbury Tales* to have as broad an audience as possible. It also argues that—contrary to the views of some scholars—Chaucer intended his works—particularly *The Canterbury Tales*—to be enjoyed by women as well as men.

Chapter three deals with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales fabliaux* (*The Miller's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale*, *The Merchant's Tale*, and *The Shipman's Tale*). In each case, the tale's provenance is discussed; then discussion turns to its characterisation and use of erotic symbolism. The discussions reveal that, although each tale is comic, each has a dark side. This is especially true of *The Reeve's Tale*, which, stripped of its comic elements, is a story concerning possible rape and certain gratuitous violence. The sexual imagery within each is bawdy.

Chapter four deals with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* romances (*The Knight's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and *The Physician's Tale*). The first and last of these are violent stories, and the erotic imagery within them is not bawdy; it is penetrative, phallic, and, curiously, virginal. *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, by contrast, is an anachronism, in part because its *Prologue* is the longest in *The Canterbury Tales* and is arguably as important as the tale itself, and in part because, although a romance, it does not paint a heroic picture of its protagonist (the knight). In most traditional romances, knights are portrayed as being at least nominally noble.

Chapter five deals with *Troilus and Criseyde*. The treatment is similar to that of *The Canterbury Tales* in Chapters three and four. The chapter examines erotic imagery in the story of Troy as told by Chaucer. It also examines the love and tragic elements of the story. The analysis reveals a variety of recurring erotic images. It also points to *fabliaux* and comic elements in the poem. Unlike the other versions of the story, Chaucer's version concentrates more on love than on war. Love destroys Troilus, just as, in a wider context, love destroys Troy. The chapter illustrates that, as in *The Knight's Tale*, themes such as voyeurism, martial imagery, and lovesickness occur frequently within the poem.

The reason for placing discussion of *Troilus and Criseyde* after that of *The Canterbury Tales* although *Troilus and Criseyde* is believed to have been composed before (c. 1381–1386) the *Tales* (c. 1390–1395) is twofold.<sup>121</sup> First, determining the

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<sup>121</sup> Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 3–5. See also Larry D. Benson, 'The Order of the *Canterbury Tales*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 3 (1981), 77–120.

precise chronology of Chaucer's authorship is problematic. *The Knight's Tale*, for example, was originally written during the period 1384–1385 as an independent work (in the *Prologue* to the *Legend of Good Women*, written c. 1385,<sup>122</sup> Chaucer refers to the work as *Palamon and Arcite*); similarly, elements of *The Physician's Tale* occur in *The Legend of Good Women*, written in the early 1380s.<sup>123</sup> Second, *Troilus and Criseyde*, although a romance, has *fabliaux* elements, so it is logical to discuss Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* *fabliaux* and romance works before discussing *Troilus and Criseyde*.

The thesis terminates with a conclusions section. This centres on the nature of Chaucer's use of eroticism; how he used eroticism to further his plots; and how his use of eroticism reflected and subverted fourteenth century English values.

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<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 471.

<sup>123</sup> See Anne Middleton, 'The Physician's Tale and Love's Martyrs: 'Ensamplis Mo Than Ten' as a Method in the *Canterbury Tales*', *The Chaucer Review*, 8 (1973), 9–32.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND TO MEDIEVAL EROTICISM**

The purpose of the present chapter is to provide the intellectual background to Chaucer's eroticism in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. The chapter thus provides the background to medieval European views on eroticism. It does not discuss Chaucer or his works directly. Instead, it traces the roots of the medieval views on sex and eroticism.

The discussion starts with an outline of classical Greek philosophy, particularly Platonic philosophy.<sup>124</sup> The influence of Plato on the medieval mind was immense. The discussion then considers Christian views of sexuality as elaborated in the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New. It then considers how the Fathers of the Church attempted to integrate Platonic thinking into Christian theology. It then moves to the Middle Ages, and how, on the one hand, theologians integrated Aristotelian thought into Christian teaching on sexuality, but, on the other, lay thinkers taught a more liberal attitude towards sexuality. The section includes discussion of the impact of Islamic scholarship on medieval thought.

Finally, the chapter discusses medieval symbolism, particularly with reference to eroticism. The section argues that symbolism was pervasive in medieval arts, but, despite the particularities of the era, was not much different from symbolism used today.

### **Classical background**

Greek ideas and attitudes towards sexual love helped shape medieval Western culture. This was because Greek ideas permeated the Roman Empire, and Christianity arose within the Roman Empire in the first few centuries AD. Christianity therefore absorbed Greek ideas, including ideas about sexuality. Joyce Salisbury comments:

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<sup>124</sup> Alfred. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, eds., by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), p. 53.

The early Christian centuries were formative for our beliefs about sexuality because that was a time when many ideas were in flux: Should Christians go to gladiator shows? Should Christians eat pork? What was Christian sexuality? Thus, Christians were establishing an identity that both preserved much that was Roman and created much that was new.<sup>125</sup>

In this passage, Salisbury specifically highlights Roman ideas. Although much Roman philosophy and theology derived from the Greeks, Chaucer frequently uses Roman allusions to it. In *The Merchant's Tale*, for instance, Chaucer uses the goddess Proserpine, not her Greek equivalent, Persephone. Chaucer knew of Greek and Roman mythology, and used it in his works. It is unlikely, however, as is discussed in Chapter five, that Chaucer used Homer's *Iliad* as a source for the Trojan War; he is more likely to have used Roman sources.

As regards philosophy and science, three Greek thinkers were especially important: Plato, Aristotle, and Galen.

### ***Plato***

Plato (c. 424–c. 347) lived mostly in Athens. His philosophy is mainly a development of that of his mentor, Socrates (c. 469 BC–399 BC). Plato's philosophy is termed *Platonism*. Platonism posited the existence of an ideal world of *Ideas*. This world is termed the *Platonic Realm*. The Ideas within the Platonic Realm are perfect exemplars of everything in the physical world. The business of philosophy, Plato taught, is the contemplation of the Ideas in the Platonic Realm. The physical world of real things, by contrast, is sordid, because physical things are invariably imperfect. This notion impacts on sexuality in that, if one accepts that physical things are sordid, sexual acts may be sordid, too.

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<sup>125</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, 'When Sex Stopped Being a Social Disease: Sex and the Desert Fathers and Mothers' in *Medieval Sexuality: a Casebook*, eds., by April Harper and Caroline Proctor (London: Routledge, 2008), pp 47–59 (p. 47).

Beyond this, Plato's views on sexuality were mixed.<sup>126</sup> Plato believed that people—male or female—should be judged only on merit.<sup>127</sup> He thought sex was a purely animal function. Human sexual behaviour should therefore be curtailed. Ideally, people should have sex only for reproduction.

Plato did, however, allow for love. The highest form of love, he taught, is non-sexual<sup>128</sup>—this today is termed *Platonic love*. Plato thus defined Eros as the passion to possess the Good (the supreme Idea in the Platonic Realm) and the Beautiful (another Idea), and that, as David Carr observes, “the only way a soul can gain freedom from the chaos of temporary pleasures like sex is to redirect its desire to higher goods, like beauty and truth”.<sup>129</sup>

Plato allowed for male homosexuality. Although he taught that the highest form of male homosexuality should exercise Platonic love—that is, be non-physical—he allowed that this was not always possible. He also taught that male homosexuality (physical or Platonic) should be encouraged in warriors; this was because, he believed, male lovers would protect each other in battle. This idea, as it happens, was practised in Thebes. There was a Sacred Band of 500 soldiers in Thebes who were famous for their valour;<sup>130</sup> this may have influenced Plato.

Plato's notions about soul and body led to a distrust of physical sex and the categorization of sexual pleasure by which marriage “was respected as an institution

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<sup>126</sup> Julia Annas, ‘Plato’s “Republic” and Feminism’, *Philosophy*, 51(1976), 307–321 (p. 307).

<sup>127</sup> Plato, *Platonis Opera*, ed., by John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), bk. 7, 540c5–9, 455d, in *Perseus Digital Library*<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text;jsessionid=799B764C3753D4176C86371D0EC9CBE7?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0167>> [accessed 12 January 2012].

<sup>128</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, trans., by Benjamin Jowett (Australia: The University of Adelaide Library, 2004)<<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plato/p71sy/index.html>> [accessed 03 August 2011]

<sup>129</sup> David Carr, *The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>130</sup> Brent Pickett, ‘Homosexuality’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2011 Edition)*, ed., by Edward N. Zalta <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/homosexuality/>> [accessed 03 August 2011]

that provided progeny and good housekeeping; it was not expected to fulfil one's longing for a soul mate".<sup>131</sup>

Plato's writings contain the roots of the later Christian antipathy to sexuality. For instance, the connection between sexual love and melancholy was first enforced by Greek treatises on sexuality, which categorized love as an illness, either defining it as a form of melancholy or associating it with mania. As Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella observe:

Sappho wrote of love in the terms of the symptoms of disease, the early humoral writers explained madness and all emotional disturbances in the brain in terms of the invasion of black bile, Plato spoke of sexual love as a disease of the soul, and Aristotle assigned the origins of eros not to the soul but to a boiling of blood around the heart.<sup>132</sup>

This connection can be seen in late medieval treatises on love where "Love is consistently imagined as a physical illness or wound" with destructive qualities.<sup>133</sup> Most of the "wounded" lovers of classical antiquity in *The Canterbury Tales* show symptoms of love-sickness, including continuous sighing and singing, turning pale, and the inability to eat, drink, or sleep. Palamon and Arcite in *The Knight's Tale*, for instance, go without sleep because they are tormented by their love for Emily. Eventually, the physical love, an emotion powerful enough to hurt and please at the same time, leads the lovers to their own destruction and agony. C. S. Lewis states:

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<sup>131</sup> Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Wife* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 20.

<sup>132</sup> Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella, 'Jacques Ferrand and the Tradition of Erotic Melancholy in Western Culture', in *A Treatise on Lovesickness*, ed., by Jacques Ferrand (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), pp. 113–122 (p. 42).

<sup>133</sup> Corinne Saunders states that this destructive 'bodily quality of desire is especially striking in Troilus' experience' that 'on first seeing Criseyde, he is physically affected, 'Right with hire look thorough-shoten and thorough-darted' (I, 325).' She also points out that Chaucer, using neo-Paltonic model of sight, presents and describes the symptoms of the malady of love such as weeping, sighing, swooning and physical decline. See Corinne Saunders, 'Love and the Making of the Self: *Troilus and Criseyde*', in *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, ed., by Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 134–155 (p. 140).

In ancient literature love seldom rises above the levels of merry sensuality or domestic comfort, except to be treated as a tragic madness which plunges otherwise sane people (usually women) in to crime and disgrace. Such is the love of Medea, of Phaedra, of Dido; and such the love from which maidens pray that the gods may protect them.<sup>134</sup>

Plato also introduced and popularised the *extro-mission* theory; this states that “the eye emits a ray. This ray, strengthened by the presence of light, goes out to encounter its visual object, is shaped by that object, and finally returns to the eye”.<sup>135</sup>

The theory of *extro-mission* appears to offer most in terms of masculine agency, for this version of sight coheres most closely to what medieval writers thought of as the penetrating, masculine gaze where the viewer holds power over visionary relations, to the extent that he brings objects into visibility through the animate power of the eye. According to this theory, sight lends the flesh a new destructive dimension; it literally carries sexual desires outside the viewer’s corporeal envelope and into the world—even into other bodies. A woman’s visibility as an object may clarify the limits of her power over viewers (usually male). The *extro-mission* theory of vision can largely be traced to Calcidius’s fourth-century translation of Plato’s *Timaeus*.

Plato’s major influence as regards medieval thought lay in his belief that earthly things are in some sense sordid and that knowledge therefore depends, not on observation but on contemplation. Although, as is discussed in the next subsection, Plato’s influence diminished from the mid twelfth century onwards, the Platonic belief that body and soul are distinct persisted, as did aspects of the *extro-mission* theory of perception. As it is argued in Chapters four and five, perception figures largely in Chaucer’s romances, and is used as an erotic device.

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<sup>134</sup> Clive Staples Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: a Study in Medieval Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 4.

<sup>135</sup> Cynthia Hahn, ‘Visio Dei: Changes in Medieval Visuality’, in *Visuality before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing How Others Saw*, ed., by Robert Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 169–96 (p. 174).



*Aristotle*

Aristotle (384–322 BC) was a pupil of Plato. His studies were broader than those of Plato, and more down-to-earth. These studies ranged through logic, biology, physics, astronomy, ethics, and political science. It is unclear how much he accepted the idea of the Platonic Realm. He was an observer and classifier. Thus, the key difference between Plato and Aristotle is that Plato was a mystic but Aristotle was a scientist.

Aristotle's views on sex are mainly set out in his *Politics*. In general, he taught that women are inferior to men. Aristotle's views were based on the idea that men and women were opposites; one sex had to be the inferior of the other. Aristotle considered women to lack all male privileged qualities, and therefore women to be inferior to men. Aristotle identified women with the lower elements of matter and with passivity. He identified men with the higher elements of matter and with the properties of form and activity.<sup>136</sup> In this, he taught that babies are not “conceived”; rather, the “seed” comes from the father—in the semen—and the mother's role is merely to provide a receptacle—the womb—in which the seed grows. Further, because men are superior to women, a purpose of men is to rule and a purpose of women is to be ruled.<sup>137</sup> However, women are not slaves, for slaves are ruled to work for their master's benefit whereas women are ruled to work for their own good.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, Aristotle believed in fidelity in marriage, and was against promiscuity.<sup>139</sup>

Aristotle believed in the *intro-mission* theory of perception. In contrast to the extra-mission theory, the *intro-mission* theory states that a thing external to the viewer emits rays that make an impression upon the eye. The theory came to the West through the Arab scholar Alhazen (965–c. 1040), probably in the twelfth or

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<sup>136</sup> Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: the Aristotelian Revolution, 750 BC – AD 1250* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1985), p. 100.

<sup>137</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans., by H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1944), bk. 1, 1254b, in *Perseus DigitalLibrary*<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0058%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D1254b>>[accessed 13 August 2010].

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. 1, 1259 a40.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. 1. 1261 b34–1262 a2.

thirteenth century; it was known and adopted by the English philosophy Roger Bacon (c. 1214–1294).

The *intro-mission* theory of vision influenced on early and late medieval philosophy and the social and religious interpretation of vision. Unlike Plato's conception, the Aristotelian perspective on vision prioritized the power of the object in seeing. The claim that both seer and the object seen are simultaneously active and passive blurs gender distinctions established through early medieval vision writings.

The significance of Aristotle to late medieval thought was profound. During the early centuries of Christianity, Aristotelian ideas, because they were scientific, were viewed, if they were discussed at all, as heresy.<sup>140</sup> This changed with the incorporation of Aristotle's philosophy into Christian thinking. Studying nature became respectable, as is witnessed by the works of, for example, Roger Bacon (1214–1294), who, inspired by Islamic scholars such as al-Kindi (Alkindus) (c. 801–873 CE), made great contribution to optics,<sup>141</sup> and Chaucer's near contemporary, William of Ockham (1287–1347), who made great contribution to the philosophy of science.<sup>142</sup> Both Roger Bacon and William of Ockham, incidentally, were Franciscan friars, which shows how deeply Aristotelian thinking had entered the Church. Chaucer, inspired by such thinkers, was interested in medicine, astronomy, and alchemy.<sup>143</sup> His interest in astronomy is witnessed by his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, which he wrote for his son Lewis.<sup>144</sup>

The tragedy for medieval thought, it has been argued, is not that it adopted Aristotle's philosophy; it was that it adopted it, particularly as regards astronomy, to

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<sup>140</sup> Edward Grant, *A Source Book in Medieval Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 42.

<sup>141</sup> Nader El-Bizri, 'A Philosophical Perspective on Alhazen's Optics', *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 15 (2005), pp. 189–218.

<sup>142</sup> Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, eds., *History of World Christian Movement Volume I: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 434.

<sup>143</sup> J. A. Tasioulas, 'Science', in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed., by Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 174–189 (p. 176).

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

large extent, uncritically. The philosophy became, in time, the equivalent of Gospel, and those who disagreed with it were persecuted, as was Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), who taught, contrary to Aristotle, that the Sun is the centre of the solar system, and was burnt at the stake for the heresy. The largely uncritical acceptance of Aristotelianism in the Middle Ages is termed *scholasticism*.

### *Galen*

Galen (AD 129–c. 217) was more a physician than a philosopher. His anatomical studies made him realise that Aristotle was incorrect as regards the role of women in conception. The female reproductive organs, he reasoned, are much like an inverted penis: the clitoris is erectile and the focus of female sexual pleasure, and is thus analogous to the penis; the ovaries, meanwhile, are analogous to the testes. Thus, both sexes contribute “half-seeds” to the foetus.<sup>145</sup> Galen also accepted the humours theory of human moods, as proposed by Hippocrates (460–c. 370 BC). Under this theory, the body has four fluids: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. Each was associated with a given mood (blood—sanguine; yellow bile—choleric; black bile—melancholic; phlegm—phlegmatic). An imbalance of any of these fluids led to the corresponding mood; thus too much black bile led to melancholia, for example.

Galen accepted the *extro-mission* theory of eyesight because it corresponded well with his image of sight as a “fiery” component, flowing forth from the brain to the eyes through hollow optic nerves. As regards sex, the “fiery” nature of vision may have suggested that seeing someone—particularly a beautiful woman—may have set the soul “on fire”. Tassi, commenting on the view that vision was viewed erotically during the Middle Ages, states:

Sight was potentially dangerous, erotic, and spiritually deviant, as the medieval phrase *libido videndi* (lust of the eye) and the Protestant emphasis on the “idolatrous eye” emphasize. The courtly love tradition, as well,

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<sup>145</sup> Sophia M. Connell, ‘Aristotle and Galen on sex Difference and Reproduction: A New Approach to an Ancient Rivalry’, *Studies in the History of Philosophy of Science*, 31(2000), 405–427 (p. 419).

supported the notion that a beautiful woman's eyes could bind the soul of a man; by extromission, her visual rays wounded her victim through his eyes. This implied that the male gazer's eyes were passive, as in the intromission theory, and were penetrated, and sometimes blinded, by the intensely beautiful image of the beloved.<sup>146</sup>

Thus if men sin, it is the woman's fault. This belief, as is argued in Chapter four, is prominent in *The Knight's Tale* and *The Physician's Tale*.

Concepts of male superiority and "disruptive" sexual passion from classical philosophy were incorporated into Christian doctrine and literature. The Bible, as argued below, reflects male claims to superiority over women, and the sinfulness of sex outside marriage.

### **The Bible**

The Bible comprises two main parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Roman Catholic version of the former comprises forty-six books, from Genesis to Malachi. These were originally written in Hebrew and form the basis of Judaism. The latter comprises the gospels of the Four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), accounts of the activities of Jesus' followers after his death (the Acts of the Apostles), diverse letters (epistles) on Christian lore, most of them written by St Paul (c. AD 5–c. 67), and a book of prophecies (The Book of Revelation). The New Testament was originally written in Greek. Although the New Testament can be viewed as a continuation of Judaic thought, it is not accepted by Jews and differs in tone from the Old Testament. For this reason, one can treat the Old Testament and the New Testament separately. By far the most important part of the New Testament as regards sexual ethics comes from the writings of St Paul.

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<sup>146</sup> Marguerite A. Tassi, *The Scandal of Images: Iconoclasm, Eroticism, and Painting in Early Modern English Drama* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2005), p. 17.

### *Sexuality in the Old Testament*

The Old Testament is at best ambiguous about sex. Thus, we have:

And Moses spake unto the people, saying, Arm some of yourselves unto the war, and let them go against the Midianites, and avenge the LORD of Midian. (Numbers 31: 3).<sup>147</sup>

Followed by:

And Moses said unto them, Have ye saved all the women alive? Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD. Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves. And do ye abide without the camp seven days: whosoever hath killed any person, and whosoever hath touched any slain, purify both yourselves and your captives on the third day, and on the seventh day. (Numbers 31: 15–19).

Moses, evidently, favoured mass murder, including infanticide, coupled with mass rape and enslavement, provided the perpetrators of the deeds cleansed themselves afterwards.

The Bible also appears to countenance promiscuity and polygyny. Solomon, for instance, had many loves, in addition to having 700 wives and 300 concubines. (1 Kings 11: 1–3).

So, the Old Testament seems to suggest that sex, including violent sex, is permitted, provided that, when violent, it is perpetrated on one's enemies. Also, as the tale of

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<sup>147</sup> All biblical quotations are from the King James Version.

Solomon suggests, with his numerous wives and concubines, women are accorded second class humanity. This is corroborated by God, who, after The Fall tells Eve that her husband should rule over her (Genesis 3: 16).

Such misogynist sentiments, however, are balanced by the Ten Commandments, which, aside from outlawing killing, also prohibit adultery, or even desiring someone else's wife (Exodus 20: 1–17).

It is unclear how these injunctions are to be interpreted. Today, most Christians think the sixth commandment (Thou shalt not kill) pertains to people—not, for example, to locusts, for John the Baptist ate locusts (e.g., Mark 1: 6). The commandment could pertain only to the killing of the right sort of people. Shortly after delivering the Ten Commandments, we hear Moses saying:

Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.

Whosoever lieth with a beast shall surely be put to death.

He that sacrificeth unto any god, save unto the LORD only, he shall be utterly destroyed. (Exodus 22: 18–20).

So, one must not kill, except women who practice sorcery, except people who have sex with animals, and except people who do not worship the One True God.

The Old Testament also sanctions killing people for having illicit sex. Deuteronomy (22: 23–27) states that, if a betrothed woman is raped within a city, both she and the rapist should be stoned to death, but if the virgin is raped in a field, only the rapist should be put to death. The reasoning behind this is that, if a woman is raped in a city, she should scream so loudly that people would come to her rescue, but such might not be the case in a field, for a field might be unpopulated.

Deuteronomy (22: 28–29) also puts a value on virginity, for if a man has sex (rape or otherwise) with an unmarried virgin, he should pay the father, not the mother, 50 silver shekels compensation, and then marry the girl—a view that clearly portrays women as being men's property, and which carried through to the Middle Ages and beyond. Leviticus (15: 16–18), meanwhile, suggests there is something bad about sex, particularly masturbation, even if the woman masturbates the man.

Nonetheless, the Old Testament does not have a very hostile attitude to women. It allows them to enjoy religious services (Nehemiah, 8: 2–3), to engage in music (Exodus, 15: 20–21; 1 Chronicles, 25: 5), and to sing, dance, and play tambourines when celebrating the Lord (e.g., 1 Samuel, 18: 6; Psalms 68: 25).

Moreover, although Judaism, as judged by the Old Testament, had strict rules on sex, it did not see it as evil. Merry Wiesner-Hanks observes of Judaism:

Despite the ritual impurity it created, sex itself was not regarded as intrinsically evil, and husbands were religiously obligated to have sex with their wives. Women were expected to have sex with their husbands—though not religiously obligated—and the bearing of children was seen in some ways as a religious function, for this would keep Judaism alive. Sexual relations were viewed as an important part of marriage even when procreation was impossible, such as after menopause.<sup>148</sup>

Thus, marital love and sexual relationships between women and men, as viewed in the Old Testament, are a part of man's earthly existence. As is discussed below, the *Song of Songs* is vivid in exploring the physical bliss of marital love.

### ***Sexuality in the New Testament***

The four Gospels accord well with the Old Testament as regards sex, insofar as Jesus, as reported by the Evangelists, seems to agree with the Old Testament. During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. (Matthew 5: 17–18)

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<sup>148</sup> Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World*, p. 23.

However, the situation is unclear. A more humane side of Jesus appears in the Gospel of John (8: 3–11), when, for instance, Jesus saves the woman caught in adultery from being stoned to death (“He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her”—8: 7). This is a humorous and clever Jesus, for, having said this, he starts writing the sins of each of the men in the lynch mob, which so embarrasses the men that they leave (8: 8–9).

However, Jesus does not condone adultery. He only condemns hypocrites stoning adulterous women to death.

Jesus is also strict on sex. He even appears to condone self-castration if it makes one more saintly:

And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.

But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given.

For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother’s womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it. (Matthew 19: 9–12)

Jesus’ apparent condoning of self-castration, however, has to be seen in perspective. Jesus’ teachings, as reported in the gospels, are inconsistent and open to wide interpretation. Thus, for example, his humanity, as exemplified by his treatment of the woman caught in adultery, must be balanced by his admonition to his followers to sell their clothes in order to buy swords (Luke, 22: 36).

A change in the New Testament comes with the teachings of St Paul. Until the appearance of Paul, the Bible is strictly Judaic. With the arrival of Paul—or rather, his conversion—it becomes less so. Paul reduces Judaic dietary restrictions, denies the need for male circumcision, and openly preaches Christianity to the gentiles. In



doing this, he so outraged the apostles who had known Jesus (Paul had never met him) that they decided to kill him (Acts 23: 1–13).

As regards the role of women, Paul appears to deny women a say on religious matters. He appears to cast them as second-class citizens:

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.

But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

For Adam was first formed, then Eve.

And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression (1 Timothy 2: 11–14).

There is also a passage in 1 Corinthians (11: 2–16) in which he advises that, if a woman prays or prophesies with an uncovered head, she should be shaved bald; that women were created for men, not vice versa; and that men should wear their hair short and women should wear it long. Thus, in Paul's teaching, women appear inferior to men, and there is a clear differentiation of the sexes. The covering of the hair when praying, incidentally, could be to prevent a woman being viewed sexually when praying. If so, sex is incompatible with religious activity.

Elsewhere Paul is more accommodating to women, as when, for instance, he sings the praises of various women (Romans 16: 1–10) and when he states that men and women are "all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3: 28).

Paul seemed to prefer celibacy. However, he acknowledged that such is impossible for many. Thus, he advised:

I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I.

But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn. (1 Corinthians 7: 8–9).

The "burn" is ambiguous. It could pertain to Hellfire, but could equally pertain to burning with lust.

Paul is in general against sexual promiscuity. In 1 Corinthians (6: 9–10), for instance, he states that neither adulterers nor fornicators, along with the likes of thieves and drunkards, can enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The placing of sexual misconduct alongside drunkenness suggests that drunkenness leads to sexual misdemeanour, and vice versa, and this association was made explicit in the Middle Ages. In the same passage, Paul rails against the “effeminate”, suggesting he was against male homosexuality. This hostility is found elsewhere in Paul’s teachings (e.g., Romans 1: 26–27; 1 Timothy 1: 8–11).

In short, Paul seemed to preach a relaxed variant of Judaism, but one in which sexual behaviour was curtailed. Given the ambiguity in Paul’s teachings, it is unclear how much he held women to be inferior. He seems to have favoured family values, with mutual respect between husband and wife, but with as little sex as possible.

Thus, the biblical tradition broadly taught that women are inferior and that, particularly in the New Testament, sex outside of marriage is sinful. One can read that the Bible—particularly the New Testament—teaches that sex without a view to procreation, even within marriage, is sinful. This view developed independently of Plato, and was expressed most strongly by St Paul, who differentiated Christianity from Judaism.

### **The Church Fathers**

The Church Fathers were “literate men who corresponded with and advised converts and who often became officials in the growing church” and whose “ideas . . . were most influential in the subsequent development of Christianity”.<sup>149</sup> They are termed *Church Fathers* because, as is evident from discussion on the Bible, the book is open to different interpretations. It was largely the Church Fathers who, working separately or in tandem, shaped Christianity in its modern form. The process took several centuries. There were many such Fathers—Origen (c. 185–c. 254), Ambrose of Milan (c. 340–397), and Clement of Rome (92–99), for example. The most

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<sup>149</sup> Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World*, p. 27.

important as regards the present study are Jerome (c. 347–420) and Augustine of Hippo (354–430).

### *Jerome*

Jerome encouraged the dogma that Mary, mother of Jesus, was a virgin, thus reinforcing the view that celibacy is better than marriage. He also produced the first Latin translation of the Bible (the *vulgate*).

In his youth, like the later Augustine, he had been a sinner, but had suffered bouts of conscience after he had sinned. He later retired to the desert of Chalcis, where he lived as a hermit. During this period, he found time for scholarly activities. As regards sex and its connection with the flesh, Jerome deemed it morally polluting—a “foul” and reprehensible embodiment of “corruption” and bestiality; he described those who embrace it as “slave[s] of vice and self-indulgence, a dog returning to his vomit”.<sup>150</sup> He also asserted that sex was incompatible with religious activity, thus: “a layman, or any believer, cannot pray unless he abstains from sexual intercourse”.<sup>151</sup>

Jerome was also hostile to any form of sensual pleasure. He saw any intake of food beyond that necessary to live as stimulating the sense of taste, causing the inflammation of heated passions, and enlivening the body into pursuit of sexual experience. Jerome states: “first the belly is crammed; then other members are roused”.<sup>152</sup>

Jerome similarly saw the sense of touch as a fleshy and therefore undesirable, experience, with Jerome warning against touching the “fire” of another person’s

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<sup>150</sup> Jerome. ‘Against Jovinian’, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. VI*, eds., by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Co, 1893), pp. 346–416 (pp. 371–378).

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371.

<sup>152</sup> Jerome, ‘To Eustochium’ in *A select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. VI*, eds., by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Co, 1893), pp. 22–41 (p. 25).

skin.<sup>153</sup> As Salisbury argues, “the avoidance of anything pleasantly tactile, then, would help keep the body from being lured by the sense of touch into the realm of the flesh”.<sup>154</sup> In *Against Jovinian* Jerome says:

Melius est nubere quam uri. Bonum est, inquit, hominem mulierem non tangere. Si bonum est mulierem non tangere, malum est eam tangere. Nichil enim bono contrarium nisi malum. Si autem malum est et tamen ignoscitur ideo conceditur, ne malo quid deterius fiat. Quale autem illud bonum est quod conditione deterioris conceditur ? Numquam enim subiecisset unusquisque uxorem suam habeat nisi premisisset propter fornicationem autem. Tolle fornicationem et non dicet unusquisque uxorem suam habeat, uelut si quis definiat, Vesci triticeo pane bonum est et edere purissimam simulam ; tamen ne quis comedat sterco bubalum, concedo ei ut uescatur et ordeo ; num iccirco frumentum non habebit puritatem suam si fimo hordeum preferatur ? Bonum est illud naturaliter quod comparatione non habet mali, quod prelatione alterius obumbratur (*Aduersus Iouinianum*, 1. 7).<sup>155</sup>

Finally, Jerome stated that women have an intoxicating effect on men, since they enervate a man’s mind and engross all thought. In other words, they drive men so wild with lust the men lose their reason.

### ***Augustine of Hippo***

Augustine of Hippo followed the tradition of Platonism. As indicated, he was a great sinner in his youth, famously having said “Da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed

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<sup>153</sup> Jerome. ‘Against Jovinian’, p. 350.

<sup>154</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 16.

<sup>155</sup> Jerome, *Aduersus Iouinianum*, in *Commentarium in Matheum*, eds., by D. Hurst and M. Adriaen (Turnhout, CCSL 11, 1969). PL 23, 221–352.

noli modo”.<sup>156</sup> His was an extreme Platonism, one that, taking Platonic distaste for Earthly things literally, rejected all of them. Karen Armstrong comments:

God was “within” but Augustine could not find him because he was “outside himself”. . . . As long as he confined himself to the external world, he remained trapped in the fragile mutability that so disturbed him. When he questioned the physical world about God, the earth, the sea . . . all replied: “*I am not he, but it is he who made me*”.<sup>157</sup>

Augustine is notable for his promotion of the idea of original sin—the view that all people are born sinners, and are therefore condemned to Hell unless they behave correctly. Baptism was held to be essential for the expiation of original sin; therefore all non-Christians are destined to go to Hell.

Augustine taught that women are temptresses, and that sex is a sin unless performed in marriage, and even then only with a view to procreation. Sex performed out of lust within marriage, however, constitutes only a venial sin, and is therefore harmless provided the partners repent, and, even if they do not, does not involve damnation. Adultery or fornication (sex outside of marriage), however, is a mortal sin, and therefore carries risk of damnation unless the couple seriously repent. Augustine is especially clear on this in his *On the Good of Marriage*. To Augustine sex was, at best, a regrettable necessity:

Cum igitur sint multarum libidines rerum, tamen, cum libido dicitur neque cuius rei libido sit additur, non fere assolet animo occurrere nisi illa, qua obscenae partes corporis excitantur. Haec autem sibi non solum totum corpus nec solum extrinsecus, verum etiam intrinsecus vindicat totumque commovet hominem animi simul affectu cum carnis appetitu coniuncto atque permixto, ut ea voluptas sequatur, qua maior in corporis voluptatibus nulla est; ita ut momento ipso temporis, quo ad eius pervenitur extremum, paene omnis acies

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<sup>156</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, bk. VIII, ch. VII  
<<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/cdd/index2.htm>> [accessed 12 March 2013].

<sup>157</sup> Armstrong, *The Case for God*, p. 120.

et quasi vigilia cogitationis obruatur. Quis autem amicus sapientiae sanctorumque gaudiorum coniugalem agens vitam, sed, sicut Apostolus monuit ..., non mallet, si posset, sine hac libidine filios procreare,<sup>158</sup>

Augustine went further in his *Literal Interpretation of Genesis* (Book 3: 21.33), in which he argues that Adam and Eve could have had sex in the Garden of Eden without experiencing lust, had Eve not sinned. He also argues in Book 9 (9. 3. 6. 9. 14. 9. 10. 16–18) that they could also have had sex without passion and that, moreover, Eve could have given birth without experiencing pain.

In his *Confessions*, Augustine explains his understanding of bodily sensation. He also gives a vivid description of his struggle to resist the temptation of food, a temptation he considers much stronger than sexual temptation because people must eat to stay alive.<sup>159</sup> The majority of Augustine's writings focus on this relationship between the two appetites of the flesh (food and sex); linking them primarily with the bodily senses and the inner person with mind and intelligence:

Non enim ea sicut illa, quae foris sunt, ullo sensu corporis tangimus, velut colores videndo, sonos audiendo, odores olfaciendo, sapes gustando, dura et mollia contrectando sentimus, quorum sensibilibus etiam imagines eis simillimas nec iam corporeas cogitatione versamus, memoria tenemus et per ipsas in istorum desideria concitatur; sed sine ulla phantasiarum vel phantasmatum imaginatione ludificatoria mihi esse me idque nosse et amare certissimum est. Nulla in his veris Academicorum argumenta formido dicentium: Quid si falleris?<sup>160</sup>

Augustine also argued that sexual aggression and hostility are likely to be alleviated by laughter. However, he deplored humour because it often involves deception and

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<sup>158</sup> Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, bk. XIV, ch. XVI, <<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/cdd/index2.htm>> [accessed 12 March 2013].

<sup>159</sup> Hugh Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon Appetites: Food and Drink and Their Consumption in Old English and Related Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), p. 97.

<sup>160</sup> Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, bk. XI, ch. XXVI <<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/cdd/index2.htm>> [accessed 12 March 2013].

distortion of reality, making it a potential threat to rationality. For Augustine, laughter, along with harsh words and having sex with one's spouse for non-procreative purposes, were sins.<sup>161</sup>

Augustine's only concession to non-procreative sex—and even then, a reluctant one—concerned nocturnal emissions:

The power which these illusory images [erotic dreams] have over my soul and my body is so great that what is no more than a vision can influence me in sleep in a way that reality cannot do when I am awake.<sup>162</sup>

In other words, any sexual feeling, voluntary or involuntary, asleep or awake, is to be avoided.

Like Plato, the Church Fathers argued that earthly things—including sex—are in some sense sordid. However, unlike Plato, rather than differentiate between religion and philosophy, they tried to integrate the two. Thus, they argued, both on biblical lines and Platonic lines, that sexuality is sordid, but that—contrary to the view of Plato—women are inferior to men.

### **Medieval theological, medical, and cultural background to sexuality**

Some scholars present medieval views as hostile to women and to sexuality. Ruth Karras, for example, writes:

Medieval Ages sexual desire was almost universally condemned within orthodox teachings as a force destructive of social order and threatening to individual salvation. . . . To monastic authors, women were both a sexual temptation . . . and a symbol of all the temptations of the flesh that a monk

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<sup>161</sup> Mathijs Lamberigts, 'A Critical Evaluation of Critiques of Augustine's View of Sexuality', in *Augustine and His Critics*, eds., by Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 176–198 (p. 186).

<sup>162</sup> As quoted by Michael Giordano, *The Art of Meditation and the French Renaissance Love Lyric: The Poetics of Introspection in Maurice Scève's Délie, Object de Plus Haute Vertu (1544)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 52.

had to flee. Hostility toward sexuality could easily shift into hostility toward women.<sup>163</sup>

Similarly, Lillian Bisson finds that “women’s pleasing surface at once explains their seductiveness” and points to the traditional misinterpretation of the Biblical images of women; she says:

Following quickly upon the creation account, that of the temptation and the fall makes women first to succumb to the serpent’s seductive rhetoric; Adam’s trespass responds to her initiative, thereby establishing another predominant trait in the traditional portrait: women as the temptress/seductress who leads man astray from godly obedience and devotion that would characterize his life were it not for her false allure.<sup>164</sup>

Pierre Payer argues that the clerics of the period 550–1150 were not only suspicious of women; they were also suspicious of sex, and what their parishioners were getting up to; in this, confessional evidence led priests to inquire about their parishioners’ use of proscribed sexual practices.<sup>165</sup> Religious orders often went from town to town, gathering large crowds, to hear their sermons and teachings on sex. Payer comments:

The scholastic view of the place of sex in human existence comprises several fundamental beliefs: that sexual intercourse was permissible only within a legitimate marriage; that procreation was the primary purpose of marital intercourse; that intercourse was to be regulated according to certain times, places, and conditions of husband and wife; that virginity was superior to all

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<sup>163</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 103.

<sup>164</sup> Lillian Bisson, *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 193.

<sup>165</sup> Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550-1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), pp. 19, 36. Payer’s careful analysis of the sexual content of penitentials has led him to conclude that “it is reasonable to assume that their contents reflect what was in fact being done”.



other states of life. There was considerable hesitation about the moral assessment of sexual pleasure.<sup>166</sup>

In other words, as far as Church authorities were concerned, the brethren could have sex, but only during prescribed occasions, only in prescribed ways, and only with prescribed people. Thus, for instance, a couple could only have sexual intercourse at night, partially clothed with the man on top since “Nature teaches that the proper manner is that the woman be on her back with the man lying on her stomach”.<sup>167</sup> Similarly, coitus was forbidden on Sundays, Wednesdays, Fridays, on any Church feast day, and throughout Advent and Lent; in addition, couples could not copulate during or immediately after pregnancy, and, should either partner wish to partake of Holy Communion, they should desist from sex for eight days beforehand.<sup>168</sup>

Medieval theologians also, in the tradition of Augustine, disliked laughter. For instance, in *Jacob's Well*, a work dating from around 1440, the moral dimensions of laughter figured largely in discussion of the sins of the mouth. Preachers repeatedly spoke of the bad moral and spiritual effects of speech in a seemingly endless list, one that contained everything from bearing false witness to foolish laughter and including nearly sixty verbal transgressions.

be synnes of bi mowtharn bise : veyn spekyng, ofte sweryng, forsweryng, to tellyn bat is error, to seyn bedys with-oute deuocyouw, bakbytyng, nyce lawjhyng, repreuyng, stryuyng, bawnyng, cursyng, mysseyng, slauwdre, vpbraydyng, thiretyng, lackyng, dyspreysing, a3en-seying of obedyence, plychhyng at loue & charyte, lettyng of loue.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Pierre J. Payer, *the Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto, Buffalo and London; Toronto University Press, 1993), p. 18.

<sup>167</sup> Albertus Magnus, *Commentarii in IV Sententiarum*, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Auguste Borgnet, 38 vols. (Paris: Vivès, 1890–95), vol. 27, p. 263.

<sup>168</sup> Michael Camille, ‘Manuscript Illumination and the art of copulation’, in Lochrie, McCracken, and Schultz, *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, pp. 58–90 (p. 70).

<sup>169</sup> *Jacob's Well: An English Treatise on the Cleansing of Man's Conscience*, ed., by A. Brandeis, EETS OS 115 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1900), p. 294.

During the thirteenth century, religious authorities on tended to take a slightly less stern attitude towards sex than had the Church Fathers. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) formulated in the thirteenth century a Natural Law theory of sexuality in his *Summa Theologiae*, and this became authoritative within Catholic teaching. Aquinas points out that it would be irrational for married people to “detest” what was good and that despising sexual pleasure in the act of marital intercourse is impossible, since according to Aristotle “the same judgment applies to pleasure as to action, because pleasure in a good action is good, and in an evil action evil.”<sup>170</sup> Aquinas then claims that the essential, defining element of this intercourse is the emission of semen. From this, it follows that:

Ex quo patet quod contra bonum hominis est omnis emissio seminis tali modo quod generatio sequi non possit. Et si ex proposito hoc agatur, oportet esse peccatum. Dico autem modum ex quo generatio sequi non potest secundum se: sicut omnis emissio seminis sine naturali coniunctione maris et feminae; propter quod huiusmodi peccata contra naturam dicuntur. Si autem per accidens generatio ex emissione seminis sequi non possit, non propter hoc est contra naturam, nec peccatum: sicut si contingat mulierem sterilem esse.<sup>171</sup>

Aquinas, whilst allowing for sexual pleasure, is against fellatio, is against masturbation, and against *coitus interruptus* and other forms of contraception. He was also, by implication against coitus between couples when the woman had passed the menopause.

Other than promoting a slightly more relaxed attitude to sexuality, Thomas Aquinas is important in two ways. First, he was the major scholar of his era and, in this, turned to Aristotle rather than Plato. In consequence, earthly things become expressions of God’s will, and are therefore things worthy of study in their own right.

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<sup>170</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, III (Supplementum)*, trans, by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947) q. 49, art.6, commentary, 2, 742.

<sup>171</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, III (Supplementum)*, trans, by Robert Busa, Chapter 3. 122 n. 5. <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/scg3111.html> [accessed 12 June 2013].

As Karen Armstrong comments, “We cannot speak of God itself; we can only speak of the contingency of his creatures, which came from nothing”.<sup>172</sup>

Aquinas’s admiration for Aristotle (whom he called *The Philosopher*) came, ultimately, from Islamic sources. The Arabs, in the wake of the Islamic conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries, had discovered the learning of the ancient world, and in doing so had not only discovered, and preserved, the works of Aristotle, but had also produced what was the most intellectual civilization since that of ancient Greece.

It is certain that Aquinas was familiar with Islamic science and philosophy (he even used Ibn Sina’s proof for the existence of God as his third proof in his *Five Ways*—see below for Ibn Sina).<sup>173</sup> Aquinas therefore not only changed Christian philosophy from being primarily Platonic—as late as the early twelfth century, Anselm (1033–1109), Archbishop of Canterbury, was still preaching Platonism (curiously, Aquinas rejected Anselm’s ontological argument for God’s existence<sup>174</sup>)—Aquinas also helped incorporate Islamic science, philosophy, and theology into Christian thought. The Islamic contribution was especially important in medicine (again, see below), and medieval medical views on sexuality were substantially different from those of the Church, as is discussed shortly.

Nonetheless, Aquinas’s contemporaries continued in their hostility to eroticism. Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308), for example, echoed Thomas’s sentiments when he provided a definition of marriage—one that would stand from the thirteenth century to the twentieth: “Marriage is an indissoluble bond between a man and a woman arising from the reciprocal exchange of authority over the other’s bodies for the

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<sup>172</sup> Armstrong, *The Case for God*, p. 139.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140. Anselm’s argument, incidentally, may be summarised as follows: “God is by definition the most perfect being imaginable. But if God does not exist, He is not perfect. Therefore God exists”.

procreation and proper nurture of children”,<sup>175</sup> he said, arguing that sex is pointless if not geared to having children.

Such distaste for sex, coupled with misogyny, is found elsewhere. The *Ancrene Wisse* author (thirteenth century), for instance, speaks of women thus:

Amid te menske of þi neb. þat is þe fehereste deal. bitweonen muðes smech.  
& neases smeal. ne berest tu as twa priue þurles? Nart tu icumen of ful  
slim?nart tu fulðe fette. ne bist tu wurme fode?<sup>176</sup>

Similar advice is found in a guide written by Jean Gerson (1363–1429) for his sisters. In his *l'excellence de la virginite'*, Gerson advises his sisters to drink only diluted wine, to avoid spicy foods, and never speak to men they do not know, pointing out that denial of the senses is to be the rule in all their acts.<sup>177</sup>

Medieval views of rape also showed a hostility towards women.<sup>178</sup> The *Medieval English Dictionary* defines rape as something done in “haste, hurry; quickly, hurriedly” and as “forceful seizure of somebody or something, plundering, robbery, extortion in addition to the act of abducting a woman or sexually assaulting her, or both”. Thus, the term *rape* meant something different from what it means today. Frederic Pollock and William Frederic Maitland observe from this that, because in medieval times women were considered men’s chattel, rape (in today’s sense) was viewed primarily as an offense against her father or husband.<sup>179</sup> Also, of course, rape within marriage was seen as logically impossible.

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<sup>175</sup> Theodore Mackin, *the Marital Sacrament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 326.

<sup>176</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, ed. *Ancrene Wisse*, EETS o.s. 249 (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 142, 143.

<sup>177</sup> Robert L. A. Clark, ‘Devotional Practices’, in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed., by Margaret Schaus (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 206–208 (p. 207)

<sup>178</sup> Karras argues that “Rape could be understood in the Middle Ages, as it is today, as a crime primarily of violence against women, rather than of sex”. See Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europ*, p. 114.

<sup>179</sup> Frederic Pollock and William Frederic Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge, U.K., 1898; repr. 1952), vol. 2, p. 490.

Ruth Karras points out that in England in the twelfth- and early thirteenth-century the legal emphasis in rape cases was not on the victim's consent but on the degree of violence she suffered (though from the late thirteenth-century onwards the emphasis shifted to loss of virginity).<sup>180</sup> Karras, however, also points to Kim Phillip's argument that a focus on violence could help ensure women's safety.<sup>181</sup> In any event, as judged by medieval romances, rape was rampant in the Middle Ages, with knights being habitual rapists. Richard Kaeuper quotes the thirteenth-century *Lancelot* as saying:

The customs of the Kingdom of Logres are such that if a lady or a maiden travels by herself, she fears no one. But if she travels in the company of a knight and another knight can win her in battle, the winner can take a lady or maiden in any way he desires without incurring shame or blame.<sup>182</sup>

The same romance speaks at one point of, among copious acts of knightly mayhem, forty rapes.<sup>183</sup>

It was not only virgins and young women who were at risk, and it was not only knights who perpetrated violence. Michelle Middleton quotes the *Year Books of Richard II: 11Richard II, 1387–88* description of a Humberside widow. The widow's rape is

. . . with force of arms, to wit, swords, bows, and arrows, [by local bullies who] broke the close and buildings...there made an assault upon her...and beat, wounded, and ill-treated her, and took and carried off her goods and chattels.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, p. 114.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>182</sup> Richard W. Kaeuper, *Vilence in Medieval Society* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 1999), p.30.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>184</sup> Michelle L. Middleton, ““in widewes habit blak”: Chaucer’s *Criseyde* and Late-Medieval Widows (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Central State Connecticut University, 2005), p. 12.

Middleton also reports that, following the Black Death, the number of English widows increased by fifty percent and that a primary motive for remarriage was for personal protection.<sup>185</sup> This is reflected in Chaucer, both by the Wife of Bath's serial marriages and Criseyde's desire for a protector.

In contrast to theologians, medieval medical writers viewed sex as necessary to both men and women, pointing out that, without a regular outlet for sexual desire, both men and women were likely to become ill.<sup>186</sup> Speaking in the thirteenth century, Albertus Magnus (c. 1206–1280), for example, points to the necessity of sexual pleasure in the process of reproduction because “As Constantine says, pleasure is attached to intercourse so that it will be more desired, and thus generation will continue”.<sup>187</sup>

Medical authors believed that women were not only more sexual than men; they also believed that a woman could not conceive unless she experienced orgasm during sexual intercourse.<sup>188</sup> Sexual pleasure for both partners, and particularly on the part of the woman, was regarded by many writers as a precondition of conception. James Brundage comments:

Female orgasm seemed critical not only to medical writers but also to theologians who relied on their expertise in such matters, since they believed that only when a woman “emitted her seed” could conception occur. Failure of either partner to achieve orgasm rendered intercourse non procreation and

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., pp. 11–12.

<sup>186</sup> Constantine the African, speaking in the eleventh-century stated that ‘No one who does not have intercourse will be healthy. Intercourse is truly useful and promotes health.’ See Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 273.

<sup>187</sup> “Sed delectation, ut dicit Constantinus, apponitur coitui plus appetatur et sic continetur generatio.” Quoted in Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, p. 136.

<sup>188</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘Women’s History’ in Transition: The European Case’, in *The European Women’s History Reader*, eds., by Fiona Montgomery and Christine Collette (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 11–13, p. 11. See also Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: a History of Women in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 71. Because of the presumed connection between conception and sexual pleasure, a rape victim who became pregnant could not press charges under the English common law.

thus presented a moral problem, particularly if the woman deliberately refrained from yielding to sexual pleasure.<sup>189</sup>

As early as the twelfth century—that is, before Aquinas but around the time Islamic texts were finding their way into the West—Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) pointed out that the woman, through desire, received the seed and drew the uterus around it and that the cold uterus rejoiced in receiving the warm seed.<sup>190</sup> According to the Galenic theory of conception, reproduction and pleasure for a woman are linked at a physiological level. It was impossible, therefore, for pregnancy to occur as a result of rape. If pregnancy occurred, it would therefore prove, in spite of appearance of the contrary, that the woman had taken pleasure in the sexual act, even if she had not consented.<sup>191</sup> William of Conches held that women naturally desire sex and that resistance to sexual acts aided eroticism, pointing out that conception in rape is a clear proof of female pleasure.<sup>192</sup> This belief is particularly important in the Christian attitude toward sexuality as it “would have repercussions for rape cases for centuries to come”.<sup>193</sup>

Medieval medical works also contained advice to encourage pleasurable and fruitful intercourse. Trotula of Salerno (eleventh–twelfth century), a female physician writing in the eleventh century, included in her works on women’s medicine advice and instruction for sexual intercourse.<sup>194</sup> She also referred to some herbal receipts for

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<sup>189</sup> James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 450, 451.

<sup>190</sup> Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, pp. 79, 98.

<sup>191</sup> William of Conches, *Dialogus de substantiis physicis: ante annos ducentos confectus, à Vuilhelmo Aneponymo philosopho* (Frankfurt/Main: Minerva GMBH, 1967, reprinted from 1567 ed.), bk. VI, pp. 241, 242.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. VI, p. 241.

<sup>193</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass; London; Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 161, 162.

<sup>194</sup> Joan Cadden, ‘Medieval Scientific and Medical Views of Sexuality: Questions of Propriety’, *Medievalia Et Humanistica: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, 14 (1986), 157–171 (p. 164).

couples who desire to conceive a male or a female child.<sup>195</sup> Others recommended methods of ensuring conception. Maino de Maineri (c. 1295–1368) observed that the use of a magnet during sexual intercourse was important to reach sexual satisfaction: “likewise by carrying a magnetic stone into the same place, it can create harmony between the man and the woman”.<sup>196</sup>

While most theories of conception were based on Aristotle’s notions of gender and his view that the only seed comes from the man, clear guidelines on how to enhance the woman’s enjoyment, as well as how to avoid movements that might jeopardise the seed were abundant in medieval medical texts. For instance, on the subject of exciting women during sexual intercourse, Bernard of Gordon, in his *Lily of Medicine*, urges the importance of foreplay, pointing out that “the man should excite the woman to coitus” by “speaking, kissing, embracing, and touching her breasts, abdomen, and pubic region”.<sup>197</sup> Medieval physicians were also aware of the function of the clitoris in female pleasure. The fourteenth-century physician Peter of Abano states that women can experience great sexual pleasure by having the area around the vulva rubbed; he says:

Likewise [women are driven to desire] especially by having the upper orifice near their pubis rubbed; in this way the indiscreet (*curiosi*) bring them to orgasm. For the pleasure that can be obtained from this part of the body is comparable to that obtained from the tip of the penis.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> See Beryl Rowland, *Medieval Woman’s Guide to Health: the first English Gynecological Handbook* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press; London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 169.

<sup>196</sup> Quoted in Caroline Proctor, ‘Between Medicine and Morals: Sex in the Regimens of Maino de Maineri’ in Harper and Proctor, *Medieval Sexuality: a Casebook*, pp. 113–134 (p. 117).

<sup>197</sup> “Masculus debet excitare foeminam ad coitum . . . osculando, amplexando, mammillas tangendo, pectinem et peritonaem”. See Bernard de Gordon, *Opus liliū medicinae inscriptum* (Lyon: Guillaume Rouille, 1550), p. 633.

<sup>198</sup> Quoted in Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans., by Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p. 46.



Semen, meanwhile, was thought to have vital heat in three special elements: its natural, elemental heat, heat from the father's soul, and from the heat of the sun which, all together, ensures the greater pleasure.<sup>199</sup>

*Coitus interruptus* was almost certainly known, as were other contraceptive practices such as prolonged breast-feeding (this may have been limited to prophylaxis within marriage<sup>200</sup>). There are also occasional references to the use of herbs for contraceptive purposes and likewise as abortifacients.<sup>201</sup> Conversely, foodstuffs were used to facilitate conception. Onions, for instance, were used to increase sperm if the impediments to conception came from a defect of the spirit impelling the seed, from a defect of spermatic humidity or from a defect of heat:

If it happens from defect of the spirits, he will have no desire and he will not be able to have an erection. We aid him with an unguent generative of many spirits. If it is because of a defect of the seed, when they have intercourse they emit little or no semen. We help men such as this with substances which augment and generate seed, such as onions, parsnip, and similar things.<sup>202</sup>

Views on sexuality and medicine during the late Middle Ages cannot be understood without reference to Islam. From the twelfth century onwards, European opinion and culture was vastly influenced by Islamic scholars. In this, Aquinas, in his integration of Aristotelian philosophy into Christian philosophy, was strongly influenced by Ibn Rushd (1126–1198) (a.k.a. Averroes, and called by Aquinas, not by name, but “The Commentator”).

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., pp. 52–60.

<sup>200</sup> Pete Biller, ‘Birth-Control in the West in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries’, *Past and Present*, 94 (1982), 3–26 (p. 20).

<sup>201</sup> Some Medieval recipes specify certain kinds of Onions, garlic, and leeks as necessary for good sex. Melitta Adamson points out that ‘Doctors generally praised cooked onions for their heating and diuretic effects on the body. Onions were also thought to increase male sperm and to incite appetite for food and sex’. See Melitta Weiss Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), p. 7.

<sup>202</sup> *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, ed., and trans., by Monica H. Green (Penn, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 115.

Equally if not more important, his predecessor, the polymath Persian scholar, Ibn Sina (a.k.a. Avicenna, 980–1037), influenced medical practice, philosophy, and science. Smith, writing in 1980, says of him:

He was described as having the mind of Goethe and the genius of Leonardo da Vinci; through Hebrew transliteration of his name he is known as Ali Ibn-Sina or Avicenna. Most famous as a philosopher, he was also a physician, mathematician, naturalist, geologist, musical theorist, astronomer and poet. He held the political post equivalent to prime minister as well. Dante acknowledged him in the *Divina Comedia*, and Chaucer in *the Canterbury Tales*.<sup>203</sup>

The reference to which Smith refers comes from the Physician's entrance in *The General Prologue*:

Wel knew he the olde Esculapius,  
And Deyscorides, and eek Rufus,  
Olde Ypocras, Haly, and Galyen,  
Serapion, Razis, and Avycen,  
Averrois, Damascien, and Constantyn,  
Bernard, and Gatesden, and Gilbertyn. (*The General Prologue*, 429–433)

In the passage Chaucer also acknowledges Ibn Rushd (a.k.a. Averroes). He also acknowledges al-Razi (865–925)—Razis—another of Islam's great pioneers of medicine. Chaucer was clearly aware of Islamic scholars and the weight of their reputation.

In his great work, *The Canon of Medicine*, Ibn Sina is specific on what constitutes good diet. Ibn Sina viewed good diet as being essential to good health. The diet he advised was rich and varied:

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<sup>203</sup> R. D. Smith, 'Avicenna and the Canon of Medicine: A Millennial Tribute', *Western Journal of Medicine*, 133(1980), 367–370 (p. 367).

§1579 The meal should include: (1) meat, especially kid of goats; veal, and year-old lamb; (2) wheat, which is cleaned of extraneous matter and gathered during a healthy harvest without ever having been exposed to injurious influences; (3) sweets of appropriate temperament; (4) fragrant wine of good quality.<sup>204</sup>

Ibn Sina favoured fine food and wine.

His views on gluttony, and drunkenness, were also at variance with those of western theologians. Over-indulgence is bad, Ibn Sina suggests, only because it is physically unhealthy:

§1584 . . . . Great repletion is very dangerous in any case, whether in regard to food or drink. For how often do not people overeat, and perish from the consequent choking of the channels of the body?<sup>205</sup>

Neither is Ibn Sina against the use of spices. Indeed, they may be used to stave off inebriation:

§1692 It is an advantage to include in the menu cabbage boiled with meat; olives boiled in water, and the like. For this conduces to drink more wine. Anything which lightens the fumes of the wine is also helpful, for instance the seeds of the Syrian beet; cumin, dry rye, pennyroyal, Nabathean salt, cardamoms; and more particularly, any aliments which are viscous and glutinous, for the aggregate the fumes (i.e., oily, sweet and viscous articles of food) and prevent inebriety in spite of drinking so much wine, by restraining the rapidity with which the wine enters the blood.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Avicenna, *the Canon of Medicine (al-Qānūn fi 'l-tibb)*. Adapted by L. Bakhtiar. From translations by O. Cameron Gruner and M. H. Shah. Correlated with the Arabic by J. R. Crook (Chicago, IL: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1999), p. 390.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411.

Ibn Sina viewed sex as healthy. Indeed, his friend and biographer, Juzjāni, said of him:

the Master was vigorous in all his faculties, the sexual faculty being the most vigorous and dominant of his concupiscent faculties and he exercised it often. It affected his constitution, upon whose strength he depended.<sup>207</sup>

Given that Ibn Sina's works were widely read in the West from the twelfth century onwards,<sup>208</sup> it is inconceivable that his views on food, alcohol, and sex had no impact on European thought.

Finally on the Islamic influence, although western scholars focus on medieval Islam's contributions to science, medicine, and mathematics, medieval Islam also influenced western arts. A celebrated example of this is Brunelleschi's dome of Florence Cathedral—Brunelleschi is strongly suspected to have studied Islamic mosques in determining the dome's construction.<sup>209</sup> Less well known, as is discussed in Chapter three, Islamic literature may have influenced western literature. It is possible, again as is discussed in Chapter three, that Chaucer was influenced, directly or indirectly, by Islamic literature in his *fabliaux*, especially *The Merchant's Tale*.

Thus medical and Islamic opinion was at variance with the teaching of the Church, and by the fourteenth century the Islamic influence was huge. Moreover, as the prevalence of rape suggests and medieval harems, especially those in monasteries, it is unclear how much people of the era believed or obeyed the Church, at least as regards sexual matters. This is for four reasons.

First, historians argue that the medieval Church's diktats over sexual behaviour were not primarily designed to restrict sex *per se*. Instead, they were designed to limit the number of legitimate heirs. As Matt Ridley observes, "Individuals in the Church

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<sup>207</sup> Cited in Smith, 'Avicenna and the Canon of Medicine', p. 369.

<sup>208</sup> See Smith, 'Avicenna and the Canon of Medicine', pp. 367–368.

<sup>209</sup> Maryam Ashkan and Yahaya Ahmad, 'Persian Domes: History, Morphology and Typologies', *International Journal of Architectural Research*, 3 (2009), 100–117, p. 107.

(disinherited younger sons) were manipulating sexual mores to increase the Church's own wealth or even regain property and titles for themselves".<sup>210</sup> Church laws, Ridley argues, were specifically designed to restrict the size and power of aristocratic families—hence, for example, the rule that incest occurred when marriage took place within seven canonical degrees. Moreover, Ridley goes on to argue, the venality of individual clergymen became especially severe when the higher echelons of Church became dominated by members of the aristocracy—a phenomenon already in process by the fourteenth century.<sup>211</sup>

Second, the proscriptions and prescriptions suggest that many people in the Middle Ages were copulating during the day, were copulating fully naked, and were copulating in manners other than the missionary position—for, had they not been doing so, there would have been no point in the Church giving such advice. In this regard, in commenting on medieval erotic literature, Karras observes:

Literary genres do not tell us as much as we would like to know about the inner dynamics of marital sex—among other things, such texts tend to deal much more with adultery and other extramarital relations, as lovers tend to make better stories than the long-married. However, there are enough literary references to women participating enthusiastically in marital sex—from the *fabliaux* where they can seem insatiable, to romance where they deeply miss their absent husbands—to indicate to us that this would not be considered abnormal or unusual.<sup>212</sup>

Karras argues in this regard that one should not dismiss the medieval texts as inauthentic expressions of female desire simply because they were (presumably) written by men.<sup>213</sup> Karras's point is reinforced by Betzig, who argues that

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<sup>210</sup> Ridley, *The Red Queen*, p. 241.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>212</sup> Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, p. 85.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

demographic data and medieval literature present a consistent picture of medieval sexuality.<sup>214</sup>

Third, people in medieval England had laxer attitudes to nudity than have people in England today. Classen comments:

As for the nakedness . . . that in the Middle Ages people did not have the same attitude or sensitivity regarding nakedness as today because it was common to sleep together in one bed, in one room, to sleep naked (unless in a monastery where the opposite practice was pursued), to take baths together, not separating the genders, and those who covered themselves up seemed to have to hide something, being ashamed of a bodily shortcoming or illness.<sup>215</sup>

Fourth, and most important, the clergy did not practise what they preached. Corruption and sexual misdemeanour in the medieval Church was endemic—from top (the Papacy) to bottom (village priests). Writing of medieval Normandy, Classen states:

Despite all attempts by the medieval Church, especially since the eleventh century Gregorian reform, to impose absolute celibacy on the clergy, the reality looked very different, which never seems to have changed throughout the entire Middle Ages and beyond. The visitation records by Odo Rigaldus, the Archbishop of Rouen (124–1275), for instance, clearly speak a vivid language as to the many transgressions and infractions the local clergy committed and what their sexual misbehavior meant both for the Church and the various local communities.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Betzig, 'Medieval Monogamy', pp. 185–186.

<sup>215</sup> Classen, 'Naked Men in Medieval German Literature and Art Anthropological, Cultural Historical, and Mental Historical Investigations', in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, pp. 143–170 (p. 145).

<sup>216</sup> Classen, 'The Cultural Significance of Sexuality in the Middle Ages', in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, p. 58.

So bad was the corruption that it is the subject of a book by Peter de Rosa, a former Jesuit priest and professor of theology.<sup>217</sup> He states, for instance:

Promiscuity was rife in monasteries and convents. The great Ivo of Chartres (1040–1115) tells of whole convents with inmates who were nuns only in name. They had often been abandoned by their families and were really prostitutes.<sup>218</sup>

In the year 1414, King Henry V asked the University of Oxford to prepare articles for the reform of the church. Article 39 began: “Because the carnal and sinful life of priests today scandalizes the entire church and their public fornication goes completely unpunished . . .”<sup>219</sup>

Indeed, so licentious were the medieval clergy that, as Jennifer D. Thibodeaux observes, despite numerous efforts, there appeared nothing the Church hierarchy could do to contain their lust—priests fornicated with prostitutes, their concubines, even the wives of their parishioners.<sup>220</sup>

Given this, it is unsurprising that Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, comments: “Ahi, Costantin, di quanto mal fu madre, / non la tua conversion, ma quella dote / che da te prese il primo ricco padre!” (“Ah, Constantine, how much evil was born, / not from your conversion, but from that donation / that the first wealthy Pope received from you!”).<sup>221</sup>

Thus, during the period of interest to the present study—the fourteenth century—many sections of the clergy were corrupt. Speaking of the Avignon Papacy (1309–

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<sup>217</sup> Peter de Rosa. *Vicars of Christ: The Dark Side of the Papacy* (London: Bantam Press, 1988).

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412.

<sup>220</sup> Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, ‘The Sexual Lives of Medieval Norman Clerics: A New Perspective on Clerical Sexuality’, in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme*, ed., by Albrecht Classen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 471–484 (p. 478).

<sup>221</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*. Canto 19, lines 115–117

1376), for instance, the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), in his *Letter to a friend*, comments:

Instead of holy solitude we find a criminal host and crowds of the most infamous satellites; instead of soberness, licentious banquets; instead of pious pilgrimages, preternatural and foul sloth; instead of the bare feet of the apostles, the snowy coursers of brigands fly past us, the horses decked in gold and fed on gold, soon to be shod with gold, if the Lord does not check this slavish luxury. In short, we seem to be among the kings of the Persians or Parthians, before whom we must fall down and worship, and who cannot be approached except presents be offered . . .<sup>222</sup>

During the same period, the intellectual foundations and honesty of the Catholic Church were being undermined. The Donation of Constantine—an eighth century document upon which all claims of papal authority over kings and emperors rests, and alluded to by Dante (“Ah, Constantine, how much evil . . .”)—was, by the fourteenth century, widely believed to be a forgery;<sup>223</sup> it was proved to be so by Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457) around 1440.

The popular culture of the era also depicted the clergy as corrupt, French *fabliaux* consistently painted the clergy as both rich and venal.<sup>224</sup> They also painted them as fornicators. *The Sacristan*, discussed in the next chapter, for example, concerns one such corrupt monk. Corrupt clergy also figure in Chaucer, in his *Shipman’s Tale*, *Summoner’s Tale*, and *Friar’s Tale*.

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<sup>222</sup> James Robinson, *Readings in European History* (Boston: Ginn, 1904), p. 502.

<sup>223</sup> Andre Vauchez, *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2001). p, 445.

<sup>224</sup> Otto Patzer, ‘The Wealth of the Clergy in the Fabliaux’, *Modern Language Notes*, 19 (1904): 195–196 (p. 196).



### Medieval erotic symbolism

As used in the present thesis, the term *symbolism* is narrow. It does not pertain to such “symbols” as letters of the alphabet, spoken words, or hieroglyphs. Rather, it is used in the sense of imagery—imagery in which a physical thing represents another physical thing (e.g., a sword for a phallus) or a mood (e.g., heat for desire).

Many such symbols are “Freudian” in the sense that they are sexual and were documented by Freud. Hans Eysenck—as indicated, a major opponent of Freudian psychology—is worth quoting at length:

In Latin, symbolic terms to denote the penis are, for instance, *virga* (rod), *vectis* (stake), *hasta* (lance), *rutabulum* (rake, poker), *terminus* (boundary marker), *temo* (pole), *vomer* (plough), *clavus* (tiller, as a nautical metaphor). . . .

The vulgar term for the female genitals, *cunnus*, is on par with *mentula* and is hardly used outside graffiti and epigrams. However, metaphors abound. Adams says: “The frequency (in Latin and other languages) of the metaphor of the field, the garden, meadow, etc. applied to the female pudendum reflects in part the external appearance of the organ, and in part the association felt between the fertility of the field and that of females. The metaphor complements the verbal metaphors of sowing and ploughing used as the male role in sexual intercourse.”

No one familiar with Ancient Greek and Roman literature, or medieval plays and texts, can have any doubt about the prevalence of sexual symbolism, or the fact that it was known to practically everyone.<sup>225</sup>

Thus, Freud neither discovered nor invented Freudian symbols; people had known of them for millennia. This is illustrated by the *Song of Songs* (also known as the *Song of Solomon*), the shortest book in the Bible.

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<sup>225</sup> Eysenck, *Decline and Fall of the Freudian Empire*, p. 123.

The *Song of Songs* interweaves human and divine love, the sexual and the spiritual. However, in providing a sustained poetic exploration of erotic love, the *Song of Songs* celebrates the richness of sexual symbols. There is abundant language about sex and images of it. For instance, when the male lover describes just how beautiful this woman is, we hear:

How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than *wine!* and the smell of thine ointments than all *spices!*

Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the *honeycomb*: honey and milk are under thy *tongue*; and the *smell* of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon.

A *garden* inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a *fountain sealed*. Thy *plants* are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant *fruits*; camphire, with spikenard, Spikenard and *saffron*; *calamus* and *cinnamon*, with all trees of frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices: A fountain of *gardens*, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon.

(Cant 4:10–15; emphases added)

Here the male lover speaks of his female love as a lush garden of spices. There is repeated use of fruits and spices, a reference to honey and milk, the idea of oral sex (lips, tongue), repeated use of garden and fountain, reference to wine (vine), and the idea of being virgin (sealed fountain and closed spring). The poetry engages and awakens the senses: *smelling* her exquisitely fragrant spices, *feeling* the intimate touch of her mouth kiss, and *tasting* wine, honey and milk.

Later in the narrative, the female lover speaks of herself as a garden of spices and lilies. She invites her male lover to “his garden” to claim his spices and lilies.

My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies. I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies. (Cant 6: 2–3; emphases added)

The banquet scene here is a metaphor of lovemaking. Feeding on her lilies and tasting her spices, she is an emblem of love and lovemaking for him.

Two points are of note as regards the *Song of Songs*. First, the symbolism is both varied and conflated—food symbols are combined with garden symbols, with floral symbols, with eating and drinking symbols, with animal (e.g., bird) symbols, and overt sexual references (“embrace”, “concubines”. . .). Second, the *Song of Songs* was studied and appreciated, not only in biblical times, but also in the medieval period. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), the founder of the Cistercine order of monks, and highly influential author and commentator on Church lore and morals, wrote eighty-six sermons on the work.<sup>226</sup> David Carr comments:

Within the Christian tradition, the *Song of Songs* . . . was one of the most often read and commented on parts of the entire Christian Biblical canon. There are more Latin manuscripts of the *Song* than any other Biblical book, and there are more medieval sermons on the *Song* than all other Biblical books except the Psalms and John.<sup>227</sup>

Chaucer appears to have been well acquainted with the *Song of Songs*. In *The Merchant’s Tale*, for example, Januarie says to May:

No spot of thee ne knew I al my lyf. (*The Merchant’s Tale*, 2146)

As Germaine Collette Demster observes, this is, in effect, a direct lift from the *Song of Songs*.<sup>228</sup>

The panoply of sexual symbols used in the *Song of Songs*—fruits, birds, gardens, flowers (for sex or for attractive women); containers (for vaginas or wombs); diverse phallic symbols; eating and drinking (as preparation for or metaphor of sex); and so on were absorbed into (or, in some cases possibly reinvented by) medieval society.

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<sup>226</sup> See Bernard of Clairvaux, *Song of Solomon*, trans., by Samuel J. Eales (Minneapolis, MN: Klock and Klock, 1984).

<sup>227</sup> Carr, *The Erotic Word*, p. 4.

<sup>228</sup> Germaine Collette Demster, *Dramatic Irony in Chaucer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1932), p. 56. The *Song of Songs* reads “Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee” (4: 7).

The reason for the book's popularity appears twofold. First, as interpreted by the likes of Bernard of Clairvaux, it has mystical, spiritual overtones (associating the joy of sexual love with spiritual love of God). Second, it was often interpreted only as a glorification of sex (though proponents of this view—there were several—were persecuted and their works proscribed).<sup>229</sup>

Medieval artists not only employed similar symbolism to that of the *Song of Songs*; they expanded it. The noteworthy feature of medieval symbolism is its ubiquity.

Ladner comments:

It was on a basis of *significatio* that the Western Middle Ages conceptualized a universe of symbols in which, with the sole exception of God, everything could signify something else. Thus man, the microcosm, was a symbol of the universe, the macrocosm, and individual personalities could symbolize entire movements of the mind. Above all, material things signified spiritual things or even God himself.<sup>230</sup>

In other words, within the Middle Ages in Western Europe, virtually anything could (and often did) stand for something else.

Although in broad terms medieval art and literature used similar symbolism to that employed by the author of the *Song of Songs*, it is difficult to draw up a definite list of medieval symbols and their meanings. This is for three reasons. First, the symbolism was flexible. Windows and other openings, for example, could be used as erotic symbols, and in some art and literature they could be used for comic, ironic, or salacious purposes, as in, for instance, *The Miller's Tale*; in other works they could be used for mystical purposes (see, for example, discussion on the work of Fra Angelico, below). And, of course, sometimes windows could be simply windows, with no symbolic meaning attached.

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<sup>229</sup> Carr, *The Erotic Word*, p. 143.

<sup>230</sup> Gerhart Ladner, 'Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: A Comparison', *Speculum*, 54 (1979), 223–256 (p. 226).

Second, the symbols different authors and writers used varied. The art of Hieronymus Bosch, for example, was intensely symbolic—so much so that, as is discussed below, today it is difficult to impossible to discern exactly what Bosch was trying to say. Other artists and writers used relatively simple symbols—Fra Angelico is an example. In this regard, the catalogue of medieval symbols is so large that it is impossible to cover all of them.

Third, symbols were often used in the context of other symbols. Thus, for example, gardens could be used in the context of white flowers and doves, suggesting purity, but if used in the contest of red flowers and wild animals, they could suggest sexual desire.

Nonetheless, the broad types of symbols can be described, and doing so helps in one's appreciation of Chaucer's works. They fall into seven main groups: gardens and associations with them; food of several types; openings; clothing; violence; mouths; and animals. In each case, the symbolism was often combined with classic Freudian symbols.

### *Gardens*

As in the *Song of Songs*, medieval art and literature frequently associates gardens and their associates with sexual activity. In *The Merchant's Tales*, for instance, Januarie's garden was recognised "as a site of both innocence and sin, linking it figuratively or allegorically with the Garden of Eden, the enclosed garden of the Old Testament Song of the Songs (4: 12)".<sup>231</sup> In Marguerite de Navarre's (1492–1549) *Heptaméron*, Marguerite has her tapestry maker seduce a chambermaid in a walled garden. They are overseen by a neighbour, who alerts the tapestry maker's wife to the infidelity. The husband manages to convince his wife he is innocent by playing

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<sup>231</sup> David Griffith, 'Visual Culture', in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed., by Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 190–205 (p. 196).

snowballs with the chambermaid; and he has sex with his wife in the garden.<sup>232</sup>

Snowballs are white, incidentally, and may be read as a symbol of purity. More crudely, in Gottfried's *Tristan*, Mark and a dwarf climb a tree in a garden so that he can secretly spy on Tristan and Isolde as they declare their love.

The use of floral imagery not only pre-dated Chaucer's England; it also continued after it. Sarah Toulalan<sup>233</sup> notes that, in Jane Sharp's (1641–1671) *The Midwives Book*, descriptions of the female genitalia often use the metaphor of a rose, as in "The four fleshy knobs with this are like a Rose half blown when the bearded leaves are taken away, or this production with the Lap or privity is like a great Clove-gilliflower new blown, thence came the word deflowered."<sup>234</sup> Sharp also uses the metaphor to illustrate the womb. The illustration shows a picture of a woman whose body is opened up, petal-like, to reveal the foetus within her. The illustration also has a flower instead of genitalia.

Toulalan also observes that, in Nicolas Chorier's (1612–1692) *The Dialogues of Luisa Sigea*, women repeatedly refer to their genitalia as "my garden" and The Crafty Whore refers to her virginity as "the chiefe flower of my garden".<sup>235</sup>

These examples illustrate that it is not only gardens *per se* that are used as erotic metaphors; it is also their associates. Indeed, anything strongly associated with gardens (walls, birds, trees, flowers, fragrance, fruit, animals . . .) could be used to enhance erotic content.

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<sup>232</sup> Classen, 'The Cultural Significance of Sexuality in the Middle Ages', in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, p. 58.

<sup>233</sup> Sarah Toulalan, *Imagining Sex: Pornography and Bodies in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press. 2007), p. 13.

<sup>234</sup> As cited in Toulalan, *Imagining Sex*, p. 13.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Food**

April Harper calls attention to many examples concerning food, some of which predate the Middle Ages. In the Bible, Eve eats the forbidden fruit; in Greek mythology, Aphrodite exchanges the love of the most beautiful woman in the world (Helen of Troy, whom she gives to Paris) for a golden apple; in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the prostitute Shamhat civilises the wild man Enkidu with a week of sex and consumption of bread.<sup>236</sup> Harper argues that in classical Greece debauchery was associated with dinner parties, or *convivia*; in these, prostitution was more associated with food than with alcohol. The *convivia*, she argues, may be contrasted with *symposia*, parties in which the food was simple and the debauchery absent.<sup>237</sup>

Food items were frequently associated with sex in part because many food items have sexual connotations. Sarah Gordon comments:<sup>238</sup>

Hung cured meats such as bacon, ham, and sausages are the foods most associated with male sexuality, or male genitalia. By extension, cutting meat represents castration. Fertility (represented by eggs and chickens, oatmeal, etc.), marriage (represented by nightly meals, pantries, dinner tables, larders, etc.), and sexuality (represented by sausages and other flesh, and oatmeal) are all treated through the techniques of what I have termed “culinary comedy.”

Such foodstuffs were often combined with animals in French *fabliaux* for comic effect. Sarah Gordon describes how, in *Porcelet* (Piglet), a woman’s pudendum is described as a pig, but semen as wheat.<sup>239</sup> The vagina is therefore hungry for semen.

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<sup>236</sup> Harper, “‘The Food of Love’: Illicit Feasting, Food Imagery and Adultery in Old French Literature”, in Harper and Proctor, *Medieval Sexuality: A Casebook*, pp. 81–97 (p.82).

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82.

<sup>238</sup> Sarah Gordon, ‘Sausages, Nuts, and Eggs: Food Imagery, the Body, and Sexuality in the Old French Fabliaux’, in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, pp. 503–516 (p. 507).

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 514.

All goes well until the pig changes diet—to bran—indicating that the woman is adulterous. A similar theme occurs in *La dame qui avoine demandoit pour Morel* (The Woman who Asked for Oats for Morel the Horse), except that the pig pudendum becomes a horse, and the wheat becomes oats.<sup>240</sup> Likewise, in *The Squirrel* a penis becomes a squirrel that feeds on a woman's "nuts". This last *fabliau* is discussed in detail in Chapter two.

Gordon also notes how the eleventh century medical treatise *Liber de Coitu* lists "vegetables, grains, anise bulb, wild garlic, carrot, roquette lettuce, radish, clover, turnip, hemp, nettle" as aphrodisiacs, and how in the *fabliaux* (see Chapters two and three) foodstuffs and animals are used as blatant sexual symbols.<sup>241</sup>

Similar symbolism can be found in medieval Church art and literature. In both the *Morgan Old Testament Picture Bible* and in certain stained glass windows, grain is associated with fertility.<sup>242</sup> In the story of Ruth, for example, in the *Morgan Old Testament Picture Bible*, Ruth is repeatedly associated with grain—even, in one illustration, having it poured into her mantel—prior to giving birth.<sup>243</sup> This association of grain with sex is also associated with so-called "Wildman badges". These were popular in England in the fourteenth century and depicted a hairy man grinding, standing on a fish (a possible symbol for a penis), and ejaculating (or urinating); the Wildman also had ludicrously large genitalia (Plate 1.1).<sup>244</sup> The Wildman appeared in paintings and on misericords, but was also used for body

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., p. 513.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., p. 507

<sup>242</sup> Classen, 'The Cultural Significance of Sexuality in the Middle Ages', in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, p. 121.

<sup>243</sup> Alexa Sand 'Inseminating Ruth in the Morgan Old Testament Picture Book: A Romance of the Crusades', in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, pp. 535–564 (p. 539).

<sup>244</sup> Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), p. 101.



adornment in the form of lead alloy broaches.<sup>245</sup> Five Wildman badges have been found in London and three in Salisbury, Wiltshire.<sup>246</sup>



Plate 1. 1. Lay badge, c. 1375–1425; Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum.<sup>247</sup>

In a similar manner, the Church openly linked the sin of gluttony with the sin of lust. Paraphrasing Jerome in the thirteenth century, Jacopone da Todi warned his congregation to “control your gluttony because excess is poison and the companion of lust”.<sup>248</sup> As April Harper comments, in Robert Grosseteste’s (c. 1170–1253) *Templum Dei*, the bishop categorises lust and gluttony both as sins against the self and as sins of the flesh.<sup>249</sup>

Many authorities argue that food could symbolise sexual activity. Pears, for instance, were used as sexual devices. Karl Wentersdorf reports that, in Thibaut’s thirteenth century erotic romance, *Li Romanz de la Poire*, for example, the protagonist relates how a lady, sitting under a pear tree, gave him a bite of a pear, after which, he

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ruth Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons: The Protective Power of Medieval Visual Motifs and Themes* (Los Angeles: Ruth Mellinkoff Publications, 2005), p. 40.

<sup>248</sup> Harper, “The Food of Love”, in Harper and Proctor, *Medieval Sexuality: A Casebook*, p. 82.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

immediately became consumed with passion for her.<sup>250</sup> James Frazer, in his celebrated *The Golden Bough*, reports that, in European folklore, the birth of girls was celebrated by the planting of pear trees, and that of boys by the planting of apple trees.<sup>251</sup>

Finally as regards food, Margaret Miles has explained the appeal of the Virgin Mary's flesh in the late medieval period by the association of her pure flesh, in particular her breasts, with food and nurture in a time of threatened nutrition (fourteenth century).<sup>252</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum argues that food is inextricably linked to the social role expected of women in most cultures, and certainly in medieval Europe.<sup>253</sup> She links this requirement to a woman's ability to lactate, something that renders her the essential provider of nourishment. Bynum also points out that women are more often associated with food provision than with its consumption.<sup>254</sup>

### *Openings*

Openings of all sorts (windows, doors, keyholes . . .) have been used as sexual metaphors. Windows, in particular, figure heavily in medieval art and literature. Plate 1.2 shows Fra Angelico's (1395–1455) *Annunciation*.

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<sup>250</sup> Karl Wentersdorf, 'Imagery, Structure, and Theme in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*' in *Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: A Casebook*, ed., by Lee Patterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 115–136 (p. 129).

<sup>251</sup> James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3 vols, 3 (London: MacMillan, 1922), p. 393.

<sup>252</sup> See Margaret Miles, 'The Virgin's One Bare Breast: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in Tuscan Early Renaissance Culture' in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed., by Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 193–208.

<sup>253</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1987), pp. 190, 191.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*



Plate 1. 2. Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation* (c. 1440; San Marco, Florence).

The window in the picture is barred and closed. Diane Wolfthal has demonstrated that depictions of the Virgin during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, when they depict her indoors, either show her without showing windows or, if they do show windows, they are invariably closed.<sup>255</sup>

Michael Camille, in his discussion of the *Regime du corps*, notes that, in an illustration of a couple engaging in coitus, the couple are not only in a canopied bed—common among the wealthy in the Middle Ages—but also that the curtains are open, giving us a view into what would normally be viewed as a private matter. Moreover, the form of the drapery suggests female genitalia. Thus, openings such as windows (and open curtains) could not only suggest vision of forbidden, private activity, but also vaginas.<sup>256</sup>

Containers that have openings (jugs, shoes . . .) could also be used as metaphors for female sexual organs.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Diana Wolfthal, *In and out of the Marital Bed: Seeing Sex in Renaissance Europe* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 79, 80.

<sup>256</sup> Camille, 'Manuscript Illumination and the Art of Copulation', in Lochrie, McCracken and Schultz, *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, pp. 62, 63.

<sup>257</sup> Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World*, p. 24.

One may also consider Bosch's *The Wayfarer* (sometimes known as *The Prodigal Son*) (Plate 1.3).



Plate 1. 3. Hieronymous Bosch, *The Wayfarer* (1510; Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam)

The picture is replete with “holes”. There are open windows; there are holes in the roof; the doorway is open, and in it a man embraces (or assaults) a woman. There is also the woman in the doorway. She holds a jug. Jugs (and other containers) were symbols for the female sexual organ. The uterus was regarded by many embryologists as an empty, passive container, and the word *vas*—meaning “vessel” or “jar”—appears in medieval texts as a synonym for woman.<sup>258</sup> The “holes” in the picture indicate that the house is a brothel.

There are other sexual symbols in the picture (animals, including birds, urination, and a tree, for instance), but the point is that windows, and other openings, could be used for diverse purposes—sanctity, in the case of Fra Anelico; legitimate sex, as in the *Regimedu corps*; sordid sex, as in *The Wayfarer*.

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<sup>258</sup> Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, p. 178.

## *Clothing*

Erotic clothing features in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written in the late fourteenth century. Classen cites these lines:

Ho laȝt a lace lyȝtly, þat þat leke vmbe hir sydeȝ,  
Knit vpon hir kyrtel vnder þe clere mantyle  
Gered hit watȝ wyth grene sylke and wyth golde schaped,  
Not bot arounde brayden, beten wyth fyngreȝ. (1830–33)  
*Quickly she grabbed a belt, that which was girded around her sides,  
Coiled around her kirtle under the clinging cloak.  
It was geared with green silk and with gold trimmed,  
Embroidered only along the edges, embellished with pendants.*<sup>259</sup>

Classen points out that a fine belt is an example of “erotic symbolism” (presumably akin to a snake, or phallus). Moreover, the image of it automatically draws the reader’s attention to the lady’s hip and groin, enhancing the eroticism of sight.

The passage also illustrates that fine clothes—in this case silk and embroidered clothes—trimmed with gold were used to enhance erotic allure. To silk, embroidery, and gold one may add any fine clothes, especially those that utilised expensive materials—velvet, fur, Cordova leather, and so forth—and any jewellery could be used to enhance sexual allure.

Finally, as indicated, footwear may have erotic overtones because shoes, being containers, can be likened to a vagina. However, beyond this, footwear was used as a blatant sexual image for male genitalia. The most noted example of this concerned *poulaines*—excessively long, pointed shoes, often fashioned to resemble a penis

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<sup>259</sup> Classen, ‘The Cultural Significance of Sexuality in the Middle Ages’, in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, p. 35.

(Plate 1.4).<sup>260</sup> The points on the shoes were often stuffed in order to maintain their erect stance.<sup>261</sup>

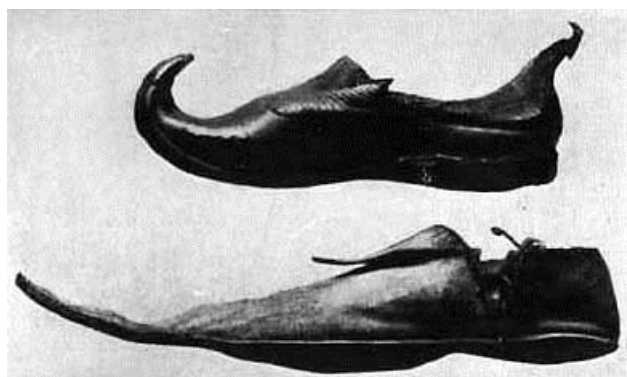


Plate 1. 4. *Poulaines*.<sup>262</sup>

Poulaines were worn by men and by women during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They were considered so outrageous that repeated, but unsuccessful, attempts were made to ban them, both in England and on the continent.<sup>263</sup>

### ***Violence***

Medieval art and literature frequently combined sex and violence. Barbara Tuchman reports that Geoffrey IV de la Tour Landry's (c. 1320–1391) compilation of cautionary for his daughters, *Livre pour l'enseignement de ses filles*, contains a tale in which a lady ran away from her husband and stayed with her parents. Her husband fetched her. On their way home the lady was attacked by "a great number of young people wild and infect [*sic*] with lechery".<sup>264</sup> The lady died of shame shortly after, whereupon the husband hacked her body into twelve pieces, "each of which he sent with a letter to certain of her friends that they might be made ashamed of her running away". Tuchman reports of another of de la Tour Landry's tales. It concerns a lady

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<sup>260</sup> See Leslie Whitbread, 'Two Chaucer Allusions', *Notes and Queries*, 12 (1942), 157–158.

<sup>261</sup> Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course*, pp. 101, 102.

<sup>262</sup> Project *poulaines* <<http://labricoleuse.livejournal.com/18311.html>> [accessed 20 June 2013]

<sup>263</sup> Leslie Whitbread, 'Two Chaucer Allusions', *Notes and Queries*, 12 (1942), 157–158..

<sup>264</sup> Cited in Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 134.

who ran away with a monk. The lady's brothers later found her in bed with the monk, whereupon they "cut away the monk's stones . . . and made her eat them".<sup>265</sup> The brothers then tied the lovers in a sack and drowned them in a river.

Similarly, Marguerite de Navarre's (1492–1549) *Heptaméron* contains numerous references to rape. In Tale 45, for example, a tapestry maker rapes a chambermaid.<sup>266</sup> At the time of the rape, the tapestry maker's wife thinks he has gone upstairs to beat the woman as punishment for laziness. The wife ignores the woman's screams when she is raped. She even tells the girl afterwards that she gave her husband permission. Classen states that the combination of rape and beating is "pornographic".<sup>267</sup>

It was not only their contemporary literature that contained scenes of rape and violence for medieval audiences. Jeane Jost describes how medieval schooling included a diet of violent classical texts from the twelfth century onwards.<sup>268</sup> She cites Anne Schotter as stating that the "young, clerical, male—for whom the poem was a school exercise, [who] would most likely have been amused by the rape . . . [and for whom] the poem may have truly been a comedy".<sup>269</sup> She also cites Marjorie Curry Woods as stating:

These texts present an increasingly complex, some would say increasingly "realistic," depiction of rape, from Statius' [*sic*] somewhat distant summary to

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Marguerite De Navarre, *The Heptameron*, trans., by Paul Chilton (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 401–402.

<sup>267</sup> Classen, 'The Cultural Significance of Sexuality in the Middle Ages' in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, p. 58.

<sup>268</sup> Jean Jost, 'Why Is Middle English Romance So Violent? The Literary and Aesthetic Purposes of Violence, in *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature: A Casebook*, ed., by Albrecht Classen (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 249– 268 (pp. 223–225)

<sup>269</sup> Anne Schotter, 'Rhetoric Verses Rape in the Medieval Pamphilus', *Philological Quarterly*, 71 (1972), 243–60 (p. 257).

Ovid's arch advice about female psychology to the orchestrated rape scene in Pamphilus complete with the victim's explicit vocal objections.<sup>270</sup>

A notable feature of the rapes depicted in classical and medieval literature, as the above examples illustrate, is that the victims objected to it. The victims' attitude to rape, if classical and medieval literature is to be believed, was much the same as it is today. This said, as Jost argues, such violent literature could well serve to desensitise medieval minds to gratuitous violence.<sup>271</sup>

Medieval and Renaissance art could likewise sexualise violence. Perugino's depiction of the execution of St Sebastian (Plate 1.5) is illustrative.



Plate 1. 5. Perugino, *St Sebastian* (1493–1494; The Louvre. Paris)

In the depiction, the arrows may be viewed as phallic symbols. Martha Easton argues that most critics view such images as homo-erotic—which, arguably they are.<sup>272</sup>

However, Easton also points out that the images could equally (or be designed to)

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<sup>270</sup> Marjorie Curry Woods, 'Rape and the Pedagogical Rhetoric of Sexual Violence', in *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*, ed., Rita Copeland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 56–86 (p. 58).

<sup>271</sup> Jost, 'Why Is Middle English Romance So Violent?', in Classen, *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature*, 249–268 (p. 223)

<sup>272</sup> Martha Easton, "'Was it good for you too?' Medieval Erotic Art and Its Audience', *Different Visions: A Journal of New Perspectives on Medieval Art*, 1(2008), 1–30 (p. 22).



appeal to women. Medieval literature criticism tends to focus, she says, on the male gaze; it tends to ignore the female gaze.<sup>273</sup>

Violence also figured in depictions of female martyrs. One may consider, for example, Master Francke's (c. 1380–c. 1440) depiction of St Barbara (Plate 1.6).

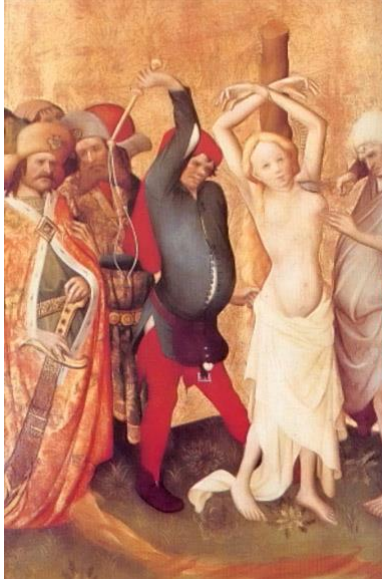


Plate 1. 6. Master Francke, *Martyrdom of St Barbara* (c. 1410–1415; National Museum, Helsinki)

In such depictions of the deaths of the saints, medieval artists lost little opportunity to combine nudity, violence, and sublimation. Such images, as Easton suggests, may stimulate religious and erotic responses in viewers, both medieval and modern.<sup>274</sup> In a similar vein, Lara Farina, writing on medieval religious erotic discourses states:

Although I discuss images that had an erotic resonance for medieval readers, the texts that offer this imagery do more than portray sexualized subjects; they also prompt their readers to participate in sensual and sexualized practices of their own.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>275</sup> Farina, *Erotic Discourse and Early English Religious Writing*, p. 2.

Nancy Partner speaks of a sexual dimension of medieval mystical experiences and practice. She refers to mystical visionaries whose experiences appeared profoundly sexual, and violent.<sup>276</sup> Mystics of the period wrote of the torments they suffered in their communion with God. Thus, for example, Mechthild of Magdeburg (c. 1260–c. 1282) combines love of the Lord with repeated mundane sexual metaphors of food and fire. The sado-masochism includes bondage:

She is captured in the first experience  
When God kisses her in sweet umon  
She is assailed with many a holy thought  
That she not waver when she mortifies her flesh  
She is bound by the power of the Holy Spirit,  
And her bliss is indeed manifold  
She is slapped with the great powerlessness  
Of not being able to enjoy without interruption eternal light  
She is buffeted and beaten with severe blows When she must return to the  
body.<sup>277</sup>

Mechthild was not alone. Beatrice of Nazareth's (1200–1268) religious ecstasy included pain and fire:<sup>278</sup>

Meantime, when love acts in the heart so vehemently and riotously, it becomes so excessive and exuberant in the soul that the soul thinks its heart has been wounded in many and grave ways. . . . So it seems that its veins are opened and its blood is boiling out, its marrow is withered and its legs are weak, its chest burns and its throat is dry. . . . And the soul thus feels love

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<sup>276</sup> Nancy F. Partner, 'Did Mystics Have Sex?' in *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, eds., by Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenblicher (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), pp. 296–311 (p. 308).

<sup>277</sup> As cited in Julie B. Miller, 'Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Mystical Literature: A Call for a Feminist Critique', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 15 (1999), 25–49 (pp. 29, 30).

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

acting riotously within it, sparing nothing, uncontrollably seizing and consuming everything within the soul like a devouring fire.

Julie Miller points to numerous female mystics who readily used phallic imagery when describing their experiences. They confessed to feeling penetrated, pierced, or stabbed. Such mystics included Angela of Foligno (c. 1248–1309), Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), Hadewijch of Antwerp (thirteenth century), and Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582). Teresa’s musings are typical: <sup>279</sup>

It seemed the angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep inside within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away, nor is the soul content with less than God.

The images of “reaching deep inside” and “drawing it out”, and the references to the “sweetest” pain suggest orgasm.

Margaret R. Miles argues that medieval mysticism is fundamentally grounded in sexual drives, using the term *religious pornography* to refer to images of violated female martyrs;<sup>280</sup> Madeline Caviness uses the term *sadoerotic* to describe the suffering and sublimation of medieval mystics.<sup>281</sup>

Against this, Corinne Saunders argues that images of tortured virgins could have evoked the image of Christ “in such a way as to recall the violence of Christ’s own death rather than to emphasise feminine sexuality”.<sup>282</sup> Similarly, Caroline Walker

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>280</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 156. Also, p. 177.

<sup>281</sup> Madeline H. Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages: Sight, Spectacle, and Scopic Economy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2001), p. 99.

<sup>282</sup> Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), p. 126.

Bynum argues that, when viewed through the lenses of medieval religious thought, such sadoerotic images could have been interpreted as a feature of late medieval piety.<sup>283</sup>

The present thesis sides more with the interpretations of Easton and Miles than of Saunders and Bynum. If, as Eysenck argues, sexual symbolism is universal and was readily understood by medieval audiences, it would be odd if they ignored the eroticism in many of their religious images. To put this in Freudian terms, medieval religious art and mysticism could have included a strong element of sublimated sexuality.

### ***Mouths***

Erotic literature often illustrates a woman's sexual attractiveness by reference to her mouth or lips. This tradition goes back to classical times. Ovid (43 BC–c. AD 17) wrote:

sumet, iam non tantum oscula sumet:

*He will taste her lips, and anon far more than her lips.*<sup>284</sup>

As is argued in subsequent chapters, not only was Chaucer much influenced by Ovid's love poetry, he also much used the erotic connotations of mouths and lips. This is seen, as is argued in Chapter three, in *The Miller's Tale*, for example.

Mouths may also be likened to vaginas. In *The Knight Who Made Cunts Talk*, for instance, as is discussed in Chapter two, the protagonist does just that—he gets vaginas to speak. The likening is also seen in Chaucer. Gail Ashton, writing of the Wife of Bath, comments “Alison's obsessive referencing on her genitalia insistently

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<sup>283</sup> Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2005), p. 179.

<sup>284</sup> Ovid *The Amores*. In J. Lewis May, *The Love Books of Ovid* (New York: Rarity Press, 1930), p. 9. <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/ovid/lboo/lboo26.htm>> [accessed 15 October 2013].

demands our attention and helps to construct her as a ‘talking queynte’<sup>285</sup>. Moreover, she is a self-confessed ‘lusty oon’ (605), her ‘coltes tooth’ (602) remind us of the consuming *vagina dentata* image.<sup>286</sup> A *vagina dentate* is a toothed vagina.

*Vagini dentati* also featured in the visual arts of the period. Samantha Riches calls attention to medieval depictions of the Last Judgment.<sup>287</sup> In them, Hell is entered through the mouth of a demon. Similarly, monsters, such as the dragon slain by St Michael, are portrayed not only as having a hideous “main” mouth; they also have supernumerary mouths—mouths played at inappropriate parts of their body (e.g., the elbow, the stomach). Riches cites Bartolomé Bermejo’s (c. 1440–1495) *Saint Michael Triumphs over the Devil* as an example (Plate 1.7).



Plate 1. 7. Bartolomé Bermejo, *Saint Michael Triumphs over the Devil* (1468; National Gallery, London)

Some monsters—the so-called *blemmye*, much used in medieval maps and folklore—lack a head; instead, they have a mouth in the centre of their body. There

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<sup>285</sup> Ashton, ‘Feminisms’, in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, pp. 369–382 (p. 380).

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> Samantha J. E. Riches, ‘Virtue and Violence: Saints, Monsters and Sexuality in Medieval Culture’, in Harper and Proctor, *Medieval Sexuality: A Casebook*, pp. 59–80 (pp. 69, 71).

appears a clear association in the medieval mind, argues Riches, between demons, the devil, Hell, and mouths.

Green, citing *The Trotula*, observes that the use of many vaginas suggests the added dangers of “diabolical sex”.<sup>288</sup> Moreover, Green argues, *vagini dentati* reinforce medieval concern over “wandering wombs”.<sup>289</sup> Misplaced vaginas suggest misplaced wombs. A misplaced womb is clearly “unnatural”. This is an idea, taken from Hippocrates, that, in ill women, wombs wandered round the body, sometimes even to the head.<sup>290</sup>

### *Animals*

Roberta Gilchrist argues that, throughout the medieval period, “Animal symbolism was commonly used in sexual punning”.<sup>291</sup> Birds were used as erotic symbols, for instance. The reason birds were associated with sex, incidentally, possibly came from a Dutch pun on the word *vogelen*, literally meaning to bird, but used as a euphemism for coitus; similarly, the noun *vogelaar* literally meant bird-catcher but was used euphemistically to mean procurer or lover.<sup>292</sup>

The symbolism can be far richer. In some *fabliaux*, for instance, an animal alone becomes equated with sex. In *The Mouse in the Basket* (discussed in Chapter two) a mouse becomes a vagina. In general, small furry animals were used as euphemisms for genitalia.<sup>293</sup> And in *Les Perdris* (The Partridges) a woman scoffs two partridges before her husband comes home. Her hunger is so frenzied that it is, as Gordon

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<sup>288</sup> Green, *The Trotula*, pp. 20–22.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course*, p. 106.

<sup>292</sup> Wolfthal, *In and out of the Marital Bed*, p. 89.

<sup>293</sup> Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 38.

comments,<sup>294</sup> metaphorical masturbation. When her husband comes home the woman tells him a priest has stolen the birds, and she tells the priest to run away because her husband wishes to castrate him. The priest runs away, while the husband shouts at him that he will bring both back hot. Partridges, incidentally, were a medieval symbol of sex and deceit.<sup>295</sup>

The association between eating, food, birds and other animals, and sex is not peculiar to the *fabliaux*, nor to France. The songs of Oswald von Wolkenstein (c. 1376–1445), as Rasma Lazda-Cazers argues, are overcrowded with bird sexual metaphors. Pecking birds are phallic symbols, and the catching of them is a metaphor for coitus.<sup>296</sup> Oswald's song *Der mai mit lieber zal*, which concerns birds in spring, can, argues Lazda-Cazers, be viewed as a metaphor of sex,

Such imagery allowed scope for *double entendre*. This is seen, for example, in Juan Ruiz's (c. 1283–c. 1350) poem *Libro de buen amor* (The Book of Good Love). In it, in his encounter with a third mountain woman, the narrator (the Archpriest) testifies to his qualifications as a good husband:

Sé muy bien tornear vacas,  
e domar bravo novillo;  
sé maçar e fazer natas,  
efazer el odrezillo;  
bien sé guitar las abarcas, / e tañer el caramillo,  
e cavalgar bravo portillo;<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> Gordon, 'Sausages, Nuts, and Eggs: Food Imagery, the Body, and Sexuality in the Old French *Fabliaux*', p. 511.

<sup>295</sup> Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2002), p. 250.

<sup>296</sup> Rasma Lazda-Cazers, 'Oral Sex in the Songs of Oswald von Wolkenstein: Did it Really Happen?', in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, pp. 579–598 (p. 591).

<sup>297</sup> Translation from Connie L. Scarborough, 'The Rape of Men and Other Lessons About Sex', in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, pp. 565–578 (p. 572–573).

As Scarborough notes,<sup>298</sup> the passage borders on the obscene: riding animals and dominating animals implies coitus; churning and making whipped cream imply ejaculation; a wine bag suggests a scrotum; a flute implies a penis; and sandals imply a vagina. The imagery is Freudian.

Chaucer takes advantage of the flexible meanings attached to animals, and uses them to reflect on the character's disposition in his tales. His use of animal imagery relies upon an understanding of an image which goes beyond purely realistic associations.

### *Mixed use of symbols*

As the above examples illustrate, within any single type of symbol, the single type rarely acts alone. Freudian images often combine with violent ones; heat imagery often conflates with colour and body imagery; garden imagery may combine with animal imagery; and so on. This accords, of course, with the *Song of Songs*.

However, in some works, both visual and literary, the conflation is so extreme that it is difficult to determine exactly which is the "most important" symbol. In the *trouvère* Audefroï Le Bâtard's (fl. 1190–1230) "Bele Ysabiauz" (Beautiful Isabel), for example, we hear:

Gerard started out, Gerard was on his way;  
he sent his squire Dennis ahead  
to announce him to his lady.  
The lady, with everything in bloom,  
was in her *garden* picking *flowers*.  
And Gerard waited for his bliss.  
The lady was wearing *elegant clothes*; she was  
full of body, lovely, smoothskinned and graceful;  
Her *cheeks* were *cherry red*.  
"My lady," he said, "may God, whom I love and

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<sup>298</sup> Connie L. Scarborough, 'The Rape of Men and Other Lessons about Sex', in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, pp. 565–578 (pp. 572, 573).



worship, grant you a good day!”

And Gerard waited for his bliss. (Stanzas 9–10; emphases added)<sup>299</sup>

Here there is a conflation of garden imagery, clothing, body parts, and fruit.

Gerard, as it happens, is foiled in his love, for before he can consummate it, the beautiful Isabel’s parents marry her off to a country squire. In time, however, the squire dies and the two “have their bliss”. Except for the absence of coitus in the garden, however, all the elements of passion are present.

Gerard also speaks of the pain and fire of love:

“My lady, for God’s sake,” said Gerard earnestly,

“take pity on me, noble soul that you are.

Love for you *torments me with its flames*,

And because of you I am more bewildered

Than any man has ever been.”

And Gerard waited for his bliss. (Stanza 7; emphasis added)

The work also alludes to violence.

“My lady, for God’s sake,” said Gerard earnestly,

“I have decided, because of you, to go across the sea.”

At those words, the lady would have rather been *killed*.

The two locked together in such *an ardent embrace*

that they both fell to the ground.

And Gerard waited for his bliss. (Stanza 11; emphases added).

Here, violence is associated with ardour.

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<sup>299</sup> As cited in Julia Wingo Shinnick, ‘Singing Desire: Musical Innuendo in Troubadour and Trouvère Song’, in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, pp. 293–324(p. 319). Emphases original.

Some medieval lyrics conflated gardens, including pear trees, alcohol, and violent sex. The anonymous fourteenth century lyric “Love in the Garden” contains this passage:

I haue a newe *gardyn*,  
 & newe is be-gunne;  
 Swych an ober *gardyn*  
 Know I not vnder sunne.  
 In be myddis of my *gardyn*  
 Is a *peryr* [pear] set,  
 & it wele nonper ienet.  
 Be fairest mayde of bis toun  
 Preyid me,  
 For to *gryffyn* [graft] her a gryf  
 Of myn *pery tre* [pear tree].  
 Quan I hadde hem *gryffid*  
 Alle at her wille,  
 Be *wyn & be ale* [wine and ale]  
 Che dede in fille.  
 & I *gryffid* her  
 Ry3t vp in her home;  
 & be bat day xx [20] wowkes  
 It was *qwyk in her womb*.<sup>300</sup> (emphases added)

Patterson observes that the *peryr* is of a phallic shape and the word *grafting* indicates swiving, pointing out that the pear tree is “a place for the consummation of the adulterous liaison” and “an image for the multibranch tree of mortal sin”.<sup>301</sup> The phrase *quik in her womb*, one may observe, reinforces the point that the sex is, if not rape, sensual.

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<sup>300</sup> R. H. Robbins, *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 15–16.

<sup>301</sup> Wentersdorf, ‘Imagery, Structure, and Theme in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*’, p. 131.

Van Eyck's (c. 1395–1441) visual art also conflates symbols. This is apparent in his *Arnolfini Marriage* (Plate 1.8).



Plate 1. 8. Van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Marriage* (c. 1434; National Gallery, London)

The picture is not simply a picture of a marriage ceremony; it is too contrived. There is a single candle in the chandelier; there are shoes placed untidily on the floor; there is fruit placed on furniture; there is a dog at the bride's feet. Van Eyck is trying to tell us something.<sup>302</sup> Interpreted through symbolism, the single candle could stand for God, the fruit for fertility, the dog for fidelity, and the shoes for intimacy. These and other interpretations have been suggested.<sup>303</sup> Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage* may not be so much a portrait of two people getting married; it may be more a picture of marriage itself.

The painting is also ambiguous. There are three obvious sexual symbols: the fruit by the window, the window itself (open), and the shoes (one places one's feet in them in simulated coitus); the dog is also ambiguous; it may be a symbol of fidelity, but may

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<sup>302</sup> Edwin Hall, *The Arnolfini Betrothal: Medieval Marriage and the Enigma of Van Eyck's Double Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. xvii–ixx.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xvii–ixx.

equally be a symbol of animal lust. The clothing is luxurious and the curtains of the four-poster bed are open. Such aspects of the portrait suggest marriage necessarily involves sexual pleasure. But the religious symbols—not only the candle, but also the rosary on the wall, and the apparent making of the Sign of the Cross by Arnolfini—work counter to this. In this way, the painting links to the *Song of Songs*. The painting accords more with Bernard of Clairvaux’s interpretation of the *Song of Songs* than with a licentious interpretation.

As indicated, extreme symbolism is seen in the works of Hieronymus Bosch. Plate 1.9 shows his triptych, *The Garden of Eden* (left), *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (centre), and *Hell* (right).



Plate 1. 9. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights Triptych* (c. 1504; Museo del Prado, Madrid)

The three together seem to portray a descent, first from paradise to sin on Earth, second from sin on Earth to Hell.<sup>304</sup>

The left-hand panel makes the reference to the forbidden fruit—the Fall. The central panel is awash with naked people, many partaking in sexual activity. Large birds feature strongly, as do fantastic fruits, orbs, pearls, fish, and wild animals. The fruits

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<sup>304</sup> Frances Jowell, 'The Paintings of Hieronymus Bosch', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 58 (1965), 131–136 (p. 135).

are obvious fertility symbols, as are the birds and the wild animals.<sup>305</sup> Frances Jowell comments:

. . . many details such as fish, the birds, the procession of animals, the few pearls, and so on, had lewd connotations in contemporary literature . . . . The group with the mussel-shell . . . alludes to adultery, the victim here being the unfortunate carrier of the abode of the sinful lovers. . . . There is a certain amount of humorous mockery in this description of disordered licentiousness, but Bosch leaves us in no doubt as to the ultimate damnation of the sinning mortals.<sup>306</sup>

The right-hand panel in Bosch's triptych is also replete with symbolism. Jowell comments:

Some of the punishments are reminiscent of other Hell panels . . . such as the woman with the toad, who symbolizes Pride. Most of the sins punished are those of the flesh. The painting is filled with extraordinary invention, sadistic imagination and weird fantasy. Many motifs have never been satisfactorily explained, and even when symbols and metaphors have been identified, it is hard to believe that the mysterious workings of Bosch's imagination have been explained.<sup>307</sup>

Jowell's point that much of Bosch's symbolism remains unexplained is correct. However, the point here is that Bosch combines a panoply of symbols, and the "message" of each changes from panel to panel. In the Garden of Eden scene (left hand panel), animals, a tree, nudity, and so forth, are associated with communion with God; in the centre panel, nudity, animals, birds, and so on, appear associated with unfettered licentiousness; in the right hand panel, animals, birds, and nudity are associated with hideous punishment. Whatever the precise meaning of the triptych, it

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>306</sup> F. Jowell, 'The Paintings of Hieronymus Bosch', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 58 (1965), 131–136 (p. 136).

<sup>307</sup> Jowell, 'The Paintings of Hieronymus Bosch', p. 136.

is a different, or more subtle, message from that of *The Arnolfini Marriage*. Sex, in Bosch's work, may be communion with God (or was, before the Fall), but it may also be sin.

### **Conclusion**

Chaucer was influenced by the High Middle Age intellectual *zeitgeist*. This *zeitgeist* included classical influences, from the mythological through the scientific and philosophical. As regards the latter, it is plausible that Chaucer was more influenced by Aristotelian thinking than Platonic. There are two reasons for believing this. First, by the fourteenth century Aristotelian lore had been assimilated into Christian doctrine. Second, Chaucer was interested in science, a medieval interest that stemmed more from the works of Aristotle than from those of Plato and an interest that had percolated through the upper echelons of medieval society. Chaucer was also aware, not only of the works of such classical scholars as Galen, but also of the works of Islamic scholars, particularly the medical works of Ibn Sina. As regards sexuality, it is very plausible that Chaucer's views accorded with those of Albertus Magnus and Bernard of Gordon. This said, Chaucer was also aware of the works of the Church Fathers, which were largely Platonic. Chaucer, of course, was fully aware of Christian lore, from both the Bible and the works of the Church Fathers.

It is sometimes difficult to determine the extent to which such influences were direct as opposed to indirect. Although it is certain that Chaucer was well read, it is uncertain which specific works, particularly as regards science, he had read. Had he read the works of Ibn Sina, for instance, or those of al-Razi, or did he know of them only by reputation? Also, indirect influences may function by filtering through the *zeitgeist*. Chaucer may have been influenced by sources whose ultimate origins were unknown to him.

Chaucer would also have been influenced by the times in which he lived. This would not only have applied to his experience of plague and war, but also to the corruption of the clergy. It would have been impossible for Chaucer to have been unaware of the venality, licentiousness, and hypocrisy of many of the priests and prelates of his day, and this awareness doubtless influenced his works.

Finally, there is the ubiquitous use of symbolism in the medieval era. It is inconceivable that Chaucer was unaware of the use of such metaphors as grinding, grain, furry animals, and shoes for sexual acts and genitalia, for they were widely used, and appreciated, in medieval art and literature. It is also inconceivable that he would have failed to have used them, for their use allows for subtlety, *double entendre*, and flexibility when speaking of sexual or romantic acts. This does not imply that Chaucer used the full menagerie inherent in, say, Bosch's symbolism, but it does imply that he used those symbols and metaphors understood by everyone in his day.

Of course, there is sometimes difficulty in determining when something is used as a symbol and when it is not. A door may be a vagina or just a door. However, this difficulty can be overstated. In most instances, it is obvious when something is used metaphorically, either from the work itself, as in certain *fabliaux*, or from the conventions of the times, as in the use of closed windows in depictions of the Virgin. Moreover, as argued in the Introduction, Freudian sexual symbolism is, in effect, timeless. There should be little difficulty in recognising Chaucer's use of erotic symbols once when one appreciates that he must have been using them, and he must have been using those symbols rampant in his day.

## CHAPTER TWO: CHAUCER'S SOURCES AND AUDIENCE

The purpose of the present chapter is to outline Chaucer's literary influences, particularly as regards eroticism, and the nature of Chaucer's audience. The chapter first discusses two popular medieval genres: *fabliaux* and the courtly romances. It then moves to the love poetry of Ovid, poetry. It next discusses Boccaccio (1313–1375) and his influence on Chaucer. Finally, it discusses Chaucer's audience. Understanding of Chaucer's literary influences, and of his audience, is essential if one is to understand his originality and his artistry.

### The *fabliaux*

Joseph Bedier defined *fabliaux* in 1893 as “des contes a rire en vers” (stories in verse that make one laugh).<sup>308</sup> Most *fabliaux* revolve around libido. Love does not enter into them.

The *fabliaux* were common in France from the twelfth through the thirteenth centuries; there are also Dutch, German, and Flemish *fabliaux* and at least one English one, *Dame Sirith*, evidently composed around the second half of the thirteenth century.<sup>309</sup> There are also Islamic *fabliaux*. These were written in the twelfth century. The extent to which these Middle Eastern sources influenced European writers is uncertain; however, given the extent of Islamic influence on medieval thought (see Chapter one), that there was some such influence is plausible—there are, incidentally and as is discussed in Chapter three, Middle Eastern analogues of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*.

There are 150 extant French *fabliaux*, with most having been composed during the thirteenth century. As originally published, they appear alongside courtly poems. The stories were read at court by jongleurs. It is likely that they were composed by

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<sup>308</sup> Cited in Carol F. Heffernan, ‘Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and *Reeve's Tale*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and the French *fabliaux*’, *Italic*, 81(2004), 311–324 (p. 315).

<sup>309</sup> Robert Enzer Lewis, ‘The English *Fabliau* Tradition and Chaucer's “*Miller's Tale*”’, *Modern Philology*, 79 (1982), 241–255 (p. 242).



clerks. They are sophisticated, and clerks appear the only group of people who are not satirised in them.<sup>310</sup> Indeed, clerks appear “uniformly admired” in them.<sup>311</sup>

The *fabliaux* draw their humour from the comic aspects of food, drink, and sex. They are often satirical, but not necessarily moralising. It is a genre that exploits vicarious and voyeuristic inspection of that which is normally private.

Four examples of *fabliaux* suffice to provide their flavour: *The Squirrel*, *The Sacristan*, *The Knight who Made Cunts Talk*, and *The Mouse in the Basket*.

*The Squirrel* was written in the twelfth or thirteenth century, probably in the Île de la France. It concerns a young, beautiful woman whose bourgeois mother tells her

Daughter, do not be foolish or be a man hunter; do not be too ready to speak, because it can look bad for a woman when she is heard saying what she should not. For this reason a woman must prevent herself from saying foolish things, because very often the outcome is disastrous. Above all, you must be careful never to name that thing which men carry which hangs down.<sup>312</sup>

Thereafter, the daughter asks her mother to name the thing that hangs down. At first the mother refuses, but, after her daughter's repeated requests, the mother names it a “willy”, whereafter, to her mother's horror, the daughter repeatedly says “willy”. The mother leaves in tears.

After this a man, Robin, who had heard the exchange between mother and daughter, approaches the daughter. His penis is erect, and he is holding it beneath his clothes. The girl asks him what he is holding, and he replies it is a squirrel. To this, the girl replies she would like it to play with her, to frolic in her room, and to “feed itself as

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<sup>310</sup> Heffernan, ‘Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and *Reeve's Tale*’, pp. 313–315.

<sup>311</sup> Muscatine, as cited in Heffernan, ‘Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and *Reeve's Tale*’, p. 311.

<sup>312</sup> *The Squirrel*, in *Nouveau Recueil Complet des Fabliaux*, ed., by Willem Noomen, vol. 6 (Assen, Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1991), pp. 35–49. Translated by Helen Nicholson < <http://freespace.virgin.net/nigel.nicholson/squirrel.htm> > [30 August 2011].

much as it liked".<sup>313</sup> Thereafter the girl "strokes" it and feels Robin's testes, which he refers to as the squirrel's "eggs". Soon after, the girl asks Robin what the squirrel eats and he replies "nuts". At this, the girl is dismayed because she had eaten all her nuts the day before. Not flummoxed, Robin tells her the squirrel can find them "through your cunt".<sup>314</sup> The couple then have sex. When Robin ejaculates, the girl is worried that the squirrel has broken one of its "eggs", but Robin extracts himself and says that his squirrel is fine. The girl replies that the squirrel can come back for his "nuts" any time it likes. That, says Robin, is all that the squirrel wants.

*The Squirrel* contains no moral and no message, other, perhaps, than that women are as desirous of sex as men and that, maybe, bourgeois women such as the girl's mother are hypocrites (or sexually repressed). The story also illustrates the use of food and animals as sexual metaphors.<sup>315</sup>

*The Sacristan* dates from at least the thirteenth century, and may be from before 1266. The oldest surviving copy is written in French.<sup>316</sup> It concerns the fate of a monk who desires a beautiful bourgeois married woman, and who offers her one hundred pounds if she will have sex with him. The woman tells her husband, and he tells her to agree to have sex with the monk but not to worry, because she will not, in fact, have sex with him. So the woman tells the monk she agrees and the monk arrives at her home with the money. Before they can have sex, the husband enters and kills the monk with a blow mace to the head.

At this, the story revolves around the disposal of the corpse. At first, the couple hide it in an abbey privy. However, the monk who discovers it thinks he accidentally killed the man, so he hides the corpse in a dunghill. But in the dunghill there's also a fine side of bacon, which the monk steals. The bacon was put in the dunghill by

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Other *fabliaux* used such imagery, *Du fevre de Creel*. See Harper, "The Food of Love" in Harper and Proctor, *Medieval Sexuality*, p. 87.

<sup>316</sup> *The Sacristan* in *Nouveau Recueil Complet des Fabliaux*, ed., by Willem Noomen, vol. 7 (Assen, Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1991), pp. 3–189. Translated by Helen Nicholson <<http://freespace.virgin.net/nigel.nicholson/squirrel.htm>>[30 August 2011].

robbers, and when they return to get it, they find only the corpse. They then bring it to the peasant's house from which they had stolen the bacon. The peasant and his wife, on discovering the corpse, then place it on a horse. The horse makes its way to the abbey and the dead monk's head touches a lintel on entering. Realising that the monk is dead, and has been for a long time (the corpse is cold), the monks grieve for him. The only people to benefit are the bourgeois couple, who keep the one hundred pounds.

Again, there is no moral to *The Sacristan* other, perhaps, than to illustrate the licentiousness of the clergy and to criticise the cupidity of the bourgeoisie. Unlike *The Squirrel*, it contains little sexual imagery.

*The Knight who Made Cunts Talk* was written in France around 1250. It concerns a knight who, seeing three naked women, who are bathing, have had the clothes stolen, retrieves the clothes for them. To reward him, the first woman (all, it transpires, are fairies) rewards him by making him loved by everyone wherever he goes, so he will never be poor. The second rewards him by enabling him to get vaginas to talk whenever he likes. The third rewards him by enabling him to get anuses to talk, should the vaginas prove unable to do so. The story climaxes when a woman bets him that he will not be able to get her vagina to talk, and then stuffs her vagina with rags so it is gagged. The woman loses the bet, however, when her anus tells everyone present that the vagina is gagged. The woman then has to ungag her vagina, which immediately expresses relief, and the knight wins the bet.

Again, there appears no moral to the tale. The story is significant in that it echoes medieval fears of *vagina dentata*. It also illustrates, as Gordon argues, *fabliaux's* mischievous exploration of body parts and functions.<sup>317</sup>

*The Mouse in the Basket* dates from the thirteenth century. The story concerns a foolish man who marries a woman who is having an affair with a monk. Upon their wedding night, the woman informs her husband that she has left her vagina at the

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<sup>317</sup> Gordon, 'Sausages, Nuts, and Eggs: Food Imagery, the Body, and Sexuality in the Old French Fabliaux', in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Time*, pp. 503, 504.

foot of her mother's bed, so he will have to go to her mother's house and retrieve it if he is to have sex. The man goes to the house and the mother, perplexed, gives him a basket, in which she says the vagina is. The man proceeds to take the basket home but in it there is a mouse, which the man takes to be the vagina, and, when the man tries to copulate with it before he gets home, the mouse runs away. Mortified, the man returns to his wife saying that he has lost her vagina. She, however, assures him that it is between her legs and that it will not bite him—again, a reference to *vagina dentata*—and that he may stroke it. She then orders him to go to sleep because he has had a tiring day.

Aside from the use of sexual symbolism (the mouse; water and wetness also feature in the tale), the story is notable in that its author draws an explicit conclusion from it, thus:

I want to point out through this fable that a woman knows more than a devil. You can be certain of this, and may both my eyes be put out if I'm not telling what I know to be the truth! When she wants to deceive a man, she deceives him and makes him more of a fool solely by talking than a man can do by all his ingenuity. The ending of my fable is that each should guard himself against his own woman so that she does not make him a cuckold!<sup>318</sup>

The *fabliaux*, as illustrated by these examples, are lascivious stories, and, for all their crudity, are designed for a sophisticated audience. Nonetheless, they are relatively unsubtle.

### **Medieval romances**

The origins of medieval romances date from antiquity. Ovid, for example, was used as a source for tales of Jason and Media,<sup>319</sup> and Virgil influenced tales of magic.

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<sup>318</sup> *The Mouse in the Basket*, in *Nouveau Recueil complet des Fabliaux*, ed., by Willem Noomen, vol. 6 (Assen, Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1991), pp. 173–183. Translated by Helen Nicholson < <http://freespace.virgin.net/nigel.nicholson/squirrel.htm> > [30 August 2011].

<sup>319</sup> William. P. Ker, *Epic And Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (London: Dodo Press, 2007), p. 382.

Folklore was also an influence,<sup>320</sup> though the fairy tale elements of folk stories evolved over time. In the Arthurian romances, the character Morgan le Fey is not a fairy; she is a woman who studies magic. Thus medieval romances deal with enchantresses more than with fairies. Christianity was also an influence, as in the Holy Grail elements of Arthurian romances.

Early form of medieval romance proper started to appear in the twelfth century. Examples include *The Song of Roland* (French) and *The Poem of the Cid* (Spanish). The precise origins and authors of both works are unclear. These early forms tended not to concentrate on love or courtship; instead, they concentrated on heroic deeds—in the case of *The Song of Roland*, The Battle of Roncesvalles (778) in which Roland, a commander in Charlemagne's army, is defeated by the Basques; in the case of *The Poem of the Cid*, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar's (c. 1043–1099) role in the conquest of Spain from the Moors. Love themes, however, soon emerged, with tales involving a knight rescuing of a lady from a monster being popular.<sup>321</sup> Tales of love, coupled with heroic deeds, written in prose started to appear in the thirteenth century, as in the French *La Mort le Roi Artu*, a source of the Arthurian romances written around 1230.

Medieval romances of the High Middle Ages, in contrast to the *fabliaux*, centre on love. They could also be written in verse. In classic form they have several characteristics. Thus (a) they idealise chivalry; (b) they centre round a hero (a knight) who performs noble deeds; (c) their hero loves a lady; (d) they include elements of the supernatural; and (e) their hero has a secret identity. Not all the romances share all these characteristics, but most have several. The romances tend to be either heroic or chivalric; in the former the heroes appear loyal to their country or to the gods, in the latter they seek transcendent values.

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<sup>320</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1964), pp. 129–30.

<sup>321</sup> Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 83–84.

The archetypal romance is the Arthurian legend. This arose gradually from the ninth century onwards. The Anglo-Saxon *Historia Brittonum* (early ninth century) speaks of an Arthur who protects Britain from invasion and who fights monsters. There are also several Welsh poems that refer to Arthur. The *Gododdin*, possibly sixth century, but dated with certainty only to the thirteenth, speaks of a warrior who slays 300 enemies, but who was “no Arthur”, which suggests that Arthur was a warrior of legendary prowess. The Welsh *Mabinogion* (date and sources uncertain, but probably between AD 1000 and 1200) tells of an Arthur performing impossible deeds. Such stories became incorporated, as “history”, into Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1138). The history, along with other sources, inspired several French Arthurian romances, including those written by Chrétien de Troyes (1100–1180), who authored four complete works: *Erec and Enide*; *Cligès*, *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*, and *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*. Chrétien was probably the first to write of Lancelot. The French romances tend to centre less on Arthur than on his knights.

The Arthurian romances, whatever the historical reality of an Arthur (still uncertain) had the features outlined above. Thus, in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, (c. 1470), Arthur and his knights are chivalrous; there are magical elements (the sword in the stone, Merlin, Morgan le Fey . . .); and Arthur does not at first know his identity.

The Arthurian romances were flexible. Thus, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century), although Sir Gawain is a knight of King Arthur's court, the story centres on Gawain and his honour, not Arthur. The magical element enters when, offered to strike the Green Knight with an axe, provided that Gawain accepts a return blow, Gawain chops off the Green Knight's head, only to find that the Knight picks up his head and places it back on his neck. The moral of the story comes when Sir Gawain, forced by honour (chivalry), allows the Green Knight the return blow. The chivalry is reinforced when the Green Knight (a figure possibly adopted from Celtic paganism) only slightly injures Gawain, this despite Gawain's (unchivalrously) flinching the blow.

### The love poetry of Ovid

The poetry of Ovid was well known to educated Europeans in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Ovid's Latin texts were used as school texts for instruction in Latin. The attraction of his verses was in part its eroticism—as witnessed by, for example, his *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love)—its description of classical mythology—as in his *Metamorphoses*—the mystery concerning Ovid's exile (around AD 8), the reason for which is unknown. It may be that the poetry's eroticism upset the Emperor Augustus, who was trying to promote monogamous marriage. In any event, as Katharina Volk argues, his exile provided a role model for those intellectuals suffering spiritual or actual banishment.<sup>322</sup>

Book II of *Amores* (Loves) provides an example of Ovid's erotic poetry:

est etiam, quae me vatem et mea carmina culpet—  
 culpantis cupiam sustinuisse femur.  
 molliter incedit—motu capit; altera dura est—  
 at poterit tacto mollior esse viro.  
 haec quia dulce canit flectitque facillima vocem,  
 oscula cantanti rapta dedisse velim;  
 haec querulas habili percurrit pollice chordas—  
 tam doctas quis non possit amare manus?  
 illa placet gestu numerosaque bracchia ducit  
 et tenerum molli torquet ab arte latus—  
 ut taceam de me, qui causa tangor ab omni,  
 illic Hippolytum pone, Priapus erit! (Elegy IV).<sup>323</sup>

The passage lacks sexual symbolism (except, maybe, the metaphorical use of “fire”). Instead, it relies on descriptions of beautiful women, and their effects on Ovid. The images of women are sensual—witness the melodious singing, the skilful

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<sup>322</sup> Katharina Volk, *Ovid* (Chichester; Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 111.

<sup>323</sup> Ovid, *The Amores*, in J. Lewis May, *The Love Books of Ovid* (New York: Rarity Press, 1930), p. 38. <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/ovid/lboo/lboo26.htm>> [accessed 15 October 2013]

musicianship, the seductive poses, the rhythmic movements of arms, the dancing, the swaying.

There is also the allusion to classical mythology: Hippolytus (the son of Theseus), according to Roman myth, devoted his life to Diana and therefore to chastity and hunting (Diana was the virgin goddess of hunting). Priapus was the god of fertility and had an enormous penis and a permanent erection. Intriguingly, Ovid, although a Roman, gives the Greek name for Hippolytus (the Roman equivalent was Virbius).

It is likely that Chaucer learned Latin through Ovid, and learned of Greek and Roman mythology through him, too. Ovid's poetry had entered medieval popular culture. The *Carmina Burana* (composed early thirteenth century) contains Ovidian themes and was clearly inspired, in part, by Ovid. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which was translated into French during the early fourteenth century; the translations became incorporated into the *Ovide Moralise*. There was also Pierre Bersuire's (c. 1290–1362) *Ovidius Moralizatus* (1340), a discussion of Ovid's ethics and a work that is known to have influenced Chaucer. Chaucer's *House of Fame* directly refers to Ovid:

Of coper, Venus clerk Ovide,  
That hath ysowen wonder wyde  
The grete god of Loves name. (1487–1489)

The works of Ovid were arguably more studied, and were more popular, than the works of any other classical figure. Volk observes that Ovid had a “quasi-official” role as “*the* authority on amatory matters” (emphasis original).<sup>324</sup> He even appears as Pope in a satirical twelfth century Latin piece:

Hoc in decretis pape Nasonis habetur,  
quod mulier plures possit habere viros.  
Hoc tu decretum firmum sub pectore serva,  
ne sis catholica pulsus ab ecclesia. (37–40)

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<sup>324</sup> Volk, *Ovid*, p. 112.



Similarly, the *Love Council of Remiremont*, a twelfth-century Latin poem in which, scurrilously, nuns debate whether knights or priests make better lovers, we hear Ovid being likened to an Evangelist:

Intromissis omnibus virginum agminibus,  
Lecta sunt in medium, quasi evangelium,  
Precepta Ovidii, doctoris egregii. (23–25)

Intriguingly, as Volk observes, the priests come as the winners in the discussion—a fact that probably reflected the tale's having been written by a priest. Such scurrilous poems were in the same tradition as the *Carmina Burana*.

It is easy to understand this popularity. Ovid was a great poet, and his works, in that they deal with erotic themes, are of interest to anyone interested in sex—that is, nearly everybody. Further, as Volk argues, they provided a light-hearted counter to the censorious teaching of the Church of the time. Finally, the popularity of Ovid coincided with the birth of the Italian Renaissance, with all the interest in learning that that implied. Ovid, with his discussion of mythology, coupled with his candid discussions of sexuality, provided an “easy” route to scholarship, and an easy route to alternatives to Christian attitudes towards sexuality.

John M. Fyler notes that medieval authorities regarded Ovid as an “ethical pedagogue”.<sup>325</sup> Fyler cites Gavin Douglas (c. 1474–1522) as stating that Chaucer, because of his admiration of Ovid, is “al woman’s friend” and Petrarch (1304–1374) as stating that Ovid had a “lascivious and lubricious and altogether womanish mind”.<sup>326</sup> Petrarch also argued, Fyler states, that Ovid enjoyed female company, but that not all medieval critics viewed Ovid sympathetically.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> John M. Fyler, ‘The Medieval Ovid’, in *A Companion to Ovid*, ed., by Peter E. Knox (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 411–422 (p. 415).

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

There is some ambiguity as regards Ovid's attitude towards women. On the one hand, as Fyler argues, Ovid may have liked female company, and he certainly allowed for female orgasm—indeed, he recommended that, ideally, the man and the woman should achieve simultaneous orgasms. Such views have to be set against Ovid's descriptions of the art of seduction, by means of which men may achieve their ways on unsuspecting women. The purpose of the female orgasm is not women's pleasure *per se*; rather, a woman experiencing orgasm adds to the pleasure of the man, and, if circumstances preclude the woman's orgasm, the man should press on regardless. Thus seduction, from a male perspective, should involve manipulation and selfishness. There is thus something Machiavellian about Ovid's art of seduction. This ambiguity is evident, Fyler argues, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which Pandarus is the expert in love but is also a master of deceit.<sup>328</sup>

Fyler may underestimate Chaucer. Chaucer doubtless read Ovid, but he also read, most likely and as Fyler admits, Ovid's medieval interpreters—Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, for example. Much of Chaucer's views of Ovid may stem from the views of such near contemporaries. Fyler does not mention the most salient feature of *Troilus and Criseyde*: Pandarus is the unambiguous villain. If Chaucer had been genuinely misogynist, he would not have portrayed Pandarus in so unpleasant a light.

Chaucer's use of Ovid served two functions. First, Ovid acted as a bridge between the rough comedy of the *fabliaux* and the darkness of certain of Chaucer's romances. In this, the use of Ovid is most notable in *The Merchant's Tale*, with its use of classical mythology. *The Merchant's Tale* is not a simple *fabliau*; it is an amalgam of *fabliaux* and romance (see Chapter three). Second, Chaucer's medieval audience would have been aware of Ovid, and may therefore have expected Chaucer to include references to him.

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid., pp. 114, 115.

## Boccaccio

Scholars agree that Chaucer used Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* as a source for *Troilus and Criseyde*<sup>329</sup> and Boccaccio's *Teseida* as a source for *The Knight's Tale*; the *Teseida* also influenced *Troilus and Criseyde*. Indeed, other than Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the *Teseida* appears to have been the most important Italian influence on Chaucer's work.<sup>330</sup>

There has been much debate on whether, or to what extent, Chaucer had read Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. Until the early 1900s, it was universally assumed that he had. Afterwards, opinion swayed in the opposite direction.<sup>331</sup> This was largely due to Cummings's doctoral dissertation to the effect that *The Decameron* was an influence neither "in the inception, [n]or in the composition of either the frame-work of *The Canterbury Tales* or the tales themselves".<sup>332</sup> Others, however, have argued that Cummings's arguments are flawed,<sup>333</sup> and have pointed to similarities between tales within *The Decameron* and the Clerk's, the Franklin's, the Shipman's, the Merchant's, the Miller's, and the Reeve's tales.<sup>334</sup> Moreover, the circumstances of Chaucer's life suggest that he had.

Chaucer was in Italy during the period December 1, 1372–May 23, 1373. For ten weeks of this period he was in Florence, on secret business of Richard II with Florentine bankers. Some of these businessmen owned copies of *The Decameron*; moreover, although the work had been published some twenty years previously, it was well liked in mercantile circles; its tales were often read out in public, and were

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<sup>329</sup> Robert R. Edwards, *Chaucer and Boccaccio: Antiquity and Modernity* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), p. 10.

<sup>330</sup> Robert A. Pratt, 'Chaucer's Use of the *Teseida*', *PMLA*, 62 (1947), 598–621 (p. 598).

<sup>331</sup> Donald McGrady, 'Chaucer and the "*Decameron*" Reconsidered', *The Chaucer Review*, 12 (1977), 1–26 (p. 1).

<sup>332</sup> Hubert M. Cummings, *the Indebtedness of Chaucer's Works to the Italian Works of Boccaccio* (unpublished doctoral thesis. University of Cincinnati, 1916), p. 198.

<sup>333</sup> McGrady, 'Chaucer and the "*Decameron*" Reconsidered', p. 1.

<sup>334</sup> Heffernan, 'Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and *Reeve's Tale*', p. 317.

often talked about.<sup>335</sup> There was ample opportunity for Chaucer to have at least heard *The Decameron* discussed; it is even possible that Chaucer met Boccaccio during the time. Conversely, it is almost inconceivable that he did not know of *The Decameron*.<sup>336</sup> As Tatlock comments, given Chaucer's degree of learning and interest in literature, it would have been "incredible" had he not known of the work.<sup>337</sup>

There is also the apologia that both writers use for their bawdy language and humour. In the *Prologue to The Miller's Tale*, Chaucer states:

Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.

The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this (*The Miller's Tale*, 3181–3182)

Similarly, in the Author's Epilogue to *The Decameron* Boccaccio states:

Peradventure, then, some of you will be found to say that I have used excessive license in the writing of these stories, in that I have caused ladies at times to tell, and oftentimes to list, matters that, whether to tell or to list, do not well beseem virtuous women. The which I deny, for that there is none of these stories so unseemly, but that it may without offence be told by any one, if but seemly words be used; which rule, methinks, has here been very well observed. (003)<sup>338</sup>

The direct similarities between *The Merchant's*, *The Miller's*, and *The Reeve's Tales* and *The Decameron* are discussed in Chapter three, as are their sources. For now, one may note three overall similarities between *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. First, there is the format. Both Chaucer and Boccaccio use the same device to

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<sup>335</sup> Carol F. Heffernan, *Comedy in Chaucer and Boccaccio* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2009), pp. 10, 11.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> John S. P. Tatlock, *the Mind and Art of Chaucer* (Syracuse: University of Syracuse Press, 1950), p. 90.

<sup>338</sup> Boccaccio, *The Decameron*. trans., by J. M. Rigg (London: The Navarre Society, 1921) <<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/decameron/engDecIndex.php>> [accessed 20 August 2011]

allow for the telling of stories. In the case of Chaucer, it is the pilgrims' desire that they be entertained on their journey to Canterbury. To affect this, under the guidance of the Host, they take turns to tell stories. In the case of Boccaccio, it is seven women and three men who, in fleeing from the Black Death, agree to each tell one tale for ten days, with days off for work and Holy Days, under the direction of a "King" or "Queen", who dictates the nature of the stories. Thus, both the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales* have a *frame* structure.

The frame structure, incidentally, was evident in Arab literature of the era—most notably seminal versions of *The 1001 Arabian Nights*—though it was probably of Indian origin.<sup>339</sup> Whether Boccaccio was aware of *The 1001 Arabian Nights* is uncertain. However, Boccaccio is known to have been influenced by Dante's *Divine Comedy*,<sup>340</sup> Ambrose's *Hexaemeron*,<sup>341</sup> Apuleius,<sup>342</sup> and *The Panchatantra*,<sup>343</sup> the last being a collection of Indian stories originally written in Sanskrit, and arguably the first use of the frame structure. Given this eclectic range of influences, and given extensive Arab influence in Europe at the time, a *1001 Arabian Nights* influence is plausible.

The second similarity is in content. Some of the tales in both sets have a bawdy element. Others in both sets satirise the clergy. They derive their comedy, in part, from mocking those in authority.

The third similarity is that both have a symbolic element. The symbolic elements of Chaucer's tales are discussed in subsequent chapters. As for *The Decameron*, the overall structure appears symbolic. The seven female protagonists may stand for the

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<sup>339</sup> Katharine S. Gittes, 'The Canterbury Tales and the Arabic Frame Tradition', *PMLA*, 98 (1983), 237–251 (p. 237).

<sup>340</sup> Robert Hollander, 'Boccaccio's Dante', *Italica*, 63 (1986), 278–289 (p. 278).

<sup>341</sup> Susanna Barsella, 'Work in Boccaccio's *Decameron*: Politics, Theology, and the Images of the Countryside', *Romance Quarterly*, 54 (2007), 231–253(p. 247).

<sup>342</sup> Martin G. Eisner and Marc D. Schachter, 'Libido Sciendi: Apuleius, Boccaccio, and the Study of the History of Sexuality', *PMLA*, 124 (2009), 817–837(p. 817).

<sup>343</sup> Stanley Rice, *Ancient Indian Fables and Stories* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), p. 10.

Four Cardinal Virtues (Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude) coupled with the Three Theological Virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity). Meanwhile, the three male protagonists may stand for the three elements of the soul (Reason, Spirit, and Lust), as discussed by Plato in Book IV of *The Republic*.<sup>344</sup>

Of course, neither Boccaccio nor Chaucer used their source material verbatim. Each updated and modified it to cater for their audiences and to make their points. And here lie differences between Boccaccio and Chaucer. Some two-thirds of the stories in *The Decameron* are erotic in one way or another. This is a higher proportion than in *The Canterbury Tales*. However, although *The Decameron* is on occasion extremely bawdy—as in, for example, the tale of Masetto (3. 1), a labourer who succeeds in servicing a complete nunnery—*The Canterbury Tales*, when they deal with sexual matters, which is often, are arguably more erotic. This is because they are more sophisticated. Boccaccio's audience appears to be women (he continually addresses his audience as “ladies”), and he is concerned mainly with showing how women are either used by men or how they cheat men.<sup>345</sup> The society in *The Decameron* is thus one that is organised around women. This is not true of *The Canterbury Tales*. Although Chaucer's women lie and cheat just as Boccaccio's do, the tales provide a broader narrative. They do so by providing four different worldviews: that of the military (e.g., *The Knight's Tale*), that of the clergy (e.g., *The Nun's Priest's Tale*), that of women (e.g., *The Wife of Bath's Tale*), and that of the commoners (e.g., *The Miller's Tale*). It is because of the range of different viewpoints that *The Canterbury Tales* provides a “relativistic” or broader view of fourteenth century life than does *The Decameron*.

Llewellyn makes a similar point as regards Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* when comparing it to Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. He writes:

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<sup>344</sup> See Joan Ferrante, ‘The Frame Characters of the *Decameron*: A Progression of Virtues’, *Romance Philology*, 19 (1965), 212–226.

<sup>345</sup> Ian Frederick Moulton, ‘Boccaccio, Giovanni’, in Brulotte and Phillips, *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, pp. 147–149 (p. 148).

Chaucer's poem has been acclaimed for its depth of characterization (in sharp contrast to Boccaccio's original), but the poem is also interesting in its frank portrayal of the ideal of *fine amour*. As summarized by D. S. and L. E. Brewer, "*fine amour* may be said to be essentially (a) masculine, (b) sexual, (c) symbolic, (d) humble, (e) improving, and (f) private."<sup>346</sup>

It is because of this greater depth that Chaucer's work can be seen as more erotic than those of Boccaccio. The term *erotic* suggests sophistication (see Chapter one). *The Decameron*, for all its elegance, is closer to pornography. Phillips raises a related point. Chaucer, she says, is primarily concerned with love, and in being so is eclectic. His love encompasses "most elements of human love — desire, delight, obsession". Moreover, his discourses on literature, politics, and philosophy are "frequently conducted through consideration of the subjects of love and sexual relations".<sup>347</sup>

### **Chaucer's primary audience**

Scholars disagree as to the exact nature of Chaucer's audience.<sup>348</sup> There is the problem that, in determining *The Canterbury Tales*' audience, one knows neither the exact date nor Chaucer's process of composition. One also lacks physical evidence of the original circulating forms of Chaucer's works, and this means one does not directly know who was reading them in Chaucer's lifetime; neither does one know what their views on his poems were. One therefore has to rely on historical reconstruction, not on what one can verify empirically. Such difficulties are compounded because, of the extant pre-Caxton copies of *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, few identify their original owners.

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<sup>346</sup> Mark Llewellyn, 'Chaucer, Geoffrey', in Brulotte and Phillips, *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, pp. 225–227 (p. 226).

<sup>347</sup> Helen Phillips, 'Love' in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed., by Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 281–295, p. 281.

<sup>348</sup> Edmund Reiss, 'Chaucer and His Audience', *The Chaucer Review*, 14 (1980), 390–402 (p. 390).

There are eighty-three surviving pre-Caxton manuscripts (some only in part) of *The Canterbury Tales* and sixteen of *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>349</sup> The large number of surviving manuscripts, particularly of the *Tales*, suggests that greater numbers, possibly many hundreds, existed by the beginning of the fifteenth century. One cannot expect all, or even the majority, of pre-Caxton manuscripts to have survived.

Given that books at the beginning of the fifteenth century were very expensive, it is virtually certain that they were shared by households. It is also highly probable that they were read aloud to an audience. Indeed, the front piece of an early fifteenth century copy of *Troilus and Criseyde* depicts Chaucer reading to an audience (Plate 2. 1).<sup>350</sup>



Plate 2. 1. Cover of early fifteenth century manuscript of *Troilus and Criseyde*, (The Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 61, fol. 1b).

It is certain that Chaucer anticipated his audience to include members of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. This was in part because Chaucer was part of their

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<sup>349</sup> Benson, Larry, *the Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 1118.

<sup>350</sup> Saunders, 'Introduction', in Saunders, *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, pp. 1–12 (p. 12).



circle. It was also because, during the fourteenth and fifteenth century, only rich people could afford books. Being a member of the royal household, Chaucer must have been writing to “the lesser gentry—the knights, esquires, and women of equivalent rank, and especially those connected with the court”.<sup>351</sup> Much recent scholarship has demonstrated the likelihood that the “West minister-London audience of gentlepersons and clerks was at the heart of Chaucer’s public”.<sup>352</sup>

However, it would be a mistake to assume that Chaucer wrote only for a courtly audience. Chaucer’s audience changed over his lifetime. Most of his early poetry suggests that Chaucer’s purpose was to qualify common suppositions held by Richard II and influential members of his essentially French-speaking aristocratic inner circle, whose focus was on romantic enterprise. Chaucer’s early works are based largely on French models, especially *the Roman de la Rose* and the poems of Guillaume de Machaut. In 1366–1379, when he composed his short poems, Chaucer had been a member of the royal household with opportunities for direct contact with powerful figures. He was trying to reflect what a late fourteenth century English court audience expected from its poet. Possibly reflecting his oblique relationship to the courts of his day, Chaucer’s early poems tend to locate their narratives at the heart of courts and address the ethos and practice of courtly conduct. Thus *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame* and *the Parlement of Foules* explicitly locate their origins in courtly networks and occasions.<sup>353</sup> It is therefore possible that *The Book of the Duchess*, for instance, was meant to be read (or heard) by a specific audience—or even reader—on a specific occasion.

In the period 1381–1389 Chaucer lost his association with the royal circle, and had to look for a new audience. His later works in general speak to the entire community rather than to a person or a well-defined group on particular occasions. Thus *The*

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<sup>351</sup> Paul Strohm, ‘Chaucer audience’, *Literature and History*, 5 (1977), 26–41 (p. 31).

<sup>352</sup> Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 63.

<sup>353</sup> *The Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer’s first major work, is an elegy for Blanche of Lancaster who died in 1369 while the *House of Fame* is probably originated in some form of seasonal courtly game. *The Parlement of Foules* is usually interpreted as a reference to the wedding of Richard II and Anne or the betrothal of Philippa of Lancaster and John I of Portugal.

*Canterbury Tales*, in particular, reflect diverse social networks, and therefore suggest a more diverse audience. This brings Chaucer's audience in recent years to be thought of as being more socially diverse than the illustration in *Troilus* suggests.

### ***Medieval literacy***

The term *literate* might not have meant the same in the fourteenth century as it does today. Jo Ann Moran Cruz comments:

“Reading” a text might mean, as John of Salisbury put it, “the activity of teaching and being taught, or the occupation of studying written things by oneself”. In addition, “literate” meant something different in the twelfth century (literate in Latin) than it did in the fifteenth century (when it included French and English); nor was this the same thing as being “lettered” (having elementary knowledge of Latin). “Laicus” implied illiterate earlier in our period, even if “clericus” throughout the period did not necessarily imply a very high level of Latin learning.<sup>354</sup>

Latin was the language of European philosophical, theological, and legal discourse. The ability to read Latin in the Middle ages provided access to a vast range of authoritative documents, including the Bible.

In the early middle ages, Latin was used for legal and administrative affairs.<sup>355</sup> Medieval clergy, especially those with access to monastic libraries and scriptoria, were highly literate. Their main concern, as Paul Strohm argues, was with theological and ecclesiastical matter, and this was written mainly in Latin.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> Jo Ann H. Moran Cruz, ‘England: Education and society’, in *A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages*, ed., by Stephen Henry Rigby (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 451–471 (p. 466).

<sup>355</sup> Graham Pollard, ‘Thepecia system in the medieval universities’ in *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts and Libraries: Essays presented to N.R. Ker*, eds., by Malcolm Beckwith Parkes and Andrew G. Watson (London: Scolar Press, 1978), pp. 145–162.

<sup>356</sup> Paul Strohm, ‘The social and literary scene in England’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, eds., by Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 1–19 (p. 6).

The kings of England from Henry I (c. 1068–1135) onwards were instructed in Latin.<sup>357</sup> Literacy in Latin extended to the aristocracy during the reign of Henry II (1133–1189); discussion on intellectual matter became fashionable during this reign, particularly among members of court.<sup>358</sup> Twelfth century English kings were also literate in French.

Literacy in English emerged gradually. After the death of Edward I (1239–1307) the English government extended the use of English in oral and written forms; this “forced its subjects to participate in literacy”.<sup>359</sup> Strohm comments:

Though English was gradually coming to the fore, the last quarter of the century still saw Latin as the language of ecclesiastical and theological discourse, and French as the language of statecraft and civil record-keeping, as well as a literary language in some circles.<sup>360</sup>

By the end of the fourteenth century possibly as many as forty percent of the merchant classes were also literate.<sup>361</sup> Throughout the fifteenth century, literacy became common in artisans. By 1500, some ten to twenty-five percent of the population were literate. Jo Ann Moran Cruz comments:

[I]t is nonetheless clear that the educational accomplishments of medieval England were considerable and the expansion of literacy remarkable. Nearly every social class was involved, at some level, whether signing one's apprenticeship oath, managing an estate, making one's will, securing a deed, reading for devotional or recreational purposes, entering a religious order,

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<sup>357</sup> Michael Clanchy, ‘Literate and illiterate; hearing and seeing’, in *Literacy and Social Development in the West: A Reader*, ed., by Harvey Graff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 14–45 (p. 24).

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>359</sup> Charles Briggs, ‘Literacy, reading, and writing in the medieval West’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 26 (2000) 397–420 (p. 403).

<sup>360</sup> Paul Strohm, ‘The social and literary scene in England’, in Boitani and Mann, *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, pp. 1–19 (p. 5).

<sup>361</sup> Moran Cruz, ‘England: Education and society’, in Rigby, *A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 451–471 (p. 466).

seeking preferment at court or among the aristocracy, becoming a clerk or scrivener, or simply following a divine service.<sup>362</sup>

Works written in English began appearing in the middle of the fourteenth century.<sup>363</sup> By the end of the century, English was not only employed in areas traditionally reserved for Latin or French; it was also the language of first resort for a wide variety of writing.<sup>364</sup> This period saw a flowering of art and literature and growing interest in classical antiquity; this interest fuelled vernacular literacy and scholarship. Although formal education in medieval universities was still conducted in Latin, “home schooling, apprenticeships, and conventicles could and did instil a foundation of vernacular literacy”.<sup>365</sup>

The Black Death may have contributed to the rise in English literacy. With a vastly reduced population, labour was at a premium, so peasants could demand higher wages. This in turn facilitated the growth of the bourgeoisie. As indicated by Briggs, merchants needed to read; artisans needed to keep accounts, and so on—there was a growing need to read and write, and to write in one’s own language.<sup>366</sup> Moreover, the plague had killed, it is fair to assume, vast numbers of scribes literate in Latin. There may simply not have been enough people capable of writing everything in Latin—or, for that matter, French.<sup>367</sup>

Two further points are relevant. First, an emergent public interest in English literature provided a receptive milieu for Chaucer and those of his contemporaries who chose to write in English. Although the growth in vernacular literacy was

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Stephen Penn, ‘Literacy and literary production’, in *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed., by Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 113–129 (p. 115).

<sup>364</sup> Paul Strohm, ‘Writing and reading’, in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, eds., by Rosemary Horrox and W. mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 454 – 473 (p.461)

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., p. 469.

<sup>366</sup> Briggs, ‘Literacy, reading, and writing in the medieval West’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 26 (2000) 397–420 (p. 401).

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., p. 412.

gradual; as Penn argues, it placed Chaucer at a critical period in the development of literacy.<sup>368</sup> In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer points to the richness and fast growth of English, stating that (“ther is so gret diversite / In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge” (*Troilus and Criseyde*, V, 1793–1799). The passage acknowledges the diversity of English dialects and styles of writing. It also acknowledges that the poem could be read or “sung”. Chaucer makes a similar point at the end of *The Canterbury Tales*:

Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodness. (1081)

The passage indicates that Chaucer's work could be appreciated in several ways, and that his audience was broad.

Second, many of Chaucer's audience were highly educated. This is witnessed in the copious classical allusions in his works. Moreover, literati known to have been part of Chaucer's contemporary audience included Thomas Hoccleve (c. 1368–1426), who praised Chaucer no less than three times in his *Regiment of Princes* and John Lydgate (c. 1370–c. 1451), who praised him in his *Fall of Princes*. Chaucer's critical portrayal of the clergy (venal, lecherous) is in keeping with Lollard views at the time. Chaucer's audience may well have included a substantial number of John Wycliffe sympathisers, many of whom one can suppose were also well educated.<sup>369</sup>

### ***Chaucer's medieval audience***

Chaucer's intended audience need not have comprised only literate people. As indicated, books were read aloud for entertainment. Here, prowess in oratory was important. The front cover of *Troilus and Criseyde* (Plate 2. 1) bears witness to the

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<sup>368</sup> Penn, ‘Literacy and literary production’, in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, pp. 113–129 (p. 116).

<sup>369</sup> Saunders, ‘*The Knight's Tale*’, in Saunders, *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, pp. 452–475 (p. 453).

popularity of public reading. Moreover, as Penn argues, Chaucer's audience could have been more diverse than the cover of *Troilus and Criseyde* suggests—among other things, the picture is highly stylised.<sup>370</sup> Thus, many illiterate people of the period could have heard Chaucer's works, and Chaucer would have been aware of this.

Saunders points out that *The Canterbury Tales* covers the entire span of medieval life, including the middle classes (e.g., the Miller, the Shipman, the Reeve, the Merchant, the Wife of Bath, the Physician), the clergy (the Priest, the Nun's Priest), and the aristocracy (the Knight, the Squire).<sup>371</sup> The lower classes also figure in the stories, though, as Saunders admits, only the Cook is given a tale. This suggests that Chaucer intended his audience to include all sections of society. In consequence, his audience might easily have included many illiterate people, Strohm comments:

The task of determining the boundaries of Chaucer's contemporary audience is complicated by the fact that the circumstances of oral narration in Chaucer's day could have permitted people to hear his work without having the occasion (or perhaps even the ability) to read it.<sup>372</sup>

Despite such possible diversity, Chaucer's contemporary audience almost certainly included knights and esquires of the royal household, civil servants, and lawyers of in the London area.<sup>373</sup> The aristocracy represented a powerful group of consumers and producers of Chaucer's poetry, especially his romances. They, as Penn points

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<sup>370</sup> Penn, 'Literacy and literary production', in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, pp. 113–129 (p. 113).

<sup>371</sup> See John S. P. Tatlock, 'the Dates of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Legend of Good Women*', *Modern Philology*, 1 (1903), 317–329.

<sup>372</sup> Strohm, 'The social and literary scene in England', in Boitani and Mann, *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, pp. 1–19 (p. 5).

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

out, had many manuscript books in their home libraries.<sup>374</sup> This, however, does not mean that these manuscripts were exclusively accessible by the aristocracy.

A major aristocrat could have many residents in his or her household. Although such large households often included extended families (poorer people did not have extended family households), especially among the rich, they also included numerous servants. Such servants, in waiting on people during times of entertainment, may have been exposed to the stories. In addition, any illiterate guests at such meetings would have heard the stories. It is plausible that guests, including illiterate guests, at lesser households (e.g., merchants) would have been exposed to the stories.

One may also consider the cultural nexus in which Chaucer operated. As indicated, society was extremely unstable at the time when most of Chaucer's works were written. The royal household was no exception: "the late-medieval loyal court and aristocratic households were remarkably fluid bodies; they regularly shifted location and included an ever-changing assembly of high status men and women".<sup>375</sup> Not only did the social and economic changes allow for social mobility during the High Middle Ages, but also many stories, sexual ones in particular, were told publicly and circulated freely; the stories may have reached a critical takeoff point.

The clergy also read Chaucer. Anthony Edwards reports of a copy of *The Canterbury Tales* owned by (and possibly prepared by) an Augustinian religious house in Leicestershire. Curiously, the monks seem not to have been bothered by the bawdiness of *The Reeve's Tale*.<sup>376</sup> However, they objected to Symkyn's wife being brought up in a nunnery. They changed Chaucer's text to her being brought up in a dairy.

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<sup>374</sup> Penn, 'Literacy and literary production', in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, pp. 113–129 (p. 120).

<sup>375</sup> Nicola F. McDonald, 'Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Ladies at Court and the Female Reader', *The Chaucer Review*, 35 (2000), 22–42 (p. 26).

<sup>376</sup> Anthony S. G. Edwards, 'Manuscripts and Readers', in Brown, *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture c. 1350–c. 1500*, pp. 93–106 (pp. 99, 100).

That the clergy read the *Tales* is also witnessed by the popularity of the earlier Robert Manning's (c. 1275–c. 1338) *Handlyng Synne*, which was written in English. It was “a compendium of sixty-six colourful exempla: ghost stories, miracle tales, saints' legends, and other accounts of intrusions of the supernatural into everyday life”.<sup>377</sup> Besides being entertaining, and often scandalous (as regards the behaviour of the clergy), it was devotional, and was read by clergy and laity. It was read to provide instruction on how to deal with human folly and moral weakness. The work added “to the existing lessons for the lay audience in both exempla and commentary a layer of instruction to the priests who use his book”.<sup>378</sup> Thus, by the beginning of the fourteenth century, there was already a tradition among the clergy of reading scurrilous material written in English. Given this, it would have been remarkable if the clergy had not taken to reading Chaucer.

Just as Chaucer's audience crossed class boundaries, it also crossed gender boundaries. Women in the late fourteenth century secured their place in Chaucer's audience.

Richard Firth Green, in noting that, in England, women were not common at court until the end of the fourteenth century, indicates that Chaucer anticipated a mostly male audience.<sup>379</sup> Green further suggests that we have this to thank for *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*. He argues that the greater accessibility of the English court to women followed the popularity of the two tales. Thus:

If I am right that Kate's petition indicated that the English did not follow the French fashion of bringing their ladies to the court until the final years of fourteenth century, then perhaps we have in part this conservatism to thank for the legacy of the *Miller's* [Tale] and the *Reeve's* [Tale]. Chaucer was

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<sup>377</sup> Kate Greenspan, ‘Robert Mannyng of Brunne's Audiences for *Handlyng Synne*’, *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 21 (2005) 109–121 (p. 109).

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>379</sup> Green, ‘Women in Chaucer's Audience’, p. 149.



writing in an erotic culture that undoubtedly was shaped by predominantly male aura of the court in which it flourished.<sup>380</sup>

How far Green is correct is debatable. First, by Green's own admission, women were coming to court at the end of the fourteenth century, and the *Tales* were composed during this time. Second, the cover of *Troilus and Criseyde* (Plate 2. 1) shows women in Chaucer's audience. Third, although technically women in England were excluded from court by law, women were allowed in court to represent their husbands. Moreover, medieval high-class women had duties that would have crossed over to readings of Chaucer's works.<sup>381</sup> Such duties included being in charge of meals; keeping accounts; entertaining guests; and running a property when the husband was absent. Women might also manage defences, and indeed fight, in the event of their husbands being absent and their property (e.g., castles) attacked.<sup>382</sup> Thus, women were not cloistered away in high society medieval life. Fourth, we know of some medieval women who took extremely active roles. These included Matilda, granddaughter of William I; Eleanor of Aquitaine (c. 1122–1204), wife of Henry II; and Isabella of France (1295–1358), wife of Edward II.<sup>383</sup> Medieval theory may have had it that women were subservient to men, but medieval practice was more subtle.<sup>384</sup> In any event, women in upper class households were expected to be literate, and reading was not done solely at court.

For such reasons, authorities other than Green argue that Chaucer's audience included, and was intended to include, women.<sup>385</sup> Thus, for example, Nicola McDonald suggests that the "women in Chaucer's contemporary audience, the noble women of Ricardian court, were sophisticated readers accustomed to the conventions

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>381</sup> Forgem and McLean, *Daily Life in Chaucer's England*, pp. 37–39.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., pp. 37–39.

<sup>383</sup> For Isabella, see Ian Mortimer, *the Greatest Traitor: The Life of Sir Roger Mortimer, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of March, Ruler of England 1327–1330* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003).

<sup>384</sup> Forgem and McLean, *Daily life in Chaucer's England*, p. 37.

<sup>385</sup> Saunders, 'Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*', in Saunders, *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, pp. 452–475 (p. 453).

of debate poetry and the role-playing involved in courtly pastimes”<sup>386</sup> and that “the possibility that there were some women, albeit in rather small numbers and perhaps only occasionally, in Chaucer’s audience seems high”.<sup>387</sup>

Women in England were pervasively involved with textual culture, as audiences of sermons, romances, and devotional and liturgical literature; and as patrons of writers.<sup>388</sup> Moreover, some women commissioned texts. Chaucer’s *The Legend of Good Women* was written at Queen Anne of Bohemia’s (Richard II’s wife) request, for example; *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer refers explicitly to Queen Anne, incidentally.

Other high status women would have been part of Chaucer’s audience. It is believed that the front piece to *Troilus*, mentioned above, depicts Queen Anne, Joan of Kent, and Constance of Castile. Also, Queen Anne’s female attendants were a regular feature of court life. The Queen had numerous such attendants, whose business was to wait upon her and execute her orders. Indeed, Richard had so many women at court that “Richard II’s courtiers were accused once of being more knights of Venus than of Bellona, more vigorous in the bedroom than on the field of battle, armed with words rather than the lance”.<sup>389</sup>

One may also observe that Chaucer provided, both explicitly and implicitly, appeals to a female audience. Direct addresses to women, although less common than those to men, are not difficult to find in *The Canterbury Tales*. In *The Merchant’s Tale*, for instance, the Merchant states: “Ladyes, I prey yow that ye be nat wroth; / I kan nat

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<sup>386</sup> As discussed in Kara A. Doyle, ‘Thisbe out of Context: Chaucer’s Female Readers and the Findern Manuscript’, *The Chaucer Review*, 40 (2006), 231–261 (p. 231).

<sup>387</sup> Green, ‘Women in Chaucer’s Audience’, p. 150.

<sup>388</sup> Carol M. Meale points out that in late medieval ages ‘Women owned and shared books; they composed texts, although their authority to do so was hedged around by prejudice; they communicated by letter; they commissioned works of art, from manuscripts to architecture; and they participated in administration and commerce’. See Carol M. Meale, ‘Women’s Voices and Roles’, in *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture c. 1350 – c. 1500*, ed., by Peter Brown (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 74–90, p. 75.

<sup>389</sup> Thomas Walsingham, *Thomae Walsingham, quondam monachi S. Albani, Historia Anglicana*, ed., by Henry Thomas Riley, 2 vols (London: Longman, Green, 1863), vol. 2, p. 156.

glose, I am a rude man" (2350–2351). There is also a reference in *Troilus and Criseyde* to Criseyde reading romance to a group of women—evidence that points directly to female consumption of such narratives (II, 81–84), and it would be at least possible that the story-teller was responding to a desire felt by women in his audience. Although literacy was common in men and women, there were gender differences. Moran Cruz observes that, in the fourteenth century, women were more likely to read for pleasure than were men, but it was still men who did most of the writing.<sup>390</sup>

Chaucer considered the social aspects of poetry. In the *Prologue* of the *Legend of Good Women*, for instance, Chaucer stands accused by Cupid of slandering women and the pursuit of love. This is followed by a female guide and defence from Alceste, who gives Chaucer instructions to write stories of good women. It is unlikely that that Chaucer would have done this had he not intended his audience to include women. Chaucer seems to recognize that some of his audience, here represented by Cupid, will give a one-sided interpretation of his poetry. He uses a dream vision to create the impression of a close relationship between himself and the audience.

### **Conclusion**

Chaucer drew on diverse literary influences. These certainly included French *fabliaux*, medieval romances. The *fabliaux* and romances would have provided Chaucer with knowledge of genres. Ovid's poetry, and, despite claims to the contrary, Boccaccio. Ovid's poetry would have helped inform Chaucer of Greek and Roman mythology, as well as diverse erotic themes. Boccaccio would have informed Chaucer of the use of a frame. And would also have provided some plot outlines.

This is not to say that these were the only sources, for the sources themselves, particularly the romances, have multiple sources, including folklore. Chaucer may also have been influenced, directly or indirectly, by Islamic or even Far Eastern sources.

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<sup>390</sup> Moran Cruz, 'England: Education and society', in Rigby, *A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 451–471 (p. 466).

Chaucer's intended audience included, at minimum, the aristocracy, the clergy, the merchant classes, and the upper levels of the peasantry (franklins, reeves, millers, and so forth). It is likely that Chaucer expected the *Tales* to be read aloud on at least some occasions. In other words, Chaucer's contemporary audience could have been vast.

### CHAPTER THREE: CHAUCER'S *FABLIAUX* AND THE EROTIC

The purpose of the present chapter is to show that, although Chaucer adopts the *fabliaux* genre, he disrupts it, largely by extending its range of social comment and by incorporating elements of medieval romance into it. In this, the chapter demonstrates that Chaucer's *fabliaux* characters are, in some instances considerably more subtle than those of traditional *fabliaux* and Chaucer's use of symbolism is considerably more sophisticated.

Chaucer's *fabliaux* are more sophisticated than the French *fabliaux*. As is discussed below, Chaucer's *fabliaux* have ambiguities; and they explore darker themes. Chaucer's *fabliaux* also tend to be longer than their continental counterparts, and—especially in *The Merchant's Tale*—to have features more associated with romances—the use of classical allusions, for instance.

The four *fabliaux* selected for discussion have been selected because they are the only of his *Canterbury Tales* that are both erotic and complete. *The Friar's Tale* and *The Summoner's Tale* are not discussed because they deal with corruption more than the erotic, and *The Cook's Tale* is not discussed in depth because it is incomplete.<sup>391</sup> Like the French *fabliaux* (*The Knight who Made Cunts Talk* is an exception) the tales discussed in the present chapter are set in familiar settings—two are in England (*The Miller's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale*), one is in Italy (*The Merchant's Tale*), and one is in France (*The Shipman's Tale*)—and all are set in the fourteenth century.

#### **The Miller's Tale**

*The Miller's Tale* is the second of *The Canterbury Tales* in Fragment I and follows *The Knight's Tale*. *The Knight's Tale*, as indicated, is a story of courtly love. *The Miller's Tale* quites (is a reply to) *The Knight's Tale*. Both *The Knight's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale* concern two men in pursuit of the same woman. The former tale is “polite”; the latter “realistic”. The Miller himself, as described in *The General*

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<sup>391</sup> Pearsall, ‘*The Canterbury Tales* II: comedy’, in Boitani and Mann, *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, p. 174.

*Prologue*, is drunk, vulgar, and pugnacious. *The Miller's Tale* states, in effect, that courtly love is nonsense.

*The Miller's Tale* combines two elements common in sex comedy. The first concerns an old man (*senex amans*), John, who foolishly marries a young woman, Alison, and the young woman finds a way of cuckolding him. The second concerns the wife's lover, Nicholas, who, despite gaining his pleasure from the girl, gets his comeuppance—Nicholas is branded on the anus by his rival Absolon as a “reward” for fornication. It also mixes genres. As is explained below, it combines elements of romance and *fabliau*, though the *fabliau* elements are the more immediately salient. Thus, it does not deal with love so much as lust. Commenting on this, Louise M. Sylvester states that *The Miller's Tale* “brings into focus the coexistence of romance [chivalry] . . . and fabliau [lust] . . . . [The] Fabliau [*sic*] appears to undo the connection, carefully sustained in romance, between love and sexual desire”.<sup>392</sup> She states that *The Miller's Tale* “brings into focus the coexistence of romance [chivalry] . . . and fabliau [lust] . . . . [The] Fabliau [*sic*] appears to undo the connection, carefully sustained in romance, between love and sexual desire”.<sup>393</sup>

The tale differs from traditional *fabliaux* in other ways. Michael Delahoyde argues that, unlike French *fabliaux*, *The Miller's Tale*, particularly in Alison, has sympathetic characters; characters in French *fabliaux*, by contrast, tend to be figures only of fun.<sup>394</sup> This humanity, as is discussed below, is also found in *The Merchant's Tale*.

For all this, *The Miller's Tale* is unabashed in its sensuality. Alfred David states that in it “Sex is frankly presented as the supreme physical pleasure, a natural satisfaction like food and drink”.<sup>395</sup> David further comments that, through the characters of *The*

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<sup>392</sup> Louise M. Sylvester, *Medieval Romance and the Construction of Heterosexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 135.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>394</sup> Michael Delahoyde, ‘The Plan of *the Canterbury Tales*’, in *Online Chaucer* (Washington State University, 2004) < <http://www.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/chaucer/CTplan.html> > [accessed 15 September 2011]

<sup>395</sup> Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 95.

*Miller's Tale*, Chaucer provides characters who maintain different aspects of human sexuality. David calls this attitude “the religion of love”; it ignores sexual restrictions imposed by the Church and creates its own moral justification by “celebrating the joy of life”.<sup>396</sup>

### ***Provenance***

Carol Heffernan argues that no single source unambiguously provides the outlines of *the Miller's Tale*, but that *The Decameron* (3. 4) provides a clear influence.<sup>397</sup> Both tales involve the wife's complicity in deceiving her husband. Both also involve a sophisticated lover using the husband's religion and credulity in order to obtain illicit sexual liaison. Both involve ridiculous claims to impress the husband. However, the three essential elements: the misplaced kiss, the Second Flood, and the hot coulter (the “knife-like” part of a plough) are present in the fourteenth century Flemish *fabliau*, *Dits van Heilen van Beersele*. This has led some scholars to speculate that there may have been an earlier French *fabliau* from which Chaucer derived the tale.<sup>398</sup> Also, Heffernan points to two Italian works, the first from the fifteenth century, the second from the sixteenth. The first contains the misplaced kiss and the red-hot coulter; the second contains the Second Flood; these again suggest the possibility of lost French *fabliaux* that Chaucer reworked. Finally, Heffernan points to a fifteenth century piece by Hans Folz that includes the misplaced kiss. In short, there are many extant works that use one or more elements of *The Miller's Tale*, and it is plausible that, in the late fourteenth century, there were more. Thus it is probable that Chaucer drew on *fabliaux* and *The Decameron* (3. 4) when writing it. Chaucer added erotic subtleties and depth to the story.

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>397</sup> Heffernan, ‘Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and *Reeve's Tale*’, p. 318.

<sup>398</sup> Stith Thompson, ‘*The Miller's Tale*’, in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed., by William F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 106–123( p. 106).

***Metaphor, imagery, and characterisation***

Absolon is named after the biblical Absolon, who, as Chaucer's medieval audience would be aware, accidentally kills himself when riding a mule; his head gets caught in the branches of a tree under which he is riding (2 Samuel 18: 9)—a mishap plausibly caused by pride. Chaucer's Absolon is similar. This is witnessed by the Miller's introduction of him:

Crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon,  
And strouted as a fanne large and brode;  
Ful streight and evene lay his joly shode.  
His rode was reed, his eyen greye as goos.  
With *Poules wyndow* corven on his *shoos*,  
In hoses rede he wente fetisly.  
Yclad he was ful smal and properly (*The Miller's Tale*, 3314–3320)

The reference to St Paul's window (3318) pertains to the saint's escape from the Jews in Damascus. This, almost certainly, is not to illustrate Absolon's piety; rather, it is to illustrate his lasciviousness. In the biblical story, in effecting his escape, Paul climbs through a window (2 Corinthians 11: 32–33). Open windows, as indicated in Chapter one, in High Middle Age and Renaissance Europe, were regarded as sexual symbols. Ironically, in the tale, Absolon is humiliated through an open window.

Louise M. Bishop states of *The Miller's Tale*:

Holes show up everywhere in the Tale's details, from architectural holes—windows (l.3694, l.3708) and doors (l.3432)—to the cat hole John's servant uses to spy on Nicholas (l.3440–41). Clothes have holes: the windows on Absolon's shoes (l.3318), the gores in Alisoun's apron (l.3237). And bodies have holes: the lover's kissing mouths (l.3305); Alison's singing mouth, sweetened with cardamom and licorice (l.3690); Alison's kissed anus (l.3734) and Nicholas's burned one (l.3812). These orifices are confused: cat



holes become peep holes, windows become doors, mouths become anuses and anuses become wounds.<sup>399</sup>

The idea that the reference to St Paul's window is sexual is reinforced by the consideration that Absolon has the image portrayed on his shoes. Such shoes were termed *calcei fenestrati*. Chaucer's audience would almost certainly have visualised such ornate shoes as *poulaines*. That they were *poulaines* is a conclusion made, in the 1940s, by Leslie Whitbread.<sup>400</sup> Whitbread argues that Absolon's shoes were phallic.

Whitbread's point is highly plausible. Roberta Gilchrist observes that, among the fourteenth century middle and upper classes, male sexuality was expressed by *poulaines*,<sup>401</sup> and that this reflected a widespread belief that the size of the penis was correlated with the size of the feet.<sup>402</sup> Moreover, *poulaines* were often lavishly decorated, as were Absolon's shoes.<sup>403</sup> Finally, although *poulaines* were briefly fashionable during the twelfth century, they returned to fashion from the 1370s onwards—that is, shortly before Chaucer was writing *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>404</sup> It therefore seems most unlikely that Chaucer's audience would not have pictured Absolon's shoes as *poulaines*.

Absolon uses medieval Biblical imagery to describe Alison. When he woos her, he uses a food/bird metaphor: "What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun, / My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome? (3698–3699). Absolon's wooing uses imagery akin to that of the *Song of Songs*:

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<sup>399</sup> Louise M. Bishop, "'Of Goddes Pryvetee nor of His Wyf': Confusion of Orifices in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 44 (2002), 231–246 (pp. 238–39).

<sup>400</sup> Whitbread, 'Two Chaucer Allusions', p. 158.

<sup>401</sup> Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course*, p. 103.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, pp, 102, 103.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, pp, 103, 105.

Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under thy tongue.... Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits; camphire, with spikenard, Spikenard and saffron; calamus and cinnamon, (4: 11, 13, 14)

However, this is a parody of courtly love, for Absolon precedes the passage with details of bodily functions (perspiring and eating):

That for youre love I swete ther I go.  
No wonder is thogh that I swelte and swete;  
I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.  
Ywis, lemman, I have swich love-longynge  
That lik a turtel trewe is my moornynge.  
I may nat ete na moore than a mayde". (*The Miller's Tale*, 3702–3707)

Unlike the ideal knights of courtly love, Absolon is a sexual predator. The Miller says of him:

In al the toun nas brewhous ne tavern  
That he ne visited with his solas,  
Ther any gaylard tappestere was.  
But sooth to seyn, he was somdeel squaymous  
Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous. (*The Miller's Tale*, 3334–3338)

Absolon gets his entertainment (*solas*) from barmaids (*gaylard tappestere*), and any barmaid will do. He is squeamish about scatological humour. It is easy for us to imagine him "going on the prowl", and that he hunts for Alison.

She was so propre and sweete and likerous.  
I dar wel seyn, if she hadde been a mous,  
And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon. (*The Miller's Tale*, 3345–3347)

The metaphor of Absolon being the cat (the predator) and Alison the mouse (the prey) is possibly a *double entendre*. We have seen in *The Mouse in the Basket* that the mouse in the story is treated as a vagina.

When Absolon dreams of Alison, he conflates food with sex:

My mouth hath icched al this longe day;  
That is a signe of kissyng atte leeste.  
Al nyght me mette eek I was at a feeste. (*The Miller's Tale*, 3682–3684)

That Absolon is primarily interested in sex is illustrated by his courtship of Alison. Before visiting her, he beautifies himself:

Up rist this joly lovee Absolon,  
And hym arraieth gay, at poynt-devys.  
But first *he cheweth greyn and lycorys*,  
To smellen sweete, er he hadde kembd his heer.  
Under his tonge a *trewelove he beer* (*The Miller's Tale*, 3688–3692;  
emphases added)

Greyn is cardamom; Absolon, like Nicholas, does not appear to have scruples about using aphrodisiacs. The “trewelove” he places under his tongue is the herb Paris. In medieval times, this had associations with love—bringing faithfulness, for instance, because of its resemblance to a love knot, or transient love, because all herbs are transient.<sup>405</sup> Herb Paris was believed to enhance fidelity because of its similarity to a truelove knot. Against this, medieval folk wisdom had it that herbs symbolised the transience of love: herbs fade and die (just as Absolon's love will fade and die).

The herb also had religious associations, because typically its four leaves form a cross.<sup>406</sup> Absolon seems to be planning to break his vows of chastity and, in doing so, to defile Christ. This, of course, accords with his misuse of St Paul's window.

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<sup>405</sup> Susanna Greir Fein, ‘Why Did Absolon Put a “Trewelove” under His Tongue? Herb Paris as a Healing “Grace” in Middle English Literature’, *The Chaucer Review*, 25 (1991), 302–317 (pp. 302, 303).

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 302, 303.

Absolon uses food and alcohol in his attempt to win Alison. He sends her hot wafers, wine, mead, and spiced ale.

And swoor he wolde been hir owene page;  
He syngeth, brokkyng as a nyghtyngale;  
He sente hire *pymment, meeth, and spiced ale*,  
And wafres, pipyng hoot out of the gleede;  
And, for she was of towne, he profred meede; (*The Miller's Tale*, 3376–  
3380; emphases added)

Thus Chaucer provides a variety of images that show that Absolon is licentious (the shoes, St Paul's window, the use of herbs and spices), is predatory (the cat and mouse analogy), is dandyish, and is vain (his biblical analogue). He is absorbed in his own attractiveness. Like the biblical Absolon, his vanity leads to his humiliation. Although Absolon uses the techniques of courtly love—he sings to Alison, he goes on his knees to her, he gives her gifts—he is unknightly. He is a parody of the traditional knight of romance.

Alison deviates from the *fabliaux* tradition. Sylvester argues that Absolon, Nicholas, and John are figures of fun but that she is not. Sylvester suggests that Alison deserves our sympathy. He observes that, although Alison is adulterous, Chaucer fails to condemn her. Sylvester comments, "This is another departure from the Old French fabliau model, where women receive condemnation both through plot devices and in frequent misogynous morals".<sup>407</sup> In this regard she anticipates the feminism of the Wife of Bath. The main difference between the two is that the Wife appears unabashed in her sexuality, but Alison conducts her affairs in secret.

Alison is described in suggestive detail. The Miller likens her to a pear tree:

She was ful moore blisful on to see  
Than is the newe pere-jonette tree,  
And softer than the wolle is of a wether.

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<sup>407</sup> Sylvester, *Medieval Romance and the Construction of Heterosexuality*, p. 137.

And by hir girdel heeng a purs of lether,  
Tasseled with silk and perled with latoun. (*The Miller's Tale*, 3247–3251)

The Miller also comments on how Alison's apron ("A barmcloth as whit as morne milk", 3236) hangs around her loins, and refers to her "likerous ye", 3244). She is a flirt. She is awash with silk and pearls. Peter Brown argues that Chaucer uses this description to represent Alison as a woman promising sexual gratification, and that Chaucer emphasises the seductive and attractive nature of her lavish dress. Brown comments:

The fact that Alisoun is dressed in remarkable clothes lends a considerable sense of enticement and allure to her appearance . . . . Sensuous as the idea of silk may be, attire is also used to provoke interest in the female body beneath it.<sup>408</sup>

In this regard, Barbara Baert argues that "Textiles can be wrapped around the body. In their draping, they model the human body as a second skin".<sup>409</sup> Clothing in the fourteenth century may be erotic in that it may enhance the bodily contours that lie beneath; thus, clothing may arouse both the perceiver and the perceived. The tactile qualities of clothes are also relevant: silk and velvet, for instance, are more sensual than wool and hessian (in *The Clerk's Tale*, Griselda—a saintly woman—dresses in wool).

Alison is identified with sweet or savoury food, as in "Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth" (3261), a "calf folwyng his dame" (3260), and a "hoord of apples leyd in hey or heath" (3262). Such images suggest that she is something to be eaten—there appear similarities between Alison and the food that Chaucer's audience would have had laid on their tables. Both are consumed, and both gratify desire: the maintenance of life in the case of food, and the fulfilment of sexual desire

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<sup>408</sup> Peter Brown, *Chaucer at Work: the Making of the Canterbury Tales* (London: Longman, 1994), p. 86.

<sup>409</sup> Barbara Baert, 'Dressing', in *Weaving, Veiling and Dressing: Textiles and their Metaphors in the Late Middle Ages*, ed., by Kathryn M. Rudy and Barbara Baert (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2007), pp. 241–245 (p. 241).

in the case of Alison. The description of Alison combines the pleasures of the table (food, especially fruit and meat) and the flesh.

The considerations that Alison is repeatedly associated with food items, that food items are metaphors for sex, and that she is treated as a sex object make even more sense when one takes into account that, traditionally, men are the hunters. Absolon, as indicated, is a hunter.

Alison is likened to flowers, and is said to be capable of being bedded by any lord: "She was a prymerole [primrose], a piggesnye [pig's eye] / For any lord to leggen in his bedde" (3269–3270); these images suggest that she is lustful and attractive, but that she is also a woman whom men may use to gratify their lust. Alison is, as Alcuin Blamires puts it, "a physical sex-object suited for male consumption or handling" and a woman who has "no sense of what she does in the workaday life of which the reader catches one glimpse".<sup>410</sup>

Yet for all the typical females erotic imagery (flowers, birds, spices . . .), Alison is also described in phallic terms. Chaucer tells us she is "Long as a mast, and upright as a [cross-bow] bolt. / A brooch she baar upon hir lowe coler, / as brood as is the boos of a bokeler" (3264–3266). This may be seen as an inversion of romance traditions, in which only the men are martial and the women are invariably "flower-like". It also appears a contrast with Absolon ("Crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon," 3313–3314). Alison wields power over Absolon. She tricks him, as well as tricking her husband.

Nicholas is introduced as awash with sexual symbols.

Ful fetisly ydight with herbes swoote;  
And he hymself as sweete as is the roote  
Of lycorys or any cetewale (*The Miller's Tale*, 3205–3207)

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<sup>410</sup>Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 53, 54.

Ceteale (today, zedoary) is a sex stimulant spice akin to ginger—that is, an aphrodisiac. But there is more to Nicholas than this. He is repeatedly deemed “clever Nicholas” (e.g., 3256, 3462). He is calculating:

Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasye  
Was turned for to lerne astrologye,  
And koude a certeyn of conclusiouns,  
To demen by interrogaciouns, (*The Miller's Tale*, 3191–3194)

And he is sly and deceitful:

Of deerne love he koude and of solas;  
And therto he was sleigh and ful privee,  
And lyk a mayden meke for to see. (*The Miller's Tale*, 3200–3202)

This slyness is illustrated by his feigned sickness when wooing Alison. It is also illustrated by the language of the tale. Robert E. Lewis notes that Chaucer uses the word *hende* eleven times when describing Nicholas.<sup>411</sup> (Lewis, however, may have got his sums wrong: the phrase *hende Nicholas* appears only ten times in the tale—3199, 3272, 3386, 3397, 3401, 3462, 3487, 3526, 3742, and 3832—though Lewis's point is sound.) Moreover, the word *hende* does not appear outside of the context of Nicholas. Lewis further observes that the term *hende*, in medieval times, had diverse meanings: these ranged from its original meaning (“near, close by, handy”), to “courteous, gracious, refined, gentle” and, most often, “skilled, clever, crafty”. Lewis then observes that

Chaucer plays with all of these meanings in “*The Miller's Tale*,” since Nicholas is by turns “Near, close by, handy,” “Skilled, clever, crafty,” “courteous, gracious, refined, gentle” (at least as the Miller sees it), and even “Ready or skilful with the hand”, a possible transferred meaning.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> Lewis, “The English Fabliau Tradition and Chaucer's “*Miller's Tale*”, p. 253.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*

Lewis's phase *transferred meaning* suggests that Nicholas is skilful at sexual foreplay.

The Miller states that Nicholas waits for the best chance to seduce Alison, namely while her husband is away. While Alison is alone, Nicholas without hesitation proceeds to make a sexual overture.

And prively he caughte hire by the queynte,  
And seyde, "Ywis, but if ich have my wille,  
For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille. "  
And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones,  
And seyde, "Lemman, love me al atones,  
Or I wol dyen, also God me save!" (*The Miller's Tale*, 168–173)

The suddenness of this sexual assault suggests Nicholas cares little for Alison's feelings, and that his primary motivation is lust. Alison at first declines, though this may be merely "keeping up appearances", for she has willingly made herself prey to seduction. This impression is reinforced when Alison is easily won over by Nicholas.

So, there is sexual symbolism in the depictions of Absolon, Alison, and Nicholas. But the three characters are different. Absolon is a self-obsessed dandy, Alison is a sex object, and Nicholas is a schemer.

In contrast, sexual imagery is lacking in descriptions of John. The main references of him, both by the Miller and in John's reported speech, testify instead to his religiosity. Thus, the Miller says: "Fil with this yonge wyf to rage and pleye, / Whil that hir housbonde was at Oseneye" (3273–3274). This Oseneye was Osney Abbey, near Oxford. John's speech is peppered with religious references. Thus:

He saugh nat that. But yet, by Seint Thomas,  
Me reweth soore of hende Nicholas.  
He shal be rated of his studyng,  
If that I may, by Jhesus, hevene kyng (*The Miller's Tale*, 3461–3464)

However, like Nicholas and Absolon, John is sex-obsessed:



Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage,  
For she was wylde and yong, and he was old  
And demed hymself been lik a cokewold.

He knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude, (*The Miller's Tale*, 3224–3227)

John's stupidity (3227), which is in sharp contrast to Nicholas's learning and craftiness, provides Nicholas with sexual access to his Alison. This easy sexual access is enabled by the genre of the *fabliau*. By contrast, sexual access is difficult to impossible in medieval romances.

Sexual metaphors are not confined to characterisation. They also further the plot. First, we hear of Nicholas and Alison love making in John's bed:

And thus lith Alison and Nicholas,  
bisynesse of myrthe and of solas,  
Til that the belle of laudes gan to ryng,  
And freres in the chauncel gonne syng. (*The Miller's Tale*, 3653–3656).

One may make three observations on the passage. First, the juxtaposition of ringing bells with lovers in bed is suggestive of orgasm and sexual love. Beryl Rowland observes that "Bells were associated with sexual love in medieval amulets. Sometimes the amulets represented a phallus, on which bridle and bells were hung on which a female was riding".<sup>413</sup> Second, lauds in medieval England signalled the first hour of church service each day; this suggests that Nicholas and Alison had been lovemaking throughout the night. Third, the passage has a subversive element; the suggestion of friars singing to the lovers' ecstasy rests unhappily with medieval notions of clerical purity.

Another instance of sexual metaphor being used to further the plot and the one that seems to capture the spirit of Chaucer's subversiveness is the brief description of Absolon setting under Alison's window.

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<sup>413</sup> Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beast: Chaucer Animal World* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1971), p. 115.

This Absolon doun sette hym on his knees  
And seyde, "I am a *lord* at alle degrees;  
For after this I hope ther cometh moore.  
Lemman, thy grace, and sweete bryd, thyn oore!" (*The Miller's Tale*, 3723–  
3726; emphasis added)

Absolon's kneeling while begging Alison for love accords with courtly love tradition. However, his reference to himself as a "lord" does not. Again, there is parody of courtly love.

Absolon "gan wype his mouth ful driethe" (3730), in preparation to receive the "kiss". Alison's response to this contrasts with Absolon's courtship. In a suggestion of debauchery, she opens the window. Then she sticks her "hole" out:

And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,  
And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,  
But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers (*The Miller's Tale*, 3732–3734)

Absolon kisses Alison's "hole", mistaking her buttocks for soft cheeks and her "hole" for a mouth. Realising that he kissed Alison's "hole", Absolon responds with a hysterical cleansing and scrubbing of his mouth:

Who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes  
With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes, (*The Miller's Tale*, 3747–3748)

One would normally expect Absolon to use water to clean his mouth, but here he does not; he uses dust, sand, and woods. This emphasises Absolon's disgust at what he has just done, but it may serve another function. There is a general lack of water in *The Miller's Tale*. There is no water for Nicholas to soothe his pain; there is no water to break John's fall; there is no water for Absolon to cleanse his mouth. This contrasts with John's expectations—he expects the Flood to come; he expects it to cleanse the world of sin. He is left, not with removal of sin, but with sordidness.

Absolon's kissing of Alison's anus cures him of his desire for her ("Of paramours he sette nat a kers; / For he was heeled of his maladie"—3756–3757). The reference to Absolon's being "healed" of his sickness is another parody of courtly love. Normally, any healing of lovesickness involved getting sex. Absolon does not get sex; instead, he gets insulted.

Although his attempts at courtly love end here, Absolon nonetheless apes the hero of a romance. In a travesty of courtly tradition, he uses a coulter (a poker), not a sword, to wreak his revenge. He plans to burn Alison. Branding is a mark of ownership of animals and Alison is akin to a horse (she is a "colt"—3263). However, his plan misfires. Instead of branding Alison, he brands Nicholas. First, however, he receives a fart in his face.

This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart  
As greet as it had been a thonder-dent,  
That with the strook he was almoost yblent;  
And he was redy with his iren hoot,  
And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot. (*The Miller's Tale*, 3806–3810)

The use of a ploughshare to burn Nicholas has three aspects. First, a coulter is part of a plough, and the verb *to plough* may be used as a metaphor for coitus, as in *he ploughed her*. Second, ploughs are used in agriculture; thus there is an association with ploughing and grain, and grain, as indicated, was a medieval metaphor for sex. Third, the use of a red hot coulter is reminiscent of trial by ordeal. Traditionally, women accused of adultery were burned as a form of trial by ordeal. If the burns healed cleanly, the woman was deemed innocent; if not, she was deemed guilty.<sup>414</sup>

Nicholas's branding is also suggestive of anal "queer" intercourse. Allman and Hanks comment:

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<sup>414</sup> Margaret H. Kerr, Richard D. Forsyth and Michael J. Plyley, 'Cold Water and Hot Iron: Trial by Ordeal in England', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 22 (1992), 573–595 (p. 573).

Explicit and painful . . . is the punishment Nicholas suffers post-coitally. Perhaps one could argue that the climactic violence involving a hot coulter in the Miller's Tale is dissociated from the earlier erotic love of Alisoun and Nicholas. However, as both Martin Blum and David Lorenzo Boyd have recently argued, *hence* Nicholas becomes feminized by the final actions of the tale as he first puts himself in the position of receiving a kiss from a man, then suffers penetration with a hot coulter in a parody of homosexual rape. The earlier-feminized Absolon here asserts his masculinity in a sexually violent act characterized by penetration and the verb "smoot" (I 3810). We recall that he means this climactic penetration for the fair Alisoun, but misdirects his stroke just as he earlier misdirected his kiss. His intent, though, is violent penetration of a woman.<sup>415</sup>

Thus, there is poetic justice. Nicholas has just "ploughed" Alison; so he gets "ploughed".

The final image of the tale, that of Nicholas screaming for water and John waking up to see the whole village laughing at him, is apposite. The laughter is not necessarily fair. Human misfortune, and folly, is the foundation of comedy. The evocation of a sexual joke illustrates that medieval culture saw humour and sex as entwined.

*The Knight's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale* have structural similarities. In *The Miller's Tale*, Absolon vies with Nicholas for Alison; in *The Knight's Tale*, Palamon vies with Arcite for Emily. *The Miller's Tale* climaxes with a "battle" between Absolon and Nicholas; *The Knight's Tale* climaxes with a tournament between Palamon and Arcite. In neither tale does either male opponent emerge as a clear victor. In *The Miller's Tale* Absolon fails to win the lady, just as in *The Knight's Tale* Arcite fails. Nicholas's victory in *The Miller's Tale* is Pyrrhic—he "wins" Alison but only at the cost of a severe and painful burn—and Absolon "wins" nothing; instead, he is repeatedly humiliated. Similarly, there is a Pyrrhic element to Palamon's winning of Emily—he gains her only because Arcite accidentally dies, and even after this

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<sup>415</sup> Allman and Hanks, 'Rough Love: Notes toward an Erotics of *the Canterbury Tales*', p. 42.

Palamon has to wait years before gaining her. Moreover, Theseus seems to agree to the marriage grudgingly, and Emily shows no affection for Palamon. It appears, literally, a loveless marriage.

There are other parallels. Arcite's lovesickness in *The Knight's Tale* is mirrored by Nicholas's lovesickness in *The Miller's Tale*. Nicholas's lovesickness, however, makes a mockery of Arcite's because Nicholas's is feigned. This satirical element may be reinforced by the tales' differences. Emily lacks personality; Alison is full of it. Emily is a pawn fought over by her admirers; Alison is active in her affair with Nicholas and is complicit in Absolon's humiliation. Indeed, Alison is the only character in the tale to emerge well at the end of it—her husband is publically shamed, her lover is branded, and her would-be suitor is humiliated. The fighting in *The Knight's Tale*, for all its brutality, accords with noble tradition; but there is nothing noble in the machinations of Nicholas, Absolon, and Alison. Sexual behaviour is not described in *The Knight's Tale*; but it is graphically described in *The Miller's Tale*.

These parallels are a Chaucerian device to satirise the romantic traditions. *The Knight's Tale* shows an elevated, but unrealistic, ideal of love and *The Miller's Tale* shows love as it really is. *The Miller's Tale* appears *The Knight's Tale* retold in *fabliaux* format.

*The Miller's Tale* is often linked with *The Reeve's Tale*. The reason for this is that both are *fabliaux* and both employ sexual imagery and erotic humour. However, the tales are different. *The Miller's Tale*, while more sophisticated than French *fabliaux*, is nonetheless largely humorous and sexual, and is therefore within their tradition. *The Reeve's Tale*, beneath the slapstick, is more sinister.

### **The Reeve's Tale**

*The Reeve's Tale* directly follows *The Miller's Tale*. In telling it, the Reeve does not only quote *The Miller's Tale*; he also quotes the Miller. The Miller had made the unfortunate John in his story a carpenter. The prologue to *The Reeve's Tale* states that, although now a reeve (a land manager during the fourteenth century, generally

promoted from the peasantry), the Reeve, one Oswald, had previously been a carpenter. Accordingly, Oswald makes a miller, Symkyn, the butt of his humour.

The tale tells of two young students, Aleyn and John, who seek revenge on the thieving Symkyn by having sex with his wife and daughter, Malyne. Unlike Alison in *The Miller's Tale*, the wife and Malyne do not plan to have sex. The Reeve portrays Symkyn and his wife as proud and deceitful. The Reeve makes their debasement all the more complete by making the students brutal and of lower social status than the miller.

The tale can be viewed as anti-feminist. Neither Aleyn nor John have any feelings towards the wife or Malyne—rather, they treat the women merely as vehicles for executing their revenge. Similarly, Symkyn treats his wife and daughter as property—beings through whom he can increase his pride. The only figure in the tale for whom one feels sympathy is Malyne.

### ***Provenance***

The sources of *The Reeve's Tale* are clearer than those of *The Miller's Tale*. There are close parallels between *The Decameron* (9. 6) and *The Reeve's Tale*. Beidler notes that not only does Boccaccio's story use the "cradle switch"; it also has twelve elements that could well have influenced Chaucer:<sup>416</sup> (a) setting the stage; (b) distinguishing between the two young men; (c) making class distinctions; (d) letting the protagonists live relatively close to one another; (e) making the guests know of the host beforehand; (f) letting the daughter become emotionally attached to the guest who sleeps with her; (g) making the child an infant; (h) making the guests provide their own food; (i) making the guests retire to bed separately from their hosts; (j) making alcohol a key ingredient of the plot; (k) making the wife nearly make a mistake when returning to bed; and (l) making the wife key to the tale's climax. Re

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<sup>416</sup> Peter G. Beidler, 'The Reeve's Tale', in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales: Volume I*, eds., by Robert Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 23–74 (p. 26).

the penultimate point (point k), Boccaccio adds to the humour by making the wife say out loud "Alas! blunderer that I am, what was I about? God's faith! I was going straight to the guests' bed" (9. 6: 016).<sup>417</sup> Chaucer uses near identical words:

"Allas!" quod she, "I hadde almost mysgoon;  
I hadde almost goon to the clerkes bed. (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4218–4219)

Given this, and other similarities in the two stories, it is inconceivable that Chaucer did not use Boccaccio as a source. As Heffernan states, it suggests "that Chaucer was not merely depending on recollection of a tale read on an early trip to Italy but actually had a copy of *Decameron* 9. 6".<sup>418</sup>

Nonetheless, there are differences between Chaucer's tale and Boccaccio's. The young men in Boccaccio's tale are noblemen, not rude clerks (9. 6: 006). There is no theft of wheat in *The Decameron* (9. 6). Indeed, Boccaccio's version has the host an innkeeper, not a miller. More important, Boccaccio's tale is simply about lust, not revenge. Because of this, the denouement in *The Decameron* (9. 6) is different from that in Chaucer: in Boccaccio's version, when the wife hears the guest bragging to her husband that he has just slept with the daughter, the wife defuses the situation by jumping into the daughter's bed and claiming that she has been there all night; the guest therefore is just a braggart. As Heffernan comments, Boccaccio's version is "softer, funnier" than Chaucer's.<sup>419</sup>

Another difference concerns the characters. As indicated, Symkyn's and his wife are unpleasant. But Boccaccio's innkeeper and his wife are not:

In the plain of Mugnone there was not long ago a good man that furnished  
travellers with meat and drink for money, and, for that he was in poor  
circumstances, and had but a little house, gave not lodging to every comer,

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<sup>417</sup> Boccaccio, *The Decameron*. trans., by J. M. Rigg (London: The Navarre Society, 1921) <<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/decameron/engDecIndex.php>> [accessed 20 August 2011]

<sup>418</sup> Heffernan, *Comedy in Chaucer and Boccaccio*, p. 47.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

but only to a few that he knew, and if they were hard bested. Now the good man had to wife a very fine woman, and by her had two children, to wit, a pretty and winsome girl of some fifteen or sixteen summers, as yet unmarried, and a little boy, not yet one year old, whom the mother suckled at her own breast. (004–005)<sup>420</sup>

The innkeeper and his family are likeable, and the daughter is beautiful. In addition, Boccaccio paints one of his noblemen as having a long-standing infatuation with the daughter; thus, in his tale, the seduction of the daughter is planned; in Chaucer's version, by contrast, it is opportunistic.

There were several variants of *The Reeve's Tale* circulating in Europe before and after publication of both *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Decameron*. Two French texts, *Le meunier et les . II. clers*—a thirteenth century *fabliau* that clearly predates Boccaccio and Chaucer<sup>421</sup>—and Jean Bodel's *De Gombert et des deus clers*, a late twelfth century *fabliau*; there was also the fourteenth Flemish *Een bispel van . ij. clerken*, which appears a derivative of *De Gombert et des deus clers*, and two German analogues.<sup>422</sup> It is unlikely that Chaucer was familiar with the German *fabliaux* because there is no evidence that he ever visited Germany, nor that he spoke German;<sup>423</sup> however, it is plausible he was familiar with one, a combination of, or all of the French and Flemish *fabliaux*.

*Le meunier et les . II. clers* comes in two forms: A and B. Of the two, text A appears better written—indeed, text B appears slovenly. However, Beidler points out that text B contains elements lacking in text A that are found in *The Reeve's Tale*.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> Boccaccio, *The Decameron*. trans., by J. M. Rigg (London: The Navarre Society, 1921) <<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/decameron/engDecIndex.php>> [accessed 20 August 2011]

<sup>421</sup> Peter G. Beidler, 'the "Reeve's Tale" and Its Flemish Analogue', *The Chaucer Review*, 26 (1992), 283–292 (p. 283).

<sup>422</sup> Beidler, 'the Reeve's Tale' in Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, pp. 23, 24.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.



These include the miller's snoring, the theft of the grain, the students' use of sex for revenge, and the cradle. Also, unlike Boccaccio, they have a miller, not an innkeeper, as victim. However, Olson has pointed to similarities between *De Gombertet des deus clers* and *The Reeve's Tale* found in neither versions of *Le meunier et les . II. clers*<sup>425</sup> These include the daughter sleeping in a bed, a parent leaving in order to urinate, the silence of the baby, and the host's unawareness of being cuckolded. Because the Flemish *Een bispel van . ij. Clerken* derives from *De Gombertet des deus clers*, it is plausible that Chaucer used it as a source rather than the original French one. Beidler comes to this latter view, noting that the Flemish derivative not only contains all similarities noted by Olson; it also contains eight other plot elements of *The Reeve's Tale* absent in *De Gombertet des deus clers*.<sup>426</sup>

To conclude, it seems that Chaucer was aware of, at the least, both *The Decameron* (9. 6) and *Een bispel van . ij. clerken*; it is also likely that he was aware of text B of *Le meunier et les . II. clers*. It is also possible he was aware of other texts or had heard oral renditions of them popular during his day. It is thus plausible that Chaucer was aware of several similar, though simpler, *fabliaux*, and that he elaborated on them.

### ***Darkness and ambiguities***

*The Reeve's Tale* is subtle. Symkyn is an expert with knives—a possible allusion to the coulter in *The Miller's Tale*. In this, the context of *The Reeve's Tale* with the two tales that precede it is important. *The Knight's Tale* has the veneer of courtliness (see Chapter four); *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*, by contrast, have unambiguous earthy elements. Of the two *fabliaux*, however, *The Reeve's Tale* is arguably darker. Unlike Nicholas in *The Miller's Tale*, who uses Alison as a willing accomplice, Aleyn and John do not seduce. This is the key passage for Aleyn and Malyne:

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<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte.  
This wenche lay uprighte and faste slepte,  
Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,  
That it had been to late for to crie,  
And shortly for to seyn, they were aton.  
Now pley, Aleyn, for I wol speke of John (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4193–4198)

With no awareness of what is about to happen to her, Malyne wakes up, finds Aleyn in bed with her, cannot cry out (or is prevented from doing so?), and soon finds that Aleyn is free to “play” with her. Legally, today we would say Aleyn rapes Malyne. The male chauvinism and violence are illustrated not only by the tale, but also by the character of the Reeve.<sup>427</sup> The Reeve admits this: “His wyf is swyved, and his doghter als [. . . ] Thus have I quyrt the Millere in my tale” (4317–4324).

John's treatment of the miller's wife may also be regarded as rape:

Withinne a while this John the clerk up leep,  
And on this goode wyf he leith on soore.  
So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yoore;  
He priketh harde and depe as he were mad.  
This joly lyf han thise two clerkes lad  
Til that the thridde cok bigan to synge. (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4228–4233)

As with Malyne, the wife has no idea of what is about to happen to her. And though she seems “myrie” with the experience, we have no idea that she knows she is copulating with John, not her husband (indeed, from her behaviour in the morning, it seems she does not know); and the emphasis in the penultimate line of having a “joly lyf” is on Aleyn and John, not the women. Further, the language is savage (“leith on soore”; “priketh harde and depe as he were mad”). The language is also illustrative of the contempt with which the students view the women—”Yon wenche wil I

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<sup>427</sup> Hopkins, *Chaucer and the Fabliau*, p. 7.

swyve,” says Aleyne (4178), for instance; the use of “yon”, as Neil Cartlidge notes, is “rudely abrupt”, and the use of “swyve” is “deliberately inelegant”.<sup>428</sup>

As indicated, rape in the Middle Ages was seen more as a crime against property, Helen Phillips states:

In ancient and medieval society, legal, ethical and social attitudes towards rape saw it, to a considerable extent, as a theft, depriving a woman—and her men folk—of a possession in which honour, status and financial prospects resided. A virgin deflowered lost her worth in the marriage market—the student who leaps on Malyne in *the Reeve's Tale* has ruined the plan of her socially ambitious parents for an advantageous marriage for her. Rape of virgin was a more serious crime than rape of a married woman.<sup>429</sup>

In this regard, James Brundage observes, “Abduction and rape . . . remained a serious but not common crime; it does not appear nearly so frequently in civic court records as larceny, burglary, theft, or even homicide”.<sup>430</sup> Because medieval canon lawyers highlighted the notion of the woman as property while dealing with sexual crimes, some criteria such as the woman's status (virgin, married, or widow) and value (noble, laywomen, or servant) were more important than the woman's will and the degree of violence.

The link between theft and rape is made clear in Chaucer's *The Reeve's Tale*. Thus, William Woods points to violent themes throughout the tale.<sup>431</sup> The mill, argues Williams, is Symkyn's means of predation, and that Symkyn is operating what is, in effect, an extortion racket is emphasised both by the need for the students to bear arms when visiting the mill and by the manciple's toothache—a “wound” that, in

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<sup>428</sup> Neil Cartlidge, ‘Marriage, Sexuality and the Family’, in Saunders, *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, pp. 218–240 (p. 229).

<sup>429</sup> Helen Phillips, *An Introduction to The Canterbury Tales: Reading, Fiction, Context* (New York: ST. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 146.

<sup>430</sup> Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, p. 469.

<sup>431</sup> William F. Woods, *Chaucerian Spaces: Spatial Poetics in Chaucer's Opening Tales* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 72.

ensuring the manacle is absent, enables Symkyn to steal still more. Williams also points to the concatenation of the sexual and violent imagery of the mill in the tale—a concatenation, as Williams observes, that is also present in *The Knight's Tale* (see Chapter four).

Symkyn, again as Williams argues, is portrayed from the outset as a violent man. Thus, even on holy days and accompanied by his wife, Symkyn is so daunting that:

Was noon so hardy that wente by the weye  
That with hire dorste rage or ones pleye,  
But if he wolde be slayn of Symkyn  
With panade, or with knyf, or boidekyn. (*The Reeve's Tale*, 3957–3960)

Thus, Symkyn carries with him, at all times, what is in effect a sword (*panade*) and, for good measure, what is in effect a dagger. As Williams comments, “no one anywhere near Symkyn is safe”.<sup>432</sup> In this, Williams observes that, given that both Symkyn's sword and his dagger are phallic symbols, the punishment the students meet out to him is appropriate. During the fourteenth century, incidentally, it was fashionable for men to wear *ballock* daggers; these were daggers with phallically carved hilts, and were often worn swinging around the crotch area.<sup>433</sup> Ole-Magne Nøttveit describes them as epitomising “the ability to penetrate both physically and symbolically”.<sup>434</sup>

The concatenation of sex and violence continues when Aleyn and Symkyn fight:

They walwe as doon two pigges in a poke;  
And up they goon, and doun agayn anon (4278–4279)

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>433</sup> Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course*, p. 101.

<sup>434</sup> Ole-Magne Nøttveit, ‘The Kidney Dagger as a Symbol of Masculine Identity’, *Norwegian Archeological Review*, 39 (2006), 138–150 (p. 148).

The “up and down” motion suggests sex. The two men fight like pigs in a *sack*, a euphemism (today at least) for bed, a plausible medieval symbol for vagina (it is a container), and a possible *double entendre* (“poke” as in *sack* or “poke” as in *stab*).

Nonetheless, there are ambiguities. There is the implication that the wife enjoyed copulating with John more than she did with her husband (“So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yore” 4230), and when Aleyn leaves Malyne, she refers to him as her “lemman” (4240) (i.e., lover) and tells him how to find the bread:

Whan that thou wendest homward by the melle,  
Right at the entree of the dore bihynde  
Thou shalt a cake of half a busshel fynde  
That was ymaked of thyn owene mele,  
Which that I heelp my sire for to stele.  
And, goode lemman, God thee save and kepe!”  
And with that word almoost she gan to wepe. (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4242–4248)

In this regard, Woods argues that the women's enjoyment of their liaisons results from liberation from Symkyn's oppression.<sup>435</sup> Similarly, Blamires argues that, though the women are technically raped, Chaucer's intention was to ensure they enjoyed the experience—this to make more exquisite Symkyn's humiliation:

Although such an argument is hugely provocative in a twenty-first-century context, I would deduce that Chaucer wants us to envisage daughter and wife as at least part-collaborators in their own “theft”, and that in fact this is essential to increase the cumulative fabliau humiliation of Symkyn, a man who deserves to be derided with the title “patriarch” if ever anyone did.<sup>436</sup>

If the wives did enjoy their sexual adventures then, according to medieval tradition, Symkyn is the more aggrieved. Blamires argues that in the Middle Ages “rational” theft was seen as worse than “irrational” theft, with the former being of a conscious

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<sup>435</sup> Woods, *Chaucerian Spaces*, p. 54

<sup>436</sup> Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, & Gender*, p. 101.

thing and the latter of a non-conscious thing.<sup>437</sup> Thus adultery was seen both as a form of theft and as a worse form of theft than, say, theft of money, because it took away the woman's honour and that of her husband. In this regard, Woods argues that *The Reeve's Tale* concatenates sexual with economic warfare, with the miller stealing from his customers and his customers, in the form of John and Aleyn, repaying by cuckolding him and deflowering his daughter.<sup>438</sup> Thus, Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1230–1298) preached that an adulteress was guilty of “a greater theft than if she filched money from her husband and gave it to the adulterer”.<sup>439</sup> Taking a maiden's virginity outside of wedlock was an even more serious crime because it robbed a woman of her virtue.<sup>440</sup> Such attitudes prevailed throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>441</sup>

Punishments for adultery in medieval Europe included death, flogging, the pillory, and imprisonment.<sup>442</sup> The severity of such punishments suggests that people sympathised with the pain suffered by cuckolded husbands, and punished adultery accordingly. However, against this punishments for other crimes were similar. It is also unclear how much the sentences for adultery were carried out: by the fifteenth century, the authorities tended to favour reconciliation between partners, not punishing the adulterous one.<sup>443</sup>

There is another aspect of *The Reeve's Tale* that anticipates later work. Chaucer was arguably the first writer to use regional accents as a comic device. Thus, he reports of John:

“Symond,” quod John, “by God, nede has *na* peer.  
Hym boes serve hymself that has *na* swayn,

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid., pp. 99, 100.

<sup>438</sup> Woods, *Chaucerian Spaces*, p. 75.

<sup>439</sup> Quoted in Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, & Gender*, p. 100.

<sup>440</sup> Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, p. 395.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., pp. 394–398.

<sup>442</sup> Wolfthal, *In and out of the Marital Bed*, p. 165.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

Or elles he is a fool, as clerkes sayn.  
Oure manciple, I *hope* he wil be deed,  
*Swawerkes* ay the wanges in his heed;  
And forthy as I come, and eek Alayn,  
To grynde oure corn and carie it ham agayn;  
I pray yow spede us *heythen* that ye may.” (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4026–4033;  
emphases added)

As Epstein argues, the passage displays a dialect peculiar to the north east of England at the time.<sup>444</sup> *na* is used for *no*; *swa* is used for *so*; the third person present tense *werkes* is used for *werketh* (the usual form in southern England at the time); *heythen* is used for *hennes*. Also, John “hopes” the manciple will be dead. What John means is that he *fears* the man will be dead, but this use of *hope* was uncommon in southern England, which used the modern meaning of the word. In short, John and Aleyn are unsophisticated. This is not only humorous; it also reinforces the impression, through suggesting that John and Aleyn are ill-educated, that the students are not as good as they make themselves out to be. Their portrayal as fools is further illustrated in that they are repeatedly outwitted by the miller: first, he sees through their subterfuge of pretending to be interested in milling corn; second, he succeeds in getting them out of the way by letting loose their horse.

Nonetheless, it is the students who win in the end. To add to the humour, the Reeve ensures that the carpenter in the story is humiliated by northerners—people who may be regarded as of lower social status, as bumpkins. This linguistic joke is Chaucer's innovation and is much more subtle than is found in the *fabliau* tradition.

### ***Metaphor, imagery, and characterisation***

The most notable metaphor in the tale is use of the mill and the grinding of corn. As indicated (Chapter one), from ancient times through the present day, grinding corn

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<sup>444</sup> Robert Epstein, “‘Fer in the north; I kan nat telle where’: Dialect, Regionalism, and Philologism”, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 30 (2008), 95–124 (p. 100).

into flour has been a metaphor for the sexual act.<sup>445</sup> Baking, particularly of bread, has long served a similar purpose.<sup>446</sup> Thus, *The Reeve's Tale* employs a persistent *double entendre*. This is salient in Aleyn and John's response to the miller's question of why they wish to watch him grinding the corn:

“By God, right by the hopur wil I stande,”  
Quod John, “and se howgates the corn *gas* in.  
Yet saugh I nevere, by my fader kyn,  
How that the hopur wagges til and *fra*.”  
Aleyn answerde, “John, and wiltow *swa*?  
Thanne wil I be bynethe, by my croun,  
And se how that the mele falles down  
Into the trough; that sal be my disport.  
For John, y-faith, I may been of youre sort;  
I is as ille a millere as ar ye.” (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4036–4045; emphases added)<sup>447</sup>

As Delasanta argues, Chaucer uses the students' regional accent (italicised) in this passage to reinforce the sexual imagery that percolates the tale.<sup>448</sup> Also, as indicated, the use of regional accents suggests the clerks are of lower social status than the miller and his family; thus their sexual conquests and the humiliation of the miller are all the more humorous.

More important, the sexuality implicit in the passage is mechanical (as in, “How that the hopur wagges til and fra”, which suggests coitus). The milling process mirrors Aleyn's motivation behind his swyving Malyne is practical; it is to take revenge on her father. The same may be said of John's swyving of the wife; he is jealous of

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<sup>445</sup> Rodney Delasanta, ‘The Mill in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 36 (2002), 270–276 (p. 271).

<sup>446</sup> Beryl Rowland, ‘The Oven in Popular Metaphor from Hosea to the Present Day’, *American Speech*, 45 (1970), 215–222 (p. 215).

<sup>447</sup> Emphasis from Rodney Delasanta, ‘The Mill in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*’, p. 271.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.



Aleyn and fears Aleyn will call him a fool ("I sal been halde a daf, a cokenay!", 4208).

The nature of the students' revenge can also be seen in the light of the grain–sex metaphor. Aleyn says:

For, John," seyde he, "als evere moot I thryve,  
If that I may, yon wenche wil I swyve. (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4177–4178)

And Aleyn justifies this like so:

Oure corn is stoln, sothly, it is na nay,  
And we han had an il fit al this day;  
And syn I sal have neen amendement  
Agayn my los, I will have esement.  
By Goddes sale, it sal neen other bee!" (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4183–4187)

Without the grain–sex metaphor, it would be logical for Aleyn to seek redress by, say, taking some of Symkyn's money, his grain, or his bread. The obvious way to get "esement" is to have sex with Malyne. The term *esement* is legal; it pertains to legal access to another person's property. Conversely, had Symkyn merely stolen money, the plot of seeking revenge through having sex with his daughter would not have worked so well.

Chaucer deliciously combines the grain–sex metaphor with a horse–sex metaphor (horses are associated with male sexuality).<sup>449</sup> Thus when Bayard, the student's horse, escapes, the wife tells the students: "Allas! youre hors goth to the fen / With wilde mares, as faste as he may go" (4080–4081). Bayard, in an echo of the tale's theme, is chasing mares while the students are chasing women. As John Friedman puts it, "[Chaucer's] use of Bayard to open the action of the tale sets the moral tone for what is to follow and suggests that the narrative is to deal with the ungoverned

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<sup>449</sup> Woods, *Chaucerian Space*, p. 52

passion of man".<sup>450</sup> Therefore, the lustful actions of Bayard foreshadow the action taken by the students later in the bedroom. Immediately upon the students' chasing Bayard (John, incidentally, first telling Aleyn to lay down his sword, a phallic symbol, 4085–4086), the miller steals their grain ("He half a busshel of hir flour hath take, / And bad his wyf go knede it in a cake", 4093–4094). In other words, in losing their horse the students have "lost their oats" (but, of course, in time they capture Bayard, and so regain their manhood). Then, in the bedroom scene that follows, the clerks' behaviour, as Woods observes, is "horsey".<sup>451</sup>

*The Reeve's Tale* uses food as a metaphor for sex. Thus, at the beginning of the tale, Malyne's "thikke" (3973) body and "buttokes brode, and brestes rounde" (3975) suggest that, though a virgin, she is capable of enjoying food and thus sex. Moreover, as Karras argues, neither Aleyn nor John appears interested in the women's bodies or characters.<sup>452</sup> The students simply devour them.

The climax to the tale is preceded by an orgy of feasting and drinking. Lines 4136 through 4159 contain a cadence of sexual metaphors (food and drink), beds, animal behaviours, and sexual allusions. The lines start with Malyne going to fetch supplies:

This millere into toun his doghter sende  
 For *ale* and *breed*, and rosted hem a *goos*,  
 And boond hire *hors*, it sholde namoore go loos,  
 And in his owene chambre hem made a *bed*,  
 With *sheetes* and with *chalons* faire yspred  
 Noght from his owene *bed* ten foot or twelve.  
 His doghter hadde a *bed*, al by hirselve,  
 Right in the same chambre by and by (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4136–4143;  
 emphases added)

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<sup>450</sup> John Friedman, 'A Reading of Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 2 (1967), 9–18 (p. 11).

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

<sup>452</sup> Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, p. 152.

In these eight lines, Chaucer mentions two food items (*breed* and *goos*, the latter, also a sexual symbol—on the one hand, being a bird, it represents femininity; on the other, because of its long neck, it is phallic—and it is one that the protagonists devour), one alcohol item (*ale*), sheet and blankets, bed (three times), and a horse—this last a blatant sex symbol that the miller, hopelessly, tethers. Two lines later, the orgy resumes:

Wel hath this millere *vernysshed* his heed;  
Ful pale he was for *dronken*, and nat reed.  
He *yexeth*, and he *speketh thurgh the nose*  
As he were on the quakke, or on the pose.  
To *bedde* he goth, and with hym goth his wyf.  
As *any jay she light was and jolyf*,  
So was her *jolly whistle well wetted*.  
The cradel at hir *beddes* feet is set,  
To *rokken*, and to yeve the child to *sowke*.  
And whan that *dronken* al was in the crowke,  
To *bedde* wente the doghter right anon; (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4149–4159;  
emphases added)

This contains four references to drinking cum drunkenness (*vernysshed*, *dronken*, *any jay she light was and jolyf*, and another *dronken*), three references to bed, two allusions to, at best, uncouth behaviour (*yexeth* and *speketh thurgh the nose*), and three expressions with sexual overtones (*jolly whistle well wetted*, *rokken*, and *sowke*).

The aftermath to this, unsurprisingly, is that the miller's family are boorish:

This millere hath so wisely bibbed *ale*  
That as an *hors* he *fnorteth* in his sleep,  
Ne of his tayl bihynde he took no keep.  
His wyf bar hym a *burdon*, a *ful strong*;  
Men myghte hir *rowtyng* heere two furlong;

The *wencherowteth* eek, par compaignye. (*The Reeve's Tale*, 4162–4167; emphases added)

Here, the emphasis is on unseemly behaviour as a consequence of drinking (*ale*). The miller snores like a horse (*as an hors he fnorteth*), as do his wife and daughter. People can hear the din two furlongs away—that is, from a quarter of a mile.

The allusions to *mill*, *bread*, *baking*, *grinding*, *corn*, and the like serve another purpose: milling, and the grinding of corn, has also long been used as a metaphor for the apocalypse. Jeremiah's prediction of the imminent Babylonian captivity, for instance, goes like this:

And I will take away from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, *the sound of the mill* and the light of the lamp. And this land shall be a desolation and an astonishment: and all these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. (25: 10–11; emphasis added)<sup>453</sup>

Milling is associated with impending apocalypse, as Delasanta shows, not only in Jeremiah, but also in Exodus, Ecclesiasts, Revelations, and the Gospels of Luke and of Matthew.<sup>454</sup> And in the Book of Judges, Samson is put to “grind in the prison house” (16: 21) before he unleashes his wrath on the Philistines, by killing them (16: 30).

In *The Reeve's Tale*, we know that, because of the milling metaphor of imminent doom, Symkyn is about to meet his “Day of Judgment”.<sup>455</sup> And the judgment is harsh: he is cuckolded; his daughter is deflowered and therefore difficult to marry to a rich man; he is left dead or half-dead; and he is robbed.<sup>456</sup> In this regard, there is a

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<sup>453</sup> As cited in Delasanta, ‘The Mill in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*’, p. 273. Emphasis Delasanta's.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 273–274.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

further subtlety. As indicated, it is unclear whether the Symkyn is justly punished or whether the students are merely vigilantes using "justice" as an excuse for sex (rape?), theft, and violence. It is relevant here that Symkyn is proud. This, Chaucer makes plain at the start of the tale: "A millere was ther dwellynge many a day. / As any pecok he was proud and gay" (3925–3926).

Indeed, the Symkyn is so proud he will not let his daughter marry until she finds someone rich enough. And he is so proud he himself did not marry until he found an educated virgin.

Symkyn is also ugly:

Round was his face, and camus was his nose;

As piled as an ape was his skulle.

He was a market-betere atte fulle. (*The Reeve's Tale*, 3934 – 3936)

Moreover, as Amanda Hopkins argues, his reaction to Malyne's loss of virginity is selfish:<sup>457</sup> "Who dorste be so boold to disparage / My doghter, that is come of swich lynage?" (4271-4272). In other words, he appears to worry about her and thereby his loss of status.

His wife is little better:

And she was proud, and peert as is a pye (*The Reeve's Tale*, 3950)

And:

And eek, for she was somdel smoterlich,

She was as digne as water in a dich,

And ful of hoker and of bisemare (*The Reeve's Tale*, 3963–3965)

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<sup>457</sup> See Hopkins, *Chaucer and the Fabliau*, p. 10.

The wife's and Symkyn's pomposity is also illustrated by their stockings, which are red ("And she cam after in a gyte of reed; / And Symkyn hadde hosen of the same", 3954–3955). In medieval England, red stockings were generally worn only by the nobility. The Symkyn and his wife affect a higher social status than their status warrants. (Also, red is a "sexual" colour.)

Here is the daughter:

This wenche thikke and wel ygrowen was,  
With kamus nose and eyen greye as glas,  
With buttokes brode and brestes rounde and hye.  
But right fair was hire heer; I wol nat lye (*The Reeve's Tale*, 3973–3976)

In addition, the girl is twenty years old, which, in medieval England, was "past it". This was plausibly a consequence of the Black Death. Frances and Joseph Gies report that, after the Black Death, "the ages of marrying couples dropped dramatically as aristocracy sought to ensure heirs and common people found economic opportunities improving".<sup>458</sup> By 1371, men typically married when aged twenty-four, and women when only sixteen.

A plausible reason for her not being able to find a husband is that her family did not wish for her to marry beneath herself. We hear of Malyne's grandfather, a wealthy and presumably venal parson, who wants her to marry an aristocrat.

This person of the toun, for she was feir,  
In purpos was to maken hire his heir,  
Bothe of his catel and his mesuage,  
And straunge he made it of hir mariage,  
His purpos was for to bistowe hire hye  
Into some worthy blood of auncetrye (*The Reeve's Tale*, 3975–3982)

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<sup>458</sup> Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 233.

Marriage is exposed here as a form of business transaction and, plausibly more frequently than today, arranged by parents—something reflected in Symkyn's (and Malyne's grandfather) desire to “save” Malyne until he finds a person of suitable rank.

The slyness of Symkyn (and Malyne's grandfather) is mirrored in the character of the Reeve. From the *General Prologue* we learn that he is choleric (587), which suggests, from Hippocratic lore, that he is authoritarian. Moreover, the Reeve quites himself, for in his *Prologue* he admits that people of his class are liars, proud, and greedy (“Foure gleedes han we, which I shal devyse / Avauntyng, liyng, anger, coveitise”, 3883–3884); This is vindicated when we learn that everyone lives in fear of him, which anticipates Symkyn's carrying of knives.

Ther nas baillif, ne hierde, nor oother hyne,  
That he ne knew his sleighte and his covyne;  
They were adrad of hym as of the deeth. (*The General Prologue*, 603–605)

Just like Symkyn, the Reeve is a thief:

Ful riche he was astored pryvely.  
His lord wel koude he plesen subtilly,  
To yeve and lene hym of his owene good, (*The General Prologue*, 609–611)

The secretiveness of his wealth suggests slyness. Chaucer reinforces this by referring to him as a good craftsman (“He was a wel good wrighte, a carpenter”, 614); this could mean, not so much that he is good at working wood, more that he is crafty.

Thus, in portraying all the unpleasant characteristics of the miller, the Reeve inadvertently condemns himself. Seen in this light, *The Reeve's Tale* is a quiting, not of *The Miller's Tale*, but a reinforcement of it. *The Miller's Tale*, as indicated, quites *The Knight's Tale* by showing that women are sexual creatures—as in Alison's free choice of Nicholas. *The Reeve's Tale* goes further. It pairs sex with violence. In this, it is similar to medieval romances, but is dissimilar to them in that it also uses vulgar imagery (bread, grinding . . .). Most important, in its portrayal of oppressed women and of callous men—not only Symkyn, but also the students—it may be viewed, as

may be *The Knight's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, as a critique of male chauvinism. In this regard, as Nicole Nolan Sidhu argues, it does not, as did the classical mythology popular in medieval society, downplay the ugliness of rape.<sup>459</sup> Beneath the tale's humour, there is a nastiness that serves to highlight the hypocrisy of Chaucer's era.

As indicated, there is ambiguity in *The Merchant's Tale*—Januarie may be a satyr, but he earns our sympathy, and May's deceit, while cruel, is also understandable; so she too earns our sympathy. The same is true in *The Reeve's Tale*. Malyne, although "raped" and although seeming to enjoy the rape, shows kindness when she almost weeps for Aleyn and, immediately prior to his departure, returns to him with interest his stolen grain.

Finally, there is a historical point. Of Chaucer's *fabliaux*, there is a difference between the two lower class *fabliaux*, *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*, and the two upper class tales, *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Shipman's Tale*. The former two tales have unambiguously violent elements; the latter two do not. As indicated, rates of violent crime decreased throughout the fourteenth century, and the decrease was especially apparent in the behaviour of the upper classes.<sup>460</sup> That Chaucer's *fabliaux* reflect this reinforces the impression that he provided an accurate description of fourteenth century society and its values.

### **The Merchant's Tale**

The earthiness of *The Merchant's Tale* may be seen in the context of its predecessor, *The Clerk's Tale*. *The Clerk's Tale* concerns a marquis, Walter of Saluzzo, who marries a poor but beautiful girl, Griselda, in order to produce heirs. Walter decides to test Griselda's loyalty by, first, having their daughter abducted and having Griselda believe the child is dead (in reality Walter has kept the daughter alive in Bologna); second, several years later doing the same with Griselda's second born, a

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<sup>459</sup> Nicole Nolan Sidhu, "'To Late for to Crie': Female Desire, Fabliau Politics, and Classical Legend in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*", *Exemplaria*, 21 (2009), 3–23 (pp. 8–12).

<sup>460</sup> Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, p. 63.



son; and third, having Griselda believe that Walter has obtained a marriage annulment and that he plans to marry another woman. Griselda remains loyal to him throughout. As a result, Walter tells her of his tests and the two live happily ever after.

It is difficult to believe that, even in the medieval period, any woman would have put up, silently, with the machinations of a Walter. *The Merchant's Tale*, in that it portrays a deceitful, adulterous wife, therefore quites *The Clerk's Tale*.

*The Merchant's Tale* may also be viewed in the light of the ambiguous status of merchants in fourteenth century Europe. Socially, merchants were of higher status than peasants but of lower status than the aristocracy. Chaucer thus adds another dimension to *The Merchant's Tale* by setting it among the aristocracy. Peter G. Beidler comments:

When Chaucer took a play about peasants and let some of its elements play themselves out on a stage peopled by personages of romance, he set up a tension that makes audiences notice and think about human folly, selfishness and nastiness.<sup>461</sup>

Thus the substance of *The Merchant's Tale* is bawdy, as would befit a peasant, but the telling of it, particularly its references to classical literature (see below), is refined, as would befit an aristocrat. This concatenation of medieval class idioms is apposite because, as is argued below, the tale is an inversion of courtly romance.

The tale presents marriage as a financial institution. Januarie goes "shopping" for May and she, in turn, expects wealth upon Januarie's death—indeed, as is argued below, he promises her as much. Thus, John Finlayson argues that *The Merchant's*

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<sup>461</sup> Peter G. Beidler and Therese Decker, 'Lippijn: a Middle Dutch source for the *Merchant's Tale*?' *The Chaucer Review*, 23 (1989), 236–250 (p. 249).

*Tale* satirises “man’s tendency either to reduce marriage and love to sex or to create institutions, social, religious or secular, to dignify his rutting instincts”.<sup>462</sup>

### ***Provenance***

The provenance of *The Merchant’s Tale* is unclear. It has strong similarities to *The Decameron* (7. 9). In this tale, an ageing nobleman, Nicostratus, marries a young woman, Lydia, who takes a lover, Pyrrhus, who happens to be much loved by Nicostratus. As in *The Merchant’s Tale*, the lovers are caught by the husband copulating in a pear tree. And as in the tale, the lovers lie their way out of trouble, by claiming that the husband was hallucinating.

But Chaucer’s humour is sharper than Boccaccio’s. The copulating protagonists in *The Decameron* (Lydia and Pyrrhus) excuse themselves by saying, in effect, “What? We fornicate? You must have been hallucinating”. May’s excuse, by contrast, is the brilliant: “Why, everyone knows that the best way to restore a blind man’s sight is for his wife to wrestle with a man in a tree!”. It is only after this that May adds that Januarie must have been hallucinating and then, impishly, suggests he may have more hallucinations in future. All this, we know but May does not, comes from Proserpine. And Proserpine does it, reinforcing the humour of the tale, to annoy Pluto. If, as seems likely, Chaucer derived at least part of *The Merchant’s Tale* from *The Decameron* (7. 9), he vastly improved on it.

The extent to which *The Merchant’s Tale* derives from *The Decameron* (7. 9) is uncertain, however. Both appear to have a common source: the French *Comedia Lidie*, written in the twelfth century. Heffernan acknowledges this, but still asserts that there remain sufficient similarities between *The Merchant’s Tale* and *The Decameron* (7. 9) for the latter to also have influenced Chaucer.<sup>463</sup> There are also

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<sup>462</sup> John Finlayson, ‘*The Merchant’s Tale*: Literary Contexts, the Play of Genres, and Institutionalized Sexual Relations’, *Anglia: Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie*, 121(2003), 557–80 (p. 566).

<sup>463</sup> Heffernan, ‘Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale* and *Reeve’s Tale*’, p. 320.

similarities between *The Merchant's Tale* and *Lippijn*, a Dutch farce composed between 1350 and 1375.<sup>464</sup>

Intriguingly, there exist Persian and Arabic analogues of *The Merchant's Tale*, and each pre-dates both Boccaccio and Chaucer. The Arabic analogue is the earlier and dates from the second half of the twelfth century. It was written by Ibn al-Jawzī (?–1201) as part of his *Kitāb al-adhkiyā'* (*Book of the Intelligent*). Al-Jawzī states that the tale was reported to him. This may have been, as Franklin Lewis reports, a literary device, one that lends authority to the truth of the story; alternatively, as Lewis also acknowledges, it may have been that the tale had widespread currency within the Islamic world at the time.<sup>465</sup> Also, even if made up by al-Jawzī, al-Jawzī himself was a popular writer and speaker. He was author of hundreds of titles, some sixteen of which have survived. As Lewis comments, he “wielded great influence in Baghdad society, his sermons attended by thousands”.<sup>466</sup>

Al-Jawzī's tale is simple, and concerns an adulterous woman who is told by her lover that he will not speak to her unless she devises a stratagem whereby her husband sees him making love to her.

The adulterous woman tells her lover of the time and date she will accomplish this, and at the appointed time she says to her husband that she will pick some dates from a palm tree, which, with his permission, she climbs. Upon reaching the top, she then accuses him of making love to another woman in front of her eyes, calling him a “cad” and a “miserable fellow”. She then comes down from the tree and her husband climbs it. Upon reaching the ground, she immediately starts making love to her lover, and her husband sees them. Rather than blame her, however, the husband blames the

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<sup>464</sup> Beidler and Decker, ‘*Lippijn*: A Middle Dutch Source for the *Merchant's Tale*?’, p. 236.

<sup>465</sup> Franklin D. Lewis, ‘One Chaste Muslim Maiden and a Persian in a Pear Tree: Analogues of Boccaccio and Chaucer in Four Earlier Arabic and Persian Tales’, in *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*, ed. by Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (Leiden: E. J. Brill, forthcoming 2012), pp. 137–204 (p. 154).

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

tree, stating that anyone who climbs it sees illusions of people making love. Hence the story may be known as *The Deceitful Palm Tree*.

The Persian story is near identical, save that in it a pear tree is used and the wife accuses her husband, not of making love to a woman, but of being the passive partner in anal intercourse with a young man; also, the husband requires more persuading that he is hallucinating the wife's infidelity than in the Arabic version, and the author, rather than apologising for the lewdness of the tale, states that it should be viewed as a parable. More important, in the Persian version, it is the wife who instigates the deception (her lover has no speaking part in the story). The Persian version was written by Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (?–1273, henceforth Rūmī) and may be known as *The Deceitful Pear Tree*. It is contained in Book IV of his *Mathnavī-I manavī* (Book IV contains other *fabliaux*). This, states Lewis, was possibly “the most widely read poem in the medieval world from Bosnia to Bengal”.<sup>467</sup> It was composed around 1266.

*The Deceitful Pear Tree* appears more subtle than *The Deceitful Palm Tree*. First, Rūmī alludes to it in Book I of the *Mathnavī*, stating:

zi sar-i amrūd-bun bīnī chunān  
 zi ān furūd ā tā namānad ān gumān  
 chūn tu bar gardī u sar gashta shavī  
 khāna rā gardanda bīnī u ān tu'ī [tuvī]

*On the top of the wild pear tree you see such things  
 come down from it so that your suppositions will not remain.  
 When you turn around and make yourself all dizzy,  
 You'll see the room spin around, but that is you (who spins).*

The implication here is that licentiousness clouds one's judgment.

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

Second, Rūmī uses wordplay. The Persian word *amrūd*, meaning “pear tree”, resembles the Persian word *amrad*, meaning catamite.<sup>468</sup> Thus, Rūmī anticipates Chaucer's use of *double entendre*, as in, for instance, his use of “pryve” in *The Miller's Tale*.

How much al-Jawzī's and Rūmī's works were known to Chaucer is impossible to say. This is in part because, although Rūmī's analogue was identified in the 1880s, it has received scant attention from western scholars; al-Jawzī's has more recently been identified and has received even less attention.<sup>469</sup> However, it is plausible that both authors were known—if not by name, at least by the stories they reported—throughout the literate world during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Indeed, there appears a Sanskrit analogue to *The Deceitful Pear Tree* in the *Bahār-i dānish*, written by Ināyat Allāh Kanbū of Delhi in 1651; the *Bahār-i dānish* appears to have drawn from earlier sources, but whether these were Indian, Persian, Arabic, Mongol, or all four, is impossible to say.<sup>470</sup> Thus, given the extent of western–Middle Eastern contact during the first centuries of the second millennium—whether via crusades, pilgrimages, trade, or all three—it seems probable that something of the stories would have percolated to the West. Second, as indicated (see Chapter one), Chaucer was certainly aware of much Islamic scholarship. It is therefore plausible that he was aware, if only by reputation, of al-Jawzī's and Rūmī's works.

### ***Allusions: Biblical and classical***

There is a wealth of allusions in the tale. Thus, for example, the inappropriateness of the marriage is echoed in the names: Januarie is winter, a season in which everything dies;<sup>471</sup> May is spring, a season in which everything comes to life.<sup>472</sup> The month of

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>471</sup> Januarie's name has another function; it was derived from the god Janus. He was the two faced guard of gates and doorways, and was often depicted with a key around his neck.

<sup>472</sup> Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, p. 222.

May was also in medieval times the traditional time for courtly love; May is therefore a “perfect romance heroine”.<sup>473</sup> However, there is a double meaning to the name. Natalie Davis tells us that in much of medieval Europe, May was considered the time of disorder and of female licentiousness. Davis adds that in folk tradition:

Generally May . . . was thought to be a period in which women were powerful, their desires at their most immoderate. As the old saying went, a May bride would keep her husband in yoke all year round. And in fact marriages were not frequent in May.<sup>474</sup>

That Januarie's marriage is doomed is also reflected in the Merchant himself, who confesses to having had an unhappy marriage, and by the names of Januarie's brothers, Justinius, or “just” (who advises against the marriage) and Placebo, or flatterer (who advises for it). Januarie's foolishness is also highlighted by his citing a string of deceitful women in the Bible (Rebecca, Abigail, Esther, and Judith) as exemplars of good wives. For example:

Lo Abigayl, by good conseil, how she  
Saved hir housbonde Nabal, whan that he  
Sholde han be slayn; and looke, Ester also  
By good conseil delyvered out of wo (*The Merchant's Tale*, 1369–1372)

Januarie gets everything backwards. Abigail saved Nabal by giving food (which she stole from Nabal) to David, and when she told Nabal about it the next day, Nabal had a heart attack and died. Ester's helping her people “out of woe” included her complicity in the execution of the unfortunate Haman, whom she tricked into sharing a meal with herself. Valerie Edden recognises this irony, pointing out that:

. . . We realize he [Januarie] has ignored his own advice, choosing a woman he (falsely) believes to be totally compliant and submissive to his will, rather

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>474</sup> Natalie Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 141.

than one like the four biblical wives, whose clever schemes and politically prudent actions make them assets indeed. The reference to these women, with their courage and variety of virtues, cause us to reflect that January, in contrast, has only one standard of wifely virtues, a sexual one.<sup>475</sup>

The paragons Januarie cites are paragons of, if anything, deceit.

The tale is also replete with allusions to classical gods in addition to Proserpine and Pluto. At the wedding feast we have:

And at the feeste sitteth he and she  
With othere worthy folk upon the deys.  
Al ful of joye and blisse is the paleys,  
And ful of instrumentz and of vitaille,  
The mooste deyntevous of al Ytaille.  
Biforn hem stoode instrumentz of swich soun  
That Orpheus, ne of Thebes Amphioun,  
Ne maden nevere swich a melodye. (*The Merchant's Tale*, 1710–1717)

Holding wedding feasts and providing food were not only instruments for demonstrating power within a group. The lavish food and spices incite lust as a consequence of the close proximity of the stomach and sexual organs.<sup>476</sup> This, along with the serving staff, music, and singers, as Niebrzydowski points out, would raise the heat of a body and thus spark other heat-dependent desires such that “This heady combination coupled with May’s beauty inflames the lust of her husband”.<sup>477</sup> The combination of quantity with quality of foodstuffs along with the serving staff, music, and singers widened taste perception beyond the demonstration of social power to the sexual. We hear:

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<sup>475</sup> Valerie Edden, ‘The Bible’, in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed., by Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 332–349 (p. 341).

<sup>476</sup> Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon Appetites*, p. 95.

<sup>477</sup> Niebrzydowski, *Bonoure and Buxum*, p. 85.

At every cours thanne cam loud mynstralcy,  
That nevere tromped Joab for to heer,  
Nor he Theodomas, yet half so cleere,  
At Thebes, whan the citee was in doute.  
Bacus the wyn hem shynketh al aboute,  
And Venus laugheth upon every wight,  
For Januarie was bicomme hir knyght,  
And wolde bothe assayen his corage  
In libertee, and eek in mariage;  
And with hire fyrbrond in hire hand aboute  
Daunceth biforn the bryde and al the route. (*The Merchant's Tale*, 1718–  
1728)

Venus's laughing at Januarie's lust reinforces his foolishness. But the inclusion of the classical pantheon—Venus, Orpheus, Bacchus, Amphion (and other classical gods elsewhere)—seemingly elevates the marriage.

There is rich sexual imagery in the passage. Lisa Parfitt draws attention to the association, in the medieval mind, between female mouths and laughter and vaginas—an open female mouth, especially one laughing, is akin to a vagina ready for sex<sup>478</sup>—and this association was common in medieval art and literature (see Chapter one), especially *fabliaux*. Thus, when we hear that Venus—the goddess of love—laughs because Januarie has become her knight, we know, albeit subliminally, that he is craving an open vagina. Coupled with this, there are allusions to music and to fire—all this in the context of a feast.

There is also the inclusion of Priapus in the tale. Chaucer introduces him as the god of gardens:

Ne Priapus ne myghte nat suffise,  
Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle

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<sup>478</sup> Lisa Parfitt, *Women and Laughter in Medieval Comic Literature* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 9.



The beautee of the gardyn and the welle  
That stood under a laurer alwey grene. (*The Merchant's Tale*, 2034–2037)

But Priapus was not only the god of gardens; he was also a figure of ridicule, scarcely a god at all (Greek mythology had it that he was expelled from Mount Olympus). As indicated, Priapus was cursed with an enormous penis and a perpetual erection, and with impotence. The parallel with Januarie is precise.<sup>479</sup> Januarie, like Priapus, is obsessed with sex, yet he is at best a poor sexual performer. Also, the association of Priapus with gardens suggests that Januarie's walled garden is, unlike the walled gardens in Chaucer's romances (see especially *The Knight's Tale*), a scene for perverted love. In *The Parliament of Foules*, for instance, Chaucer introduces Priapus as a frustrated lover:

The god Priapus saw I, as I wente,  
Withinne the temple in sovereyn place stonde,  
In swich aray as whan the asse hym shente  
With cri by nighte, and with hys sceptre in honde.  
Ful besyly men gonne assaye and fonde  
Upon his hed to sette, of sondry hewe,  
Garlondes ful of freshe floures newe. (*The Parliament of Foules*, 253-259)

Michael Calabrese argues that the presence of Priapus in Januarie's garden depicts both Januarie and Damyan as sexually frustrated lovers.<sup>480</sup> On one hand, the old and sexually frustrated Januarie creates the garden to be another "aphrodisiac" place where "Januarie's [...] rape of May under the legal aegis of their marriage" occurs.<sup>481</sup> On the other hand, Damyan is another frustrated lover who fails to achieve sexual climax in the pear tree with May before Januarie's sight is restored. Emerson Brown points out that Chaucer altered his sources for the purpose of shortening the

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<sup>479</sup> Michael A. Calabrese, 'May Devoid of All Delight: January, *the Merchant's Tale* and *the Romance of the Rose*', *Studies in Philology*, 87 (1990), 261–284 (p. 278).

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>481</sup> Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose, *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature* (ed), (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 41.

time Damyan and May spend together in the tree before Januarie interrupts them, to suppose that Damyan would not have had time to achieve climax.<sup>482</sup> Chaucer clearly models both Januarie and Damyan on Priapus; an allusion which is designed to suggest that Januarie and Damyan share Priapus's amatory frustration.

### ***Characterisation and metaphor***

There are only three characters in *The Merchant's Tale* of consequence: Damyan, May, and Januarie.

Of Damyan, we know little, other than that he is a squire and that he desires May ("He was so ravysshed on his lady May / That for the verray peyne he was ny wood", 1774–1775), so much so that he becomes sick with love for her; a common symptom of love in medieval times. The Merchant describes him as treacherous ("O servant traytour, false hoomly hewe", 1785) and "woful" (1886), but he also says Damyan will risk his life for May ("For which he putte his lyf in aventure", 1877). We also know that Damyan professes his love towards May before she reciprocates (it is this reciprocation that cures his "sickness") and that after his recovery he serves Januarie obsequiously while planning to cuckold him—so, although he may have redeeming features, he is duplicitous.

In other respects, Damyan appears a "stock" character. He is described as a "fiery" (lustful) character ("This sike Damyan in Venus fyr", 1875). The Merchant's likens him to an adder on one occasion ("Lyk to the naddre in bosom sly untrew", 1786) and to a dog on another ("And eek to Januarie he gooth as lowe / As evere dide a dogge for the bowe", 2013–2014). Significantly, there is no reported speech from Damyan in the tale. We hear only of him, not from him.

May is more rounded than Damyan. Although she schemes as much as (or more than) and is as lustful as Damyan, she may be viewed sympathetically. As discussed below,

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<sup>482</sup> See Emerson Brown, 'Hortus Inconclusus: The Significance of Priapus and Pyramus and Thisbe in the Merchant's Tale', *The Chaucer Review*, 4 (1970), pp. 31–40.

May has to endure Januarie's rough and "stretched" lovemaking in silence; she lies powerlessly, deprived of language beneath Januarie's self-indulgence. Christopher Clason sees this as "a typical medieval marriage bed scene, where the woman has no power of choice and must endure the man's penetration and self-serving gratification".<sup>483</sup> The same experience can be seen in the context of Januarie's jealousy:

Which jalousye it was so outrageous  
That neither in halle, n' yn noon oother hous,  
Ne in noon oother place, neverthemo,  
He nolde suffre hire for to ryde or go,  
But if that he had hond on hire alway; (*The Merchant's Tale*, 2087–2091)

May is miserable at her marriage, and detests her confinement and Januarie's incessant spying on her.

Erotic symbolism is rife in May. She is referred to as "fresshe May" thirteen times in the tale (1782, 1822, 1859, 1871, 1886, 1955, 1977, 2054, 2092, 2100, 2116, 2185, and 2328). As Niebrzydowski states, albeit in the context of Jankyn in the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, the term *fresh* "conveys a variety of meanings; new, vigorous, lusty, wanton and amorous".<sup>484</sup> Fresh things tend to be fruits or vegetables, and particularly in the context of the pear tree in Januarie's garden, fruits—fruits, as indicated were symbols of sexual seduction; consuming them could symbolise sexual activity and sexual gratification.

The fruit symbolism is carried further. When in the garden (and Damyan is in the tree) May speaks of her needs to Januarie:

This fresshe May, that is so bright and sheene,

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<sup>483</sup> Christopher R. Clason, "'Good Lovin'": The Language of Erotic Desire and Fulfilment in Gottfried's *Tristan*", in Classen, *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, pp. 257–278 (p. 261).

<sup>484</sup> Sue Niebrzydowski, "'So wel koude he me glose': The Wife of Bath and the Eroticism of Touch' in Hopkins and Rushton, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, pp. 18–26 (p. 24).

Gan for to syke, and seyde, "Allas, my syde!  
Now sire," quod she, "for aught that may bityde,  
I moste han of the peres that I see,  
Or I moot dye, so soore longeth me  
To eten of the smale peres grene.  
Help, for hir love that is of hevene queene!  
I telle yow wel, a womman in my plit  
May han to fruyt so greet an appetit  
That she may dyen, but she of it have". (*The Merchant's Tale*, 2328–2337)

Clearly, when May speaks of her desire for fruit, she is speaking of her desire for sex. The "fruyt" May refers to has different connotations; some of them erotic. Alcuin Blamires observes the complexity in the "fruyt" symbol, suggesting that:

The fruit is ostensibly real fruit such as a pregnant woman might crave—so May implies, to her possessive and heir-hungry husband. At the same time, the fruit is either Damyan himself, or Damyan's phallus, or sexual fruition, or the child that might result from sex with Damyan. Again, if we remember that May herself was first projected to be the "fruit" of an old man's wealth, she herself might strike us in another sense as the fruit that Damyan is about to pluck.<sup>485</sup>

May, in other words, is another popular medieval depiction of Eve. She is explicitly associated with a monstrous appetite for food, for knowledge, and for sex.

The scene goes further than the Garden of Eden metaphor. In the biblical narrative, Eve does not need the forbidden fruit; she just takes it. May needs "fruit" (sex); if she does not get it, she will die.

The portrayal of Januarie is also subtle. At first he is loathsome. We are told he is from Lombardy. This, to a medieval audience, would indicate he was a banker (a

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<sup>485</sup> Alcuin Blamires, 'May in January's Tree: Genealogical Configuration in *The Merchant's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 45 (2010), 106–117 (p. 114).

usurer), because the rich bankers of the era were Lombards. As such, he knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. So he goes “shopping” for a wife.

The Merchant's portrayal of Januarie throughout the prenuptial and immediately post-nuptial stages of the tale suggests a loathsome personality. Thus Januarie pumps himself full of rich food and wine and aphrodisiacs to better appreciate the delights of his wedding night. Thereafter there is a lurid description of his lovemaking:

And Januarie hath faste in armes take  
His fresshe May, his paradys, his make.  
He lulleth hire; he kisseth hire ful ofte;  
With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte,  
Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere—  
For he was shave al newe in his manere—  
He rubbeth hire aboute hir tendre face, (*The Merchant's Tale*, 1821–1827)

The love-making scene includes several images of suffering and force. The lines “[He] rubbeth hire aboute hir tendre face” (1827); “Thus laboureth he til that the day gan dawne” (1842); and “She preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene,” (1854) leave little doubt that the experience was far from tender or intimate.

May is not impressed by Januarie's lovemaking. Despite his repeated efforts, “She preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene” (1854). The line is stinging. It states that Januarie is useless at sex; moreover, because “bean” equals “testis”, Januarie's efforts are a waste of testes. It is also ironic, for Januarie had earlier said no life other than marriage “is worth a bene” (1263). May's encouragement of Damyan, Niebrzydowski argues, shows that “May has ‘han no plesaunce’ (1434) with Januarie” and that “what she desires from Damyan is sexual pleasure, pure and simple”.<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> Niebrzydowski, *Bonoure and Buxum*, p. 111.

Shulamith Shahar observes that in the Middle Ages the old male body was deemed cold.<sup>487</sup> Old men were not supposed to have sex. Christian doctrine to the effect that the sole purpose of sex was procreation, combined with the Galenic doctrine that the cold dry humours of old people inhibited sex, fostered the opinion that sex was unnatural during old age. Thus, old men who engaged in sexual activity were figures of disgust.<sup>488</sup> In this regard, Martin Blum argues that, in medieval Europe, “the older man’s place is equal to that of the socially enforced passivity of medieval women, who by reason of their gender were largely barred from taking on more active roles”.<sup>489</sup>

One may question Blum on details—women in medieval society, as indicated in previous chapters, were often active, not passive—but his broad point is sound: sex was viewed as inappropriate for old people. This view was buttressed by medieval medical views deriving from Hippocrates and Galen. Hippocrates’s fourteenth aphorism states that old men have little heat and therefore require little food, thus:

Those who are growing have much innate heat and therefore need much food. If they do not get it, the body wastes. Old men have little heat and accordingly need little nourishment, and much of it destroys the heat of the food. For this reason too fevers are not so acute in old men, for their bodies are cold.<sup>490</sup>

Women were viewed as being colder than men. Thus, husbands were counselled to “heat up” their wives to ensure sexual arousal, orgasm, and pregnancy. Women, it

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<sup>487</sup> Shulamith Shahar, ‘The Old Body in Medieval Culture’, in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed., by Sarah Kay and Miri Ruben (Manchester: Manchester University, 1994), pp. 160–186 (pp. 160, 164).

<sup>488</sup> J. A. Burrow, *the Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), pp. 156–157.

<sup>489</sup> Martin Blum, ‘Negotiating Masculinities: Erotic Triangles in *the Miller’s Tale*’, in *Masculinities in Chaucer: approaches to maleness in the Canterbury tales and Troilus and Criseyde*, ed., by Peter G. Beidler (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), pp. 32–57 (p. 41).

<sup>490</sup> Quoted in Roger French, *Medicine before Science: The Business of Medicine from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 50.

was believed, were not quick in getting to orgasm. Older men, because they lacked heat, could not arouse their wives. Hence sex for older men was improper.

Januarie employs much of the sexual symbolism of his era. Thus, when speaking of marriage and the relative ages of bride and groom, he argues:

I wol noon oold wyf han in no manere.  
She shal nat passe twenty yeer, certayn;  
Oold *fissh* and yong flessch wolde I have fayn.  
Bet is," quod he, "a *pyk* than a *pykerel*,  
And bet than old *boef* is the tendre *veel*.  
I wol no womman thritty yeer of age;  
It is but *bene-straw* and *greetforage*.  
And eek thise olde wydwes, God it woot,  
They konne so muchel craft on Wades boot,  
So muchel broken harm, whan that hem leste, (*The Merchant's Tale*, 1416–  
1425; emphases added)

The food symbolism (italicised) here is coarse—fish, meat, bean-straw. Januarie's likening of the ideal wife to veal (young meat) suggests a coarseness in his attitude to women. As Alcuin Blamires argues, "For Januarie, the prospect of marriage to May means an exclusive appropriation of her sexuality that will maximize his pleasure and guarantee his bloodline".<sup>491</sup> Januarie's sexual desires, which are, without a dose of aphrodisiacs, more bluster than fact, show the knight's lack of skills in courtly love. In this, his search to be what he is not renders the tale a parody of courtly romances. Ironically, Januarie gets the substance of his argument wrong. It is young women, according to the Merchant at least, who deceive men.

The food symbolism is also evident when Januarie pumps himself full of food and wine and aphrodisiacs to better appreciate the delights of his wedding night:

Soone after that, this hastif Januarie

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<sup>491</sup> Blamires, 'May in January's Tree', p. 113.

Wolde go to bedde; he wolde no lenger tarye.  
He drynketh ypocras, clarree, and vernage  
Of spices hoote t' encreessen his corage;  
And many a letuarie hath he ful fyn,  
Swiche as the cursed monk, daun Constantyn,  
Hath writen in his book De Coitu; (*The Merchant's Tale*, 1805–1811)

This equating of food with sex, and of May with meat, suggests that Januarie is a sexual glutton, but one who is unable to sexually perform. The reference to spices is also significant. Spices, as Ruth A. Johnston observes, were recommended by medieval physicians for the treatment of sexual dysfunction.<sup>492</sup> To increase sexual desire, Johnston argues, medieval “physicians prescribed pepper, cinnamon, and nutmeg”.<sup>493</sup> Therefore, “Medieval newlyweds could be served a drink much like eggnog, seasoned with cinnamon and nutmeg”.<sup>494</sup>

It is significant that, in the description of Januarie's lovemaking, he only rubs, touches, embraces, and kisses May. He does not penetrate her. Januarie even admits to May he is a poor lover:

Ther nys no werkman, whatsoever he be,  
That may bothe werke wel and hastily;  
This wol be doon at leyser parfitly.  
It is no fors how longe that we playe. (*The Merchant's Tale*, 1832–1835)

So, despite his imbibing cartloads of aphrodisiacs, Januarie admits he will take a long time to achieve orgasm (that is, if he achieves one at all). On the morning after, in a mockery of courtly romance, Januarie sings an *aubade*:

Thus laboureth he til that the day gan dawe;

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<sup>492</sup> Ruth A. Johnston, *Things Medieval: An Encyclopedia of the Medieval World* (London: Greenwood, 2011), p. 485.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*



And thanne he taketh a sop in fyn clarree,  
And upright in his bed thanne sitteth he,  
And after that he sang ful loude and cleere (*The Merchant's Tale*, 1842–1845)

Januarie gets it wrong. The *aubade* tradition had it that the song should be sung as the lover departs, preferably through his sweetheart's window.<sup>495</sup> Januarie is still in bed, and, far from departing, he immediately after falls back to sleep. This misuse of the *aubade* tradition gives the tale's relation to romance a strong element of parody.

The imagery in the tale largely concerns animal sexuality. Helen Cooper comments:

Animal imagery returns along with animal action: Januarie is “clotish”, “ful of jargon as a flekked pye”, with bristles like a houndfish; Damyan fawns like a dog and acts like an adder; May is compared to animals in their edible form, to pike and veal. The strong layer of Christian reference in the tale is equally devalued. The paradise of marriage, and the paradisaal garden, both contain their serpent, and their Eve; the garden substitutes a pear tree, with all its sexual associations, for the apple.<sup>496</sup>

Yet there are attractive aspects of Januarie's character. When Januarie hears of Damyan's sickness, the Merchant reports:

“That me forthynketh,” quod this Januarie,  
“He is a gentil squier, by my trouthe!  
If that he deyde, it were harm and routhe.  
He is as wys, discreet, and as secree  
As any man I woot of his degree,  
And therto manly, and eek servysable,  
And for to been a thrifty man right able.  
But after mete, as soone as evere I may,

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<sup>495</sup> Gale Sigal, *Erotic Dawn-Songs of the Middle Ages: Voicing the Lyric Lady* (Gainesville, Tallahassee, et al. : University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 5.

<sup>496</sup> Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (London: Duckworth, 1983), pp. 142, 143.

I wol myself visite hym, and eek May,  
To doon hym al the confort that I kan.”  
And for that word hym blessed every man,  
That of his bountee and his gentillesse (*The Merchant's Tale*, 1907–1917)

Although this is a *fabliau* and although it highlights Januarie's stupidity—Damyan, after all, rather than being gentle, is planning to cuckold him—the passage suggests kindness: Januarie seems to care genuinely for Damyan.

This other side to Januarie becomes more evident when he goes blind. Rather than treat May as meat, he speaks tenderly to her:

Thre thynges, certes, shal ye wynne therby:  
First, love of Crist, and to youreself honour,  
And al myn heritage, toun and tour;  
I yeve it yow, maketh chartres as yow leste;  
This shal be doon to-morwe er sonne reste,  
So wisly God my soule brynge in blisse. (*The Merchant's Tale*, 2170–2175)

It is as though Januarie's physical blindness turns him into a decent human being. The speech is one of a kindly old man giving all he can to his wife, who, from the tone of the speech, might just as well be his daughter. The passage comes from when Januarie takes May into the garden—the traditional setting for true love in courtly romances.

Some critics take a different view of Januarie's blindness. They point out that medieval audiences viewed physical impairment as a punishment for sin, and an object of humour. Januarie's blindness and the humour may be seen within the medieval understanding of the body, one in which physical impairment was a punishment for sin.<sup>497</sup> Robert Fossier states:

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<sup>497</sup> Januarie's blindness is also due to his refusal to “see” the truth that, for old men, “coitus destroys the eyesight and dries up the body”. See Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, p. 56.

In the Middle Ages, he [a blind man] inspired laughter. The calamity of blindness was taken as a just divine punishment, and the “miracles” that restored sight only happened to innocent children or virtuous hermits. The confusion of the blind was an excellent source of humor.<sup>498</sup>

Such critics as Fossier may be underestimating Chaucer. There is no need for Januarie to leave all his wealth to her; neither is there a need for him to wish that such inherited wealth will preserve her honour. Instead, Januarie could simply have ravaged his wife whenever and wherever he liked. True, Januarie's blindness might be punishment for sin, but it also turns him into a kind man.

There is also ambiguity in the garden. Derek Pearsall observes that, in medieval literature and art, gardens were associated with love and beauty.<sup>499</sup> Gardens were presented as appropriate settings for betrothal. In contrast to this tradition, Januarie's garden, Pearsall argues, is wild.<sup>500</sup> Chaucer's garden scene disrupts the ordered environment of “traditional” gardens. It also inverts traditional male–female gender stereotypes: it is May, not Damyan, who orchestrates the adultery. David Griffith, in this context, points out that Januarie's garden “is both the literal place of the central action of the story and a sign for meanings beyond the fabliau genre”.<sup>501</sup>

As indicated, the garden may be seen as a metaphor for the Garden of Eden. If so, the pear tree is the Tree of Knowledge; and because pears are a sexual symbol, Damyan can be seen as the forbidden fruit. It is May who climbs the tree. To add to the insult (and the humour), Chaucer has Januarie help May get into the tree. The garden is a sexual playground in which May, Januarie, and Damyan are concerned more with the sex than with wooing. As such, it is a parody of courtly love. Januarie

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<sup>498</sup> Robert Fossier, *The Axe and the Oath: Ordinary Life in the Middle Ages*, trans., Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 52

<sup>499</sup> Derek Pearsall, ‘Gardens as Symbol and Setting in Late Medieval Poetry’, in *Medieval Gardens*, ed., by Elizabeth B. MacDougall (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1986), pp. 235–252 (p. 238).

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>501</sup> Griffith, ‘Visual Culture’, in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, p. 196.

has caught his wife in *flagrante delicto*, yet he is not willing to believe it (or he is willing to pretend he is not willing to believe it).

The description of Januarie's lovemaking on his wedding night is disgusting, not erotic, yet Chaucer tells it unapologetically. In contrast, the description of May's lovemaking with Damyan is not disgusting; it is crude but erotic, yet Chaucer apologises for it:

Ladyes, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth;  
I kan nat glose, I am a rude man—  
And sodeynly anon this Damyan  
Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng. (*The Merchant's Tale*, 2350–2353)

The act of “throng” is missing from Januarie's sexual encounters with May. And “throng” appears vicious. Neil Cartlidge comments:

This deliberately brusque description, with its almost violent emphasis on penetration, serves, on the one hand, to emphasize Damyan's energy and resolution (which contrasts sharply with the limp and querulous sexuality of May's elderly husband, Januarie) and, on the other, to suggest that his conquest of May is in essence a form of invasive trespass—and, as such, an attack on the sanctioned privacy of married intimacy.<sup>502</sup>

Some authorities argue that May's readiness to cuckold her husband is the result of Januarie's sexual perversion. Jill Mann, for instance, states that “male selfishness creates the female shrew”.<sup>503</sup> May schemes early in the tale to make love to Damyan. Indeed, she plans the tryst. Moreover, May develops a cunning language to further her schemes. Alcuin Blamires observes:

Clearly she [May] expresses this desire [sexual desire], that impels her to make strategic arrangements to couple with Damyan, both through sign-

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<sup>502</sup> Cartlidge, ‘Marriage, Sexuality and the Family’, in Saunders, *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, p. 228.

<sup>503</sup> Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 68.

language—the gesture of twisting his hand on his sickbed (rv. 2005)—and through verbal indirection by speaking to Januarie (in Damyan's hearing) of her "appétit" for "fruyt" (rv2336).<sup>504</sup>

In Boccaccio's version, Lydia is given the privilege to complain about her sexual frustration and explain why she would want to have sexual relationship with another man:

Thou seest, Lusca, that I am in the prime of my youth and lustihead, and have neither lack nor stint of all such things as folk desire, save only, to be brief, that I have one cause to repine, to wit, that my husband's years so far outnumber my own. Wherefore with that wherein young ladies take most pleasure I am but ill provided, and, as my desire is no less than theirs, 'tis now some while since I determined that, if Fortune has shewn herself so little friendly to me by giving me a husband so advanced in years, at least I will not be mine own enemy by sparing to devise the means whereby my happiness and health may be assured,<sup>505</sup>

Although, in comparison to Lydia, May does not speak much, she is an effective communicator. Richard Shoaf observes: "She is very much alive and capable of signification or mediation. She can at least make a fiction, even if that fiction, regrettably, should be only a lie".<sup>506</sup>

Shoaf is correct. May lies, schemes, and cheats. Only moments before she climbs up the tree to consummate her affair with Damyan she claims that she is "a gentil womman and no wenche" (2202) and then asks Januarie to help her into the tree. May, unlike the hapless Emily in *The Knight's Tale*, is active. She is also intelligent. This is manifest when, impishly, she tells Januarie he is going to be fooled again:

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<sup>504</sup> Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*, p. 96.

<sup>505</sup> Boccaccio, *The Decameron*. trans., by J. M. Rigg (London: The Navarre Society, 1921) <<http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/decameron/engDecIndex.php>> [accessed 20 August 2011]

<sup>506</sup> Richard Allen Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word: Money, Images, and Reference in Late Medieval Poetry* (Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1995), p. 198.

Til that youre sighte ysatled be a while  
Ther may ful many a sighte yow bigile.  
Beth war, I prey yow, for by hevene kyng,  
Ful many a man weneth to seen a thyng,  
And it is al another than it semeth.

He that mysconceyveth, he mysdemeth. (*The Merchant's Tale*, 2405–2410)

She explains that recovering from blindness is like someone waking from sleep who does not immediately see clearly. His sight may therefore “beguile” him for a day or two and maybe more. This will give her more time to spend with Damyan without the fear of being caught. May would not have gone to the trouble of explaining the side effects of her cure unless she planned to have more meetings with her lover. This is situated within the context of her miserable marriage. Because May's intercourse with Januarie is not what she would call an experience worth having, she will return to the garden for more encounters with Damyan.

In this respect Chaucer is closer to al-Jawzī and Rūmī than to Boccaccio, for in *The Decameron* (7. 9) the pear tree is cut down, thereby suggesting that future liaisons between wife and lover are impossible (the same is true of *Comedia Lidie*). The Islamic versions, by contrast, suggest that the husband views the tree, as Lewis suggests, as a possible tourist attraction.<sup>507</sup> It is “the sight of May's lovely buttocks [which] sets Januarie's mind on fire” that “His excitement is increased by his blindness, which teased by fantasy, highlights the girl's erotic aura”.<sup>508</sup>

*The Merchant's Tale* may, as indicated, be a quiting of *The Clerk's Tale*. May is a far more believable character than patient Griselda. As such she may be illustrative of the real power women had in medieval society. In this respect, *The Merchant's Tale* compliments the Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, which, as is argued in the next

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<sup>507</sup> Lewis, ‘One Chaste Muslim Maiden and a Persian in a Pear Tree: Analogues of Boccaccio and Chaucer in Four Earlier Arabic and Persian Tales’, in Seyed-Gohrab, *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*, p. 164.

<sup>508</sup> Agnès Blandeau, *Pasolini, Chaucer and Boccaccio: Two Medieval Texts and Their Translation to Film* (New York: McFarland, 2006), p. 28.

chapter, presents an empowered view of women in medieval society. And though May is deceitful, we can sympathise with her. We know why she is adulterous, and we can ask ourselves whether any woman, faced with similar circumstances, would not be at least tempted to behave in similar ways. The tale illustrates the foolishness of old men marrying young women, and the inhumanity that such marriages entails, particularly when the bride has no choice.

And beneath the humour, there is a tenderness to the story. When he goes blind, Januarie behaves as a loving husband should. This can be seen as a quiting of courtly romances. Januarie gains humanity only when his wife plots to cuckold him, and only when he is powerless. The turning upside down of romantic convention throughout the tale reinforces this point.

The tale's portrayal of sex is also an inversion of courtly convention. All three main characters, in contrast to the knights and love goddesses in medieval romances (see Chapter four), are actively sexual. In this May's sexuality is significant (as is Damyan's "lovesickness"). That she desires sex and enjoys it suggests that medieval people understood female sexuality better than their theological advisers.

The sexual culinary comedy in *The Merchant's Tale* does not focus only on male sexuality, nor is it necessarily "misogynist". The tale portrays May as a female body full of appetite and sexual desire. May's rejection of medieval gender traits in her pursuit of an erotic project of her own is clear evidence of the existence of a sexual female individualism which is neither constructed nor controlled by "exterior" male sources.

### **The Shipman's Tale**

Although *The Miller's Tale*, *The Cook's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale*, and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* link money and sex, *The Shipman's Tale* makes the linkage more salient. The wife openly finances her dressmaker's bill by having sex. The husband is a trader and makes money by credit and exchange transactions. The monk is venal;

he does not pay the hundred francs that he has promised the wife. The wife settles her debt with her husband through marital sex.<sup>509</sup>

The tales provides insight into the power of money, into the use of sex as a commodity, and into male and female subterfuge. The tale presents stereotypes, not individuals. The wife represents those wives whose husbands satisfy them neither sexually nor financially; the husband represents those husbands who fail to satisfy their wives' financial needs; the monk represents those monks who abandon their vows. In this last regard, at the conclusion of the tale, the Host points out that *The Shipman's Tale* warns against inviting monks into one's house, and, to drive the point home, turns to the (pilgrim) monk and asks him if his name is Daun John (1929)—that is, whether Daun John is representative of all monks.

Because of the above considerations, Helen Fulton argues that there is more to the tale than is apparent at first sight.<sup>510</sup> She argues that the monk betrays his vows, the wife subverts marriage, and that the tale as a whole subverts the medieval world order—most notably in that wealth is not an index of gentility, or honour; and it is no qualification for being a civic or moral leader.

### ***Provenance***

*The Shipman's Tale* is, of all of Chaucer's *fabliaux*, closest in form to French *fabliaux*. William Lawrence observes that it displays the technique of the jongleurs;<sup>511</sup> John Spargo writes that, so similar in tone is the tale to French *fabliaux*, the most likely primary source was a near identical, now lost, French tale;<sup>512</sup> and John Hines has pointed to the French setting, the use of French in the tale, and the

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<sup>509</sup> See Phillips, *An introduction to the Canterbury Tales*.

<sup>510</sup> Helen Fulton, 'Mercantile Ideology in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 36 (2002), 311–328 (p. 323).

<sup>511</sup> William W. Lawrence, 'Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*', *Speculum*, 33 (1958), 56–68 (p. 56).

<sup>512</sup> John W. Spargo, 'Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*: The Lover's Gift Regained', *Folklore Fellows Communications*, 91 (1930), 439–346 (p. 439).



use of swearing to French saints as indicating a French origin.<sup>513</sup> Also, there are two French *fabliaux*, *The Priest and the Lady* and *The Butcher of Abeville* that contain elements of *The Shipman's Tale* and that may have acted as sources. The plot elements of the tale might also have been common in folk stories of the era; so Chaucer need not have used a single source. Nonetheless, as Spargo argues, *The Shipman's Tale* provides more complex characterisation than do the French *fabliaux*.<sup>514</sup>

It is debatable whether the tale has a French origin. John Scattergood argues that the French setting does not imply a French primary source, for Chaucer was capable of changing the geographical location of his tales, as he did, for instance, in *The Reeve's Tale* (originally in France, but transposed by Chaucer to Cambridge).<sup>515</sup> John Finlayson has argued that, in its lack of ethical judgement and its dispassionate storytelling, it is not only unlike other *fabliaux* in *The Canterbury Tales*; it is also unlike all other *fabliaux*, regardless of source.<sup>516</sup> Thus though the content—the illicit sex, the cheating, the cuckoldry—is typically French, the telling of the story is not. One may, however, take issue with Finlayson—other of Chaucer's *fabliaux* discussed in the present chapter are ambiguous as to ethics, and some French *fabliaux* appear devoid of moral judgment, as discussed in Chapter two.

Many have pointed to Boccaccio's *Decameron* (8. 1 and 8. 2) as a possible source.<sup>517</sup> *Decameron* (8. 1) uses the theme of money in exchange for sex, and has a mercantile setting; *Decameron* (8. 2) uses property (a cloak) and has a peasant setting and a priest. Significantly, in *Decameron* (8. 2), when the priest (Varlungo) approaches the wife (Monna Belcolore), she asks him what he is doing in the heat ("per questo

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<sup>513</sup> Hines, *the Fabliau in English*, p. 72.

<sup>514</sup> Spargo, 'Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*: The Lover's Gift Regained', p. 55.

<sup>515</sup> John Scattergood, 'The *Shipman's Tale*', Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales: Volume I*, pp. 565–582 (p. 566).

<sup>516</sup> John Finlayson, 'Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*, Boccaccio, and the "Civilizing" of Fabliau', *The Chaucer Review*, 36 (2002), 336–351 (p. 336).

<sup>517</sup> Scattergood, 'The *Shipman's Tale*', p. 567.

caldo"). This is reflected in Chaucer's lines, when Daun John counsels the merchant to "Governeth yow also of youre diete / Atemprely, and namely in this hete" (261–262). This, argues Richard Guerin, is too close a similarity for *Decameron* (8. 2) not to have been a source.<sup>518</sup>

There are elements present in Sercambi's *Novelle XXXII*. This, like the *Shipman's Tale* and like *Decameron* (8. 1) has a mercantile setting, but has elements present in Chaucer but absent in Boccaccio: the meeting and the payment are arranged for the next Sunday; the husband leaves on the day following the wife's and the lover's agreement; the husband is surprised to find his wife has not told him the loan is repayed.<sup>519</sup> This makes the *Novelle* a plausible source. However, the *Novelle* has been dated with certainty only to 1400—too late to have influenced *The Canterbury Tales*—though a version dating from 1374 might have existed.<sup>520</sup>

Nonetheless, *The Shipman's Tale* is notably different from *Decameron* (8. 1 and 8. 2) and the *Novelle XXXII*. In comparing the *Shipman's Tale* with the *Decameron*, Spargo points out that, while the wife in Boccaccio's version is associated with excessive sexual desires, "Chaucer does not depict the wife as miserly or sordid in any way, but as just the reverse".<sup>521</sup> There is no indication in the tale of how much, or if, the wife in Chaucer's version obtains sexual pleasure; there is similarly no indication of whether she enjoys deceiving her husband. As with his portrayal of Damyan in *The Merchant's Tale*, Chaucer omits unnecessary details in his characterisation of the wife. In this regard, Spargo points to differences between Chaucer's and Boccaccio's versions of the tale. Boccaccio's wife, he says, unlike Chaucer's wife, unambiguously wants sex because of lust. There is also the difference that Boccaccio paints the husband as unambiguously unpleasant—so he deserves to be cuckolded—but Chaucer portrays the husband as sympathetic figure.

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<sup>518</sup> Ibid.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid., p. 569.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Spargo, 'Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*, *The Lover's Gift Regained*', p. 12. See also Albert H. Silverman, 'Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*', *Philological Quarterly*, 32 (1953), 329–336 (p. 331).

The tale suggests that Chaucer was, from today's perspective, more feminist than Boccaccio and Sercambi. Indeed, it is the ambiguity of the wife—on the one hand gaining our contempt for her deceitfulness; on the other gaining our admiration for turning a bad situation to best advantage—that lends the tale its humour. And though it is Daun John who gains most, ostensibly from the exchange (he has, in effect, got the merchant to pay him to cuckold him), it is the wife who comes out the “winner”. However, Chaucer's sympathetic portrayal of the merchant is in contrast to the *fabliaux* tradition in which the cuckold merely receives poetic justice.<sup>522</sup>

Cathy Hume has pointed to sources other than *fabliaux* and other tales current in the fourteenth century. She calls especial attention to writings of the role of women in fourteenth century Europe, particularly the wives of merchants.<sup>523</sup> Several late fourteenth-century texts, including *Le Menagier de Paris*, written around 1394, and *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, written in French around 1371, point to the wifely duty to manage the household and to entertain guests. They also point to the duty of the wife to socially network; to ensure that her husband has many friends; to rule servants efficiently; to dress well in order to accord her husband status; and to help him, where possible, in business. Such women were also allowed some financial independence. Chaucer, because of the social circles in which he operated, would doubtless have been aware of such views—he may even have read the literature on them prevalent in his day—and thus used them to give *The Shipman's Tale* its more sympathetic view of the adulterous wife. Boccaccio (*Decameron* 8. 1), by contrast, has the wife shamed in front of her husband, the servants, and the community.

Hume's thesis is plausible, for we are continually reminded of the wife's functions. When in the garden, meeting Daun John, we hear:

A mayde child cam in hire compaignye,

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<sup>522</sup> Finlayson, 'Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*, Boccaccio, and the "Civilizing" of Fabliau', p. 336.

<sup>523</sup> Cathy Hume, 'Domestic Opportunities: The Social Comedy of *the Shipman's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 41 (2006) 138–162 (p. 138).

Which as hir list she may governe and gye,  
For yet under the yerde was the mayde. (*The Shipman's Tale*, 95–97)

So, it is the wife's duty to govern the servants.

She must also keep up appearances:

An hundred frankes, or ellis I am lorn.  
Yet were me levere that I were unborn  
Than me were doon a sclaudre or vileynye; (*The Shipman's Tale*, 181–183)

She is also in charge of the food:

And bad the cookes that they sholde hem hye,  
So that men myghte dyne, and that anon (*The Shipman's Tale*, 210–211)

Thus, the wife knows her duties, knows her rights, and knows her powers. She is not a chattel.

### ***Characterisation and metaphor***

Several authorities comment on the link in *The Shipman's Tale* between sex and money. Thus, for example, Hume argues that the wife uses the opportunities afforded by her bourgeois lifestyle to wheedle money out of the monk.<sup>524</sup> She is, in effect, a prostitute, a conclusion shared by Finlayson.<sup>525</sup> Albert Silverman has pointed out that it is appropriate that the wife's husband is a merchant—a person who will trade in anything—and, because the wife trades sex for money, the tale is a satire on the merchant class.<sup>526</sup> Beidler, taking the wife's assertion of the merchant's stinginess at face value, argues that the wife is thereby forced into prostitution and,

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<sup>524</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>525</sup> Finlayson, 'Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*, Boccaccio, and the "Civilizing" of Fabliau', p. 345.

<sup>526</sup> Silverman, 'Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*', p. 335.

far from deserving our condemnation, deserves our sympathy.<sup>527</sup> The association between sex and money is made elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales*. Gila Aloni has called attention to the repeated use of money in exchange for favours in *The Cook's Tale*,<sup>528</sup> and William Woods has argued that the trade exemplifies the rottenness at the heart of medieval society.<sup>529</sup> Woods also calls attention to the exchange between the merchant and the monk in which the merchant equates gold with sex.<sup>530</sup> Thus:

“But o thyng is, ye knowe it wel ynogh  
Of chapmen, that hir moneie is hir *plough*.  
We may creauce whil we have a name,  
But *goldless* for to be, it is no game”. (*The Shipman's Tale*, 287–90;  
emphases added).

A plough, although a sexual symbol, is also a crude, loveless metaphor. As used in *The Shipman's Tale*, in its link with money, it reinforces the equation of sex for money; Fulton says:

The equation of money and plough suggests that the merchant sees himself as essential and productive as the ploughman producing food from the fields, but all he actually does in the tale is to make a profit for himself through currency exchange, while the wife and the monk benefit from the same economic system. The merchant has nothing to sell except his own good name, his wife has nothing to sell but her body, and all three characters are unproductive in a way that the humblest ploughman is not.<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> See Peter G. Beidler, ‘The Price of Sex in Chaucer’s “*Shipman's Tale*”’, *The Chaucer Review*, 31 (1996), 5–17.

<sup>528</sup> Gila Aloni, ‘Extimacy in *the Miller's Tale*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 41 (2006), 163–184 (p. 178).

<sup>529</sup> William F. Woods, ‘Society and Nature in the *Cook's Tale*’, *Papers on Language and Literature*, 32 (1996), 189–205 (p. 192). Woods connects the theme of corruption in *the Cook's Tale* to the increasing rottenness of late fourteenth-century English urban culture.

<sup>530</sup> Woods, *Chaucerian Spaces*, p. 114.

<sup>531</sup> Helen Fulton, ‘Mercantile Ideology in Chaucer’s *Shipman's Tale*’, p. 320.

Woods observes that “gold is a merchant’s irreplaceable tool, the plough that breaks the market earth, with its associations of fertility, sexuality, and manliness”.<sup>532</sup>

Woods has a point. We hear near the end of the tale of the wife’s ability to earn silver (“Of silver in thy purs shaltow nat faille”, 248). There is thus the implication that the wife uses her vagina to earn silver. However, silver is less precious than gold; hence there is also the implication that the wife is of lower economic status and power than the husband—wives may earn only silver, but husbands may earn gold, too. In this regard Crocker argues, in effect, that the merchant, at the beginning of the tale at least, views his wife purely as an ornament, as his porperty.

The use of gold as a metaphor for sex is ironic given the merchant’s advice to the monk when he lends Daun John the one hundred francs:

Now sikerly this is a smal requeste.

My gold is youres, whan that it yow leste,

And not oonly my gold, but my chaffare.

Take what yow list, God shilde that ye spare. (*The Shipman’s Tale*, 283–286).

By saying the monk is free to use the merchant’s gold as he wishes, the merchant—intentionally or otherwise—is giving the monk symbolic permission to cuckold him.

Woods makes four observations on this.<sup>533</sup> First, the merchant might be aware that the monk is a sexual predator and rival. By this interpretation, the merchant is saying to the monk that the monk may have his wife, but only if he returns her. Second, there appears a relation between female pudenda and economic assets; thus the merchant says to his wife: “Keep bet thy good, this yeve I thee in charge” (432). Third, the merchant appears, not only to know of his wife’s infidelity, but also to forgive her (“Now wyf,” he seyde, “and I foryeve it thee / But, by thy lyf, ne be

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<sup>532</sup> Woods, *Chaucerian Spaces*, p. 114.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

namoore so large", 430–431). Fourth, the wife's infidelity empowers her, and the merchant acknowledges this ("Keep bet thy good", 432).

Fourteenth century views as to adultery were more lenient than those of earlier times. The merchant is portrayed as kind man—either a cuckolded fool but otherwise benevolent man, or a knowing cuckold who forgives (and understands) his wife's infidelity. The villain is the monk. Here, in contrast to French *fabliaux* and as in *The Merchant's Tale*, Chaucer is sympathetic to a cuckolded husband.

There are, as is discussed below, problems with Crocker's view that the wife is viewed only as a chattel.<sup>534</sup> Nonetheless, Crocker has a point. There is the suggestion that, by the end of the tale, the wife has been liberated by her infidelity: she can earn at least some money. Woods comments "The wife, who had earlier been entirely dependent upon resources outside her, has discovered richer ones within her own person".<sup>535</sup> This is a slightly different take on wifely infidelity from that presented in *The Merchant's Tale*. May, in the latter tale, intimates that she will be unfaithful in future, but, in May's case, the suggestion is that she will do so purely from lust (or, possibly, love); but in the wife's case, the infidelity need only be for financial advantage.

Another aspect to the prostitution aspect of the tale is the sex allusion, for it is only after the merchant's visit to Italy, that is, after he has become seriously rich, that the wife becomes seriously interested in him. The idea of prostitution is further reinforced by the merchant's advice to the monk that "To stoore with a place that is *oures*. / God helpe me so, I wolde it were *youres*!" (272–274; emphases added). The house, the living room, the bedroom are open to the monk; so also, presumably, is the wife's body. The merchant appears complicit in his wife's infidelity.

Nonetheless, it is debatable whether the wife can be viewed as a prostitute. One can make some general points on this. First, it is likely that Chaucer originally intended

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<sup>534</sup> Holly A. Crocker. *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 121.

<sup>535</sup> Woods, *Chaucerian Spaces*, p. 114.

the tale to be told by the Wife of Bath. This is evidenced by the opening lines, in which the Shipman—evidently a man—talks as though he is a wife:

He moot us clothe, and he moot us arraye,  
Al for his owene worshipe richely,  
In which array we daunce jolily (*The Shipman's Tale*, 12–14).

Either Chaucer did not have time to put the finishing touches to the tale here, or he deemed doing so unimportant. In any event, the Wife of Bath is the only married female narrator in *The Canterbury Tales*, so it would seem that when the narrator likens himself to other wives, the original intent was to make the tale the Wife of Bath's.

The ambiguity as to the gender of the teller of the tale has led Crocker to argue that the ambiguity is deliberate because “Unlike other *fabliaux*, *the Shipman's Tale* admits that women have agency, and it suggests that such control is legitimate in this transactional world of manly exchange”.<sup>536</sup> Crocker has a point in that, as is argued elsewhere in the present thesis (see especially discussions on *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Physician's Tale*), Chaucer was sympathetic to what would now be viewed as feminism. Crocker is incorrect, however, in saying that *The Shipman's Tale* is the only *fabliau* that provides women agency. Outside of Chaucer, one need only think of *The Mouse in the Basket* (see Chapter two), in which the wife clearly has domination over her husband, and within Chaucer one need only think of *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale*, in each of which, as is discussed in the present chapter, the wives play active role in cuckolding their husbands. Thus Crocker misses the point. The point of *The Shipman's Tale* is not to empower women—Chaucer does this repeatedly elsewhere (see especially discussion on *The Wife of Bath's Tale*). Rather, it is to present a view of sexual relations that is based entirely on financial advantage; this view is very different from those presented in, for instance, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* (female domination), *The Clerk's Tale* (fidelity), and *The Man of Law's Tale* (virtue).

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<sup>536</sup> Crocker. *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood*, p. 121.



Given this, and given that the Wife of Bath, bawdy as she is, is not a prostitute, it would seem unfair to brand the merchant's wife as one. Moreover, the Wife of Bath admits freely that she married for money. If one were to view the merchant's wife as a prostitute, one would have to view the Wife of Bath as one, too.

It is also notable that people in medieval Europe distinguished between prostitutes—that is, women whose livelihoods depended on selling sex to strangers—from *meretrices*, or loose women.<sup>537</sup> This was a different use of the term *meretrix* from its Latin original, which had in Roman times been used to denote prostitutes. By the fourteenth century, medieval usage had changed. When legal medieval writers spoke of prostitutes, they sometimes used the term *mulieres publice* (public women);<sup>538</sup> at others, they used the term *meretrix publica* (that is, publically loose women as opposed to privately loose women). Prostitution was tolerated, if not accepted, throughout medieval Europe, and, unlike in Roman times, prostitutes could attain a level of respectability after they gave up their trade. Indeed, many former prostitutes became saints,<sup>539</sup> St Mary of Egypt (c. 344–c. 421) being a notorious example.<sup>540</sup> Finally on medieval attitudes to prostitution, the distinction between prostitutes and loose women was codified in law: prostitutes were forbidden to ply their trade in certain places, for instance, but loose women were not.<sup>541</sup>

*The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, a book commenced by Geoffroy IV de la Tour Landry in 1371 and translated into English by William Caxton, points out that some women have sex to get money, others, however, have sex just because of their own lustiness and sexually immoral behaviour:

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<sup>537</sup> Leah Lydia Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of an Urban Institution in Languedoc* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 11.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>540</sup> Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, p. 105.

<sup>541</sup> A Toulouse charter, dating from 1201, for instance, forbids prostitutes (termed *meretrix publica*) from residing within the city walls. See Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, p. 17.

These sorts of women which take as their paramours and love such folk [married men, priests and monks, and servants and “folk of naught”], I hold them of no esteem or value; they are greater harlots than those who are daily at the brothel. For many women of the world do that sin of lechery only because of need and poverty, or else because they have been deceived into it by the false counsel of bawds. But all gentlewomen who have enough to live on, who make their paramours such manner of folk as before is said, it is by the great ease wherein they are, and by the burning lechery of their bodies.<sup>542</sup>

Prostitutes solicit sex for money from strangers, and they often do so in public. The wife, in *The Shipman's Tale*, does not. She solicits sex for money from her husband's friend, and she does so in private. Had Chaucer wished to represent her as a simple prostitute, he would have depicted her having sex with someone else, someone previously unknown to her. The only caveat to this is that it is an open question whether Chaucer's portrayal of marriage in *The Shipman's Tale* is as a form of “respectable prostitution” or of the ambiguities inherent in female sexuality.

Nonetheless, there is an unpleasant aspect to the merchant's wife. In demanding one hundred francs off the monk, she backbites against her husband:

As helpe me God, he is noght worth at al  
In no degree the value of a flye.  
But yet me greveth moost his nygardye.  
And wel ye woot that wommen naturelly  
Desiren thynges sixe as wel as I:  
They wolde that hir housbondes sholde be  
Hardy and wise, and riche, and therto free (*The Shipman's Tale*, 170–176)

Thus the wife attests that her husband is a niggard, and suggests that he is impotent (he is not worth, in any way at all, the value of a fly). But we have only the wife's

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<sup>542</sup> Geoffroy de La Tour Landry, *Livre pour l'enseignement de ses filles du Chevalier de La Tour Landry*, trans., by William Caxton, ed., by M. Y. Offord (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 169.

testimony for this, and only when she is brazenly trying to extract money from Daun John. Elsewhere, we hear from the Shipman that the merchant is far from being a niggard.

This noble marchaunt heeld a worthy hous,  
For which he hadde alday so greet repair  
For his largesse, and for his wyf was fair (*The Shipman's Tale*, 20–22)

So, the merchant is not only rich; he keeps an open house, and freely distributes his wealth to his guests. The Shipman also refers to the merchant twice as being a “goode man” (29 and 33), a description affirmed by Daun John (107). The merchant’s humanity is also attested by his agreement to loan the monk the one hundred francs, his willingness to forget the debt when he hears that it has been paid (to his wife), his embarrassment at having to remind the monk of the debt, and the speed with which he forgives his wife for spending the money without his permission.

The monk, in contrast to the merchant, appears duplicitous. He pays numerous visits to the merchant’s house, and shows too much generosity to the servants of the house and to the merchant. He promises the wife money, knowing that, in effect, he will steal it from the merchant. The wife is also inspired by this faux generosity, and that, of course, is the monk’s intention.

A suggestion of the impotency of the husband arises when the monk points to the issue. The monk warns the girl that she looks very pale and placid in the morning which he believes is the result of her being such in the morning-after. This is the key passage:

“Nece,” quod he, “it oghte ynough suffise  
Fyve houres for to slepe upon a nyght,  
But it were for an old appalled wight,  
As been thise wedded men, that lye and dare  
As in a fourme sit a wery *hare*,  
Were al forstraught with *houndes* grete and smale.  
But deere nece, why be ye so pale?”

I trowe, certes, that oure goode man  
Hath yow laboured sith the nyght bigan  
That yow were nede to resten hastily. “  
And with that word he lough ful murily,  
And of his owene thought he wax al *reed*. (*The Shipman's Tale*, 100–111;  
emphases added)

The monk thus suggests the wife looks tired because she has been having too much sex. The animal imagery in the passage (hare, hounds) lends the monk's words sexual innuendo. Also, the monk is turning red; this could be indicative of the monk's embarrassment at having “overstepped the line”, or it could be indicative of his lust for the wife, inflamed by images of her in bed with her husband.

Nonetheless, the wife contradicts him: “In all the reawme of France is ther no wyf. / That lasse lust hath to that sory pley” (116–117).

In her critique of this passage, Crocker comes close to contradicting herself. She states: “the monk assumes a posture of familiarity that asserts sexual control over the wife”.<sup>543</sup> But Crocker also argues (see above) that *The Shipman's Tale* is one of female emancipation, in which event the wife could easily be playing with the monk. And there are other interpretations of the passage. It could easily be a depiction of simple flirtation; it could also be a critique of the debauchery of fourteenth century priesthood. There is no need, in other words, to read male chauvinism into the passage.

Nonetheless, Crocker has a point. She states: “[the monk views the wife] as a passive player in their relations, a conduit through whom their masculine good cheer is circulated, the monk acts as if he can tease her in the same way that he would her husband”.<sup>544</sup> Thus Chaucer depicts the monk as *thinking* that he and the merchant are in control of the wife—she is, as indicated, an ornament, a plaything—but, as we

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<sup>543</sup> Crocker. *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood*, p. 125.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

discover later in the tale, it is she who is in control of her destiny. In this interpretation, it is the wife who is the manipulative agent.

Although the wife may be lying to the monk about her husband, she is quick to convey that, just like the wife of Bath, she believes that monetary welfare and sexual gratification are necessary; Fulton points out that:

The wife then repays the loan to her husband in the converted currency, and the monk, who has acted as banker and loan-broker between husband and wife, is paid commission on the deal in the form of some of the sexual favours which belong to the husband. Like the merchant, he has therefore benefited from a favourable exchange rate.<sup>545</sup>

Silverman makes a related point.<sup>546</sup> Although, as argued above, the wife should no more be thought a prostitute than should the Wife of Bath, sex in exchange for money permeates the tale. The tale starts with an affirmation that a husband must pay, generously, for his wife.

Swiche salutaciouns and contenaunces  
Passen as dooth a shadwe upon the wal;  
But wo is hym that payen moot for al!  
The sely housbonde, algate he moot paye,  
He moot us clothe, and he moot us arraye,  
Al for his owene worshipe richely,  
In which array we daunce jolily (*The Shipman's Tale*, 8–14)

This introductory part of the tale illustrates that the husband needs to be generous to his wife, or she will find other ways of satisfying her needs. It is clear that Chaucer points to candour in both sex and money; the husband needs to satisfy his wife in terms of both money and sex;<sup>547</sup> this is similar to the Wife of Bath, who is likewise

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<sup>545</sup> Fulton, 'Mercantile Ideology in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*', p. 318.

<sup>546</sup> Silverman, 'Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*', p. 330.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.

unable to decouple sex from money. Later in *The Shipman's Tale*, the wife is explicit that she will trade sex with Daun John if he gives her the one hundred francs.

Lene me this somme, or ellis moot I deye.  
Daun John, I seye, lene me thise hundred frankes.  
Pardee, I wol nat faille yow my thanks,  
If that yow list to doon that I yow praye.  
For at a certeyn day I wol yow paye,  
And doon to yow wh4tat plesance and service  
That I may doon, right as yow list devise. (*The Shipman's Tale*, 186–192)

As indicated, there is no suggestion of lust or love on the part of the wife. Crocker argues that the sex is a purely financial exchange: “She does not want a lover, a man who expects her attachment to him to last for more than the single meeting to which she agrees”.<sup>548</sup> Again one may take issue with Crocker. Although there is nothing in the text to suggest that the wife enjoys sex with the monk, there is nothing in the text to suggest that she *does not*. Chaucer, Crocker fails to appreciate, could be deliberately ambiguous.

The wife's confession to the monk makes clear that, if he gives her money, she will then be able to fulfil his every wish. She does not hesitate to mention her intent to the monk straightaway. The tale climaxes with the suggestion that the merchant will have to continue paying for sex (“Ye shal my joly body have to wedde; / By God, I wol nat paye yow but abedde”—423–424). Thus one can say Silverman is correct in asserting that the tale is illustrative of “increasing sardonicism” rather than a harmless, if bawdy, story.<sup>549</sup> Unlike the Wife of Bath, who similarly trades sex for money and is possibly capable of infidelity, the wife exhibits no charm or erudition. Also, as Crocker correctly notes, she appears to be a better merchant than her husband in that, in selling her body, she gains sensual and fiscal benefits from her

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<sup>548</sup> Crocker. *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood*, p. 126.

<sup>549</sup> Silverman, ‘Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*’, p. 329.

trade.<sup>550</sup> In this, the monk serves as a conduit through which she effects her deception.<sup>551</sup>

The impression of sexlessness of money in exchange for sex is reinforced in two ways. First, the description of sex is brief and mechanical (“Have hire in his armes bolt upright; / And this acord parfourned was in dede”, 316–317). Second, the merchant, either when counting his money or when out on business, is studiously not enjoying himself. In the former, we are told he shuts himself alone in his room so as not to be distracted; in the latter we are told, when in Bruges, he concentrates on being a merchant (“He neither pleyeth at the dees ne daunceth”, 304). We also hear that he enjoys company, and, indeed, he enjoys fine food and wine. This suggests that, unlike his wife, the merchant sees the making of money as necessary for human enjoyment, but not necessarily part of it. To the merchant, sex is divorced from the making of money, but to the wife the two are inseparable.

There is also use of the word *cousin*. David Abraham has argued that the repeated use of the term (it occurs sixteen times in *The Shipman's Tale*, but only eight times in the entirety of the remainder of *The Canterbury Tales* he says, incorrectly—it occurs nine times in *The Knight's Tale*) is no accident.<sup>552</sup> Abraham argues that *cousin* is a pun on the word *cozen*, meaning “prostitute” or “cheat”.

Hume, among others, dismisses Abraham's argument.<sup>553</sup> He argues instead that the repeated use of *cousin* merely serves to reinforce the social nexus of the three main characters in the tale (aristocrats of the period often addressed each other as “cousin”, in part out of politeness and in part because they really were related—the term

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<sup>550</sup> Crocker. *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood*, p. 108.

<sup>551</sup> Silverman, ‘Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*’, p. 335.

<sup>552</sup> David H. Abraham, ‘*Cosyn and Cosynage*: Pun and Structure in the *Shipman's Tale*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 11 (1977), 319–27(p. 320).

<sup>553</sup> Hume, ‘Domestic Opportunities: The Social Comedy of *the Shipman's Tale*’, p. 144.

*cousin*, as used in the period, incidentally, was used as a form of address, not only between cousins, but also between other relatives.<sup>554</sup>

Nonetheless, Hume's point seems implausible. If, as he correctly states, the use of the word *cousin* was so ubiquitous in medieval society, why, one may ask, is it so rare elsewhere in the *Tales*? Moreover, as its relatively frequent use in *The Knight's Tale* testifies, the term *cousin* was mainly used by members of the aristocracy, not merchants. Further, even in *The Knight's Tale*, the term is only used in Book I (six times), before Palamon and Arcite come to blows, and Book IV (three times), after Arcite is injured and dying. The use of *cousin* in *The Knight's Tale*, in other words, is appropriate for a courtly romance; its use in *The Shipman's Tale*, by contrast, if it were not a sexual pun, would be inappropriate..

Moreover, Abraham's suggestion, given use of puns elsewhere in the tale, is plausible. If used as "cheat" or "prostitute", it would certainly make sense. It is used especially for the monk and the wife. Moreover, the monk asserts that the merchant is not a blood relative ("He is na moore cosyn unto me", 149), from which one could read the merchant is honest but the other two protagonists are not.

A less ambiguous pun is Chaucer's use of "tallying". The wife tells the merchant:

For I wol paye yow wel and redily  
 Fro day to day, and if so be I faille,  
 I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille (*The Shipman's Tale*, 414–416)

For "taille" here one could read "tally" (meaning account—again, there is an association between sex and money), but one could also read "tail" (meaning pudendum). The same *double entendre* is used in the closing lines of the tale: "Thus

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<sup>554</sup> Matt Ridley comments that, so strict were the Church's rules on marriage between relatives, that, by 1100, a nobleman found that this "excluded most noble women within three hundred miles" from marriage. See Ridley, *The Red Queen*, p. 233. For use of the word *cousin* in medieval England and Europe, see, e.g., Terttu Nevalainen and Helena Raumolin-Brunberg, 'Constraints on Politeness: The Pragmatics of Address Formulae in Early English Correspondence', in *Historical Pragmatics: Pragmatic Developments in the History of English*, ed., by Andreas H. Jucker (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: John Benjamins. 1995), pp. 541–602 (pp. 572, 573).



endeth my tale, and God us sende / Tallynge ynough unto oure lyves ende. Amen” (433–434). The Shipman here implies both settlements of debts as well as sexual intercourse. The same use of the word *tally* occurs in the text shortly before the wife offers her tail (genitals) to his husband in lieu of the hundred francs that she had stolen from him. She says: “I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille” (416).

It is clear that the use of the word *tail* here means both the account as well as the slang word that is used by the Wife of Bath in her *Prologue*; the Wife refers to her vagina as a “taille” (416) or tally—as if “it were a kind of credit facility”.<sup>555</sup> Again, later in her *Prologue*, she links her liking of wine with her liking of the sex. She says: “A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tayl” (466).<sup>556</sup>

Although not as cynical as *The Merchant's Tale*, or as dark and bawdy as *The Reeve's Tale*, *The Shipman's Tale* appears more than a simple sex comedy. The wife is a calculating woman, and one who cleverly gets herself out of trouble when discovered by her husband that she has received money that she has not previously admitted to. It is ambiguous, however, in that it is unclear whether the wife is just *a* wife or symbolic of *all* wives. Because of this, it is unclear whether it is a depiction of a marriage or marriage in general. Nonetheless, there is a hint. The lack of sexual imagery in the tale pertaining to love (flowers) or to fecundity (fruit) suggests that “The merchant's marriage is based on the contractual exchange of commodities, financial support in return for sexual favours”, and that the wife is just one wife among many possible stereotypes.<sup>557</sup> Here, it is what Chaucer does not do that is as revealing as what he actually does. Thus Chaucer keeps us guessing as to what (he thinks) is the real nature of marriage. Silverman says:

The additional twist given by Chaucer to the ending, whereby the wife deflects to her husband the trickery visited upon herself, puts the *Shipman's Tale* in the company of Chaucer's many observations upon the married state.

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<sup>555</sup> Cartlidge, ‘Marriage, Sexuality and the Family’, in Saunders, *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, p. 227.

<sup>556</sup> Silverman, ‘Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*’, p. 331.

<sup>557</sup> Fulton, ‘Mercantile Ideology in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*’, p. 317.

For whereas the analogues focus upon the act of adultery and make what fun they can out of the treachery and insincerity of such an act, Chaucer's tale begins and ends with dramatic insights into the husband-wife relationship against a background of adultery. His technical device for pointing up the cynical relationship between husband and wife is the *double entendre*, upon which turn the many variations on the theme of the sex-money alliance.<sup>558</sup>

Unlike other of Chaucer's *fabliaux*—most notably *The Merchant's Tale*—*The Shipman's Tale* uses few sexual symbols. It uses, as do *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Knight's Tale*, a garden as a scene for sexual attraction, but in doing so mentions neither flowers nor fruit (as indicated in the discussion on Bosch, potent sexual symbols). Indeed, the garden in the story may simply be a plot device (the wife has to be out of earshot from her husband when she solicits Daun John). Food and wine are mentioned in the tale, but not in the context of sex. Moreover, the use of wine in the tale may merely be to produce local colour—the tale is set in France and Flanders, where people drank wine, not ale. Birds, however, are mentioned. The wife is likened to a magpie (“And forth she gooth as jolif as a pye”—309). Magpies are not only sexual symbols; they are also thieves (the Wife of Bath, as is discussed below, is also likened to a magpie). The reference to a magpie comes just after the wife has arranged her tryst with Daun John. For his part, the monk is twice likened to a fowl (38 and 51) and is also shown eating fowl (with the merchant) (72). The fowl could be a sexual symbol. However, the use of the term *fowl* could also be a pun. The wife promises God's vengeance on herself “As foul as evere hadde Genylon of France” (194) should she fail to keep her word with him.

Such an interpretation would give added richness to the tale. The equation of sex with money—that is, loveless sex—need not be only a cynical view of female sexuality. It could also be a view of a Church that was, literally, loveless. We have no indication that the merchant equates sex with money. At the extreme, the tale could portray a Church that was not only debauched; it was also one that was happy

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<sup>558</sup> Silverman, ‘Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*’, p. 336.

to defraud honest business people. Thus, the association of debased sex with the clergy may be viewed as a pointed critique of the Church.

*The Shipman's Tale* leaves much unsaid. We do not know if the merchant views his wife purely as an adornment, or whether he views her as someone to be cherished. We do not know if he is aware of his wife's infidelity, or is a fool who is outwitted by the monk. We do not know whether the wife is unfaithful purely through cupidity or who seeks more (love, sexual gratification . . .). We do know, however, that the monk is a schemer, and that it is he who is unambiguously unpleasant. We likewise know that the equation between sex and money is asymmetrical—the wife trades sex for money, so sex may therefore be, from a female perspective, a purely economic arrangement. Chaucer is much more subtle than arguing simplistically for male versus female rights. He documents the different types of sexual relations that existed within his times. *The Shipman's Tale* may thus be viewed as a snapshot of one aspect of medieval marital life, but not as a portrait of *all* marital life in the Middle Ages, or of all women.

### **Conclusion**

The erotic of Chaucer's *fabliaux* is thematised through the pleasures of laughter, touch, and taste. These sometimes overlap. Alison, May, and Malyne are associated with food and animals to emphasize their lasciviousness.

Chaucer's *fabliaux* are unlike the French *fabliaux*. They are longer; they have rounder characters; they present realistic stories. Apropos this last point, nobody could believe that *The Mouse in the Basket* or *The Knight who Made Cunts Talk* really happened; in contrast, *The Merchant's Tale*—up to the restoration of Januarie's sight—is credible, and similar could be said of Chaucer's other *fabliaux*. Chaucer's *fabliaux* are also more subtle than those of Boccaccio. Chaucer adds to *Decameron* (9, 6), as indicated, by bringing in different motivations for sex. Sex, in Chaucer, need not only be about lust; it can also be about violence, about revenge.

The four *fabliaux* discussed in the present chapter can easily be viewed as presenting a cynical view of marriage. All present unfaithful wives. Nonetheless, they are humane. We sympathise with the characters. We understand May's infidelity in *The*

*Merchant's Tale* because of the ghastliness of her marriage; we understand Malyne's "love" because of the conceit of her parents, which has made her, in effect, unmarriageable.

The tales, despite being *fabliaux*, are varied. In *The Shipman's Tale* the motivation is only for money; in *The Merchant's Tale* the motivation is lust; in *The Reeve's Tale* it is for revenge. The characters are also varied. Although, for example, both *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale* involve wives trapped in marriages to old men, the characters are different: Januarie is portrayed, after he has lost his sight, as a kind man; John, by contrast, is portrayed as a credulous fool throughout.

Like the French *fabliaux*, Chaucer's *fabliaux* employ erotic imagery. But the imagery in Chaucer is more subtle. Chaucer's erotic imagery in his *fabliaux* helps round the characters and to further the plots. Its absence in *The Shipman's Tale* is to good purpose; the imagery in *The Merchant's Tale*, in its use of a walled garden and a pear tree, makes a mockery of courtly romance; the use of grain and grinding in *The Reeve's Tale* highlights the coarseness of the male protagonists; the use of the coulter in *The Miller's Tale* adds to the humour, for Nicolas is effeminate and therefore possibly homosexual, so he is metaphorically sodomised and thereby punished.

In this regard, Chaucer's *fabliaux* impinge on his romances, and vice versa. As has been argued above, Chaucer blends genres in his *fabliaux*. He does the same in his romances, as is argued below. While representations of heterosexual encounters in English romances before Chaucer address sexual desire, and, in effect, work to maintain a social mystique about sexuality, Chaucer's romances challenge medieval social, religious, and sexual mores, particularly as regards fourteenth century notions of chivalry. Chaucer's *fabliaux* and romances allow licensed expression of aspects of life that are contradictory and distressing. Chaucer uses eroticism, both in his *fabliaux* and his romances, not as pornography, but as a vehicle to criticize the mores of his day.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CHAUCER'S ROMANCES AND THE EROTIC

The purpose of the present chapter is to show that, as with his *fabliaux*, Chaucer disrupts the romance genre. He did this, not by including *fabliaux* elements in his *Canterbury Tale* romances, but by turning the genre into a critique of chivalry and religious mores, not a celebration of them. Chaucer's erotic *Canterbury Tale* romances are seditious.

As with Chaucer's *fabliaux*, his romances lack a clear taxonomy.<sup>559</sup> Robert Jordan observes that, if one takes a definition of romance as a tale concerning "knightly love", neither *The Clerk's Tale* nor *The Man of Law's Tale* is much concerned with knightly love, though each is regarded as a romance, and that *The Merchant's Tale*, though describing a knight's love, is regarded as a *fabliau*.<sup>560</sup> Similarly, J. A. Burrow observes that the only Chaucerian romance with an Arthurian setting is *The Wife of Bath's Tale*.<sup>561</sup> Burrow states that Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* romances comprise only *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, *The Squire's Tale*, *The Franklin's Tale*, and *The Knight's Tale*. Burrow is using a different definition from that of Jordan, for he does not include *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Man of Law's Tale*. Also, curiously, Burrow does not include *The Physician's Tale* although the tale is included, albeit in slightly different form, in *The Romance of the Rose*.

Helen Cooper argues that typical romances were set in exotic places, times, or both, and that they dealt mainly with love and chivalry, and that other features included songs of heroic deeds (*chansons de geste*), high ranking characters, quests, magic, and a concern more for the hero's "inward thoughts, feelings, and aspirations" than for the "communal good".<sup>562</sup> Although not all of these features are present in *The Physician's Tale* (there is no *chanson de geste*, no quest, and no magic), the tale is

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<sup>559</sup> Robert M. Jordan, 'Chaucerian Romance?', *Yale French Studies*, 51 (1974), 223–234 (p. 223).

<sup>560</sup> Ibid.

<sup>561</sup> J. A. Burrow, 'The *Canterbury Tales* I: Romance', in Boitani and Mann, *the Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, pp. 143–159 (p. 143).

<sup>562</sup> Helen Cooper, *the English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 10.

set in an exotic time and place, it involves high ranking characters, and it concerns these characters' thoughts and emotions, not the communal good.

The present study takes a broad view of romances. As discussed in Chapter two, a romance may be an ostensibly epic tale of heroic deeds, or it may, again ostensibly, be one of courtly as opposed to sexual love; in either case, the tale is set in a distant (in time or geography) setting. On this definition, several of *The Canterbury Tales* would qualify as romances, including *The Clerk's Tale* and *The Man of Law's Tale*. However, the term *ostensibly* in the above definition is two-edged: on close examination, there appears little that is "courtly" in the knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and *The Physician's Tale* is one, of anything, perverted love.

The present study is concerned mainly with the erotic in Chaucer. Only three of his *Canterbury Tale* romances are overtly erotic: *The Knight's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and *The Physician's Tale*; so only these tales are discussed in detail here.

### **The Knight's Tale**

*The Knight's Tale* encapsulates the ideals of courtly love: it portrays love as akin to an illness. The lovers lose the ability to sleep because they are tormented by love; they pine hopelessly for an unattainable woman. The tale is concerned with the effects of erotic desire on men; it is less concerned with the desires themselves.

The tale is the first story of Fragment I of *The Canterbury Tales*. With 2250 lines, it is by far the longest. It was, as Saunders comments, possibly written as a work in its own right.<sup>563</sup> Not only is it longer than other of *The Canterbury Tales*, it is also cited in the *Prologue to The Legend of Good Women* (written about 1386, i.e., some time before the composition of other *Canterbury Tales*). It is also an unambiguous tale of courtly love, and as such complements *Troilus and Criseyde*. Saunders states, as regards the portrayal of Emily as a love goddess,

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<sup>563</sup> Saunders, 'Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*', in Saunders, *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, p. 456.

part of the power of attraction lies in the apparent otherness, the beauty beyond the ordinary, of the beloved; in the same way, it might be argued that Troilus fails to perceive Criseyde as an earthly, inevitably flawed woman, and that his sublimation of her underpins the profundity of his betrayal.<sup>564</sup>

Saunders, incidentally, confuses the characters: she states that it is Arcite who views Emily as a love goddess; it is not Arcite; it is Palamon—see below.

The tale has parallels with both *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Physician's Tale*. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* concerns the redemption of a knight who is guilty of physical and mental violence, and who is redeemed of these qualities only by renouncing his masculinity (giving his “sovereignty” to his wife); *The Physician's Tale* is a concatenation of lust, voyeurism, sublimated incest, and murder—again, it is a tale that equates male sexual love with violence. The same is true of *The Knight's Tale*. Despite its high rhetoric, it is a story of how obsession over a woman drives two knights, not only to violence, but also to abandon human decency. Thus, Chaucer's romances in *The Canterbury Tales* discuss, albeit in different ways, the relationship between male sexuality and violence. In this regard, as Saunders notes, *The Knight's Tale* is unlike other medieval romances in that the object of desire—Emily—is unaware of the passion she arouses; neither, until the end, is she aware of the chaos this passion engenders.<sup>565</sup>

Chaucer's main concern in the tale is chivalry. Chaucer interrogates the political and social chivalric mores, particularly, its presentation of gender relations. *The Knight's Tale* eschews the conventions of medieval romances. Emily, unlike conventional heroines and foreshadowing queer theory, wishes to remain a virgin. She is denied this wish. Unlike in a conventional romance, she is not “won over” by martial prowess. Arcite wins the tournament, but pathetically dies in a horse accident. So Palamon wins her—an outcome determined, not by Emily, but by her father,

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<sup>564</sup> Corinne Saunders, ‘Erotic Magic: The Enchantress in Middle English Romance’, in Hopkins and Rushton, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, pp. 38–52 (p. 51).

<sup>565</sup> Ibid.

Theseus. And Palamon is rewarded not for his strength of character or prowess on the battlefield, but for his desire to possess a woman who does not love him. All he does in his endeavour to win Emily is pray to Venus.

### ***Provenance***

The immediate source of *The Knight's Tale* is Boccaccio's *Teseida*.<sup>566</sup> The plot of the story, in essence, comes from *Teseida*, though Chaucer telescopes Boccaccio's story, describing key events such as Creon's usurpation of Thebes only briefly.<sup>567</sup> As Saunders comments, Chaucer "pares down and adapts Boccaccio's work", and incorporates a "complex philosophical perspective indebted to Boethius".<sup>568</sup> Chaucer also simplifies characters, especially Emily.<sup>569</sup>

Boccaccio's tale derives, in part, from Statius's (c. AD 45–c. 96) *Thebaid* (Books XI–XII). Statius's books, however, deal only with the first part of the tale—the usurpation of Creon, his failure to bury the dead, and Theseus's victory over him. The parallels, however, to these aspects of both *Teseida* and *The Knight's Tale* are so close as to make *Thebaid* a certain ultimate source of both works. In addition, almost all of the *Thebaid*, from Book I onwards, concerns two brothers—the sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices—who are so at odds with one another that they take it in turns to rule Thebes (they kill each other in Book XI). The rivalry between them, though it does not involve courtly love, Coleman argues, strongly influenced Chaucer and moderated his borrowing from Boccaccio.<sup>570</sup> Chaucer may also have been influenced by Statius's "high style". Statius interpolates his story with

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<sup>566</sup> See David Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale: Imitation of classical epic in Boccaccio's Teseida*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); and see William E. Coleman, 'The Knight's Tale', in Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales: Volume II*, pp. 87–248.

<sup>567</sup> Coleman, 'The Knight's Tale', p. 94.

<sup>568</sup> Saunders, 'Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*', in Saunders, *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, p. 456.

<sup>569</sup> Coleman, 'The Knight's Tale', p. 94.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.



references to the gods and in other ways shows off his learning. Chaucer used this device, though far less frequently, in *The Knight's Tale* (and, of course, elsewhere). It is virtually certain that Chaucer had a copy of *Thebaid*.<sup>571</sup>

Chaucer's rendition of the tale is more rounded than is Boccaccio's. In Boccaccio's version, when the two knights first see Emily, they do so together, and the effect of Emily on each of them is identical: each becomes transfixed by her. In *The Knight's Tale*, by contrast, the knights discover Emily separately, and each reacts in a different way. Palamon, who discovers her first, sees her as a love goddess "I noot wher she be womman or goddesse / But Venus is it soothly, as I gesse" (1101–1102), but Arcite, who sees her second, views her more as a sex object "For paramour I loved hire first er thow / What wiltow seyen? Thou woost nat yet now / Wheither she be a womman or goddesse!" (1155–1157). These two views of Emily fuse; Chaucer delineates the characters of the two knights more saliently than does Boccaccio, and, in doing so, he allows them to "mediate each other's experience".<sup>572</sup> In this regard, there is also the relationship between the two knights. As Robert Stretter argues, in Boccaccio there is no indication of closeness between the knights prior to the introduction of Emily.<sup>573</sup> But in Chaucer we know that they are sworn brothers. This suggests a closeness deeper than mere kinship, for sworn brotherhood, unlike kinship, is voluntary—again foreshadowing queer theory, there is a homoerotic aspect to the knights' relationship. This, as Stretter argues, highlights the poignancy of the violence between the two knights after each becomes besotted with Emily. In this regard, Arcite, as is argued below, seriously breaks the rules of courtly love, for, having been the second to fall in love with Emily, he should have acknowledged Palamon's priority.

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<sup>571</sup> Ibid., pp. 96, 98.

<sup>572</sup> Judith Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 27.

<sup>573</sup> Robert Stretter, 'Rewriting Perfect Friendship in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and Lydgate's *Fabula Duorum Mercatorum*', *The Chaucer Review*, 37 (2003), 234–252 (p. 237).

Boethius's (c. 480–c. 524) *Consolation of Philosophy* also influenced *The Knight's Tale*. Chaucer had translated it into English (his *Boece*).<sup>574</sup> Boethius wrote *The Consolation* during his imprisonment by Theodoric for treason (after he had completed it, Boethius was tortured; then he was cudgelled to death). The more philosophical aspects of *The Knight's Tale*, especially the conversations between the imprisoned cousins, reflect the issues discussed in *The Consolation*. Thus Book I discusses Boethius's wretched condition, Books II and IV discuss fortune and love, and Book V discusses Divine Providence. It is Divine Providence, of course, that allows Palamon to escape from prison, that allows Arcite to meet him, that allows Theseus to happen upon them before one kills the other, and that allows Arcite's horse to kill him. Book III of *The Consolation* deals with Orpheus. Chaucer uses Book's II, III, and IV in Arcite's unsuccessful attempt to console Palamon when in prison (1251–1267); he uses Book I for Palamon's reply (1303–1327); and he uses Books I–IV for Theseus's speech on Divine Providence to Palamon and Emily (2987–3016).<sup>575</sup>

Medieval literature on courtly love also influenced the tale, either directly or indirectly. The most important treatise on this was Andreas Capellanus's (1174–1238) *De Amore*, written in the late twelfth century. The work is based on Ovid's *Art of Love*, *Amours*, and *Remedy of Love*. Book I sets out definitions. Thus, love is defined as:

Amor est passio quaedam innata procedens ex visione et immoderata cogitatione formae alterius sexus, ob quam aliquis super omnia cupit alterius potiri amplexibus et omnia de utriusque voluntate in ipsius amplexu amoris praecepta compleri.<sup>576</sup>

Book I also describes the effects of love:

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<sup>574</sup> Coleman, 'The Knight's Tale', p. 87.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>576</sup> Andreas Capellanus, *De Amore Liber Primus*, <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/capellanus/capellanus1.html>>[accessed 20 June 2013]

. . . quia verus amator nulla posset avaritia offuscari; amor horridum et incultum omni facit formositate pollere, infimos natu etiam morum novit nobilitate ditare, superbos quoque solet humilitate beare; obsequia cunctis amorusus multa consuevit decenter parare. O, quam mira res est amor, qui tantis facit hominem fulgere virtutibus, tantisque docet quemlibet bonis moribus abundare. . . .<sup>577</sup>

Book II of *De Amore* includes thirty-one “rules” of love. These include:

- v. Non est sapidum quod amans ab invito sumit coamante.
- xiii. Amor raro consuevit durare vulgates.
- xv. Omnis consuevit amans in coamantis aspectu pallescere.
- xviii. Probitas sola quemque dignum facit amore.
- xxiii. Minus dormit et edit quem amoris cogitatio vexat.
- xxix. Non solet amare quem nimia voluptatis abundantia vexat.<sup>578</sup>

Palamon and Arcite flout these rules. Neither considers Emily's feelings. Instead—the substance of the tale—they fight each other, and in so doing facilitate their mutual moral disintegration. This is part of Chaucer's use of *The Knight's Tale* to subvert medieval notions of chivalry.

It is unclear, incidentally, how seriously Capellanus viewed courtly love. First, the term *courtly love* was mostly a nineteenth century term; people in Chaucer's England were more likely to speak of *true love*. Second, Book III of *De Amore* largely comprises a diatribe against love, fornication, and women. Capellanus states that copulation weakens the body, and is therefore unhealthy. Debora Schwartz argues that the work is a satire of courtly love.<sup>579</sup>

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<sup>577</sup> Ibid.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid.

<sup>579</sup> Debora B. Schwartz, *Backgrounds to Romance: "Courtly Love"*, (California Polytechnic State University, 2001)<<http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwartz/eng513/courtly/courtly.htm>> [accessed 04 March 2012].

Regardless of the intent behind *De Amore*, however, Paris's work showed that medieval romances—most notably, Chrétien de Troie's (dates uncertain, but flourished 1165–80) *Lancelot* (c. 1170)—followed its diktats as set out in Books I and II. Moreover, *De Amore* was popular, so much so that in 1277 Bishop Stephen Tempier of Paris officially condemned it. Schwartz concludes that *De Amore* “attests to the popularity of the literary conventions of ‘*fin ’amor*’ within courtly society—for you cannot satirize something that does not exist!”<sup>580</sup>

In essence, therefore, Chaucer had three main sources, and although Boccaccio's *Tesseida* provides the backbone of the story, Chaucer uses it to explore the philosophy of Boethius while simultaneously using Statius's *Thebaid* to explore, as Coleman states, “fraternal strife”.<sup>581</sup> In addition, Chaucer used the tradition of courtly love, though whether he had read Capellanus is unclear.

### ***Imagery and characterisation***

The combination of sight and love sickness is based on a combination of two ancient beliefs, one having to do with ancient theories of vision, the other with ancient theories of conception. Predominant medieval understanding of vision had it that the image beheld was captured by the eye, travelled along the optic nerve, and literally stamped itself on the soul, transforming it.<sup>582</sup> The beholder becomes a prisoner to his own senses and emotions. Thus, after they have seen Emily, Palamon and Arcite are no longer governed by reason; instead, they are dominated by Emily's image and by sexual passion.

The god of love, ah! benedicite, bless ye him  
How mighty and how great a lord is he!  
Against his might there gaine none obstacles, avail,

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<sup>580</sup> Ibid

<sup>581</sup> Coleman, ‘*The Knight's Tale*’, p. 94.

<sup>582</sup> Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 49–50.

conquer He may be called a god for his miracles  
For he can maken at his owen guise  
Of every heart, as that him list devise. (*The Knight's Tale*, 1785–1790)

Captivated by the image of Emily, the men subsequently feed their erotic imaginations. Enclosed in this private obsession, they become demented. We hear of Arcite that:

And in his geere for al the world he ferde  
Nat oonly lik the loveris maladye  
Of Hereos, but rather lyk manye,  
Engendred of humour malencolik  
Biforen, in his celle fantastik. (*The Knight's Tale*, 1372–1376)

The idea of lovesickness, incidentally, was not only a common theme in European literature of the High Middle Ages. It was also a recognized medical condition. Thus, when the Knight tells us of Arcite that “Of Hereos, but rather lyk manye, / Engendred of humour malencolik” (1374–1375), the word *Hereos* does not pertain to *Eros* or to *heroes*. Instead, it pertains, as Heffernan, drawing on earlier work by Lowes, argues, to the scientific name for lovesickness—etymologically, *hereos* comes from a combination of the Greek *eros* (“love”), the Arabic *al-'isq* (deep love), and the Latin *herus* (self-knowledge).<sup>583</sup> Moreover, as Heffernan points out, Arcite's symptoms follow those described by medical authorities familiar to Chaucer, including both al-Razi (865–925) and Ibn Sina. Islamic science also permeates the tale in that, as Klassen observes, the relationship between vision, love at first sight, and being smitten, was developed most by Islamic scholars; he writes “Given the heritage of Arabic poetry, in which eye imagery was evidently well developed by the

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<sup>583</sup> Carol F. Heffernan, ‘Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*: the Disease of Love and Courtly Love’, *Neophilologus*, 74 (1990), 294–309 (p. 295).

twelfth century, there is a strong suggestion of continuity and borrowing between the Arabic and Western cultures".<sup>584</sup>

Yet, as indicated, the knights' reactions to Emily differ. Palamon is in pain at the sight of her, but Arcite loses his mind. Arcite's suffering accords with Catholic doctrine. The *Viaticum* explains that unless those suffering from *hereos* get help they fall into mania or die:

Sometimes the cause of eros is. . . the contemplation of beauty. For if the soul observes a form similar to itself it goes mad, as it were, over it in order to achieve the fulfilment of its pleasure.<sup>585</sup>

Palamon's problem with Emily is physical, but Arcite's is psychological, and Arcite suffers more. Arcite's obsession with Emily introduces her as a "real woman". On the one hand Emily is a virgin, a goddess, an exemplar of all that is pure. On the other she is a temptress. This highlights the relationship between the flesh and the eye of the flesh (the sense of seeing), beginning with the increasingly prominent role of sight in medieval commentaries on the temptation and fall. As argued in Chapter one, the philosophical and religious thought of late Antiquity was pervaded by asceticism, and this often led to a negative view of the body and sexuality and, for that reason, to the propagation of sexual abstinence. Stanbury comments:

Late medieval accounts of the "focalized" female body, the feminine erotic form as it is seen, watched, and desired by a viewer in a narrative, are deeply nuanced, I will suggest, by anxieties about bodily images and by contemporary schema for representing the body in the visual arts: the textual body, however over determined by the rhetorical tradition, is also a cultural body, regulated and exposed by lines of sight that are tightly bound to

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<sup>584</sup> Norman Klassen, *Chaucer on Love, Knowledge and Sight* (New York: Boydell and Brewer, 1995), p. 68.

<sup>585</sup> Constantine the African. *Viaticum* 1. 20, in Mary Frances Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and its Commentaries* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1990), p. 189.

schema for representing the painted or the plastic body in contemporary manuscript illumination, panel painting, or statuary.<sup>586</sup>

Hence, Emily is “forbidden fruit”, and, realising this, when Palamon sees her, he feels pain and, when Arcite sees her, he goes mad.<sup>587</sup>

Both knights break the rules of courtly love. Each plans to wed Emily, but her thoughts on the matter are not consulted (they are not consulted even when she marries Palamon, for Theseus *orders* her to marry him). Thus, each knight breaks Rule 5 (taking something against the wishes of the other). Each knight loses his moral integrity (Rule 18), for they fight like beasts, unchivalrously, in the grove. Each suffers from an excess of passion (Rule 29).

But Arcite is the more serious offender. First his passion for Emily is sexual. He admits this to Palamon, and states that Palamon's obsession for her, by contrast, is asexual.

What wiltow seyen? Thou woost nat yet now  
Wheither she be a womman or goddesse!  
Thyn is affeccioun of hoolynesse,  
And myn is love as to a creature; (*The Knight's Tale*, 1156–1159)

Second, although the rules of courtly love allow for two men to love one woman (Rule 31), Palamon sees Emily first and Capellanus states elsewhere that one “shalt not knowingly strive to break up a correct love affair that someone else is engaged in”. Arcite thus breaks the rules when he proclaims his love for a woman that his friend loves. Palamon recognizes this when he reminds Arcite that he is the “brother and the friend that swore / To further me [Palamon], as I have said before” and that

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<sup>586</sup> Sarah Stanbury, ‘Regimes of the Visual in Premodern England: Gaze, Body, and Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*’, *New Literary History*, 28 (1997), 261–289 (pp. 264–265).

<sup>587</sup> The Italian physician, Dino del Garbo (1327), in a commentary on a love poem of Cavalcanti “Donna mi priega,” states that this kind of love has no part in the intellect, but is part of the sensitive appetite and a passion related to fear and anger. See Otto Bird, “The Canzone d'Amore of Cavalcanti According to the Commentary of Dino del Garbo”, *Mediaeval studies*, 2 (1940), 150–203 (pp. 161–165).

Arcite is "bound in honour as a knight / To help me [Palamon], should it lie within your might" (34).

Arcite's prayers to Mars are unpleasant. He confesses to Mars that he is "with love offended moost / That evere was any lyves creature," (2394–2395). He then lashes out against Emily, blaming her for his situation. He laments: "For she that dooth me al this wo endure, / Ne reccheth nevere wher I synke or fleete." (2396–2397). If this is what Arcite truly believes, he is breaking another of Capellanus's rules; it states that "in practising the solaces of love thou shalt not exceed the desires of thy lover".<sup>588</sup>

Arcite misreads Boethius's *Consolation*. When Palamon reminds him that he (Palamon) saw Emily first, Arcite replies that Palamon does not really love Emily and that he (Arcite) does. He then justifies himself by saying: "That `who shal yeve a lovere any lawe?" (*The Knight's Tale*, 1164). The relevant passage in *Boece* has Lady Philosophy saying:

Love is a grettere lawe  
and a strengere to hymself thanne any lawe that  
men mai yyven. Allas! Whanne Orpheus and his  
wif weren almost at the termes of the nyght  
that is to seyn, at the laste boundes of helle),  
Orpheus lokede abakward on Erudyce his wif,  
and lost hire, and was deed. (*Boece*, XII, 53–59)

Lady Philosophy's point, as Robertson argues, is that the passions, as illustrated by Orpheus's descent into Hell, lead to bad decisions, and this is how the myth was interpreted in the fourteenth century.<sup>589</sup> Lady Philosophy is not saying, as Arcite seems to think, that it is *ethical* to break the law when in love; rather, she is saying

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<sup>588</sup> Debora B. Schwartz, *Backgrounds to Romance: "Courtly Love"*, (California Polytechnic State University, 2001) <<http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwartz/engl513/courtly/courtly.htm>> [accessed 04 March 2012]

<sup>589</sup> Durant White Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 106–107.



that it is a psychological fact that people tend to do foolish things when in love, so it is better not to let the passions rule one. This is both ironic and humorous: had Arcite understood Boethius, he could have spared himself much trouble, including losing his life.

The knights' attitudes to the tourney also differ, with Arcite coming out as the more unpleasant. Prior to the tourney, Palamon prays to Venus for the love of Emily. This love appears more important than victory in battle:

I recche nat but it may bettre be  
To have victorie of hem, or they of me,  
So that I have my lady in myne armes. (2245–2247)

This accords with Capellanus's dictum, "a true lover is constantly and without intermission possessed by the thought of his beloved".<sup>590</sup> The prospect of a 150 man battle and potential death does not faze Palamon; he only wants an enduring love with Emily; so he is "constantly and without intermission possessed" by Emily.

Not so Arcite. In his visit to the temple of Mars, he prays solely for victory: "Thanne help me, lord, tomorwe in my bataille," (2402) he demands of Mars, and "Now, lord, have routhe upon my sorwes soore; / Yif me [victorie]; I aske thee namoore. " (2419–2420) (Arcite prays to Mars, but Palamon prays to Venus). Ironically Arcite gets what he prays for—victory in battle—but it is Palamon, the less flawed and "truer" knight, who gets Emily.

Erotic images in *The Knight's Tale* are martial, phallic, or both, and suggest violence, distress, and death. This is because *The Knight's Tale* is most concerned with the conflict between Palamon and Arcite, and how chivalry causes the nobility to suffer. Chaucer simplifies characters, especially Emily, and eliminates most of the romantic elements of Boccaccio's *Teseida* in *The Knight's Tale* to generate a harsher representation of the knightly estate. By contrast—see Chapter five—in *Troilus and*

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<sup>590</sup> Debora B. Schwartz, *Backgrounds to Romance: "Courtly Love"*, (California Polytechnic State University, 2001) <<http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwartz/eng513/courtly/courtly.htm>> [accessed 04 March 2012]

*Criseyde*; Chaucer keeps the fall of Troy and wars largely in the background and concentrates instead on Troilus's love for Criseyde.

This is reflected in the allusions to Greek gods in the works. There are twenty-five references to Mars in *The Knight's Tale*, but only twenty to Venus; in contrast, there are fourteen references to Venus in *Troilus and Criseyde*, but only eight to Mars. Considering Mars's nature as the god of war and violence, it is unsurprising that Palamon's and Arcite's desires for Emily is repeatedly set in the context of martial violence. Some of the words (or inflections of them) that underscore the violent nature of the relationship between Palamon, Arcite, and Emily feature prominently; thus, we have *war* (38 occurrences), *blood* (22), *death* (19), *sword* (16), *spear* (14), *fight* (11), and *cry* (14).

The animal images in *The Knight's Tale* also tend to be martial and noble: *boar* (3 instances), *lion* (9), *tiger* (2), *wolf* (2), *hound* (8), and *bear* (6). The word *horse* is common (10), as is *steed* (7); conversely, the term *palfrey* (a horse not used in battle) is used only once. Similarly, the birds that feature in the story are not birds much associated with love. There are, for instance *crow* (1), *eagle* (2), *raven* (1), *lark* (3), *kite* (1), *hawks* (1), and *dove* (1). In this context, Jennifer LaBurre observes that there are twenty-eight types of animals in *The Knight's Tale*, all of which are indicative of the noble status of Palamon and Arcite, and the violent nature of their love of Emily.<sup>591</sup>

Moreover, Elaine Tuttle Hansen observes that, Palamon and Arcite are akin to the noble eagles in *The Parliament of Foules* (see especially *The Parliament of Foules*, 414–469).<sup>592</sup> The knights, like the eagles in their dispute over a female, show little interest in the female's desires; instead they nitpick over unanswerable questions like who "loved hire first" (1146, 1155). The knights are akin to the licentious eagles in *The Parliament*: they care nothing for the feelings of the object of their affections.

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<sup>591</sup> Jennifer LaBurre, "Wood Leoun" . . . "Cruel Tigre": *Animal Imagery and Metaphor in "The Knight's Tale"* (unpublished thesis: University of New Orleans, 2011), p. 9.

<sup>592</sup> Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, p. 201.

Ravens may be associated with God's messenger, but were also associated with death.<sup>593</sup> The reference to a crow comes just after Artice has fallen from his horse (His brest tobrosten with his sadel-bowe / As blak he lay as any cole or crowe, 2691–2692) and likens him to being black as coal; also, crows—like ravens—are scavengers; notoriously, they feed off the dead on battlefields. Larks could, conceivably be associated with love, but as used by Chaucer in the tale they appear more to signify early morning. Kites and hawks, like eagles, are birds of prey. The dove is associated with Emily. Doves are a symbol of peace. Emily—as befits a love goddess—is at peace when all around her is chaos.

As Saunders observes, the predominant use of wild beast imagery depicts “the complete abandonment of the lovers to their destructive passions”.<sup>594</sup> This use of “love weaponry” was a widespread motif in medieval literature.<sup>595</sup>

The rarity of female erotic images appears not only due to Emily's lack of involvement in the love affair, but also in the poem itself.<sup>596</sup> Emily is more a symbol of the beauty that chivalric nature desires than a character with thoughts, actions, and emotions of her own. Emily lacks individuality. The narrative does not mention what she does, what she says, or what she thinks. Elaine Tuttle Hansen writes:

Emily's exclusion from the Knight's Tale seems to require no subtle reading and has been affirmed by many modern critics. As one early twentieth-century scholar says, we have in Emily “a heroine who is merely a name.” Mandel points out that “For all courtly intents and purposes of love, Emily does not exist in this tale.” Charles Muscatine views Emily as “merely a

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<sup>593</sup> Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art: a Topical Dictionary* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1996), p. 37.

<sup>594</sup> Corinne Saunders, ‘Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*’, in Saunders, *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, p. 456.

<sup>595</sup> The poet Dafydd ap Gwilym (c. 1315–c. 1360) used it, as did his father, and as did many French poets. See Huw M. Edwards, *Dafydd ap Gwilym: Influences and Analogues* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1996), pp. 209–211.

<sup>596</sup> Priscilla Marten, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons* (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1990), p. 42.

symbol of the noble man's desires"; E. Talbot Donaldson stresses that "she has no character," and Donald Howard notes that "the lady herself is a distant and unreal figure".<sup>597</sup>

Modern critics agree that Emily only has to walk around and look pretty. In *Conquering the Reign of Femeny*, Angela Jane Weisl points out that "As a love object, Emelye is a vision created by male desire and the male gaze; her own desire—not to take part in the romance plot at all—is irrelevant", and that Emily "is barely human".<sup>598</sup> Roberta Gilchrist comments, "The gaze was central to medieval sexuality—both the act of looking and the sensation of being observed".<sup>599</sup>

There is no direct encounter with Emily prior to Palamon's and Arcite's seeing her; and, unlike the case in Chaucer's *fabliaux*, hardly any body part is exposed. The introduction to Emily, provided by the narrating Knight, is, as Miller comments, intensely visual.<sup>600</sup>

That Emelye, that fairer was to sene  
 Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,  
 And fressher than the May with floures newe—  
 For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe, (*The Knight's Tale*, 1035–1038)

The tale uses the word *flower* seven times (but in one case only in the sense of "flower of chivalry"). It is used twice in the immediate context of Emily, and is obviously sexual. The use of the lily stalk is phallic. Similarly:

She gadereth floures, party white and rede,  
 To make a subtil gerland for hire hede;

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<sup>597</sup> Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, p. 216.

<sup>598</sup> Angela Jane Weisl, *Conquering the Reign of Femeny: Gender and Genre in Chaucer's Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), pp. 51–53.

<sup>599</sup> Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course*, p. 8.

<sup>600</sup> Mark Miller. *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2004), p. 85.

And as an aungel hevenysshly she soong.  
The grete tour, that was so thikke and stroong,  
Which of the castel was the chief dongeoun  
(Ther as the knyghtes weren in prisoun (*The Knight's Tale*, 1053–1058)

Emily is framed in her walled garden. She is likened in beauty to lilies and roses. She is presented as an icon, or, as Miller puts it, an “aesthetic object”. As such, she is, as Miller argues, inconsumable; unlike the female protagonists in Chaucer's *fabliaux*, she is inactive; she is an automaton. Accordingly, Emily does not do anything in the tale except walk, be observed, get dreamed of, and, at the end, light the funeral pyre.

Helen Cooper argues that authors of romances face a recurring problem. The female protagonists of their stories are invariably outstandingly beautiful and outstandingly virtuous. This, paradoxically, makes describing them difficult. One can use such words and expressions as *beautiful*, *smooth skinned*, and *haunting eyes* only so many times before they begin to pall, and, if used by several authors, may become such clichés they are worthless to counte-productive. Chaucer's solution, again as Cooper argues, is to tell us next to nothing about what Emily looks like. Thus, in 20 lines, all we get is:

It fil ones, in a morwe of May,  
That Emelye, that fairer was to sene  
Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,  
And fressher than the May with floures newe—  
For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,  
I noot which was the fyner of hem two—  
Er it were day, as was hir wone to do,  
She was arisen and al redy dight,  
For May wole have no slogardie anyght . . .  
Hir yelow heer was broyded in a tresse  
Bihynde hire bak, a yerde long, I gesse.  
And in the gardyn, at the sonne upriste,  
She walketh up and down, and as hire liste  
She gadereth floures, party white and rede,

To make a subtil gerland for hire hede;  
 And as an aungel hevenysshly she soong. (*The Knight's Tale*, 1034–1042,  
 1049–1055).

Thus, all we know of her is that she is blond and her hair is in braids. But the imagery, as Cooper observes, is intense. Emily is repeatedly associated with May (a month conducive to love—and also an associate of spring, the season of youth). She is associated with roses (eroticism) and with lilies (purity). She is in a garden. She sings like an angel. She gets up at sunrise (she is not a slattern). She is, as Cooper puts it, a human female equivalent of the “holy grail”, and unleashes in men who gaze on her “an infinity of desire for the unattainable”.<sup>601</sup> Chaucer, incidentally, uses a similar device in *Troilus and Criseyde* (he provides little physical description of Criseyde), and uses its converse when describing lecherous women—Alison in *The Miller's Tale*, for example, receives copious physical description, including that of her clothing. Chaucer's solution to the problem of using clichés when speaking of love goddesses is to avoid physical descriptions of them.

Palamon's and Arcite's obliviousness to Emily's “true personality” is reflected in the Knight's attitude. The Knight describes her both as a love goddess and as an erotic image (1049–1055—see above), not as a real woman. The problems Palamon and Arcite face arise; Chaucer appears to be saying, precisely because they share the Knight's unrealistic views of femininity. This is an irony, and is spotted unequivocally by the Miller (see *The Miller's Tale*, Chapter three).

The Knight, as Mark Miller argues, provides a hint that the Knight's (and his own) views on female sexuality are amiss; he says:

On the one hand, the Thebans' [Palamon's and Arcite's] erotic compulsion represents their perversion, that is, their inability to take command of themselves as men properly should – in quite pointed contrast to Theseus,

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<sup>601</sup> Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, p. 17.

who does manage a masculine self-command, and who later in the tale announces with pride that he is devoted to Diana rather than to Venus.<sup>602</sup>

However, Miller fails to identify an ambiguity. Diana was the Roman goddess of hunting; thus, by implication, Theseus is interested in hunting women, not in falling in love with them. But Diana in Roman mythology was also, in contrast to Venus, a virgin and adamantly celibate. Thus, whichever way one looks at it, Theseus is not interested in treating women as sexual creatures: either he is interested in conquering them (as in hunting) or he is personally celibate. On whatever interpretation, he has a “knightly” view of women. Women, in Theseus’s view, are not “people”. This conclusion is reinforced when Theseus, in effect, orders Emily to marry Palamon. Emily’s feelings on the matter do not enter the equation. Susan Crane observes that:

Chivalric courtship designs sexual relations and dynastic succession through heroic adventuring: Palamon, Arcite, and Theseus all assume that Emelye will marry and disagree only on how to “darreyne hire”.<sup>603</sup>

While all this is going on, there is a lack of female sexual images other than flower and garden. Unsurprisingly for a romance, there are no *fabliaux*-type metaphors such as *bread, cake, wheat, jug, grinding, oats, and milling*, but neither are there metaphors found in other romances—especially *fruit*, for instance. The only door mentioned in the tale is that of the Temple of Mars. The only windows mentioned are the one in Palamon’s and Arcite’s prison cell and the one in Theseus’s palace (through which people see him, not Emily). The main female sexual metaphors in the tale are garden and flower, and each is implicitly or explicitly associated with Emily. The use of *flower* suggests she is a virgin (she is not yet deflowered). The main male sexual metaphors, as indicated, are phallic, martial, or both.

*The Knight’s Tale* is by far the most violent, in terms of physical aggression, of the three tales discussed in this chapter. The violence starts at the beginning, with

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<sup>602</sup> Miller, *Philosophical Chaucer*, p. 10.

<sup>603</sup> Susan Crane, ‘Medieval Romance and Feminine Difference in *the Knight’s Tale*’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 12 (1990), 47–63 (p. 62).

Theseus's victory over the Amazons. In this regard, Durant Robinson argues that the victory is symbolic of Theseus's views on women: it is not proper that women be warriors; it is proper only that they be subservient to men—"what with his Wysdom and his chivalrie, / He conquered all the regne of Femenye." (ll. 865–866. ). To reinforce the point, Theseus marries the Amazon queen, Ypolite.<sup>604</sup>

The violence continues with Creon's victory over Thebes, and, after this, with Theseus's defeat of Creon, after which Theseus allows his soldiers to desecrate the bodies of his enemies:

To ransake in the taas of bodyes dede,  
Hem for to strepe of harneys and of wede,  
The pilours diden bisynesse and cure  
After the bataille and disconfiture.  
And so bifel that in the taas they founde,  
Thurgh-girt with many a grevous bloody wounde,  
Two yonge knyghtes liggyng by and by, (*The Knight's Tale*, 1005–1011)

Arcite and Palamon emerge from this scavenging wounded and covered in blood. The violence continues. When Arcite and Palamon duel, they fight as wild animals:

That foughten breme as it were bores two.  
The brighte swerdes wenten to and fro  
So hidously that with the leeste strook  
It semed as it wolde felle an ook. (*The Knight's Tale*, 1699–1702)

Allman and Hanks call attention to how Chaucer uses the stabbing metaphor elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales*.<sup>605</sup> In *The Reeve's Tale*, for example, as indicated, when John has sex with the miller's wife, he "priketh harde and depe as he were mad" (4231). The verb *priken* as used by Chaucer is ambiguous, incidentally. It has four

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<sup>604</sup> Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives*, pp. 106, 107.

<sup>605</sup> Allman and Hanks, 'Rough Love: Notes toward an Erotics of *the Canterbury Tales*', p. 39.



meanings: to have sex with, to cut, to stab, and to spur.<sup>606</sup> There is also Januarie's musings over the delights of marriage in *The Merchant's Tale*. "A man may do no synne with his wyf / Ne hurte hymselfen with his owne knyf" (1839–1840).

Similarly, in *The Man of Law's Tale* we have:

Of worldly wommen, mayde, ne of wyf.  
I dar wel seyn hir hadde levere a knyf  
Thurghout hir brest, than ben a womman wikke;  
There is no man koude brynge hire to that prikke." (*The Man of Law's Tale*,  
1026–1029)

Thus, the incessant references to cutting and stabbing in *The Knight's Tale* reinforce the violent aspect of courtly love and sexual desire. But the bellicosity of the imagery may serve another function. We are told that Theseus is a "noble duc" (873). And he is initially painted as an all powerful ruler. Yet, as Saunders argues, he fails to get his way in virtually anything. He fails to keep the cousins imprisoned, he fails to kill them when he has the opportunity, he fails to allow the winner of the tournament to marry Emily, and eventually he marries her off to the "wrong man".<sup>607</sup> Theseus is a failure.

The knights' personal hell serves as a background to the tale's philosophical content. Just as Boethius was imprisoned in his life, so were Arcite and Palamon. And they were not only imprisoned in their cell. They were imprisoned by their love for Emily. And the discussions on Boethian philosophy—especially on predestination, fate, and freewill, afford them (and us) insight into their condition, as when Arcite sees them as dogs fighting over a bone, only to have it stolen from them (1177).

This highlights another irony of the tale. Although the protagonists, Theseus included, preach the ideals of chivalry, they do not meet them. Arcite and Palamon fight unchivalrously in the grove. And Theseus lays waste to Thebes when all he

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<sup>606</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>607</sup> Judith Ferster, 'Genre in and of the *Canterbury Tales*', in Saunders, *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, pp. 179–198(p. 194).

needed do was oust Creon. He does not even, as chivalry would dictate, take prisoners for ransom. Instead, he defiles the dead of the city. The background violence, and the martial imagery, together serve to put a lie to the ostensible chivalry in the tale.

It was noted in the discussion of *The Reeve's Tale* that Chaucer's handling of the rapes is ambiguous. There is a similar ambiguity in *The Knight's Tale*. On the one hand, we are led to believe that the knights' love of Emily is pure, and that Theseus is a noble warrior. But on the other we see that the knights' love of Emily debases their character (particularly Arcite's) and that Theseus, far from being noble, practises war viciously. And the harrowing images in the Temple of Mars remind us what war was really like.

For all the veneer of romance in *The Knight's Tale*, the tale contains nothing a noble. Chaucer highlights this by following it with the Miller's *fabliau*, which is structurally similar. Thus, Chaucer strips away the facade of a romance to reveal the ugly side of medieval chivalry.

This idea, that *The Knight's Tale* is a critique of chivalry, is made all the more plausible in that Chaucer had previously produced a satire on courtly love: *The Parliament of Foules*. In the poem, Chaucer implicitly likens the courtly ideals of knights to the mating habits of diverse species of bird. As Marion Turner states, *The Parliament of Foules* is "subversive"; it describes "a world upside down".<sup>608</sup>

*The Canterbury Tales* tells us that *The Miller's Tale* quites *The Knight's Tale*. But it does not do so effectively, for *The Miller's Tale*, although it allows some agency to women, nonetheless assumes male supremacy. The real quiting of *The Knight's Tale* comes from *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. The latter asserts female supremacy—and, for that matter, humanity in sexual relations.

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<sup>608</sup> Marion Turner, 'The Carnavalesque', in Ellis, *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide*, ed., by Steve Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 384–399 (p. 394)

### The Wife of Bath's Tale

*The Wife of Bath's Tale* is the first story in Fragment III of *The Canterbury Tales*. It has to be seen in the context of the *Prologue* to the tale. This is arguably more complex than the tale itself, and is the longest prologue within *The Canterbury Tales*. The *Prologue* and the tale compliment one another. They are, as it were, two halves of the same story. The Wife is named Alisoun in the tale's *Prologue*. However, to avoid confusion with the Alison in *The Miller's Tale*, she is referred to in the present section mainly as the "Wife".

Some critics point to antifeminism on the part of the Wife. Felicity Currie, for instance, argues that Chaucer puts most of St Jerome's antifeminist views on women and sexuality into the mouth of the Wife and that "everything in her appearance and behaviour is programmed to set her up as a target for the antifeminist mode to which her own prologue generally belongs".<sup>609</sup> Similarly, Hansen argues that Chaucer provides the Wife with the wrong feminist powers—lying and in other ways deceiving, for instance—and that "throughout her performance, the Wife both consciously and unconsciously endures the antifeminist stereotypes she cites".<sup>610</sup> To such critics, the Wife offers a poor role model for feminists.

Other feminists, Shiela Rigby, for instance,<sup>611</sup> however, see the Wife as a role model for women. Caroline Dinshaw also points out that "[The Wife] is impersonating a masculine discourse, dislocating it and voicing it from elsewhere".<sup>612</sup> Dinshaw argues that the Wife opposes clerical opinion in part because it is written by men, in part because the men preach asceticism, and in part because it has the veneer of

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<sup>609</sup> Felicity Currie, *Geoffrey Chaucer: the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* (The Critical Forum: Buckingham, 2000), p 5.

<sup>610</sup> Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, p. 32.

<sup>611</sup> For discussion, see S. H. Rigby, 'The Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan, and the Medieval Case for Women', *The Chaucer Review*, 35 (2000), 133–165. Also, Susan Carter, 'Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted: What Lies behind Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, 37 (2003), 329–345.

<sup>612</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, 'Quarrels, Rivals and Rape: Gower and Chaucer', in *A Wyf Ther Was*, ed., by Juliette Dor (Belgium: Liege UP, 1992), pp. 112–122 (p. 117)

scholarship. Accordingly, Dinshaw argues, the Wife plays the clergy at their own game: in Dinshaw's phrase, she "manipulates her own glosses".<sup>613</sup> A casual glance at the Wife's *Prologue* shows she is as learned as many of the clerics of her era. In addition, she uses her sexuality to dominate men; she uses her body in addition to her mind. In this way, Dinshaw argues, she challenges the male chauvinist ethos of her era.

The Wife observes that religious mores concerning marriage and sexuality are set by men who cannot marry, so cannot know much about marriage and sex. Marion Wynne-Davies argues that the Wife's status as an unmarried widow affords her a privileged status: she is a *femme sole*, and as such, unlike married women of the era, she had the legal right to make contracts and to own property in her own name.<sup>614</sup> This aspect of fourteenth century law derived from the Anglo-Saxon legal system, which was less gender biased than were the Norman and Plantagenet legal systems; despite the Norman Conquest, it remained as part of English common law. This status, as Wynne-Davies argues, provides the Wife "an important focus for challenging patriarchal ideologies".<sup>615</sup> This view accords with a feminist interpretation of the Wife's character. In this regard, the present study rejects antifeminist interpretations of the Wife. As is argued below, both the Wife's *Prologue* and her tale appear strongly sympathetic to women.

### ***Provenance***

#### The Prologue

Much of *The Prologue* comes ultimately from the Bible. However, the arguments expressed by the Wife come mainly from elsewhere. A major source is Jerome's *Against Jovinianum*. This is a treatise, written by the saint, against the teachings of

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<sup>613</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>614</sup> Marion Wynne-Davies, *the Tales of the Clerk and the Wife of Bath* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 15.

<sup>615</sup> Ibid.

Jovinian. Little is known about Jovinian save that he wrote a text in which he claimed, among other things, that there is no greater merit in being a virgin than not, and that there is no greater merit in fasting than in eating one's fill. Jerome—as indicated (Chapter one), an ascetic—was keen to refute Jovinian's arguments. Thus the Wife uses Jerome's arguments, and his biblical references, to acknowledge that virginity may be “better” than marriage (“Virginitiee is greet perfeccion, / And continence eek with devocion”, 105–106), but marriage is better than sin. Compare, for example:

Biside a welle, Jhesus, God and man,  
 Spak in repreeve of the Samaritan:  
 Thou hast yhad fyve housbondes,” quod he,  
 And that ilke man that now hath thee  
 Is noght thyn housbonde,” thus seyde he certeyn.  
 What that he mente therby, I kan nat seyn;  
 But that I axe, why that the fifthe man  
 Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan? (15–22).

With what Jerome says:

For it is better to have one husband, though he be the second or the third, than many lovers; that is, it is more tolerable to be a prostitute to one man than to many. At least the Samaritan woman in John's gospel who says she has a sixth husband is rebuked by the Lord because he is not her husband.<sup>616</sup>

Indeed, as Hanna and Traugott argue, the arguments of the first 183 lines of *The Prologue* mostly come from Jerome.<sup>617</sup>

Another source is Jean de Meun's (c. 1240–c. 1305) *Romance of the Rose*. Chaucer used passages from the friend character in the romance to allow the Wife to speak of

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<sup>616</sup> Jerome, as cited in Ralph Hanna and Traugott Lawler, ‘*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*’, in Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues of The Canterbury Tales: Volume II*, pp. 351–404 (p. 362).

<sup>617</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351.

the pain of jealousy, and passages from the duenna—the grandmother—to allow her to speak of her winning ways with men.<sup>618</sup> The friend character ultimately derives from Ovid.<sup>619</sup>

Hanna and Lawler list other sources, including Ptolomy's *Almagest*. These sources (including Aesop's *Fables*, Metheolus, and Eustache Deschamps), however, are relatively minor, and serve mainly to provide extra colour to the Wife's character.<sup>620</sup>

### The Tale

*The Wife of Bath's Tale* is similar to the anonymously written *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. The main difference between the two is that, whereas in Chaucer's story the knight is put to task because he is guilty of rape, in the latter story Gawain is put to task in order to save King Arthur. However, like its authorship, the date of its composition is unknown. It is suspected to have been written in the late fifteenth century (that is, long after *The Canterbury Tales* was written)—this from the earliest dated surviving manuscript. One view, proposed in 1982 by P. J. C. Field, has it that Sir Thomas Malory (1405?–1471?)<sup>621</sup> wrote it, and some view this thesis sympathetically.<sup>622</sup> This does not preclude *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* being an influence on Chaucer, however, because the story is an Arthurian Romance, and the Arthurian Romances were based, in part, on folklore.<sup>623</sup>

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<sup>618</sup> Ibid., pp. 351, 352, 367, 378.

<sup>619</sup> Ibid., p. 353.

<sup>620</sup> Ibid., pp. 352, 378.

<sup>621</sup> Even if true, this would only partially solve the problem, for all that is known of Malory is that he wrote *Le Morte d'Arthur* and that he was imprisoned. There were at least six people imprisoned named Sir Thomas Malory in the 15<sup>th</sup> century who could have been the “real” one. See Gwyneth Whitteridge, “The Identity of Sir Thomas Malory, Knight-Prisoner”, *The Review of English Studies*, 24 (1973), 257–265.

<sup>622</sup> Ralph Norris, ‘Sir Thomas Malory and the Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell Reconsidered’, *Arthuriana*, 19 (2009), 82–102; and see John Withrington and P. J. C. Field, ‘*The Wife of Bath's Tale*’, in Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales: Volume II*, pp. 405–448 (pp. 405, 406).

<sup>623</sup> The first surviving publication of the Arthurian legend is, of course, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, published in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Although Geoffrey's history includes neither the Gawain Wedding nor the story of the Green knight, historians agree that, though Geoffrey

Another possible influence is Irish mythology. It is probable, incidentally, that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has its roots in eighth century Irish and Welsh folklore.<sup>624</sup> The most important Irish myth as regards *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is the tale of *Niall and the Nine Hostages*.<sup>625</sup> In it, Niall adventures with companions through forests. At one stage, desperate for water, they find a well, but it is guarded by an ugly old woman (a loathly lady). She says the men can have water only if one agrees to kiss her. Niall is the only one to do so; he also promises to have sex with her, which is more than she asked for. Immediately, she transmogrifies into a beautiful young woman. She then declares she is Sovereign of Erin (Ireland) and that, thereafter, Niall will be king and will found a dynasty. The tale was first recorded, in written form, in the early eleventh century, if not before.<sup>626</sup>

The “magic kiss” is not only found in Arthurian Romance and Irish folklore. Some stories from *The Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, compiled from the brothers' nineteenth century researches into Teutonic folklore,<sup>627</sup> contain magic kisses as key plot elements. In *Beauty and the Beast*, for instance, a girl is imprisoned by a “beast” but treated well. Eventually she kisses him, whereupon he turns into a handsome young prince. The same happens to the girl in *The Frog Prince*, save that the girl is not imprisoned and the “beast” is a frog. Similarly, in *Sleeping Beauty*, a girl is restored to consciousness when a prince kisses her. This is not to say, of course, that Chaucer's sources were the same as those of the Grimm brothers. It does demonstrate, however, that magic kisses appear common in folklore.

Another theme, just below the surface in *Niall and the Nine Huntings* and not much lower in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *The Wife of Bath's*

invented much of it (e.g., the Merlin character in the legend appears to have no possible historical counterpart), Geoffrey used some written sources and, when he did not, he based his characters (including Merlin) around folklore. See Frank D. Reno, *Arthurian Figures of History and Legend: A Biographical Dictionary* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), p. 185.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>625</sup> See Janet Grayson, ““Do You Kiss Your Mother?”: Stephen Dedalus' Sovereignty of Ireland”, *James Joyce Quarterly*, 191(982), 119–126 (p. 123).

<sup>626</sup> Maud Joint, ‘Echtra Mac Echdach Mugmedóin’, *Ériu*, 4 (1910), 91–111(p. 91).

<sup>627</sup> Laura Gibbs, *Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (University of Oklahoma, 2004). <<http://www.mythfolklore.net/3043mythfolklore/reading/grimm/background.htm>>[accessed 7 September 2011]

*Tale*, concerns the Earth Goddess. The “Sovereign of Erin” is not the physical ruler of Ireland. She is instead, as Coomaraswamy argues, the Irish equivalent of Isis, Diana, Europa, Rhea—indeed, countless earth goddesses.<sup>628</sup> Thus, again, given that *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is a fairy story, its origins may lie in folklore. Also, if Chaucer was aware of *Niall and the Nine Huntings*, he changed sovereignty over a country to sovereignty over men. If he did so, he used a similar technique in *The Physician's Tale*. As is discussed below, the ultimate source of *The Physician's Tale* is Livy. However, Chaucer uses Livy's rendition of events, regardless of whether Chaucer read Livy directly (again, see below), only as a template for a story. Livy's focus in the tale is on politics; Chaucer's is on male supremacy. In like manner, if the focus in *Niall and the Nine Huntings* is on governance of a country (Ireland), the focus in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is on governance within marriage—in other words, who rules, wife or husband?

It is also possible that the *Wife of Bath's Tale* was influenced by Chaucer's personal life. Marion Wynne-Davies observes that not one of the *Tale's* analogues “includes a sexual assault”.<sup>629</sup> From this, Wynne-Davies argues that the inclusion of rape in the *Tale* may have arisen from Chaucer's personal life. In 1380 he was accused of the rape (*raptus*) of one Cecily Chaumpaigne. Whether he did rape her is unclear. First, the term *rape* in the fourteenth century also meant to abduct; second, Cecily later dropped charges.<sup>630</sup> This said, as Laura Betzig observes, abduction could be tantamount to rape in the modern sense of the term: “. . . there were other means to the same end [to ensuring children]. For knights, one of the most common was abduction”.<sup>631</sup>

A notable feature of the tale is that the knight, at the beginning of the story, does rape a woman (in the sexual sense, for the rape occurs in a field and the knight takes

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<sup>628</sup> Amanda. K. Coomaraswamy, ‘On the loathly bride’, *Speculum*, 20 (1945), 391–404 (p. 391).

<sup>629</sup> Wynne-Davies, *the Tales of The Clerk and The Wife of Bath*, p. 15.

<sup>630</sup> Haldeen Braddy, ‘Chaucer, Alice Perrers, and Cecily Chaumpaigne’, *Speculum*, 52 (1977), 906–911 (pp. 906–907).

<sup>631</sup> Betzig, ‘Medieval Monogamy’, p.198.



her maidenhead) and so is guilty of sin, but by the end of the story the knight has atoned for it, by keeping to his word both to Guinevere and to the loathly lady. This part of the story is a substantial departure from *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. It is therefore at least possible that Chaucer, if guilty of rape, wished and tried to atone for his sin.

Finally, there are similarities between John Gower's "Tale of Florent," (in *Confessio Amantis*). However, the *Confessio* is known to have been completed (first draft), in 1390, the same year that Chaucer is thought to have written *The Wife of Bath's Tale*.<sup>632</sup> Moreover, as Withrington and Field argue, too little is known about Chaucer's relations with Gower "for it to be worthwhile speculating as to which of the two texts was written first, let alone whether they were indebted to each other or had a common source".<sup>633</sup>

To conclude, there are several plausible sources to *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and though Chaucer was influenced by the Bible, Christian teaching, folklore, and so forth, he may also have been influenced by personal experience. The exact sources of the tale are unclear. In any event, the diversity of the sources may well have served to lend both the *Prologue* and the *Tale* subtlety.

### ***Imagery and characterisation in the Prologue***

The Wife is introduced as brazenly immoral, at least by medieval standards. Robertson comments that "no Christian should do what the Wife has done or understand life as she understands it, regardless of her social situation or the conflicts her situation forces upon her".<sup>634</sup> Robertson has a point. Five times married (and widowed), the Wife has a "masculine" attitude to sex. She is unabashed in providing her fellow pilgrims with stories of the "wo that is in mariage"(3), and she speaks

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<sup>632</sup> Withrington and Field, 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', in Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales: Volume II*, pp. 405–448 (pp. 405, 406).

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407.

<sup>634</sup> Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives*, p. 330.

openly of her luck in selecting her husbands; four were rich and all had good physique (and, by implication, virility): "Of whiche I have pyked out the beste / Bothe of here nether purs and of here cheste"(44a–44b). From the start she is introduced as a sexually active woman. *The General Prologue* states of her that:

Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,  
Ful streite yteyd, and shoes ful moyste andnewe. (*The General Prologue*,  
456–457)

So, she wears scarlet stockings (she is a "scarlet woman") and her shoes (her vagina) are moist. We then hear:

Ywmped wel, and on hir heed an hat  
As brood as is a bokeler or a targe;  
A foot-mantel about hir hipes large,  
And of hir feet a paire of spores sharpe. (*The General Prologue*, 470–473).

Her wide hat reflects her wide hips and genital area.<sup>635</sup> Sarah-Grace Heller comments:

In a fashion system, display of fashionable appearance is thought to have a power to seduce: to attract the interest of others or awaken desire in potential sexual partners.<sup>636</sup>

Heller's point is true but humdrum. Nonetheless, Chaucer's description of the Wife's clothing is purposeful. The clothes that the Wife wears loudly proclaim her sense of her sexuality, and the economic prosperity she enjoys because of her successful cloth-making business.

Chaucer reinforces the message in the Wife's *Prologue*. The Wife states:

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<sup>635</sup> Gail Ashton notices that the Wife of Bath 'is bold of face and in her dress, her stockings red stockings almost matching her high complexion. She is associated with the vibrant colour red, itself an indication of heat and lasciviousness'. See Gail Ashton, *Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 11.

<sup>636</sup> Sarah-Grace Heller, *Fashion in Medieval France* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2007), p. 38.

And I was yong and ful of ragerye,  
 Stibourn and strong, and joly as a *pye*.  
 How koude I daunce to an harpe smale,  
 And synge, ywis, as any *nyghtyngale*,  
 Whan I had dronke a draughte of *sweete wyn!*  
 Metellius, the foule cherl, the swyn,  
 That with a staf birafte his wyf hir lyf,  
 For she drank wyn, thogh I hadde been his wyf,  
 He sholde nat han daunted me fro drynke!  
 And after wyn on Venus moste I thynke,  
 For al so siker as cold engendreth hayl,  
*A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tayl.*  
 In wommen vinolent is no defence—  
 This knowen lecchours by experience. (The Wife of Bath's Prologue, 455–  
 468; emphases added)

The Wife is happy as a “pye” (magpie); as indicated, magpies are both sexual symbols and symbols of thieves, so she trades sex for profit—something she admits to when speaking of her first three husbands (see below). She then likens herself to a nightingale. This is another sexual symbol, one of lust and betrayal. This is seen in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Philomela, a rape victim of King Tereus, and her sister Procne (Tereus's wife) are transformed into birds.<sup>637</sup> Although the *Metamorphoses* does not name the birds, the *Ovide Moralisé* (a French work written between 1316 and 1322 and widely read in Europe) does: Philomela is transformed into a nightingale and Procne into a swallow. Chaucer was certainly aware of the work: he retells the story in *The Legend of Good Women*, (though in it he omits the metamorphoses) and he specifically refers to Procne as a swallow in *Troilus and Criseyde* during the seduction scene (“The swalowe Proigne, with a sorowful .lay”, II, 64). Marilyn King, incidentally, argues that the swallow is also a symbol of

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<sup>637</sup> See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans., by Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1955), Book IV: The Story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela.

incestuous love and betrayal, as exercised by Tereus.<sup>638</sup> Also, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Criseyde hears a nightingale singing prior to her queer dream (II, 918–924). There is also Chaucer's description of the Squire in *The General Prologue*, in which the nightingale is associated with lust and desire: "So hoot he lovede that by nyghtertale / He sleep namoore than dooth a nyghtyngale" (98–99).

After this likening of herself to birds, the Wife kindles her lechery by drinking wine. In this regard, she is similar to Januarie in *the Merchant's Tale*. Niebrzydowski says:

Each has had sexual encounters in their youth that contravene canon law. Like Januarie's pre-marital affairs, Alisoun's juvenile sexual experiences are sinful and constitute fornication (*General Prolouge*, 461). Both use their wealth as a means of attracting a younger spouse. Both are aroused by the effect of alcohol. Alisoun's confession that she is both 'ful of ragerye' and 'joly as a pye' echoes the Merchant's description of the post-coital Januarie, 'al coltish, ful of ragerye, / And ful of Jargon as a flekked pye' (*Merchant's Tale*, 1847–48). Both admits to remaining wanton in their maturity and are compared with magpies.<sup>639</sup>

The Wife admits to being easily seduced when intoxicated. She also states she has difficulty turning down men. She cannot deny "My chambre of Venus from a good felawe" (618). She makes ten references to Venus in her *Prologue*, including:

In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien.  
Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,  
And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse;  
Myn ascendent was Taur, and Mars therinne. (*The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, 610–613)

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<sup>638</sup> Marilyn Shelley King, *Three Images: A Study of the Role of Nautical, Bird, and Fire Imagery in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde* (Unpublished thesis: McMaster University, 1978), p. 45.

<sup>639</sup> Niebrzydowski, *Bonoure and Buxum*, p. 117.

The concatenation of Mars with Venus reinforces her male attitude towards sex. It also has hints of sadomasochism. The Wife speaks of the lustfulness she gets from Venus and the learning she gets from Mars (whose mark she bears on her face and genitalia— “Yet have I Martes mark upon my face, / And also in another privee place”; 619–620). Trevor Whittock views the Mars–Venus passage as representative of the aggression lurking within male–female relationships and of the disharmony existing between clerks and women.<sup>640</sup>

The Wife uses metaphor commonly seen in *fabliaux*, particularly those pertaining to grain. She likens wives to barley bread (“And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed”, 145); and she admits to being post-menopausal (“The flour is goon; ther is namoore to telle; / The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle; / But yet to be right myrie wol I fonde”, 477–479). Indeed, she is so outlandish that the Pardoner changes his mind on getting married:

I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas!  
 What sholde I bye it on my flessch so deere?  
 Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!” (The Wife of Bath’s *Prologue*,  
 166–168)

The Wife’s reply to the Pardoner is telling. She says:

Of tribulacion in mariage,  
 Of which I am expert in al myn age  
 This is to seyn, myself have been the *whippe*—  
 Than maystow chese wheither thou wolt sippe  
 Of thilke tonne that I shal abroche.  
 Be *war* of it, er thou to ny approche;  
 For I shal telle ensamples mo than ten.  
 “Whoso that nyl be *war* by othere men,  
 By hym shul othere men corrected be. “

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<sup>640</sup> See Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

The same wordes writeth Ptholomee; (The Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, 173–182; emphases added)

The reference to Ptolemy's *Almagest* is also apposite. Ptolemy wrote:

If you do not learn from others' mistakes, others will learn from yours.  
The hands of the intellect hold the reins of the soul.  
A leader who keeps a firm rein on the people will not need a lot of soldiers.<sup>641</sup>

The references to whips and war reinforce the impression of sado-masochism in the Wife's marriages. The illustrator(s) of the Ellesmere edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, produced in the early fifteenth century, appreciated this,<sup>642</sup> for the portrait shows her carrying a whip and wearing spurs (Plate 4.1).



Plate 4. 1. Wife of Bath.

Also, the Wife rides astride, in the manner of a man. In contrast to the Wife, neither of the other two female pilgrims, the Second Nun and the Prioress, wears spurs (they

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<sup>641</sup> Cited in Hanna and Lawler, 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue', in Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues of The Canterbury Tales: Volume II*, p. 380.

<sup>642</sup> Philip H. Goepp, *The Ellesmere Chaucer* (University of Rochester Library Bulletin, 1952) <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=2454>> [accessed 15 May 2013]

cannot, because they are riding side-saddle); the Prioress carries not a whip, but a crop, and the Second Nun does not even carry a crop (Plate 4.2).



The Second Nun



The Prioress

Plate 4. 2. The Second Nun and the Prioress.

In this regard, Beryl Roland observes that medieval writers used the image of a woman riding astride to illustrate the woman's desire "to reverse the position of the sexes".<sup>643</sup>

The Wife declares that happiness lies in being in control. This is reflected in her *Prologue* and her tale. Significantly, in the tale the loathly lady becomes beautiful *only* when she gains sovereignty, which suggests that women are more attractive when they are powerful.<sup>644</sup> In this regard, Jill Mann observes that, in the medieval era "female ugliness . . . [was] the accurate reflection of the deformity of male desires".<sup>645</sup> From this, Mann points to the paradox of the tale: "men can have what

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<sup>643</sup> Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1971), p. 131.

<sup>644</sup> See especially Carter, 'Coupling the Bestly Bride and the Hunter Hunted', pp. 329–330.

<sup>645</sup> Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, p. xvi.

they want only by renouncing their claim to it", which is exactly what happens at the end of the *Tale*.<sup>646</sup>

There is a suggestion in *The General Prologue* that the Wife is a good dissembler. She is good at "cloth-making" (weaving stories) ("Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt / She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt", 447–448). She also appears meretricious ("In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon / That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon—449–450).

The first section of the Wife's *Prologue* concerns the Wife's views on bigamy, remarriage, and the merits of virginity over marriage. She defends marriage and remarriage, and, in doing so, draws on biblical references, including ones to Solomon and Abraham. She argues that the Bible neither prescribes virginity nor proscribes intercourse, that if everyone in the past had been a virgin there would be nobody alive now, that none of the saints would have been born had everyone been celibate, and that God gave people sexual organs with two functions (urination and procreation), so there is nothing wrong with using them for sex. Thus, in contrast to the Knight, the Wife makes plain that love is sexual.

Douglas Gray observes that, in medieval societies, marriages were defined in economic terms, and that "marriage was not at all incompatible with love, but probably many people thought of marriage less as the culmination of a romantic relationship than as a kind of job".<sup>647</sup>

In a similar vein, Christine Tucker observes that, particularly in her first three marriages, the Wife equated sex with money.<sup>648</sup> To Tucker, the Wife does not differentiate between the three husbands, noting only that they were "goode men,

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<sup>646</sup> Ibid.

<sup>647</sup> Douglas Gray, *the Oxford Companion to Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 312.

<sup>648</sup> Christine Tucker, 'Wo' What?: Sex, Money, and Power in The Wife of Bath's *Prologue* and *Tale*', in *L-SAW*, (2008) <<http://jsaw.lib.lehigh.edu/include/getdoc.php?id=1752&article=970&mode=pdf>>[accessed 10September 2011], p. 2.



and riche, and olde” (197). The wife admits, as Tucker argues, that she used sex to wheedle the husbands’ riches (land and treasure) out of them (“What sholde I taken keep hem for to plesse, / But it were for my profit and myn ese?”, 213–214). Tucker, however, misinterprets the Wife. Tucker says “There is *no* indication that the Wife gives her husbands sex for *any reason other* than to get their land and treasure” (emphases added);<sup>649</sup> but the text clearly states she gave the husbands sex for profit *and* for pleasure (“ese”.<sup>650</sup>) The Wife, venal as she may be, believes in combining business with pleasure. One gets the impression that the Wife married rich old men, knowing that she could obtain much of their wealth from them while they were alive, and inherit the remainder when they died. This did not preclude the Wife’s enjoying herself in the process. In this regard, Niebrzydowski argues that in both *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *The Merchant’s Tale* Chaucer “acknowledges that women experience sexual desire” and points out that “Alisoun of Bath and May’s marital experiences demonstrate that although financial security is important, money is not everything”.<sup>651</sup> Tucker underestimates the Wife, and Chaucer.

Tucker’s underestimation is also evident in her discussion of the Wife’s description of her fourth marriage. Tucker rightly points to the Wife’s cupidity being (temporarily) foiled by the fourth husband’s infidelity. Because of this infidelity, the Wife cannot use her sexuality as “leverage”<sup>652</sup> (Tucker’s term) because the husband can obtain sexual gratification elsewhere. The wife overcomes this by making the husband jealous. Tucker asserts that the Wife was unfaithful, and let her husband know it. However, although this interpretation is plausible, from the text we know only that she ensured her husband had the *impression* she was unfaithful. The husband’s jealousy ensures he is so miserable he cannot risk her being unfaithful again. The Wife states “That in his owene grece I made hym frye / For angre, and for verray jalousye. / By God, in erthe I was his purgatorie” (487–489). Tucker misses

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<sup>649</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>650</sup> The Harvard Chaucer translates *ese* directly as “pleasure”.

<sup>651</sup> Niebrzydowski, *Bonoure and Buxum*, p. 58.

<sup>652</sup> Tucker, ‘Wo’ What?’, p. 3.

opportunities. She fails to mention that the Wife's "infidelity" suggests the Wife's intelligence—far greater than that of her husband. There is also the suggestion that the Wife relished tormenting her husband. Again, there are hints of the sado-masochism. The following lines are revealing:

For, God it woot, he sat ful ofte and song,  
Whan that his *shoo* ful bitterly hym wrong.  
Ther was no wight, save God and he, that wiste,  
In many wise, how soore I hym twiste. (The Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, 491–494; emphasis added)

The use of "shoe" is, in this context, could be a medieval metaphor for a vagina. The shoe in this case is too tight. The metaphor thus suggests that the Wife placed her fourth husband's penis in a vice. She tortures him (exquisitely) and, in the process ensures his penis is in "the right place".

In addition to the "sins" of remarriage and cupidity, the Wife makes clear that she lied to her husbands in order to make them suffer (yet again, there are hints of sado-masochism), and that she withheld sex from them if they did not obey her whim.

Her fifth marriage, to Jankyn—a clerk—was the only one in which the Wife marries for love (or lust), not money. She was initially attracted to him by the sight of his legs: "Of legges and of feet so clene and faire / That al myn herte I yaf unto his hold", (598–599). She admits that Jankyn annoyed her by reading passages from his book on infamous women. This culminated in a fight in which she tore pages from the book and Jankyn, in retaliation, knocked her unconscious and rendered her deaf in one ear. After this, she tells us, Jankyn was so remorseful he gave her the run of the household and loved her dearly. But again there are hints of sadomasochism. The Wife tells us that Jankyn's violence enhanced their sex lives:

And yet was he to me the mooste shrewe;  
That feele I on my ribbes al by rewe,  
And evere shal, unto myn endyng day.  
But in oure bed he was ful fressh and gay, (The Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, 511–514)

The Wife points out that he could “glose” her extremely well whenever they had sex, and she loved him best, because he played hard with her:

And therwithal so wel koude he me glose  
Whan that he solde han my bele chose,  
That thogh he hadde me bet on every bon  
He koude wynne agayn my love anon.  
I trowe I loved hym beste, for that he  
Was of his love daungerous to me. (The Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, 515–520)

There is ambiguity in the term *glose*. Niebrzydowski argues that the Wife of Bath—and, one could add, Chaucer's contemporary audience—was familiar with the meaning of the verb *glose*. It means exploring, examining, and studying a text carefully. Niebrzydowski also suggests that Jankyn, also familiar with the concept of “glossing”, transforms the Wife's body into a sheet of parchment onto which he can apply his reading and studying techniques.<sup>653</sup> One can go further than Niebrzydowski. The Wife admits that Jankyn beat her badly and frequently “on every bone”. She also emphasises Jankyn's violent beating and the use of excessive force that one of his blows did not only knock her down but permanently damaged her—“That of the strook myn ere wax al deaf” (636).

Butler comments that the Wife's reaction to the beatings is odd: “The Wife of Bath's response to her fifth husband's violence is intriguing: she not only seems to expect cruelty from her husband (perhaps as any disobedient wife should have), but she seems to delight in it”.<sup>654</sup> In this regard, Crocker argues that it is not so much the beatings that annoy the Wife.<sup>655</sup> It is more Jankyn's book. It is as though the Wife objects to Jankyn's intellectual snobbery, his male intellectual chauvinism.

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<sup>653</sup> Niebrzydowski, “‘So wel koude he me glose’: The Wife of Bath and the Eroticism of Touch”, p. 23.

<sup>654</sup> Sara M. Butler, *the Language of Abuse: Marital Violence in Later Medieval England* (Leiden; Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2007), p. 231.

<sup>655</sup> Crocker. *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood*, pp. 110, 111.

There is another aspect to the violence. Crocker observes that the Wife flirted with Jankyn when she was married to her fourth husband.<sup>656</sup>

Now wol I tellen forth what happed me.  
I seye that in the feeldes walked we,  
Til trewely we hadde swich daliance,(The Wife of Bath's *Prologue*, 563–  
565)

Jankyn's motive, therefore, could be to keep her housebound, where he can see her. After all, if she flirted with him when she was married to another, she could easily flirt with someone else when she is married to Jankyn.

In another incident in her *Prologue*, the Wife turns to violence to frame her sexual experience. She relates a dream (that never occurred) in which Jankyn slays her, and her bed fills with blood.

I bar hym on honde, he hadde enchanted me—  
My dame taughte me that soutiltee—  
And eek I seyde, I mette of hym al nyght,  
He wolde han slayn me as I lay upright,  
And al my bed was ful of verray blood;  
But yet I hope that he shal do me good,  
For blood bitokeneth gold, as me was taught-  
And al was fals, I dremed of it right naught,  
But as I folwed ay my dames loore  
As wel of this, as of othere thynges moore. (The Wife of Bath's *Prologue*,  
575–584)

Timothy O'Brian<sup>657</sup> points to the “undeniable” sexual aspects of the dream, and notes in particular that the Wife appears to have been “penetrated by some weapon”

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<sup>656</sup> Ibid., p. 110, 111.

<sup>657</sup> Timothy D. O'Brien, 'Seductive Violence and Three Chaucerian Women', *College Literature*, 28 (2001), 178–196 (pp. 181–182).

He also observes that the Wife tells Jankyn of her dream in order to illustrate how the two of them are intimately connected and that he is forever in her thoughts. But why, O'Brian asks, is the dream so violent? He answers in two ways: first, blood could be viewed as gold, which in turn suggests prosperity; second, women were seen in the Middle Ages as being incapable of preserving boundaries, and, in this, menstrual blood was seen as pollution—thus the Wife's blood is symbolic of her femininity, and thereby her subservient status.

There are simpler explanations. The violence could indicate merely that the Wife enjoys rough sex. Related to this, violence is intrinsically erotic to some people. Another explanation is that the Wife admits to the audience, and to Jankyn, that there is something wrong with their marriage. Here, the Wife's tale revolves around curing a knight of his violence. The violence is cured, significantly, by the knight's discovery of true erotic love (see below).

Other interpretations are possible (they are not mutually exclusive, and they are compatible with those given above). One could say the Wife's lust can only be relieved by bloodletting (this was thought, in medieval times, to drain blood away from overheated genitalia). Lust is caused by heat or "inflammations" and can be remedied by cooling, such as may be provided by dousing in cold baths. Bloodletting in men was also thought to reduce the amount of blood available for creating sperm.<sup>658</sup> Another interpretation is that the pleasure that the Wife has from being killed is described in the same terms as is the loss of a woman's virginity. Just as the loss of virginity is represented as initially bringing pain (and concomitant pleasure) so too the killing in the dream is represented as a preparation for a much greater pleasure to come.

Medieval science, of course, knew of the hymen. Mondino de Luzzi (c. 1270–1326), for example, stated that "the surface [of the entrance to the womb] is in virgins covered by a subtle and venous membrane; at the moment of deflowering, it breaks,

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<sup>658</sup> An explanation of such methods can be found in Robert Schnucker, 'Elizabethan Birth Control and Puritan Attitudes', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 4 (1975), 655–667 (pp. 665–667).

and women bleed".<sup>659</sup> Hence loss of virginity, to women, is painful. Also, the evidence of blood was crucial to the medieval understanding of loss of virginity, although people of the period were aware that bleeding could also result from injury to the female genitals.<sup>660</sup>

The description of the pleasure that follows the physical violence closely resembles the description of the supposed pleasure of intercourse that follows loss of virginity. Allman and Hanks comment:

Alisoun here doubtless alludes to the blood of defloration, but by likening this act to a bloody slaying, she again brings the image of knife or sword into the erotic relationship. One does not expect to see the assertive (even aggressive) Wife as it were aiding and abetting the pro mulgation of this bloody view of masculinity; we remember, however, that she seems resigned to male violence toward women, at least in her relationship with Jankyn,[*sic*]—whom she will allow to make love with her on the night of the day wherein he has “bete [her] on every bon” (III 511–512).<sup>661</sup>

In any event, the Wife uses the dream to arouse Jankyn, and thus again links eroticism with violence. Her use of the dream also reinforces the point that she is manipulative.

To summarise, the Wife is thus unabashedly sexual and open about her sins. These qualities make her attractive. They are also in contrast to her tale. The tale is arguably the most delicate of Chaucer's stories.

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<sup>659</sup> Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, p. 44.

<sup>660</sup> Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (Routledge: New York, 2000), p. 28.

<sup>661</sup> Allman and Hanks, 'Rough Love: Notes toward an Erotics of *the Canterbury Tales*', pp. 48, 49.

***Imagery and characterisation in the tale***

The *Wife of Bath's Tale* is the only tale that features an unambiguous rape. The rape is “clear”, in that, unlike the “rapes” of the miller’s wife and daughter in *The Reeve’s Tale*, everyone agrees that it is rape. The rape is not described in detail. It is simply mentioned. It occurs at the beginning of the tale. A knight is riding out alone, sees a maiden, and then, in a vicious couplet, “Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed, / By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed” (887–888)—in other words, despite her attempts to escape, he uses brute force to deflower her. In contrast, the tale ends with joyous lovemaking:

And whan the knyght saugh verrailly al this,  
That she so fair was, and so yong therto,  
For joye he hente hire in hise armes two.  
His herte bathed in a bath of blisse,  
A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hir kisse,  
And she obeyed hym in every thyng  
That myghte doon hym plesance or liking (*The Wife of Bath's Tale*, 1250–  
1256)

Amanda Hopkins argues that the violence of the rape is used to highlight “the eroticism of romance’s idealistic female passivity”.<sup>662</sup> Chaucer may also, however, have avoided graphic description of the rape because such could, in today’s terms, be viewed as pornographic. Hopkins is correct in pointing out that the beastliness of the rape contrasts with the lovemaking at the end, but one may question her use of the phrase *idealistic female passivity*. If the lady at the end of the tale is “passive”, it is a passivity of her own choosing. The lady is the architect of her own destiny.

The tale is not overtly erotic. Although we hear that he repeatedly kisses his bride, and that she pleasures him in every way he desires, we do not hear any specifics. Nor

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<sup>662</sup> Hopkins, “‘wordy vnthur wede’: Clothing, Nakedness and the Erotic in some Romances of Medieval Britain”, in Hopkins and Cory, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, pp. 53–70 (p. 62).

is there much sexual imagery in the tale. Instead, at the beginning, we hear of elves and fairies. We then witness a minor miracle when twenty-four ladies morph into the loathly lady. We then hear, from the Wife, of King Midas and his enchanted ears. We next have another minor miracle in which the loathly lady appears out of nowhere at Camelot, to demand that the knight marries her.

We learn that the knight gets married in secret, so there is no wedding feast. Animals, food, birds, phallic symbols are notable by their absence (though there is one owl). What we hear of instead is *nobility* (the tale uses the word twelve times, and the word *noble* sixteen). It is the loathly lady who is noble, not the knight. He is a convicted rapist; and he is mentally and physically cruel. He hides his wife from others; he says she is ugly, that she is of base birth, and that she is poor. Yet it is she who talks, in Boethian terms, of Christ, and of what being noble entails; and the knight only falls in love with her only *after* she has become beautiful. This is in contrast to Beauty in *Beauty and the Beast*. It is Beauty's love of the beast that turns him into a prince. The knight does not even have the nobility of Niall, who, as indicated, offers to copulate with the loathly lady although she has asked only for a kiss.

There is some ambiguity in the loathly lady. We do not know whether she is teaching him subservience, teaching him good manners, or taking delight in his discomfort at the prospect of being married to an ugly woman. The tale starts with violence (the rape), and thereafter is peppered with acts of cruelty, albeit cruelty of a psychological sort. Only after this composite nastiness do the knight and the loathly lady achieve happiness. This coupling of nastiness with requited love is echoed in the Wife's *Prologue*. The Wife's *Prologue* can be viewed as an anthem to the merits (and joys) of rough sex—violence is used to enhance sex. In contrast, in the tale eroticism is used to cure the knight of his violence.



Saunders points out that, in the tale, “convention is rewritten”.<sup>663</sup> Everything in the tale is upside down. The knight, rather than being an Arthurian hero (Lancelot, Percival, Galahad . . . ), is not even an anti-hero; his only redeeming feature is his obedience to Guinevere—something that, for all we know, about which he has little choice; and the “fairy” in the story, unlike the Fairy Queen in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* or Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen*, is not beautiful; she is hideous. Moreover, unlike Shakespeare’s and Spenser’s fairies—and, for that matter, Morgan le Fay in Arthurian romances—she is (so long as she stays ugly) sexless.

Other things are upside down: the lack of a marriage feast; the loathly lady’s command of philosophy (Saunders notes that she is akin to Boethius’s Lady Philosophy—yet nowhere in *The Consolation* does Boethius suggest that his lady is ugly); the lack of basic education in the knight; and, above all, the idea that the wife rules the marital home rather than the husband.

This topsy-turvy nature of the romance is witnessed elsewhere in Chaucer. Burrow points out that, in the Wife’s *Prologue*, she argues, in contrast to traditional romances, that times were worse in the past—the Wife, though Burrow does not say so directly, seems to take a Hobbesian view of history.<sup>664</sup> *The Tale of Sir Thopas* also inverts tradition: Sir Thopas is effeminate (he dresses in “female” clothes, and even his name is feminine—“Thopas” was a woman’s name in the fourteenth century); he falls in love (with a fairy) before he meets the object of his passion; and, rather than fight the giant, he runs away.<sup>665</sup> The tale is a mockery of romantic tradition, and this may be why Chaucer has the Host ordering him to stop telling it.

Chaucer’s love goddesses, as is discussed in the section on *The Knight’s Tale*, in contrast to his seductresses, lack physical description. So does his loathly lady, even

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<sup>663</sup> Saunders, ‘Erotic Magic: The Enchantress in Middle English Romance’, in Hopkins and Rushton, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, p. 52.

<sup>664</sup> Burrow, ‘*The Canterbury Tales* I: Romance’, in Boitani and Mann, *the Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, p. 144.

<sup>665</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

after she transmogrifies into a beautiful young woman. But unlike Emily in *The Knight's Tale*, once transmogrified, she is not sexless. Thus, we hear:

And thus *they* lyve unto hir lyves ende  
In parfit joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende  
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde, (*The Wife of Bath's Tale*,  
1257–1259; emphasis added)

There would be no point in the bride's life being completed in "perfect joy" yet at the same time having what appears to be a sexually active ("young, and vigorous in bed") husband. The transmogrified loathly lady enjoys sex: the text clearly states that the sexually active couple lived in perfect joy, something that would have been impossible had the lady not enjoyed sex. It is also clear from the Wife's *Prologue* that the Wife enjoys sex; it would be odd if the lady did not enjoy sex. Finally on this issue, as indicated (Chapter one) medieval authorities were fully aware of the clitoris and the female orgasm, Thus the loathly lady appears to have transformed herself into something of a sex goddess, albeit one only for her husband's delectation.

There is also the question of the lady's wish for sovereignty. On the surface, this appears short-lived. Thus: "And she obeyed hym in every thing / That myghte doon hym plesance or liking" (1255–1256). Taken literally, this means she has become his cook, his sex slave, his housekeeper—his chattel. Thus, the tale appears to turn upside down the Wife's own thesis, namely that all women wish to rule over their husbands. However, Chaucer was too subtle a writer to allow for such an interpretation. The final lines of the tale are revealing:

And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves  
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;  
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,  
God sende hem soone verray pestilence! (*The Wife of Bath's Tale*, 1261–  
1264)

The Wife thus curses men who refuse to be governed by their wives. So, by implication, the knight is governed by his wife, and they live in bliss thereafter. It is no coincidence that the knight is the one who lacks nobility. As Susan Carter argues,

the knight starts as a “sexual predator” (Carter’s phrase)—hence the rape at the commencement of the tale—but finishes as the “victim” of the wiles of a loathly lady; hence his punishment is “acutely appropriate” (again, Carter’s phrase).<sup>666</sup>

The lady gains sovereignty over the knight through sex (again, there are parallels with the Wife’s *Prologue*, particularly in her control of her first three husbands), and, to achieve this, the loathly lady must transform herself into a sexually attractive individual, if not object. Thus, the message of the tale appears to be that men are the “victims” of their own lust: the more they crave sex, the more women have power over them. This is a power that the loathly lady, all too willingly, exercises.

The other romances discussed in depth in the present chapter—*The Knight’s Tale* and *The Physician’s Tale*—point to the damage done to men by male chauvinism, and, as is discussed below in coverage of *The Physician’s Tale*, *The Franklin’s Tale* points to gender equality, not dominance of one gender over another. Here, as regards male chauvinism, Saunders notes that, in *The Knight’s Tale*, the relationship is between brotherhood and sex (with the former being destroyed by it); but in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* the relationship is between sovereignty and sex (and, in this, neither is destroyed).<sup>667</sup>

*The Wife of Bath’s Tale* therefore has two aspects: (a) an exploration of sexual politics as it really is (or was, in medieval Europe); (b) an appeal for give and take in sexual relations, and, in this, an acknowledgement of female sexuality. Apropos both points, Christine Tucker observes that the resolution of the tale echoes the Wife’s resolution of her marriage with Jankyn. Tucker states that the tale “reinforces the moral that a successful marriage is one in which the woman has the power”.<sup>668</sup> But Tucker understates her point. The Wife is the dominant partner in *all* her marriages, and the most problematic ones are her fourth, in which the husband temporarily denies her sovereignty, and her fifth, in which Jankyn tries to dominate her

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<sup>666</sup> Carter, ‘Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted’, p. 334.

<sup>667</sup> Saunders, ‘Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*’, in Saunders, *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, p. 456.

<sup>668</sup> Tucker, ‘Wo’ What?’, p. 9.

(unsuccessfully) through physical force. The attempts by the husbands backfire. There is thus a symmetry between the Wife of Bath's *Prologue* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*: the Wife dominates her husbands in real life, and Jankyn—the only husband of whom we are provided great detail—achieves happiness only when he is so dominated; the same is true of the knight in the Wife's tale.

The knight starts as ill educated, violent, insensitive, snobbish, and male chauvinist (again, there is a parallel with Jankyn, at least as regards violence and his suggested pseudo-intellectualism). It is only when he abjures his nastiness that he finds happiness. Thus, the most important part of the knight's year-and-a-day quest is not to discover what women want most. Instead, it is for him to redeem himself. One may also add that it is a woman—Guinevere—who sends him on this quest, with the approval of the ladies at court. The message is clear: women know what is best for men. What is best for men is denial of their innate sovereignty, and acceptance of female sexuality. This point is reinforced by the rape at the beginning of the tale, which, as indicated, is joyless, and may be contrasted with the lovemaking at the end, which is ecstatic.

Chaucer adds another subtlety. As Saunders observes, the loathly lady desires only sovereignty.<sup>669</sup> But, in her final act of magic, she not only makes herself beautiful; she also becomes sexual (she enjoys sex) and, in doing so, she brings herself “back within the realms of the human”.<sup>670</sup> Thus *The Wife of Bath's Tale* may be viewed, not only as a message to men to give greater power to women, but also as a message to women to embrace their sexuality. Like *The Franklin's Tale*, the tale is not so much feminist as humanitarian. That it comes from the mouth of a bawdy woman enhances its whimsy and delight. In this, it reveals a more tender, moral dimension to the Wife herself. She is not quite the sinner she appears. Indeed, she could be Chaucer's Lady Philosophy.

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<sup>669</sup> Saunders, 'Erotic Magic: The Enchantress in Middle English Romance', in Hopkins and Rushton, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, p. 52.

<sup>670</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

*The Wife of Bath's Tale*, as indicated, quites *The Knight's Tale*, and is a far more effective, and subversive, quiting of it than is *The Miller's Tale*. It also quites *The Physician's Tale*. This tale is arguably the most violent in Chaucer's *oeuvre*.

### **The Physician's Tale**

*The Physician's Tale* is like *The Wife of Bath's Tale* in that, as is discussed below; its use of erotic imagery is relatively sparse. This is despite the tale's implicit sexual violence. The reason for the tale's relative lack of erotic of imagery is that, as the present section argues, the tale is deeply subversive—arguably far more than is even the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*—suggesting that women deserve to be treated better than chattel. Erotic imagery in *The Physician's Tale* occurs within a matrix of violence and oppression. In this, the tale has to be seen in context of other *Canterbury Tales*, particularly *The Franklin's Tale*. As such, it can be seen as a development of themes articulated in *The Knight's Tale*.

Nonetheless, the violence within the tale differs from that in *The Knight's Tale*. In *The Knight's Tale*, the violence, as argued above, is continuous; in *The Physician's Tale*, by contrast, it is sudden, but more vicious; it involves metaphorical rape and actual murder. In this, as is argued below, the tale is seditious. In this regard, Robert Mills reminds us that accounts of sexual and physical violence in the Middle Ages, “provided spaces in which to work through more subversive possibilities”.<sup>671</sup> The subversion within the tale is twofold. At one level, it is a critique of male desire to control women. At another level, it is a critique of sexual violence.

### **Provenance**

Chaucer has the Physician claim the source of the story is Livy's (59 BC–AD 17) *Histories*. This is plausible. The story, as related by the Physician, is identical in all key respects (even names) to that reported in Livy's *Histories* (Book III: 46–53). The main substantive differences are that, in Livy's version, Appius does not commit

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<sup>671</sup> Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture*, p. 17.

suicide and Virginius does not behead Virginia; instead, he stabs her. Livy's story differs in emphasis, however. Whereas Chaucer stresses personal and moral questions—especially those concerning Virginia (of the tale's 286 lines, the first 102 revolve around Virginia's virtue), Livy stresses political corruption, particularly of those in high places. Also, Livy states that Virginia has a fiancé, one Icilius, but Chaucer does not. Chaucer's purpose here is to turn Livy's story of political corruption into one of the injustices of sexual politics. Catherine Sanok argues:

Although Livy and Boccaccio present the story primarily as an exemplum of political vice, the Physician—especially in his long moralizing aside to governesses and parents of young girls—presents the story as an exemplum of sexual virtue. The substitution suggests that the emphasis on feminine chastity in Middle English literature often has as its unconscious the instability of masculine political order.<sup>672</sup>

It is unclear, however, whether Chaucer actually read Livy. Original works by Livy were scarce in England at the time, though Chaucer may have read them in translation.<sup>673</sup> Moreover, the entirety of the story, with Livy cited as a source, is contained in Jean de Meun's *The Romance of the Rose* (XXXVI: 5910–5970). As indicated in the context of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, the romance was widely read in medieval Europe, and it is inconceivable that Chaucer was unaware of it.<sup>674</sup> Jean's version has all the plot elements present in Chaucer but absent in Livy—the beheading, the sparing of Claudius, and the imprisonment and suicide of Appius. Jean's version also fails to mention Icilius. The only major difference as regards plot is that Jean provides no indication that Virginia agreed to die.

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<sup>672</sup> Sanok, 'Women and Literature', in Corrie, *A Concise Companion to Middle English Literature*, p. 59.

<sup>673</sup> Brian S. Lee, B. S., "'Well done of rash Virginius': Renaissance Transformations of Livy's Account of the Fall of the Decemvirs' *English Literary Renaissance*, 27 (1997), 331–360 (p. 333).

<sup>674</sup> Martha S. Waller, 'The Physician's Tale: Geoffrey Chaucer and Fray Juan García de Castrojeriz', *Speculum*, 51 (1976), 292–306 (p. 292).

There is also John Gower's (c. 1330–1408) *Confessio Amantis* ("The Lover's Confession") (Book VII: 5131–5306). This is more akin to Livy's version, however (it mentions Icilius, for example). Gower and Chaucer were, as indicated, contemporaries but, again as indicated, we do not know how often, or if, they met. Moreover, Chaucer's version shows no trace of Gower's influence, and it is impossible to precisely date the composition of either tale; Chaucer's may have been the earlier.

The Bible is another possible influence. In Judges (11: 30–40), Jephthah vows to God that, if God grants him victory over his enemies, he will kill the first thing or person that comes out of his house. This, it turns out, is his daughter. So Jephthah kills her (albeit after granting her a two months stay of execution). Other than a father killing his daughter, however, the only commonality with *The Physician's Tale* is that the daughter is a virgin. This, incidentally, parallels the murder of Iphigenia, whom, in Greek mythology, Agamemnon sacrifices prior to sailing to Troy. However, although, like Virginia, Iphigenia is a virgin, and, at least in Euripides's version of the myth, Iphigenia goes gladly to her death—this despite her father's tears.<sup>675</sup>

As indicated, Chaucer differs from Livy (and, albeit to a lesser extent, from Jean de Meud and Gower), in that he fails to emphasise the political aspects of Livy's version and substitutes in its place moral factors. In this regard, Aegidius Romanus (1243–1316), Archbishop of Bourges, may have been an indirect influence. Aegidius wrote a guide for the future Philip IV (the Fair) of France (1268–1314), *De regimine principum*.<sup>676</sup> It is an amalgam of classical and Christian philosophy designed to ensure that the young grow up virtuously. This became popular in Europe and, in the fourteenth century, was translated and adapted for the education of the Castilian

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<sup>675</sup> Euripides. *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 1540–1559. Translated by George Theodoridis (2007), <<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Iphigeneia.htm>>[accessed 15 June 2013]

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

Infante Pedro: *Regimiento de Principes*. This is more ascetic than the Aegidius original.<sup>677</sup> Above all, it emphasises chastity in young women.

In concentrating the first one hundred lines of *The Physician's Tale* on Virginia, they specify that she is fourteen years old. Chaucer's is the only version of the tale that specifies her age. She has reached an age that allows her to be married off as her father's only object of exchange on the marriage market.<sup>678</sup> However, both *De regimine principum* and *Regimiento de Principes* specify the ages at which children should acquire, and be taught, certain qualities, and the characteristics of Virginia, aged fourteen, are exactly those specified by *Regimiento de Principes*; moreover, as Waller argues, several passages in *The Physician's Tale* mirror passages in *Regimiento de Principes*.<sup>679</sup> Thus, it appears likely that Chaucer used the work as a source.

### ***Characterisation and sexual imagery***

Ademaree argues that scholars have largely ignored the significance of the tale's sexual violence (in part, she suggests, because no rape occurs within the tale).<sup>680</sup> One can go further. Some scholars view the tale as one of Chaucer's weaker tales, and from this argue that Chaucer must have composed it relatively early; its lack of sophistication, in this view, derives from Chaucer's lack of experience as a writer. For instance, Delany points out that *The Physician's Tale* is "generally conceded to be one of Chaucer's least interesting and least successful efforts: flat characters [and] a rather incompetent narrative flawed by irrelevant digressions".<sup>681</sup> Yet the difficulty in precisely dating any of *The Canterbury Tales* is widely acknowledged, besides

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<sup>677</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid., p. 296.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid., pp. 296–298.

<sup>680</sup> Ademaree, 'Sexual Violence in "*The Physician's Tale*": Was She or Wasn't She? <<http://ademaree.hubpages.com/hub/Sexual-Violence-in-The-Physicians-Tale>> [accessed 2 May 2012].

<sup>681</sup> Sheila Delany, 'Politics and Paralysis of Poetic Imagination in *The Physician's Tale*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 3 (1981), 47–60 (p. 47).



which, although, as indicated, elements of *The Physician's Tale* are present in *The Legend of Good Women*, it was completed only after *Troilus and Criseyde*, which is widely acknowledged as a masterpiece. It is easy to suppose therefore that modern scholars have failed to notice its subtlety.

In the *Physician's Tale*, the violence is elaborated by blind lust, a lecherous look that causes Appius's fatal attraction for Virginia.

And so bifel this juge hise *eyen caste*  
Upon this mayde, avysynge hym ful faste  
As she cam forby, ther as this juge stood.  
Anon his herte chaunged and his mood,  
So was he caught with *beautee* of this mayde,  
And to hymself ful pryvely he sayde,  
“This mayde shal be myn, for any man”. (*The Physician's Tale*, 123–129;  
emphases added)

Although Appius's attempt to violate Virginia is unsuccessful, it nonetheless affords a space in which audiences can contemplate images of female subjected to sexual threats.

There is a problem with the tale's central character, Virginia. Despite over one hundred lines of the tale extolling her virtue, we do not know much about her. In this regard, she is similar to Emily in *The Knight's Tale*, and Chaucer fails to provide physical description of her because, as with Emily, doing so would have risked cliché.

Chaucer uses the same device elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales*. We learn little of Griselda's, the virtuous woman in *The Clerk's Tale*, appearance. We hear only of her “virtuous beauty”, not what she actually looked like:

But for to speke of virtuous beautee,  
Thane was she onn the fairest under sonne;  
For povreliche yfostred up was she,  
No likerous lust was through hire herte yronne. (*The Clerk's Tale*, 211–214)

Similarly, in *The Man of Law's Tale*, we hear little of what Constance looks like. Instead, Chaucer tells us of her holiness, her humility, and her virtue.

In hire is heigh beautee, withoute pride  
 Yowthe, withoute grenehede or folye;  
 To alle hire werkes vertu is hir gyde;  
 Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tirannye.  
 She is mirour of alle curteisye;  
 Hir herte is verray chambre of hoolynesse,  
 Hir hand, ministre of fredam for almesse. (*The Man of Law's Tale*, 162–168)

Chaucer uses the same device in other works. The heroines of *the Legend of Good Women* are usually described as bright, fair, and young. Cleopatra, for instance, is “fayr as is the rose in May” (613); Hypsipyle is “fayre” and “yonge” (1467); Medea is “so wis and fayr” (1599). And in *The Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer omits much of his French source's description of forehead, eyebrows, nose, mouth, teeth, chin, haunches, thighs, legs, feet, and flesh.

In some tales, as in *The Physician's Tale*, female virtue is coupled with misfortune. In *The Man of Law's Tale*, for instance, Constance's virtue is coupled with bloodshed and the disruption arising from her mother-in-law's jealousy, and in *The Clerk's Tale*, Griselda's loveliness is coupled with the nastiness of her husband, Walter.

Virginia's appearance is so poorly described that we do not even learn her name until line 213, which is when she is about to be murdered. This suggests that neither the Physician nor Virginius views her as, not so much a sex object, more a “virgin object”. As Ademaree observes, there are parallels here between *The Physician's Tale* and *The Shipman's Tale*.<sup>682</sup> In the former, virginity, and the right to life, are portrayed as property; in the latter, sex is portrayed as a commodity.

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<sup>682</sup> Ademaree, ‘Sexual Violence in “*The Physician's Tale*”: Was She or Wasn't She?’

It is significant that the Physician fails to mention Virginia anywhere in his sermonising at the end of the tale. Instead, he finishes, laying the blame on Appius, with the platitudinous “Therefore I rede yow this conseil take: / Forsaketh synne, er synne yow forsake” (285–286). The Physician has spent the best part of 250 lines extolling the honour of Virginia and describing the lead-up to and manner of her death. Yet he fails to grieve for her, nor to draw any moral from her. The omission incenses the the Host:

. . . “by nayles and by blood!  
 This was a fals cherl and a fals justise.  
 As *shameful deeth* as herte may devyse  
 Come to thise *judes* and hire advocatz! . . .  
 Wherefore I seye al day that men may see  
 That yiftes of Fortune and of Nature  
 Been cause of deeth to many a creature.  
 Hire beautee was hire deth, I dar wel sayn.  
 Allas, *so pitously* as she was slayn!  
 Of bothe yiftes that I speke of now  
*Men* han ful ofte moore for harm than prow. (*The Pardoner's Tale*, 288–300;  
 emphases added)

The Host sees the death as “shameful”; he blames judges (but which judge, Appius or Virginius?); he blames the death on Virginius (“so piteously was she slain”); and he states that men often do more harm than good. So, there is little doubt that the Host sees Virginius as the villain. He also, as Ademaree observes, blames fate: “The gifts of Fortune and Nature / Have been the death of many a creature” 295–296), pointing out that Chaucer sullies (“dirties”) his tale by bringing in Divine Providence.<sup>683</sup> However, the role of fate is common in Chaucer, and, in any event, the Host’s disgust at Virginius is evident. Ademaree is arguably too harsh on Chaucer.

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<sup>683</sup> Ademaree, ‘Sexual Violence in “*The Physician's Tale*”: Was She or Wasn't She?’

There is a difference between Livy's virgin daughter and Virginia. We know that Livy's virgin has no intention of remaining one, for we know she is betrothed to Icilius. We have no indication, one way or another, whether the same is true of Virginia. The Physician fails to mention her fiancé. We learn only that she is modest:

Bacus hadde of hir mouth right no maistrie;  
For wyn and youthe dooth Venus encesse,  
As men in fyr wol casten oille or gresse. (*The Physician's Tale*, 58–60)

Thus we know that she behaves with decorum. This does not mean that she is uninterested in sex or marriage. Moreover, the Physician also tells us that young girls are sexually active unless carefully nurtured:

Ye fadres and ye moodres eek also,  
Though ye han children, be it oon or mo,  
Youre is the charge of al *hir surveiaunce*,  
Whil that they been under youre governaunce.  
Beth war, if by ensample of youre lyvyng,  
Or by youre *necligence in chastisyng*, . . .  
The wolf hath many a sheep and lamb torent.  
Suffiseth oon ensample now as heere,  
For I moot turne agayn to my matere. (*The Physician's Tale*, 93–104;  
emphases added)

The Physician spends thirty lines of the beginning of the tale telling us of the importance of governance of daughters (this out of a total of fewer than 290 lines in the tale); The Physician then tells us that her mother chaperones Virginia to the temple. If Virginia were a “determined virgin”, there would be no need for this governance. By implication, Virginia is as much interested in sex, and is as easily led astray, as any other girl of her age.

There is another subtlety. The Physician advises us:

And ye maistresses, in youre olde lyf,  
That lordes doghtres han in governaunce,

Ne taketh of my wordes no displesaunce.  
Thenketh that ye been set in governynges  
Of lordes doghtres oonly for two thynges:  
Outher for ye han kept youre honestee,  
Or elles ye han falle in freletee,  
And knowen wel ynough the olde daunce, (*The Physician's Tale*, 72–79)

Thus, older women are of two sorts: old maids, who, by definition, know nothing about the ways of the flesh, and bawds, who, by definition, know much about it, but, in the Physician's rendition of the tale, cannot tell Virginia what they know. The majority of old women, given the rarity of virgins, presumably are well versed in the art of love. They become, in effect, poachers turned gamekeepers. This, presumably, is why the mother (not Virginius) chaperones Virginia. But the Physician further tells us:

A thief of venysoun, that hath forlaft  
His likerousnesse and al his olde craft,  
Kan kepe a forest best of any man. (*The Physician's Tale*, 83–85)

The thieving motif reinforces the notion that Virginia (or, rather, her virginity) is a chattel. Holly Crocker identifies the subtlety. She argues that women who abuse their role in chaperoning, who advise their charges in feminine wiles, are guilty of treason ("Of alle tresons sovereyn pestilence / Is whan a wight bitrayseth innocence", 91–92).<sup>684</sup> Crocker argues that this "treason" involves overturning the male dominated social order of medieval Europe: women who are sexually free pose a threat to male supremacy. Thus, just as poaching in medieval Europe was viewed as a crime against the aristocracy, so "poaching" a maiden's honour was viewed as a crime against the state.

Crocker's point is good, but she misses an opportunity. One may question the identity of the poacher in the tale. It could be Virginia's mother, as a "poacher-not-

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<sup>684</sup> Crocker. *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood*, pp. 57, 58.

turned-gamekeeper”, who corrupts her daughter, rather than Appius. The Physician is quiet as to the mother’s role in the tale—indeed, other than her escorting of Virginia to the temple, we hear nothing of her—yet the Physician emphasises the role of loose women in corrupting their daughters.

There is also the absence of Icilius in the tale. Appius’s crime therefore is an inversion of common sexual mores—he is preventing Virginius from exercising his “rights” over what is his chattel, just as a medieval baron could prevent medieval peasants from hunting his chattel—deer, for instance. *The Physician’s Tale* is one of topsy-turvy moral values.

The Physician’s character is important. It is he, not Virginius, who does the talking. He appears full of himself, happy to advise on any subject. This is consistent with his unattractive portrait in the *General Prologue*. As Muriel Bowden observes, the Physician’s “exaggerated proficiency” renders him “too good to be true”.<sup>685</sup> Thus, he gives the appearance of moderate habits when dining “Of his diete mesurable was he / For it was of no superfluitee”, (435-336), yet he dresses in fine garments “In sangwyn and in pers” (439); he appears to care for his patients “esy of dispence” (441), yet he loves the gold he earns when they die of plague “For gold in phisik is a cordial” (443); he seems to know his subject “In al this world ne was ther noon hym lik / To speke of phisik and of surgerye”, (412-413), yet he appears to care little for people’s souls “His studie was but litel on the Bible”, (438).

Moreover, much of the Physician’s knowledge appears skin-deep. Among the Physician’s learned authorities, there appears the name of Constantine (line 433). In *The Merchant’s Tale*, Constantine is referred to as a “cursed monk” who appears to have written a lewd book containing (in part) information about aphrodisiacs—the

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<sup>685</sup> Muriel A. Bowden, *A commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 199.

Physician, despite his professed admiration of Virginia, appears to have a side-line in medieval erotica and pornography.<sup>686</sup>

This is not a coincidence. Just as the Physician appears pseudo, so does Virginius. Here, as Crafton argues, Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* is relevant.<sup>687</sup> Aquinas speaks at length about virginity—which, all things being equal, Aquinas argues is good—and foolish virginity—which he argues is invariably bad. Foolish virginity, Crafton argues, is characterised by four traits: non-spiritual obsession with virginity, hubris, search for public acclaim, and peripateticism (wandering about).<sup>688</sup>

All four traits of foolish virginity are shared by the Physician and Virginius. Each has a non-spiritual obsession with virginity. To someone who is genuinely chaste, the physical state of the body is unimportant. Thus, for instance, a chaste woman who is raped, according to Aquinas, remains chaste. But this is not how Virginius views the matter. The thought of Virginia losing her virginity, for whatever reason, appals him. The same, evidently, is true of the Physician, hence his one hundred line introductory diatribe on Virginia's "virtue".

The same is true of hubris. Virginius's hubris is witnessed by his effrontery in stating that he, not Virginia, is judge and jury over her right to life—as Ademaree observes, he "sentences" her—and the Physician's hubris is witnessed in—exquisitely—Chaucer's putting into Virginia's speech words that requite Virginius and the Physician.<sup>689</sup> In pleading for her life (or, at least, a few more moments before her death), Virginia states: "For, pardee, Jepte yaf his doghter grace / For to compleyne, er he hir slow, allas" (240–241). The reference here is to Jephthah, the man who, as indicated, sacrificed his daughter as a result of a foolish oath. Jephthah was widely regarded during medieval times as a fool; so Virginia is, in effect, calling her father

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<sup>686</sup> Mauric Bassan, 'Chaucer's "cursed monk", Constantine Africanus', *Mediaeval Studies*, 24 (1962), 127–140 (p. 127).

<sup>687</sup> See John Micheal Crafton, "'The cause of everiche maladye': A New Source of *The Physician's Tale*", *Philological Quarterly*, 80 (2005) 259–286.

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>689</sup> Ademaree, 'Sexual Violence in "*The Physician's Tale*": Was She or Wasn't She?

an idiot. The Physician seems not to notice this. His so-called learning appears skin-deep.

There is further subtlety. Beidler calls attention to the relationship between *The Franklin's Tale* and *The Physician's Tale*, the former of which immediately precedes *The Physician's Tale*.<sup>690</sup> *The Franklin's Tale*, like the story of Jephthah, involves a foolish promise—in this case, one made by Dorigen to her suitor, Aurelius, that she will bed him only if he performs an impossible task (remove all the rocks from the coast of Brittany), a task that, to Dorigen's chagrin, Aurelius performs, with the help of a scholar-magician (for a fee of £1000). Dorigen is therefore morally beholden to bed Aurelius.

*The Franklin's Tale* and *The Physician's Tale* are intensely different. Dorigen (and Jephthah), stupidly or otherwise, make the promise. Neither Virginius nor Virginia entertains any promise. Virginius merely assumes that what he is doing is "correct". If *The Physician's Tale* is an attempt to quite *The Franklin's Tale*, the attempt falls flat. *The Franklin's Tale*, arguably, is one of genuine love and genuine morality, because Dorigen tells her husband, Averagus, of her stupidity, and he tells her she must honour her word, but Aurelius, on learning this, releases Dorigen from her promise. Moreover, so moved is the magician-scholar by the nobility of the other protagonists, he releases Aurelius of his £1000 debt to him. *The Franklin's Tale*, in contrast to *The Physician's Tale*, is humane and honourable. It is no coincidence here that, whereas the Physician is authoritarian, the Franklin is an Epicure. In *The General Prologue* we hear of the Franklin, "To lyven in delit was evere his wone, / For he was Epicurus owene sone", 335–336), and that Chaucer describes him as "worthy" (A shirreve hadde he been, and a contour / Was nowher swich a worthy vavasour", 359–360).<sup>691</sup>

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<sup>690</sup> Peter Beidler, "The Pairing of the "*Franklin's Tale*" and the "*Physician's Tale*", *The Chaucer Review*, 3 (1969), 275–279 (p. 278).

<sup>691</sup> The term *Epicurean* is not synonymous with hedonist. The true hedonists of Greek philosophy were the followers of Aristippus, the Cyrenaics. Epicureans, in today's terms, would be viewed more as humanists than hedonists: they believed in pleasure, but not to excess.



The above point has been missed by certain scholars. Beidler, for instance, argues that Virginia's failure to compare herself to historical women is "meant to reflect back and put into proper light the *shallowness* of Dorigen's character" (emphasis added).<sup>692</sup> One wonders how Beidler can call Dorigen shallow while implying that Virginia is "deep". But, as indicated, we know little of Virginia's real character other than that she behaves in public with propriety and that she does not wish to die—character traits that are neither uncommon nor deep. Yet Dorigen's behaviour is uncommon and deep. Thus: she has the moral courage to admit to her husband that she has been foolish, and that, although she wishes she had never been born, she must fulfil her promise ("Allas," quod she, "that evere was I born! / Thus have I seyde," quod she, "thus have I sworn", 1463–1464). Virginia, by contrast, lacks the moral courage to tell her father that she would rather take her chances with Appius than be murdered merely to satisfy the hubris of her father. As for depth, Dorigen has the depth of understanding to know that successful marriage requires honesty, even when it is embarrassing, and the depth of understanding that honesty is a primary moral duty. Virginia, by contrast, seems not to understand even that murder is wrong. Beidler is thus correct in stating that Virginia is offered as a contrast to Dorigen, but, in doing so, he gets Chaucer's message wrong.

As for the search for public acclaim, Virginia does not, for all we know, advertise her chastity. But the Physician does, as is witnessed by his one hundred line introductory eulogy of her. Genuine virgins, as Aquinas argues, neither require nor desire eulogies. Further, Virginius, as Crafton argues, is likewise guilty, in that he does nothing to prevent Virginia's chastity becoming public knowledge.<sup>693</sup> On the contrary, the (supposed) loss of this chastity is the cause of his murdering her. Virginius would rather murder his daughter than be deprived of the pleasure of (and kudos deriving from) having a virgin daughter.

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<sup>692</sup> Beidler, 'The Pairing of the *'Franklin's Tale'* and the *'Physician's Tale'*', p. 278.

<sup>693</sup> See Crafton, "'The Cause of Everiche Maladye': A New Source of the *Physician's Tale'*", pp. 265–270.

Aquinas's fourth feature of foolish virginity, peripateticism, is, as Crafton argues, seemingly absent in Virginia. But she is not the guilty character: as indicated, it is Virginius (and the Physician).<sup>694</sup>

Thus three points. First, the similarity of the names, *Virginia* and *Virginius*, may be explained, as Crafton argues, by Aquinas's distinction between virginity and foolish virginity. Virginia is chaste and is genuinely a virgin, but, for all we know, has no intention of remaining one, and Virginius is not a virgin but, hypocritically, values virginity in his daughter.<sup>695</sup> Second, Virginius and the Physician are, in effect, the same person. Third, related to this, Virginius and the Physician are fools.

Virginius's murder of Virginia is ugly over and above the mere fact of the murder. It is ugly first because Virginius sees his honour as more important than that of his daughter; this is evident from consideration foolish virginity. It is ugly second because the manner of the murder is replete with sexual overtones. This impression is reinforced by the description of the murder:

And with that word she preyed hym ful ofte  
That with his *sword* he wolde smyte *softe*;  
And with that word *aswowne* doun she fil.  
Hir fader, with ful sorweful herte and wil,  
Hir heed of smoot, and by the top it hente, (*The Physician's Tale*, 251–255;  
emphases added)

The act of killing fetishizes Virginia's upper body as a snare for visual attention, in which her neck is penetrated. The act is symbolic: if Virginius cannot control to whom he gives his daughter's virginity, he will take it himself. This message is reinforced by Virginius's violent, erotically charged language before he kills her:

That thou most suffre, allas, that I was bore!  
For nevere thou deservedest wherfore

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<sup>694</sup> Ibid.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid.

To dyen with a *swerd*, or with a *knyf*.  
 O deere doghter, endere of my lyf,  
 Which I have fostred up with swich plesaunce,  
 That thou were nevere out of my remembraunce.  
 O doghter, which that art my laste wo,  
 And in my lyf my laste *joye* also,  
 O gemme of chastitee, in pacience  
 Take thou thy deeth, for this is my sentence,  
 For love and nat for hate, thou most be deed;  
 My pitous hand moot *smyten of thyn heed*. (*The Physician's Tale*, 215–226;  
 emphases added)

Ademaree calls attention to the phallic imagery of the sword.<sup>696</sup> She also notes that the plea for Virginius to strike her “soft” makes no sense except in a sexual context. Soft beheading is slow and painful. If she wanted a quick death, she should ask her father to strike her *swift*, not soft; and she asks him *repeatedly* to strike her soft. This (a point not observed by Ademaree) has the erotic association of stroking. Immediately after this pleading, she swoons as though in orgasmic ecstasy. This makes the subsequent beheading all the nastier. Chaucer, in showing Virginia—at last—to be a sexual creature—emphasises that her father denies her fulfilment of her pleasure. He cuts off her head, and then picks it up by her hair and delivers it to Appius. As Ademaree observes, this is a metaphorical rape.<sup>697</sup>

In this regard, Allman argues that all situations of sexual union in *The Canterbury Tales* are in the vein of men dominating women, commenting that lovemaking is presented “in terms of cutting, stabbing, bleeding, and dying”;<sup>698</sup> Allman is incorrect in detail—neither the lovemaking between the knight and the transformed loathly lady in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* nor the lovemaking between Nicholas and Alison in *The Miller's Tale* contains any hint of violence—but the general point is sound. The

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<sup>696</sup> Ademaree, ‘Sexual Violence in “*The Physician's Tale*”: Was She or Wasn't She?’

<sup>697</sup> Ibid.

<sup>698</sup> Allman and Hanks, ‘Rough Love: Notes toward an Erotics of *the Canterbury Tales*’, p. 39.

picking up by the hair is also significant, for in his description of her physical beauty, the Physician, in one of the few allusions to what she looks like, comments on her hair (And Phebus dyed hath hire tresses grete / Lyk to the stremes of his burned heete (37–38). Virginius thus defiles the one aspect of her beauty of which we have direct knowledge.

Mann points to two aspects of the violence:

The point of *The Physician's Tale* is, however, to show the crucial distinction between the two parallel acts of male violence, the one informed by the desire to “enthral” Virginia, the other by love. The one aims to extinguish her selfhood, the other to save it.<sup>699</sup>

Related to this, Beidler argues that, in adding to his sources, “[Chaucer implies that] Virginia actively chooses her own death”.<sup>700</sup> However, as Ademaree argues, Beidler’s view is unsustainable. Virginia pleads for her life (““mercy, deere fader!’ quod this mayde”, 231), and she has no choice but to die.<sup>701</sup> To Ademaree’s point one may add that Virginius does not explore any options other than to murder her. Even the Physician acknowledges that Virginius does not make much of a stand in the court of law (he could have “preeved it as sholde a knyght / and eek by witnessyng of many a wight / that it was fals that seyde his adversarie” (192–195)—Virginius (by implication, a coward) could have challenged Appius to ordeal by combat, or, even if a coward, he could have called upon other witnesses. This suggests the possibility that Virginius delighted in murdering his daughter. .

Ironically, *The Physician's Tale*, despite its torrid coverage of characters, especially that of Appius, employs little erotic imagery. There is a brief use of the erotics of vision, when Appius is “stabbed” by the sight of Virginia:

And so bifel this juge his eyen caste

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<sup>699</sup> Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, p. 113.

<sup>700</sup> Beidler, “The Pairing of the “*Franklin's Tale*” and the “*Physician's Tale*”, p. 278.

<sup>701</sup> Ademaree, “Sexual Violence in “*The Physician's Tale*”: Was She or Wasn't She?

Upon this mayde, avysynge hym ful faste,

As she cam forby ther as this juge stood.

Anon his herte chaunged and his mood, (*The Physician's Tale*, 123–126)

But thereafter we hear only of Appius's machinations and his scheming to make Virginia his own. This is possibly because, as Malte Urban argues, "the Physician is primarily concerned to relate Virginia's fate, he does not have to expand his narrative on Apius any more than is strictly necessary for our understanding of Virginia's sacrifice".<sup>702</sup> Other than in the murder scene, there is little animal imagery, little reference to flowers (one of a rose, one of a lily, each in the context of Virginia), little use of martial imagery and no reference to heat. This cannot be a coincidence. In *The Knight's Tale*, as indicated, such imagery is rampant (it is also rampant, as is argued below, in *Troilus and Criseyde*). In its use of erotic imagery, *The Physician's Tale* is more akin to *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. The lack of erotic imagery in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, however, is explained by the knight's unambiguous sexual crime (rape) and the seeming ugliness of loathly lady. Virginia, however, ostensibly at least, is akin to Emily. So, one may ask about the lack of erotic imagery in the tale.

The answer may be that *The Physician's Tale* is just too unpleasant. What Virginius does and his motives for doing so are too horrible to dwell upon. They are akin to the rape in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*; they are not described both because doing so would be superfluous and because what is implied can be more persuasive than what is described. This is not to say that Virginius's motives are the same as the knight's—if anything, they are worse. It is to say that, like rape, his motives are sordid.

As indicated, Chaucer deviates substantially from Livy and Boccaccio. Livy and Boccaccio treat the case as exposing political corruption. In Chaucer, by contrast, criticism of the political elite is replaced by a critique of false virginity. Catherine

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<sup>702</sup> Malte Urban, *Poetics of the Past, Politics of the Present: Chaucer, Gower, and Old Books* (unpublished doctoral thesis, the University of Wales, 2005), p. 207.

Sanok argues that Chaucer substitutes sexuality for politics suggests a deep unconscious instability in the “masculine political order”.<sup>703</sup>

There certainly was uncertainty in fourteenth century England, but it did not necessarily pertain to the *masculine* political order. It could have pertained only to the *political* order. Richard II's reign was marked by instability. He came to the throne aged only ten—during the first years of his reign England was ruled by his uncle, John of Gaunt—and four years later, in 1381, he had to face down the Peasants' Revolt. When he came of age, he promoted favourites, which so offended the nobility that, by 1387, government was controlled by what were, in effect, rebels, the Lords Appellant. Although Richard regained control in 1389, in 1397 he executed some of the Lords Appellant and exiled many others. This so annoyed the remaining aristocracy that, in 1399, Henry Bolingbroke had no difficulty in deposing, imprisoning, and, later, murdering Richard. Henry thus became Henry IV. It may simply have been too personally dangerous for Chaucer to have criticised the political order.

But Sanok has a point, and it can be taken further. *The Physicians Tale* can be viewed as an incitement of the sexual mores prevalent in England at the time. Chaucer, in portraying the Physician as a fool and Virginius as a false virgin, uses the tale as a critique of what is “noble” in courtly love. The context of the tale, coming immediately after *The Franklin's Tale*, its failure to refute it, the unpleasant character of the Physician compared with that of the Franklin, and the Host's reaction to the tale reinforce this impression. In this way, Chaucer enlarges on Livy's original, seeing Livy's basic story to point to a sickness in medieval society. The tale therefore complements both *The Knight's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. It is this that makes *The Physician's Tale* subversive.

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<sup>703</sup> Sanok, ‘Women and Literature’, p. 59.

## Conclusion

In Chaucer's romances, erotic themes are illustrated through voyeurism, the martial arts, and symbolic violence. In *The Knight's Tale*, *The Physician's Tale*, and the *Wife's Prologue*, love is equated with suffering. By contrast, with the exception of *The Merchant's Tale*, lovesickness is absent from all Chaucer's *fabliaux*.

Like Chaucer's *fabliaux*, the romances provide different views of love. *The Knight's Tale* is one of obsession; *The Physician's Tale* is one of insane paternal jealousy; *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is one of redemption through love. There is a hint of homosexuality in *The Knight's Tale*, but, more important, it is a story about how obsession over a woman can destroy friendship (or love) between men. There is a hint of incest in *The Physician's Tale*, and, in the character Appius, a suggestion of obsession.

The erotic imagery of *The Knight's Tale* is visual, martial, and piercing. It is different from that of the *fabliaux* in that grinding, oats, and so forth are absent. But there are similarities. Palamon and Arcite see Emily through a window; Emily at the time is in a garden. That of *The Physician's Tale* is also visual, and there is the piecing horror of Virginia's decapitation. By contrast, there is virtually no erotic imagery in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*.

All three tales are subversive. *The Knight's Tale* is so in that it illustrates the dangers of treating women as love goddesses; it also questions the moral worth of codes of chivalry. *The Physician's Tale* is subversive in that it shows the immorality of treating women as loves goddesses; Virginia is human, but has no say in expressing her humanity. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is subversive in that it suggests recognition of female sexuality and power. This subversiveness is reinforced by the *Wife's Prologue*, in which the Wife openly admits to her sexuality and directly challenges the official doctrines of the Church.

The three tales may also be seen in the context of *The Franklin's Tale*; this is a tale of true love, mutual respect, and honour; it compliments *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Chaucer did not, it appears, have the cynical view of marriage as evidenced by his

*fabliaux*. Instead, he wished to express all aspects of love, and in doing so, as in his *fabliaux*, to present powerful criticism of the mores of his age.



## CHAPTER FIVE: *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE* AND THE EROTIC

### Introduction

*Troilus and Criseyde*, unlike *The Canterbury Tales*, is a complete work. It appears to have been composed largely for a courtly audience. It is likely that many in the audience were broadly familiar with the story, for it was popular throughout medieval Europe.

Saunders observes of *Troilus and Criseyde* that “On every level, the poem seems to present us with questions rather than answers”.<sup>704</sup> Saunders is correct in one sense. The poem presents questions. But she is incorrect in another. The poem provides answers to at least some of Chaucer’s questions.

Related to Saunders’s point, Barbara Nolan observes that many authorities regard *Troilus and Criseyde* as unclassifiable.<sup>705</sup> Quoting Charles Muscatine, she writes:

Because of its particular range of style, the *Troilus* can be called neither romance nor realistic novel. Though it has traits common to both, it cannot even be called both . . . The *tertium quid* created by the interplay of . . . styles and . . . philosophical positions is best called a genre unto itself, . . .”.<sup>706</sup>

*Troilus and Criseyde* sets off trains of thought that may not otherwise occur to the poem’s audience. Chaucer achieves this effect, in part, by means of literary eclecticism. The poem combines the erotic imagery of *The Canterbury Tales* (*fabliaux* or otherwise) with courtly love. One may analyse this eroticism in terms of four genres familiar to fourteenth-century readers, each exemplified in part, but not fully, in *Troilus and Criseyde*: romances, tragedies, and philosophical tracts.

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<sup>704</sup> Saunders, ‘Love and the Making of the Self: *Troilus and Criseyde*’, in Saunders, *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, pp. 134–155 (p. 139).

<sup>705</sup> Barbara Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 198–199.

<sup>706</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198–199.

### ***A romance***

On the face of it, *Troilus and Criseyde* is a courtly romance. Troilus, the young, handsome, hero, falls in love with Criseyde. However, it departs substantially from the tradition, even from its closest source (Boccaccio). Thus there is much that is “wrong” with Troilus—his love for an older woman, his incessant self-pitying, his cowardice—at least in Book V—and his use of subterfuge and help from Pandarus. Related to this, the sexual imagery goes beyond that found in *The Knight’s Tale*, in which, as indicated, the imagery as regards the knights is mainly martial and that as regards Emily is mainly virginal. Indeed, the erotic imagery in *Troilus and Criseyde*, were it not handled so artfully by Chaucer, would be seen as vulgar, more fitting for a *fabliau* than a courtly romance.<sup>707</sup> There are also the two dreams in the poem, each of which is erotic and the second of which is explicitly sexual, so much so that, one imagines, were it enacted on stage it would be deemed pornographic.

Chaucer uses the earthier erotic content of *Troilus and Criseyde* to extend the force of the poem. The same is true, of course, of Boccaccio’s *Il Filistrato*, but the earthiness of Chaucer’s imagery is largely lacking in Boccaccio.

### ***A tragedy***

A tragedy is a story in which a potentially great figure self-destructs. In the story of Troy, Hector’s death is not tragic because he dies bravely and had lived honourably. Troilus, by contrast, is tragic because a once great man destroys himself.

The tragedy is threefold. First, there is the deterioration in Troilus’s character. From being a warrior and hero, he becomes a misery. He lacks personal autonomy, so much so that he relies on Pandarus’s wiles to consummate his desire for Criseyde.

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<sup>707</sup>Melissa Furrow characterizes Book III as “the erotic highpoint” of medieval English romance. See Melissa Furrow, *Expectations of Romance: The Reception of a Genre in Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), p. 215.

By Book V, he so lacks autonomy that he does not participate in the war; he does not eat; he does not seek women other than Criseyde.

Second, the self-destruction is pointless. Troilus does not truly love Criseyde. This point is often missed by commentators. For instance, Barbara Nolan tells us that Chaucer “allows Troilus’ subjective, lyrical account of his *love* to draw us sympathetically into his experience even as we witness the woeful consequences of his folly”,<sup>708</sup> (emphasis added). Alcuin Blamires similarly argues that *Troilus and Criseyde* “constructs the ill-fated *love* of its central couple into what has been called a ‘high romance’”<sup>709</sup> (emphasis added). Neither Nolan nor Blamires questions Troilus’*s* love. But, as is argued below, if it is a love, it is a strange one. Troilus relies too much on Pandarus; he shows too little respect for Criseyde; when he eventually succeeds in making love to her, the manner of his lovemaking has a hint of savagery; and Criseyde all too willingly deserts him for Diomedes, a man who, unlike Troilus, treats her with respect. Troilus’*s* relationship with Criseyde is not so much love; it is mere obsession.

Third, there is the tragedy of Criseyde. She wishes to assuage the shame of her father, who has deserted Troy. Fate intervenes and Criseyde becomes guilty of double treachery: deserting Troilus and deserting Troy. She knows this, but is helpless in the face of love.

The tragedy starts when Eros fires an arrow into Troilus as punishment for Troilus’*s* arrogance. It is unclear whether subsequent developments are intrinsically part of Eros’*s* punishment (i.e., Eros not only makes Troilus fall in love, but also gives him the wrong form of love) or whether they are natural consequences of Troilus’*s* intrinsic character flaws.

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<sup>708</sup>Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique*, p. 200.

<sup>709</sup>Alcuin Blamires, ‘Chaucer’*s* *Troilus and Criseyde*’, in Saunders, *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, pp. 435–452 (p. 441).

The tragedy, as Barbara Nolan observes, has farcical elements.<sup>710</sup> Indeed, the earlier parts of the lovemaking scene, in which Troilus swoons at the sight of Criseyde's body, and then needs help to make love, if taken outside of the overall story, could be viewed as high comedy. The same may be said of Pandarus's various schemes to get the couple together.

### ***Philosophy***

Two themes relevant to *Troilus and Criseyde* are present in Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*: the overarching importance of love in human affairs, and the problem of freedom of the will. Boethius, although he treats his relationship with Philosophy as Platonic, unlike Augustine, does not preclude the importance of erotic love.

Blamires comments:

[The] bravura prologue to Book III where the speaker offers a tribute to the planet-goddess Venus as wellspring of a sort of glorious continuum of diverse forms of "love", from animal instinct to Jupiter's sexual rapacity to human couples who are ethically improved by their amours, to political harmony; all under the assurance that "God loveth" and that no-one's life has value without love (III. 1–42).<sup>711</sup>

To Troilus, at this stage in the story, love is the apotheosis of God's will, and as such must be enjoyed in all its forms. This is ironic, because Troilus does not enjoy love in all its forms. Love is about sharing, give and take, and mutual respect. Troilus's love, being obsessive, is all take.

Boethius also had an "open" view of free will, and Chaucer's view seems to reflect this. Thus, Diomedes asserts that human will can alter the course of history.

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<sup>710</sup> Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique*, p. 225.

<sup>711</sup> Blamires, 'Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*', in Saunders, *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, p. 440.

“For if my fader Tideus,” he seyde,  
“Ilyved hadde, ich hadde ben er this  
Of Calydoyne and Arge a kyng, Criseyde!  
And so hope I that I shal yet, iwis.  
But he was slayn allas, the more harm is!  
Unhappily at Thebes al to rathe,  
Polymyte and many a man to scathe. (V. 932–938)

Here, Chaucer’s view of freedom of the will, as Edwards argues, is more optimistic than that of Boccaccio.<sup>712</sup>

Yet there is ambiguity. We do not know whether Troilus (or, for that matter, Diomedes) has free will. We do not know whether people should (or are at least be allowed to) emulate the lust of Jupiter. Such ambiguities in the philosophy reflect ambiguities in the story and in the characterisation.

There is also the narrator. The narrator of the poem, as Mark Lambert observes, has a special function.<sup>713</sup> The narrator prepares us from the outset that the poem will start as happy but finish as tragedy (“Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie”, I. 4). The narrator further asserts that he is telling the story out of love, and that the audience should pray for young lovers (“To prey for hem that Loves servauntz be”, I. 48). This, as Lambert acknowledges, provides the poem with an intimacy between poem and audience.<sup>714</sup> Of course, any epic poem needs a narrator, but Chaucer’s handling of the narration is especially sensitive, setting at once the poem’s themes of love and tragedy, its intimacy, and its comic elements. The handling of the narration anticipates Chaucer’s still more subtle use of narrators in *The Canterbury Tales*, in which the characters of the pilgrims impinge on the nature of their tales.

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<sup>712</sup> Edwards, *Chaucer and Boccaccio*, p. 55.

<sup>713</sup> Mark Lambert, ‘Telling the story in *Troilus and Criseyde*’ in Boitani and Mann, *the Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, pp. 78–92 (p. 79).

<sup>714</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

## Provenance

The first major medieval retelling of Troilus and Criseyde is Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Le Roman de Troie*, composed in the twelfth century. This was based in part on Dares's and Dictys's works. Benoît's romance includes the story of Jason and the Argonauts, the early sack of Troy, and the stories of Orestes and of Ulysses. In doing this, it makes much of Achilles's love of Polyxena (a Trojan princess), the heroism of Hector, and the loves of Briseida, who is the model for Chaucer's Criseyde. Benoît's work was popular in medieval Europe, and is a kind of "catch all" romance of antiquity (*romans antiques*), covering acts of heroism, mythology, and love affairs. Similar may be said of Joseph of Exeter's *De Bello Troiano* (written in Latin, and composed twelfth century), which was also based on Dares's and Dictys's works, and which involves a retelling of the *Iliad*.

Thus, by the fourteenth century, there were several versions of the fall of Troy, including classical re-workings of the story, and medieval re-workings of the classical re-workings. Curiously, the works of Homer did not attain popularity in the West until the fifteenth century; prior to then, western scholars tended to view Dares's and Dictys's works as definitive (there was, however, a Latin version of *The Iliad* available—*Ilias Latina*—though this comprised only a short synopsis of Homer's original; it was composed in the first century AD).

Although Chaucer undoubtedly was familiar with some or all of these texts—he refers explicitly to Homer, Dares, and Dictys, for instance (I. 146) (also, Barbara Nolan lists, among other texts, Benoît's *Roman de Troie*, Joseph of Exeter's *De Bello Troiano*, Statius's *Thebaid* as almost certain reference books)—it is likely that he mainly relied on Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, itself based on Statius's *Thebaid*.<sup>715</sup> Boccaccio also used Guido delle Colonne's (thirteenth century) retelling of Benoît's *Roman de Troie*.<sup>716</sup>

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<sup>715</sup> Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique*, p. 5

<sup>716</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

Boccaccio was the first to present the story mainly as a love story. Boccaccio, in effect, turned an epic into a romance. Unlike Boccaccio, Chaucer sets the love story in the context of the Trojan War. Although he starts by saying he will not discuss the details of war, he provides (in Book IV) description of the Greek forces besieging Troy.

Two other sources influenced Chaucer. The first was Ovid's love poetry, particularly his *Metamorphoses*, *Heroides*, and *Ars Amoria*. Chaucer, as did Boccaccio, used Ovid's dictums as regards the art of seduction in his re-working of the story. This especially applies to Pandarus, who advises Troilus as to how to go about seducing Criseyde. Ovid was also an influence, as indicated, on the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*.

Barbara Nolan argues that medieval scholars interpreted (or misinterpreted) Ovid's *Heroides* as describing three types of love: legitimate (e.g., genuine love within marriage), foolish (e.g., blind infatuation), and illicit (e.g., adultery). Nolan comments:

Ovid might well have balked at so neat and moral a summary of his letters. Moreover, he might have been surprised to learn that the epistles could all be construed as a series of juxtaposed examples pointing finally to the same simple moral lesson. Yet medieval schoolteachers clearly taught the *Heroides* in just this way . . . . Through such calculated exempla, they suggest, Ovid aimed to warn his readers against destructive, illicit relationships and to celebrate faithful marriage.<sup>717</sup>

Troilus is an exemplar of foolish love: his love is self-destructive. He is not the only exemplar in Chaucer's *oeuvre*. Hansen, in her discussion of *The Legend of Good Women*, points to women, Dido for instance, that value "the love of a man only above all other responsibilities, even above life itself".<sup>718</sup> There is also Griselde in

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<sup>717</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>718</sup> Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, p. 196.

*The Clerk's Tale*, and Constance in *The Man of Law's Tale*. Foolish love is a recurring theme in Chaucer's poetry.

The other influence, as indicated, was Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (Chaucer had, by the time he composed *Troilus and Criseyde*, translated *The Consolation* into Middle English—his *Boece*). Two themes recur from *The Consolation*: first, the importance of love in human affairs; second, the problem of free will versus determinism. This blending of Classical myth with Boethian philosophy was Chaucer's innovation.

### **Characterisation**

There are four main characters in the poem: Troilus, Criseyde, Pandarus, and Diomedes.

### ***Troilus***

The most salient feature of Troilus is that he departs from the norms of medieval chivalry. At the time we first meet him he has no interest in women. Vern Bullough points to the importance of virility among the medieval elite, and argues that prowess in bed was an essential component of being a knight. Without sexual appetite, a knight could not beget heirs, at considerable loss to the prestige of his family and himself. Moreover, sexual vigour was a message to a knight's peers, indicating enhanced manhood.<sup>719</sup> Celibate knights were military and dynastic flotsam. Yet we learn that Troilus is contemptuous of knights who seek love:

And in his walk ful faste he gan to wayten  
If knyght or squyer of his compaignie  
Gan for to syke, or lete his eighen baiten  
On any womman that he koude espye.

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<sup>719</sup> Vern Bullough, 'On Being a Male in the Middle Ages', in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed., by Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 31–45 (p. 41).



He wolde smyle, and holden it folye,  
And seye hym thus, “God woot, she slepeth softe  
For love of the, whan thow turnest ful ofte! (I. 190–196)

The reference to “lewd observances” (I. 198) suggests that Troilus is not only contemptuous of love; he is contemptuous of lust, too. The word *baiten* in the passage, incidentally, means, literally, to feast. Thus, integrating the erotics of food with that of sight, the knights feast on the images of the young women.

There is another aspect to the passage. Molly Martin argues that Troilus’s gazing is typically masculine, and he is denouncing the other knights for their compromised masculinity.<sup>720</sup> However, there is a Freudian interpretation of the passage. As indicated, Freud wrote of the defence mechanism projection. On this interpretation, Troilus *really* wants to fall in love, but is afraid to admit it, even to himself. In this interpretation, Troilus is not a “true man”, because he cannot act on his true feelings.

There is also an irony. We hear of Troilus that he loses sleep over no woman—“Now here, now there, for no devocioun / Hadde he to noon, to reven him his reste” (I, 187–188)—but this is exactly what happens to him after he sees Criseyde.

This compromised masculinity continues Troilus is shot by Eros. He knows of Pandarus’s machinations to get him into bed with Criseyde, and he follows every word of Pandarus’s advice in this regard. Troilus cannot take the initiative. We hear in the seduction scene:

Quod Pandarus, “For aught I kan asprien,  
This light, nor I, ne serven here of nought.  
Light is nought good for sike folkes yen!  
But, for the love of God, syn ye ben brought  
In thus good plit, lat now no hevvy thought

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<sup>720</sup> Molly A. Martin, ‘Troilus’s Gaze and the Collapse of Masculinity in Romance’, in *Men and Masculinities in Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde*, eds., by Tison Pugh and Marcia Smith Marzec (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 132–147 (p. 139).

Ben hangyng in the hertes of yow tweye”—  
And bar the candel to the chymeneye. (III. 1135–1141)

The Freudian imagery in the passage is blatant. From a Freudian viewpoint, the candle symbolises a phallus; the chimney symbolises a vagina. It is Pandarus who places the candle in the chimney. It is as though Pandarus is grabbing Troilus’s penis and placing it inside Criseyde. Troilus needs help from Pandarus even when making love.

Troilus’s compromised masculinity is further reinforced in the seduction scene in that. Criseyde is naked but Troilus is not. Troilus strips down only to his undershirt. Had he stripped down fully, as Hodges argues, he would at least have appeared honest.<sup>721</sup> Even when lovemaking, Troilus lacks the character give himself fully to Criseyde.

Troilus’s lack of masculinity is reinforced when, having lost Criseyde, he fails to heed Pandarus’s advice to find a new lover:

This town is ful of ladys al aboute;  
And, to my doom, fairer than swiche twelve  
As evere she was, shal I fynde in som route  
Yee, on or two, withouten any doute.  
Forthi be glad, myn owen deere brother!  
If she be lost, we shal recovere an other. (IV: 401–406)

Instead of seeking other women, Troilus merely sickens.

Troilus has other flaws. Sylvester notes that there is something unpleasant (priggish? prudish? bullying?) in Troilus’s hectoring of his fellow soldiers.<sup>722</sup> Sylvester (and

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<sup>721</sup> Hodges, ‘Sartorial Signs in *Troilus and Criseyde*’, pp. 231, 232.

<sup>722</sup> Sylvester, *Medieval Romance and the Construction of Heterosexuality*, p. 71.

see Pugh<sup>723</sup>) also labels Troilus a masochist.<sup>724</sup> This appears justified. Marcia Smith Marzec argues that he is suicidal throughout the poem.<sup>725</sup> Thus Marzec quotes him as saying, “God wold I were aryved in the port / Of deth, to which my sorwe wol me lede!” (I. 526–527); “O deth, allas, why nyltow do me deye?” (IV. 250); “O deth, that endere art of sorwes alle” (IV. 501); “sely is that deth” (IV. 503); “I nothing so desire. / O deth” (IV. 508–509); “Wel may myn herte longe / After my deth” (V. 690–691); “thorough the deth my wo sholde han an ende” (V. 1273); “deth may make an ende” (V. 1393); and “Myn owne deth in armes wol I seche” (V. 1718).<sup>726</sup>

Phillipa Hardman points out that the so-called Man of Sorrows was a popular motif in medieval literature.<sup>727</sup> One can go further than Hardman: Troilus’s misery goes beyond the norm. Unlike Damyan in *The Merchant’s Tale*, or Palamon and Arcite in *The Knight’s Tale* he does nothing about his misery. All he does is make a virtue of it—the more miserable he gets, the more he takes pleasure in it, and the more he implores others to take mercy on him. This metaphorical self-mortification results in repeated allusions to Troilus’s body, which, it seems to him, is falling to pieces. We hear that his heart is bleeding (“blede”; I, 502), and that he is speechless “Although men sholde smyten of his hed” (III. 81).

Bower argues that, even in his fantasies, Troilus is not interested in procreative sex:

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<sup>723</sup> Tison Pugh, Michael Calabrese and Marcia Smith Marzec, ‘Introduction: The Myths of Masculinity in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*’, in *Men and Masculinities in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde**, eds., by Tison Pugh and Marcia Smith Marzec (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 1–8 (p. 2).

<sup>724</sup> Sylvester, *Medieval Romance and the Construction of Heterosexuality*, p. 71.

<sup>725</sup> Marcia Smith Marzec, ‘What Makes a Man? Troilus, Hector and the Masculinities of Courtly Love’, in Pugh and Marzec, eds., *Men and Masculinities in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde**, pp. 58–72 (p. 68).

<sup>726</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>727</sup> Phillipa Hardman, ‘Chaucer’s Man of Sorrows: Secular Images of Pity in *the Book of the Duchess*, *the Squire’s Tale*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 93 (1994), 204–227 (p. 206).

Even in matters of love, Troilus the obsessive thinker prefers the sort of libidinous fantasy classified by the *Penitential of Theodore* as a perversion of the reproductive act in the same category with masturbation, oral sex, and interfemoral intercourse.<sup>728</sup>

Troilus seems unable to express his emotions. His lust—if that is what it is—for Criseyde is not engendered by himself, but by an outside agency (Eros). Even then he “gets it wrong”. Instead of wooing Criseyde as occasion and passion would dictate, he stumbles in reverie, debating with himself the meaning of love. In an echo of Boethius, he states:<sup>729</sup>

Love, that of erthe and se hath governaunce,  
Love, that his hestes hath in hevene hye,  
Love, that with an holsom alliaunce  
Halt peples joyned, as hym lest hem gye,  
Love, that knetteth lawe of compaignie,  
And couples doth in vertu for to dwelle,  
Bynd this accord, that I have told and telle. (III. 1744–1750)

Alcuin Blamires argues that Chaucer’s use of religious and philosophical metaphor for the agonies of love was necessary in that the only language for such emotions was, in Chaucer’s day, found in religious texts.<sup>730</sup> Blamires is too generous to Troilus. As soon as Troilus has opportunity to seduce Criseyde, he swoons. Upon recovery, he needs the help of both Pandarus and Criseyde to consummate his passion. Worse, he wants Criseyde’s love, not for love of her, or passion, or, indeed, out of desire for children; instead, he wants her love in order to prove his manhood. When he contemplates her movement, we hear “that men myght in hire gesse /

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<sup>728</sup> John M. Bowers, “‘Beautiful as Troilus’: Richard II, Chaucer’s Troilus, and Figures of (Un)Masculinity”, in Pugh and Marzec, *Men and Masculinities in Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde*, pp. 9–27 (p. 12).

<sup>729</sup> Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy, Book II, Song VIII* (Project Gutenberg EBook, 2008) <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14328/14328-h/14328-h.htm>> [accessed 15 July 2013]

<sup>730</sup> Blamires, ‘Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*’, in Saunders, *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, p. 441.

Honour, estat, and wommanly noblesse” (I. 286–287). This is a horrible, yet revealing, couplet. The first line tells us that he is not thinking of Criseyde’s intrinsic qualities—her beauty, her kindness, her intellect. Instead, he is thinking of the impression she makes on other men. This is reinforced by the second line: he desires Criseyde for her honour, her estate, her nobility—anything other than herself.

Troilus’s appears valourous at the beginning of the poem. We hear:

And men criden in the strete, “Se, Troilus  
Hath right now put to flighte the Grekes route!”  
With that gan al hire meyne for to shoute,  
“A, go we se! Cast up the yates wyde!  
For thorwgh this strete he moot to paleys ride (II. 612–616)

Towards the end of Book V, we hear that Troilus, enraged by Criseyde’s treachery, goes on the warpath:

And dredeles, his ire, day and nyght,  
Ful cruwely the Grekis ay aboughte;  
And alwey moost this Diomed he soughte.  
And ofte tyme, I fynde that they mette  
With bloody strokes and with wordes grete,  
Assayinge how hire speres weren whette;  
And, God it woot, with many a cruel hete  
Gan Troilus upon his helm to bete! (V. 1755–1762)

The image of Troilus, armed to the hilt, first seeking out Diomed and then stabbing him and striking him on the head, is in keeping with medieval views of valour. Naturally, he appears heroic in death, taking thousands of Greeks with him.

Pandarus also vouches for Troilus’s valour. When answering Criseyde as to how Troilus fares in battle, he states:

Save in his arm he hath a litel wownde;  
And ek his fresshe brother Troilus,  
The wise, worthi Ector the secoude,

In whom that alle vertu list habounde,  
As alle trouthe and alle gentillesse,  
Wisdom, honour, fredom, and worthinesse. (II. 156–161)

Yet there is something lacking. Pandarus is a manipulator, and he has an ulterior motive: he wants Criseyde to marry Troilus, so it is natural for him to speak of Troilus's courage. And elsewhere, when speaking to Troilus, Pandarus recognises him as a coward:

But oones nyltow, for thy coward herte,  
And for thyn ire and folissh wilfulnesse,  
for wantrust, tellen of thy sorwes smerte,  
Ne to thyn owen help don bysynesse  
As mucche as speke a reson moore or lesse?  
But list as he that lest of no thyng recche—  
What womman koude louen swich a wrecche? (I. 792–798)

It may be that Troilus's cowardice pertains only to sexual matters, not to performance in battle. However, doubts remain. Andrew Lynch argues that although, presumably, Troilus goes to war each day (as Lynch puts it, as a "commuter"), we have no description of him fighting. Indeed, the only complete account of a Trojan–Greek battle in the poem is that concerning the capture of Antenor (V. 36–56). In the account, Chaucer names nine knights, not one of whom is Troilus.<sup>731</sup>

There is something ersatz about Troilus's valour. He refuses to fight after Criseyde enters the Greek camp, and he returns to battle only after he learns Criseyde has betrayed him. His motive appears revenge, not salvation of Troy.

Ben Parsons sees in this "transcendent insights".<sup>732</sup> But Troilus's language contains little that is insightful and nothing that is transcendent. Having discovered Criseyde

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<sup>731</sup> Andrew Lynch, 'Love in Wartime: *Troilus and Criseyde* as Trojan History', in Saunders, *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, pp. 113–133 (p. 127).

<sup>732</sup> Ben Parsons, "'Verray goddes apes": Troilus, Seynt Idiot, and Festive Culture', *The Chaucer Review*, 45 (2011), 275–298 (p. 298).

has given Diomedes the brooch Troilus gave her, he confesses he still loves her (“Yet love I best of any creature!”, V. 1701); he then states he wants to hack Diomedes to pieces (“Yet shal I make, I hope, his sydes blede”, V. 1705); that he will do this purely out of vengeance (“Whi nyltow don a vengeance of this vice?”, V. 1708); and that he will search his own death in the process (“Myn owen deth in armes wol I seche;” V. 1718). There is no insight that his misery makes him unattractive; no insight that there is more to winning a woman’s heart than killing her lover; and no insight that seeking suicide in the process is fatuous. As ever, Troilus seeks the outward appearance of honour, but shows no understanding of its nature. Rather than being transcendent, his behaviour is, if anything, comic. This is ironic in that Parson’s paper specifically addresses the comedy in Pandarus’s labelling Troilus “Seynt Idiot” (I. 910), an appellation not found, incidentally, in Boccaccio’s *Filistrato*.

Troilus’s lack of action as the poem progresses highlights his impotence. Significantly, as Edwards argues, even when he dies in battle, he lacks even a corpse; he has only a place of death—“there he was slain” (V. 1820).<sup>733</sup>

To summarise, Troilus lacks the qualities one would expect of a knight; he is initially disdainful of sex, and, when forced to fall in love, he falls in love for the wrong reasons; insofar as he fails to express his love properly, he is pathetic. He wallows in his own misfortune. His motives are not heroic, and he goes to battle only when it suits him.

### *Criseyde*

Criseyde is not a virgin. This is in contrast to Emily in *The Knight’s Tale*. Unlike Emily, who is dressed in white, Criseyde is dressed in black.

Criseyde, as is evidenced by her seduction of Troilus (with some help from Pandarus), is well versed in sexual arts. But her motivation in seducing Troilus

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<sup>733</sup> Edwards, *Chaucer and Boccaccio*, p. 73.

appears neither sexual nor romantic. Instead, it is practical. Tamara Faith O'Callaghan calls attention to the large number of references to "honour" in *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>734</sup> There are seventy-eight of them, of which almost half are made either by Criseyde or in the context of her. There is therefore a suggestion that she seeks the love of Troilus, not because he is satisfactory as a man, but because he has sufficient status to accord her sufficient prestige to counter the shame occasioned by the treason of her father. Criseyde has an ulterior motive in seeking, and encouraging, Troilus's affections. O'Callaghan also notes that, though references to "heart" are common in *Troilus and Criseyde*, they do not figure much in Criseyde's feelings towards Troilus until after she deserts him (neither, as O'Callaghan also notes, do they figure much in Troilus's musings of Criseyde prior to their lovemaking). Indeed, Criseyde's feelings towards Troilus do not appear to go much beyond letting him look on her (voyeuristically?) prior to Book III—thus, for instance, "[To] guerdoun hym with nothing but with sighte" (II. 1295). Even after she warms to him, she seems to see him more of a protector:

he was to hire a wal  
Of stiel, and sheld from every displesaunce;  
That to ben in his good govemaunce,  
So wis he was. she was namore afered (III. 479–482).

In the seduction scene, Criseyde appears moved to participate only because Troilus has calmed her fears: "Right so Criseyde, whan hire drede stente, / Opned hire herte" (III. 1238–1239).

Criseyde's behaviour is rational. It is not her choice to be wooed by a man with diminished, "abnormal" sexual appetite; and it is natural that, following her father's disgrace, she should attempt to regain her status. Nonetheless, she fails to gain our complete sympathy. She lacks, on the one hand, the Wife of Bath's gutsiness, as evidenced in the Wife's *Prologue*, and, on the other, Griselda's fidelity, as evidenced

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<sup>734</sup> Tamara Faith O'Callaghan, *Love Imagery in Benoit de Sainte-Maure's Roman de Troie, John Gower's Confessio Amantis, and Geoffrey Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 2005), p. 192.



in *The Clerk's Tale*. Falling between two stools, she fails to meet the standards of either.

Criseyde has an ambiguous attitude towards Troilus. Although initially attracted to him by his martial bearing (II. 628–634), she later denies its importance. Lynch comments:

Despite her role in the chivalric tableau, Criseyde later specifically distinguishes “worthinesse . . . / In werre or tourney marcial” from the “moral vertu, grounded upon trouthe” on which she bases her love of Troilus (IV, 1670–3). In saying so, she allows “moral vertu” to mean far more than knightly “doing well” before female spectators in romance combat narrative.<sup>735</sup>

Lynch seems to take Criseyde's words at face value—Criseyde, in his view, sees more to virtue than martial prowess. However, Criseyde's actions speak louder than her words. In the end, Criseyde chooses Diomedes, who is unambiguously martial, and is unambiguously a “knight's knight”.

Criseyde is a domineering woman. Annoyed by Troilus's self-pity and jealousy, she berates him: “Wol ye the childissh jalous contrefete? / Now were it worthi that ye were ybete” (III. 1168–1169)—she will beat him if he does not behave himself—and she reinforces the message with: “And evere more on this nyght yow recorde, And beth wel war ye do namore amys” (III. 1179–1180). 0

Hopkins argues that Criseyde is passive throughout the seduction scene in Book III.<sup>736</sup> Hopkins is incorrect. It is Criseyde who does the seducing, and in doing so she readily uses the erotics of touch. After Troilus swoons, we hear:

And to deliveren hym fro bittre bondes  
She ofte hym kiste; and shortly for to seyne,

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<sup>735</sup> Lynch, ‘Love in Wartime: *Troilus and Criseyde* as Trojan History’, p. 128.

<sup>736</sup> Hopkins, ‘Clothing, Nakedness and the Erotic’, in Hopkins and Rushton, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, p. 62.

Hym to revoken she did al hire peyne. . . .  
And therwithal hire arm over hym she leyde,  
And al foryaf, and ofte tyme hym keste. . . .  
And with hire goodly wordes hym disporte  
She gan, and ofte his sorwes to comferte. (III. 1116–18, 1128–29, 1133–34)

As Niebrzydowski observes, “it is *Criseyde* [emphasis original] who renders their intimate touching ultimately more erotic—it is she who entwines her whole body around Troilus”.<sup>737</sup> To this, one may add Helen Cooper’s more general point: Criseyde, unlike Emily in *The Knight’s Tale*, is active throughout the poem.<sup>738</sup>

Criseyde is sexual. She may, like the wife in *The Shipman’s Tale*, use her body for ulterior reasons, but, if so, she knows how to use it. That, in the seduction scene, Criseyde acts in a manner akin to that of the wife in *The Shipman’s Tale* is suggested by the lack of references to Criseyde “heat” prior to her meeting Diomedes. Indeed, even prior to her lovemaking with Troilus, she is cold towards him. Nonetheless, Criseyde is capable of passion. On seeing Diomedes, she feels her heart bleed:

Ful reddy was at prime Diomedes  
Criseyde unto the Grekis oost to lede,  
For some of which she felt hire herte blede,  
As she that nyste what was best to rede (V. 15–18).

And when she realises that Troilus is lost to her forever, her heart burns:

And in hireself she wente ay purtraynge  
Of Troilus the grete worthynesse,  
And al his goodly wordes recordyng  
Syn first that day hire love bigan to springe.  
And thus she sette hire woful *herte afire*  
Thorough remembraunce of that she gan desire.

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<sup>737</sup>Sue Niebrzydowski, *Food, Fabric and Flesh: The Erotics of Touch in Late Medieval Literature* (Unpublished manuscript, University of Bangor, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>738</sup>Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, p. 20.

In al this world ther nys so *cruel herte*  
That hire hadde herd compleynen in hire sorwe  
That nolde han wepen for hire peynes smerte,  
So tendrely she weep, bothe eve and morwe. (V. 716–725; emphases added)

There is ambiguity in the lines. The character it portrays, of a Criseyde madly in love with Troilus, is at variance with the picture painted of her in Books I–IV. The phrase *cruel heart* could pertain to the cruelty of her heart in making her feel such grief, but it could also pertain to her intrinsic cruelty in having treated Troilus badly. Similarly, the phrase *heart afire* could pertain to the agony of her grief, but it could suggest that, at last, she feels erotic love for Troilus—indeed, it could suggest both. In any event, she at least has a conscience. In this regard, O’Callaghan notes that in “one breath”<sup>739</sup> Criseyde promises loyalty to Diomedes yet admits to dishonouring Troilus (V. 1065–1077). This could suggest duplicity, but it could equally be a natural reaction: leaving one love for another can bring emotional turmoil.

In any event, her love for Diomedes appears genuine. We hear how she weeps over and tends his wounds:

. . . tho wep she many a teere  
Whan that she saugh his wyde wowndes blede,  
And that she took, to kepen hym, good hede;  
And for to helen hym of his sorwes smerte,  
Men seyn—I not—that she yaf hym hire herte. (V. 1046–1050)

The tenderness of this passage is all the more poignant given what comes immediately after. She knows her name will be reviled throughout history.

She seyde, “Allas, for now is clene ago  
My name of trouthe in love, for everemo!  
For I have falsed oon the gentileste

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<sup>739</sup> O’Callaghan’s phrase in O’Callaghan, *Love Imagery in Benoit de Sainte-Maure’s Roman de Troie*, p. 203.

That evere was, and oon the worthieste!  
“Allas, of me, unto the worldes ende,  
Shal neyther ben ywriten nor ysonge  
No good word, for these bokes wol me shende. (V. 1054–1060)

The reference to Troilus in the passage, as the most gentle and the most worthy, is revealing. It suggests that although Criseyde likes Troilus and that she respects his bravery, she does not love him; she *pities* him.

Like Troilus, Criseyde is complex, and like him, she is prepared to use sex for status. But unlike him, she is genuinely sexual, and she is active rather than passive, and is prepared to sacrifice her honour, and to hurt others (Troilus), in order to satisfy her passion (even if she feels guilty about doing so). She loves Diomedes as a man. Troilus loves her as an object.

### ***Pandarus***

We are uncertain of Pandarus's status. Although we know he is Criseyde's uncle, we do not know whether he is a maternal or paternal uncle. If a paternal uncle, presumably, he shares the dishonour following Criseyde's father's treason. In any event, Pandarus's motivation appears to be mainly to enhance his family's prestige through the marriage of his niece to a high status Trojan.

He is a manipulator. As Robert Edwards comments, his work seems to be solely to facilitate Troilus's wooing of Criseyde.<sup>740</sup> Pandarus is responsible for Troilus's writing of his initial letter to Criseyde (in this, he follows Ovid's dictat: *Write and make promises*.<sup>741</sup>) Pandarus tells Troilus: “Hold of thi matere / The forme alwey, and do that it be lik” (II. 1039–1040). Nolan observes that Pandarus's instructions

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<sup>740</sup>Edwards, *Chaucer and Boccaccio*, pp. 64, 65.

<sup>741</sup>Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, trans., by A. S. Kline (2001). Book I, Part XII, <<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/ArtofLoveBkI.htm#Toc521049268>> [accessed 08 June 2011]

are adapted from Horace's *Art of Poetry* and are absent in Boccaccio's *Filostrato*; Chaucer's Pandarus is a more subtle character than is Boccaccio's.<sup>742</sup>

Pandarus contrives Criseyde's second sight of Troilus (through her window). He then orchestrates Troilus and Criseyde's encounters in three crucial episodes: their initial encounter at Deiphebus's house (II. 1361–1365); their lovemaking at Pandarus's house (III. 193–196); and their encounter following the Trojan parliament (IV. 651–657).

Donald Howard observes a comic side to Pandarus. During the seduction scene he bustles "about like a friendly aunt in the kitchen", he manoeuvres Troilus into bed and helps undress him.<sup>743</sup> Without Pandarus, Troilus would not have sex with Criseyde.

The comedy in Pandarus can be overstated. There are unpleasant aspects to his character. We learn in Book II that he is over-familiar with Criseyde. When he gives her Troilus's love letter, we hear: "'Refuse it naught,' quod he, and hente hire faste, / And in hire bosom the lettre down he *thraste*" (II. 1154–1155; emphasis added). Not only is the idea of an uncle shoving a letter down his niece's cleavage both sexual and violent, the wording of the passage is erotic.

On the morning after the consummation of her love for Troilus, Pandarus sexually assaults Criseyde. Jumping into bed with her, we hear:

With that she gan hire face for to wrye  
With the shete, and wax for shame al reed;  
And Pandarus gan under for to prie,  
And seyde, "Nece, if that I shal be ded,  
Have here a swerd and smyteth of myn hed!"  
With that his arm al sodeynly he thriste

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<sup>742</sup>Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique*, p. 198.

<sup>743</sup> Donald R. Howard, 'Literature and Sexuality: Book III of Chaucer's "*Troilus*"', *The Massachusetts Review*, 8 (1967), 442–456 (p. 449).

Under hire nekke, and at the laste hir kyste. (III. 1569–75)

Thomas Edward Hill argues that the passage is ambiguous, in that the scene could be viewed as a “peek-a-boo” game (Hill’s phrase) between uncle and niece.<sup>744</sup> This is implausible. First, it is unacceptable for an uncle to take sexual advantage of his niece—with or without threats of violence (Pandarus appears to half strangle Criseyde). Second, Criseyde has just made love to Troilus. A caring uncle would not so abuse his niece after the emotional turmoil—of which Pandarus is aware—surrounding Criseyde’s affair with Troilus. The violence of the passage foreshadows that of *The Physician’s Tale* (“Have here a swerd and smyteth of myn hed!”).

William Taylor points to disagreement among scholars as to whether Pandarus’s behaviour towards Criseyde is incestuous. Opinions range from that of E. Talbot Donaldson, who calls the scene “‘delightful’ and ‘not without a hint of prurience’” to that of Taylor himself, who designates the opinions of Donaldson and his ilk as “absurd”.<sup>745</sup> Taylor has a point. The word *prurience* relates to unwholesome interest in sexual activity, and, as Taylor point out, the majority of authorities see Pandarus’s behaviour as ranging from unsavoury to rape.<sup>746</sup> Moreover, Criseyde sees nothing “delightful” in the machinations of Pandarus: she calls him a “fox” (III, 1565) and, insightfully, sees him as the cause of her woe (“God help me so, ye caused al this fare”, III, 1566). Regardless of whether Pandarus is technically guilty of incest, his behaviour is repulsive.

### *Diomedes*

We do not hear anything of Diomedes until Book IV, and then only as a passing reference. He does not become active until Book V. In contrast to Troilus, he is

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<sup>744</sup> Thomas Edward Hill, “*SHE, THIS IN BLAK*” *Vision, Truth, and Will in Geoffrey Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 66.

<sup>745</sup> William Joseph Taylor, *Geoffrey Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde: Criseydan Conversations* (unpublished thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2004), p. 57.

<sup>746</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

literally a breath of fresh air—“This Diomede, as fressh as braunche in May” (V. 844). The likening of him to a fresh branch in May is clearly sexual. He appears the male equivalent of May in *The Merchant’s Tale*.

Diomede is brave. He is also a good judge of women. He knows that Criseyde wants status, that she wants security, that she wants love, and that she wishes to dominate. So he tells her he can provide what she wishes (his name, incidentally, means “godlike cunning”, a fact of which Chaucer was plausibly aware).

As for status, he is a king, almost as powerful, in Greek lore, to Agamemnon. As for security, it is probable that Criseyde suspects Troy is doomed—that, after all, was the reason for her father’s treachery. As for everything else, Diomede is forthright:

“What wol ye more, lufsom lady deere?  
Lat Troie and Troian fro youre herte pace!  
Drif out that bittre hope, and make *good cheere*,  
“And thenketh wel, ye shal in Grekis fynde  
A moore *parfit love*, er it be nyght,  
Than any Troian is, and more *kynde*,  
And bet to *serven* yow wol don his myght.  
And if ye vouchesauf, my lady bright,  
I wol ben he to *serven yow myselve*,  
Yee, levere than be kyng of Greces twelve!” (V. 911–924; emphases added).

Everything in the speech promises the opposite of Troilus. Diomede will make Criseyde happy (“good cheer”), he will give her good sex (“perfect love”), treat her with kindness, and he will serve her. In the same passage, he tells her that Troy is doomed (“in such a jeopardy”). All this is good psychology. Pandarus may be the main schemer in the poem, but Diomede is the better psychologist.

### **Erotic imagery**

The erotic imagery in *Troilus and Criseyde* is richer than that in the other Chaucer romances discussed in the present thesis. This is plausibly because *Troilus and Criseyde* lends itself more to a Freudian reading than do the other Chaucerian

romances discussed in the present thesis. Also, as indicated, Chaucer incorporates *fabliaux* elements in the romance as a means of parodying the romance genre.

Chaucer uses six main types of erotic imagery in the poem: those concerned with sight (and, related to this, visual stabbing); windows and other openings; martial prowess; clothing and jewellery; animals; and food and drink.

The use of sight is similar to that in *The Knight's Tale*. Thus just as Palamon and Arcite are transfixed by the sight of Emily, so too is Troilus by the sight of Criseyde. Saunders comments:

Chaucer follows the convention of using a neo-Platonic [extro-mission] model of sight . . . [and that] the image of Criseyde passes back through Troilus' eyes, the way to the heart, which is caused to "sprede and rise", wounding and quickening his affections.<sup>747</sup>

The situation is not as simple as Saunders suggests. Chaucer also employs the *intro-mission* theory. Troilus first sees Criseyde, we hear:

And upon cas bifel that thorough a route  
His eye *percede*, and so depe it wente.  
Til on Criseyde it mot, and ther it *stente* (I. 271–273; emphases added).

The light beam originates from Troilus's eyes (*extro-mission*), in, as O'Callaghan suggests, an attempt to "stab" Criseyde ("his eye perceived so deeply").<sup>748</sup> However, the attempt backfires. The gaze does not pierce Criseyde: instead, it "stands" on her, and it is Troilus who is stabbed:

And of hire look in him ther gan to quyken  
So gret desir and such affeccoun,  
That in his herte botme gan to stiken

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<sup>747</sup> Saunders, 'Love and the Making of the Self: *Troilus and Criseyde*', in Saunders, *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, pp. 134–155 (p. 140).

<sup>748</sup> O'Callaghan, *Love Imagery in Benoit de Sainte-Maure's Roman de Troie*, p. 178.



Of hir his fixe and *depe impressioun*. (I. 295–298; emphasis added)

Troilus fails to “reduce Criseyde to the passivity of spectacle” and to “textualize” her.<sup>749</sup> Because the sight of Criseyde makes a “deep impression” on Troilus, his being “stabbed” by her can only be explained by the *intro-mission* theory. Chaucer thus employs both Platonic and Aristotelian theories of vision. Troilus’s visual stabbing also echoes his being pierced by Cupid’s arrows. Troilus’s failure to “stab” Criseyde foreshadows his immuring passivity soon to come in the seduction scene.

The stabbing metaphor occurs throughout the poem. Immediately upon returning to the palace, Troilus, in reverie, is “Right with hire look thorough-shoten and thorough-darted” (I. 325). Later we hear Pandarus asking Criseyde to pity Troilus’s suffering (“Yee, nece, wol ye pullen out the thorn / That stiketh in his herte?”, III. 1104–1105); later still, we hear that Troilus regrets that “fro my soule shal Criseydes darte / Out nevere mo” (IV. 472–473). O’Callaghan observes that, after their lovemaking, Troilus gazes on Criseyde’s eyes and repeatedly kisses them; thereafter her eyes become knotted. “Aboute his herte” (III. 1069).<sup>750</sup>

Three considerations are relevant here. First, Criseyde appears more in control of gaze than is Troilus. When, for example, Criseyde first sees Troilus, she is not so “astoned” (II. 427) by the sight of him than he by the sight of her. Second, because of this, sudden love applies only to Troilus; this suggests, in line with Criseyde’s character, that she is more discriminating in what she wants out of love. Third, gazing is associated with aggression, but more with Troilus than with Criseyde.

On seeing the crowd of lovers at the beginning of the poem, Troilus castigates them for being “blynde” (I. 202), only, immediately upon being smitten, to himself complain of the blindness of fortune and of the ways of the world “O blynde world, O blynde entencioun!” (I. 211). He now is blind; he cannot reason; he cannot see

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<sup>749</sup> David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360–1430* (London, New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 129.

<sup>750</sup> O’Callaghan, *Love Imagery in Benoit de Sainte-Maure’s Roman de Troie*, p. 179.

things the way they really are; he cannot even see that his “love” for Criseyde is foolish.

The visual metaphors in the poem are reinforced by suggestions of voyeurism. Prior to the seduction scene, Troilus secretly observes Criseyde through a “litel window” in her bedchamber (III. 601–602). In this, he exhibits a lack of respect for Criseyde. There is also a hint of voyeurism in Pandarus. We do not know where he goes after he places the candle in the chimney (III. 1135–1141). Earlier, he had stated that Criseyde could sleep in the inner chamber (III. 676) and he with Criseyde’s ladies in waiting (as their “protector”). Yet there is no mention of his leaving Criseyde’s chamber, Pandarus could be lurking in the shadows, eavesdropping on the couple’s lovemaking.

Chaucer combines the eroticism of gaze with the eroticism of touch. In the seduction scene, we hear how Troilus responds to Criseyde’s body:

Hire armes smale, hire streghte bak and softe,  
Hire sydes longe, flesschly, smothe, and white  
He gan to stroke, and good thrift bad ful ofte  
Hire snowissh throte, hire brestes rounde and lite. (III. 1247–1250)

Some critics believe that with this shift from the visual to the physical in this scene, Chaucer negates Criseyde’s active erotic role in favour of the convention of female passivity. For example, Patrick J. Gallagher argues that “Criseyde’s passivity” is asserted when her body becomes the object of Troilus’s actions.<sup>751</sup> Amanda Hopkins similarly points out that Criseyde, in the consummation scene, “neither speaks nor stirs, but merely lies naked beneath his [Troilus’s] moving hands”.<sup>752</sup> Although it is true that Troilus becomes relatively active in the consummation scene, it is Criseyde who initiates the physical sexual contact in which Troilus recognises his sexual

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<sup>751</sup> Patrick J. Gallacher, ‘Chaucer and the Rhetoric of the Body’, *The Chaucer Review*, 28 (1994), 216–236 (p. 223).

<sup>752</sup> Hopkins, ‘Clothing, Nakedness and the Erotic’, in Hopkins and Rushton, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, p. 62.

being. Moreover, it is Criseyde who appears to be “on top”: Troilus states, “I, on which the faireste and the beste / That evere I say deyneth hire herte reste,” (III, 1280–1281), suggests that he is underneath. If on top, this indicates sexual adventurousness on the part of Criseyde for the women to be on top is suggestive of female dominance.<sup>753</sup>

In the same context, later we hear: “Quod tho Criseyde, and therwithal hym kiste, / That where his spirit was, for joie he nyst” (III. 1350–1351). And just prior to Troilus’s departure, she “hym in armes tok, and ofte keste” (III, 1519). Criseyde is an active participant in the act of lovemaking. It is Criseyde, as June Hall Martin points out, who in effect “plays the masculine role” throughout the poem.<sup>754</sup>

However, this is not all about Troilus’s pleasure; Criseyde’s sexual satisfaction is acknowledged by both Criseyde’s words, “my ground of ese. . .” (III, 1304), and the narrator’s, ‘hire delit or joies’ (III, 1310).

In Book V, the physicality becomes associated with lack and absence. After Criseyde has entered the Greek camp, Troilus laments over her palace, personifying it as “disconsolate” (V. 542), and kissing its doors:

Yet, sin I may no bet, fayn wolde I kisse  
Thy colde dores, dorste I for this route;  
And fare-wel shryne, of which the seynt is oute (V. 551–553)

Troilus, finding himself unable to have access to Criseyde (the door of her palace is barred), he is grief ridden. He kisses its doors, in an act of metaphorical cunnilingus.

Despite the visual stabbing metaphors in the poem, there appears less martial imagery in the *Troilus and Criseyde* than in *The Knight’s Tale*.<sup>755</sup> Nonetheless, it is

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<sup>753</sup> The woman on top position was not favoured in the Middle Ages because it interfered with the natural order of male-female roles.

<sup>754</sup> June Hall Martin, *Love’s Fools: Aucassin, Troilus, Calisto and the Parody of the Courtly Lover* (London: Tamesis, 1972), p. 53.

<sup>755</sup> See the discussion of martial imagery in *The Knight’s Tale*. For all their faults, Palamon and Arcite are active in their quest to win Emily, and their passion is repeatedly set in the context of martial arts.

present and is at times ambiguous. The first time Criseyde sees Troilus, his knightly bearing seems impressive:

But swich a knyghtly sighte trewely  
As was on hym, was nought, withouten faille,  
To loke on Mars, that god is of bataille.  
*So lik a man* of armes and a knyght  
He was to seen, fulfilled of heigh prowesse,  
For bothe he hadde a body and a myght  
To don that thing, as wel as hardynesse. (II. 628–634)

However, there is ambiguity. The line “so *like* a man of arms and a knight” suggests the possibility that Troilus has the appearance but not the substance of a warrior. We then hear that his armour is battered:

It was an heven upon hym for to see.  
His helm tohewen was in twenty places,  
That by a tyssew heng his bak byhynde;  
His sheeld todashed was with swerdes and maces,  
In which men myghte many an arwe fynde  
That thirled hadde horn and nerf and rynde; (II. 637–642)

D. S. and L. E. Brewer observe that “fine amour may be said to be essentially (a) masculine, (b) sexual, (c) symbolic, (d) humble, (e) improving, and (f) private”.<sup>756</sup> The wearing of a suit of armour, in effect, turned a knight into a phallic symbol. But yet again there is ambiguity. Troilus’s armour is battered—that is, damaged. It could therefore signify, not his bravery, but his crushed masculinity. If so, Troilus, in his battered armour, is a metaphorical eunuch.

The depiction of Troilus when Criseyde first views him is therefore two-edged: on the one hand, Criseyde finds him attractive because of indications of bravery; on the

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<sup>756</sup> Derek Brewer and L. E. Brewer as quoted in Gaëtan Brulotte and John Phillips, eds., *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature: Troilus and Criseyde* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 226–227.

other, the same indications, in a foretaste of what is to come though Criseyde seems unaware of it at the time, suggest his lack of masculinity.

As is Troilus's battered armour, Criseyde's clothing is ambiguous. Critics have steadily drawn attention to the ambiguity of Criseyde's clothing. Thus, Laura Hodges argues that Chaucer does not use clothing to develop Criseyde's character sexually.<sup>757</sup> When in public—in the temple, in Deiphebus's house, and even when at home—Criseyde habitually wears “[black] widow's weeds”. Hopkins argues that, in medieval times, black clothing was used by widows to make them appear sexually unattractive<sup>758</sup>); but black is also the colour of evil.<sup>759</sup> There therefore appears a message: Criseyde may be a widow grieving for her dead husband; but she may also be a harbinger of misery.

Nonetheless, there is eroticism in Criseyde's attire. Nolan observes that Benoit's Briseida, whom Boccaccio turned into his Criseida, is dressed in *bruna vesta*, and that this was in keeping with Ovid's recommendation in his *Ars Amatoria*, in which he advises that fair skinned ladies should wear dark clothes to enhance their beauty.<sup>760</sup> Ovid states:

Pulla decent niveas: Briseida pulla decebant:

Cum rapta est, pulla turn quoque veste fuit. (III. 189–90)

Hopkins may therefore be misinterpreting Chaucer. Criseyde's black clothing could mark her as sexual.

The impression of Criseyde's sexuality is reinforced by her jewellery. Hodges argues that Chaucer uses her jewels as erotic symbols. These, when set against the

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<sup>757</sup> Laura F. Hodges, 'Sartorial Signs in *Troilus and Criseyde*', *The Chaucer Review*, 35 (2001), 223–259 (pp. 231, 232).

<sup>758</sup> Hopkins, 'Clothing, Nakedness and the Erotic in some Romances of Medieval Britain', in Hopkins and Rushton, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, p. 53.

<sup>759</sup> In medieval western culture, 'Black often means simply "bad" or "evil"'. It was used metaphorically to refer to death, pain, hell, and 'obscene' deeds and desires. See Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, p. 28.

<sup>760</sup> Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique*, p. 140.

blackness of her widow's weeds, lend her a seductive charm.<sup>761</sup> Consider this Freudian passage:

And be ye wis as ye be fair to see,  
Wel in the ryng than is the ruby set.  
Ther were nevere two so wel ymet,  
Whan ye be his al hool as he is youre. (II. 584–587)

In Freudian psychology, the ruby is viewed as the phallus and the ring as the vagina. It is a male–female metaphor, and one of coitus. This is demonstrated when Pandarus chides Criseyde for offering Troilus a ring that lacks a stone:

That ryng moste han a stoon  
That myghte dede men alyve maken;  
And swich a ryng trowe I that ye have non. (III. 891–893)

Criseyde gives Troilus her brooch as a token of her love (III. 1370–1372). The brooch contains a heart-shaped ruby. It appears similar, as Dominique Battles argues, to the Brooch of Thebes.<sup>762</sup> Chaucer describes the Brooch in his *Complaint of Mars*, in which the god Vulcan fashions the Brooch as a gift (punishment) to Mars for his adultery with Venus. Should Mars ever lose the Brooch, he will suffer “double wo and passioun” (255)—a similar phrase to that which Chaucer uses to describe Troilus's relationship with Criseyde: “In which ye may the double sorwes here / Of Troilus in lovyng of Criseyde” (I. 54–55)—and, in general, the Brooch is fashioned such that it will bring misfortune on all those who possess or desire it. The parallel between the brooch Criseyde gives Troilus and that of the Brooch of Thebes—the latter with its strong sexual overtones (forged in response to adultery)—suggests that Criseyde's brooch is a poisoned chalice. Thus, the use of the brooch is two-edged: initially it serves as a love token; later, it a reminder of infidelity.

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<sup>761</sup> Hodges, ‘Sartorial Signs in *Troilus and Criseyde*’, pp. 233, 234.

<sup>762</sup> Dominique Battles, *The Medieval Tradition of Thebes History and Narrative in the OF Roman de Thèbes, Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Lydgate* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 124–125.

Nonetheless, there is ambiguity as regards Criseyde's brooch. First, as Battles observes, it is not exactly the same as that described in *The Complaint of Mars*.<sup>763</sup> Thus in the *Complaint* we hear:

The broche of Thebes was of such a kynde,  
So ful of rubies and of stones of Ynde  
That every wight, that sette on hit an ye,  
He wende anon to worthe out of his mynde;  
So sore the beaute wolde his herte bynde. (IV. 245–249)

Therefore, the Brooch of Thebes as previously described by Chaucer contained several precious stones, including several rubies; but Chaucer's description of Criseyde's brooch alludes to only a single ruby:

But wel I woot, a broche, gold and asure  
In which a ruby set was lik an herte  
Criseyde hym yaf, and stak it on his sherte (III. 1370–73)

However, Chaucer's description allows for the possibility of other precious stones in the brooch.

In any event, we hear in Book V (1040) that she gives a brooch to Diomedes—this time without description of the brooch. We do not know whether it is the same brooch that Troilus gave to her. Despite such doubts, the similarity between it and the Brooch of Thebes, coupled with its intrinsic erotic overtones, lend the gift an added piquancy.<sup>764</sup> Boccaccio, incidentally, in his *Filostrato* clearly portrays Troilus as seeing the brooch as being *his* (Troilus's) brooch.

Finally on clothing, there is the seduction scene. As indicated, in it Criseyde is nude but Troilus is not. Here clothing is not used as a metaphor for sex; instead, it is used as a metaphor for sexlessness.

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<sup>763</sup> Ibid., pp. 125–126.

<sup>764</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

Just as Chaucer subtly employs clothing to establish simultaneously Criseyde's own fully aware sexuality while highlighting Troilus's passivity and sexual sublimation, he also uses animal imagery. When Criseyde seduces Troilus, we hear:

Criseyde . . .  
Made him swich feste, it joye was to sene,  
Whan she his trouthe and clene entente wiste.  
And as aboute a *tree*, with many a twiste,  
Bitrent and wryth the sote wodebinde,  
Gan ech of hem in armes other winde.  
And as the newe abaysshed *nightingale*,  
That stinteth first whan she biginneth to *singe*, (III. 1226–1239; emphases added)

Criseyde is likened to a singing nightingale when she embraces Troilus (this is reminiscent of Absolon in *The Miller's Tale*: "He syngeth, brokkyng as a nyghtyngale", 3377). And, having so behaved, she tells him of her intent, which is clearly sexual. In this context, the reference to the nightingale, as discussed in Chapter four in the context of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, could also be suggestive of illicit love, betrayal, or both. Also, prior to the seduction scene, Criseyde hears a nightingale singing before falling asleep and dreaming (II, 918–924). The singing sends her to sleep with "good entente" (II, 923), which, given the sexual nature of her dream, reinforces the notion that she is a sexual creature.

However, when applied to Troilus, animal imagery often reinforces his presumably compromised masculinity. For example, Criseyde views Troilus for the first time from her window, riding on a wounded horse (II, 626), might suggest his lack of masculinity. Sandy Feinstein argues that horses in medieval times were associated with masculinity, passion, and lust.<sup>765</sup> Troilus's wounded horse is, in effect, useless. Moreover, the fact that the wounded horse appear outside the context of battlefield

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<sup>765</sup> Sandy Feinstein, 'The Reeve's Tale: About That Horse', *The Chaucer Review*, 1 (1991), 99–104 (p, 100).



eliminates the martial nature of the horse, renders it to a symbol of transgression. The wounded horse, in a Freudian reading of the tale, becomes an analogous to Troilus's sexual immaturity.<sup>766</sup>

Similarly, when Pandarus castigates Troilus for his faintheartedness ("Thow wrecched mouses herte", III. 736), the allusion to a mouse reinforces Troilus's weakness. Here, of course, a small furry animal is not used as a metaphor for genitalia—as, for instance, in *The Squirrel*. As indicated, medieval symbolism was flexible.

There are two occasions in which the animal imagery, although sexual, is brutal. The first concerns Criseyde's dream; the second concerns Troilus's dream. The dreams here reveal psychology; although comprising only brief episodes within the poem, the dreams underscore the emotional turmoil suffered by Troilus and Criseyde.

Dreaming in medieval Europe was closely linked with the notion of the *Dream Vision*, which dates from the early Middle Ages.<sup>767</sup> The vision was often interpreted as a message from God but it could be viewed as providing psychological insight, or even insight into the future.<sup>768</sup> Chaucer used dreams extensively as a literary device—*The Parliament of Foules* uses Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, for example, and *The House of Fame* used Virgil's *Aeneid*. Chaucer did not only use such dreams as plot devices, for scene setting, for instance; he also used them to explore the nature of reality; and the first part of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* comprises a debate between Chauntecleer and Perteloteon about whether dreams are warnings from God or merely artefacts of unbalanced humours. Given this, the dreams in *Troilus and Criseyde* are clearly intended to tell us *something* of the protagonists' personalities and, in this matter, sexuality.

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<sup>766</sup> Eysenck, *Decline and Fall of the Freudian Empire*, p. 108.

<sup>767</sup> Ananya Jahanara Kabir, *Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2001, 2004), p. 78.

<sup>768</sup> Gwenfair Walters Adams, *Visions in Late Medieval England: Lay Spirituality and Sacred Glimpses of the Hidden Worlds of Faith* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 206.

Criseyde's dream is relatively innocuous. We hear:

And as she slep, anonright tho hire mette  
How that an egle, fethered whit as bon, he rente,  
Under her breast his long clawes sette,  
And out her herte, and that anon,  
And dide his herte into hire brest to go—  
Of which she nought agroos, ne nothing smerte—  
And forth he fleigh, with herte left for herte (II. 925)

Criseyde seems willing to have her heart exchanged with that of an eagle (and by implication, to submit to violent male) and to not mind the pain that such entails. The dream is sadomasochistic. The sadomasochism illustrates Criseyde's repressed (and possibly unhealthy) sexual desires. Yet there is ambiguity. Tony Davenport comments:

There is a sense of predatory sexuality in the action of the eagle but at the same time the image is a royal, heraldic one and the exchange of hearts can be understood as a symbolic act akin to devices on a shield.<sup>769</sup>

The dream may therefore also signify Criseyde's desire for respectability. Yet the union, we hear from the dream, will be savage—a Freudian interpretation of the dream would be that it represents a sublimated desire on Criseyde's part to give in to love. The dream, Steven F. Kruger concludes, "shows Criseyde ready to love, even as it acknowledges that she may not be wholly in control of her own involvement in love".<sup>770</sup> Here, there is ambiguity, for we do not know whom the eagle represents, Troilus or Diomedes. Troilus is hardly a dominant male, but Diomedes is. As Marilyn King observes "the eagle was a type of the dominant male which Criseyde craved,

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<sup>769</sup> Tony Davenport, *Medieval Narrative: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 228.

<sup>770</sup> Steven F. Kruger, 'Dreaming', in Saunders, *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, pp. 69–110 (p. 72).

and which Troilus patently was not”.<sup>771</sup> Troilus, unlike the traditional masculine subject, is a male with no apparent sexual experience.

There is also the issue of freewill of Criseyde in the dream. Frank Zeitoun argues that, after her dream, Criseyde “gradually disappears from the narrative”.<sup>772</sup> The end of Book II therefore marks the eclipse of Criseyde’s personal autonomy. Moreover, he argues, this disappearance is occasioned by the substitution of the eagle’s heart with her own—she is doomed because “the winged herald of love has forcibly instilled passion” in her.<sup>773</sup>

Although one can take issue with Zeitoun on the issue of freewill—*Troilus and Criseyde* is ambiguous on the issue both before and after Criseyde’s dream, and not only as regards Criseyde, but as regards Troilus, too; and Criseyde appears active in choosing Diomedes over Troilus—his point that the dream signifies Criseyde’s passion appears sound. The dream provides insight into her character.

Given this, Criseyde’s dream is clearly intended to tell us *something* about her, and this something, whatever it is, in today’s terms is *queer*.

Troilus’s dream is also queer. He dreams of Criseyde performing coitus, and enjoying it, with a wild pig:

He mette he saught a bor with tuskes grete,  
That slepte aveyn the bryghte sonnes hete.  
And by this bor, faste in his armes folde,  
Lat Kyssyng, ay, his lady bright, Criseyde. (V. 1250)

That Troilus can imagine Criseyde engaging in such activity suggests that he does not trust her, for he treats the dream seriously. He confesses to Pandarus (not Criseyde) of the dream, and Pandarus tells him to forget it (V. 1288).

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<sup>771</sup> King, *Three Images*, p. 57.

<sup>772</sup> Frank Zeitoun, ‘The Eagle, the Boar and the Self: Dreams, Daydreams, and Violence in *Troilus and Criseyde*’, *Cercles*, 6 (2003), 43–53 (p. 46).

<sup>773</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

The wild boar is, of course, symbolic of Diomedes, and signifies that Criseyde will not return to Troilus. This is made clear by Cassandra, who states:

“And thy lady, wher-so she be, ywis,  
This Diomedes hire herte hath and she his—  
Wepe if thou wolt or lef, for out of doute,  
This Diomedes is inne and thou art oute.” (V. 1516–1519)

The “in and out” reference in the final line of the quotation is clearly sexual. But Troilus refuses to believe Cassandra’s interpretation (Cassandra, in Greek lore, was cursed to tell the truth but forever to fail to be believed). Instead, he rises from his bed and resolves to return to the life of a soldier (though, as Davenport observes, no good comes of this).<sup>774</sup> Here, Chaucer departs from Boccaccio, for in Boccaccio’s account Troilus sees the symbolism in the dream and identifies the boar as Diomedes. Troilus’s refusal to accept reality in Chaucer’s account serves to heighten both his bathos and his pathos.

The animal imagery in the poem is often coupled with hunting imagery. Troilus is likened to a poor hunter. Pandarus advises him, “Lo, hold the at thi triste cloos, and I / Shal wel the deer vnto thi bowe dryue (II. 1535–1536). Criseyde is the deer that Troilus will shoot, but he will need Pandarus’s help to guide his arrow. Pandarus is accurately predicting the future, for Troilus does, as events turn out, need Pandarus’s help in seducing Criseyde. This suggests, incidentally, as in the candle in the chimney scene, that Troilus will need Pandarus’s help to guide his penis into Criseyde.

Pandarus repeats the hunting metaphor just prior to the lovemaking. He likens Criseyde to a lark and Troilus to a sparrow hawk: “What myghte or may the sely larke seye, / Whan that the sperhawk hath it in his foot?” (III. 1191–1192). The metaphor is echoed by Troilus’s attitude towards Criseyde during the lovemaking:

This Troilus in armes gan hire streyne,

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<sup>774</sup> Tony Davenport, *Medieval Narrative: An Introduction*, p. 230.

And seyde, “O swete, as evere mot I gon,  
Now be ye kaught; now is ther but we tweyne! (III. 1205–1208)

Again this shows how much Troilus fails to empathise with Criseyde. Criseyde has been doing her utmost to seduce him, and in response he says that he has caught *her*, and there is nothing she can do about it.

This likening of Troilus to a bird of prey in the hunting metaphor may be contrasted with the hunting metaphor used to describe Diomedes: Diomedes seeks “To fisshen hire he leyde out hook and lyne” (I. 777) and “with shortest tarynge, / Into his net Criseydes herte brynge” (V. 774–775). The contrast is stark. Troilus is savage—either a hunter who pierces Criseyde with an arrow, or a hawk who tears her apart—but Diomedes is merely a fisherman. Diomedes catches Criseyde by cunning, and, in capturing her, he does not harm her mentally or physically.

As with animal imagery, Chaucer subtly manipulates the images of food and eating to emphasise the progressively increasing passivity of Troilus. Food and the lack of it applied to Troilus is invariably linked with self-destruction, disease and eventually death. On the evening Pandarus admits Criseyde and her servants to his house—prior to her and Troilus’s lovemaking—Pandarus treats Criseyde to food and, immediately prior to her going to bed (she thinks, alone), he offers her wine: “The wyn anon, and whan so that yow leste, / So go we slepe: I trowe it be the beste” (III. 671–672). Here, however, there is an irony. Troilus receives neither the food nor the wine, for he at the time is cooped up in the closet, secretly spying on Criseyde. Thus, food and wine are associated with sexual pleasure, but only for Criseyde, not for Troilus.

The no-food–no-sex metaphor is reiterated when Troilus awaits in vain for Criseyde’s return from the Greek camp. We hear of Troilus:

He ne et ne drank, for his malencolye,  
And ek from every compaignye he fledde:  
This was the lif that al the tyme he ledde  
He so defet was, that no manere man  
Unneth hym myghte knowen ther he wente;  
So was he lene, and therto pale and wan,

And feble, that he walketh by potente (V. 1216–22)

Not only is Troilus emasculated through hunger; he is now a coward (“from every campaign he fled”). Here, Blamires notes a difference between Chaucer and Boccaccio. Blamires states:

[F]ollowing Troilus’s vigil on the city walls waiting in vain for Criseyde to come back from the Greek camp as promised, he declines into desolate misery, physically drained and unable to eat anything. According to Boccaccio, “there was scarcely enough vitality in his limbs to sustain him” (*Fil.* 7. 20). Chaucer outdoes Boccaccio: “So was he lene, and therto pale and wan, / And feble, that he walketh by potente” (V. 1221–2). Troilus is reduced to walking *with a crutch* [emphasis original]. It is a deliciously over-wrought idea.<sup>775</sup>

In this, Troilus’s self-imposed starvation, because of the food–sex metaphor, is tantamount to self-inflicted castration. Troilus loses all vestige of masculinity. He is, as Zeitoun argues, consumed with “continual daydreaming”.<sup>776</sup> Troilus, because of his desire for Criseyde, loses his honour, the woman he loves, and his life.

### **Conclusion**

The poem anticipates the themes present in *The Canterbury Tales* romances. It particularly anticipates *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* in that it allows, in contrast to *The Knight’s Tale*, power to women. Indeed, it is only when Criseyde escapes the wiles of Pandarus that she discovers her love of Troilus and her even greater love of Diomedes. It anticipates *The Physician’s Tale* in that it shows that inappropriate love leads to character disintegration—in *The Physician’s Tale*, that of Virginius; in *Troilus and Criseyde*, that of Troilus. It anticipates *The Knight’s Tale* in that it

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<sup>775</sup> Blamires, ‘Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*’, in Saunders, *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, p. 442.

<sup>776</sup> Zeitoun, ‘The Eagle, the Boar and the Self’, p. 51.

depicts the frenzy of sexual jealousy, particularly when Troilus seeks revenge on Diomedes.

Also, like *The Knight's Tale*, *Troilus and Criseyde* is not so much a glorification of courtly love; it is a condemnation of it. Troilus is a failure. He fails to see Criseyde as a sexual creature; he fails to seduce her without her (and Pandarus's) help; he fails to win her undying affection; he fails to kill Diomedes. But if the poem is a critique of extremes of courtly love, it is not as devastating a critique as any of the romances in *The Canterbury Tales*. It is, after all, Diomedes who wins Criseyde, and he does so through martial prowess, status, and wealth. The poem does, however, anticipate *The Wife of Bath's Tale* in that Diomedes appears to acknowledge Criseyde's sexuality, and, equally if not more important, surrender part of his sovereignty to her.

This portrayal of love is enlivened by the range of erotic imagery, part *fabliau*, part romance, part a mixture of both. The sexuality of the poem is marked by the vivid erotic symbolism—Pandarus's placing of the candle in the chimney, Troilus's simulated cunnilingus, the poem's martial imagery, though less prevalent than in *The Knight's Tale*, is strongly phallic—the stabbing and piercing, Troilus's erect poise when dressed in battered armour and seated on a horse, and Troilus's use of his lance to try to kill Diomedes.

Some of the imagery is repulsive—Criseyde copulating with a pig, Pandarus sexually molesting his niece. However, this has to be set against the beauty of Criseyde's caring for Diomedes, the humour of much of the sexual imagery, the intensity of the passion, and the tragedy of Criseyde's loss of honour.

The start of the present chapter quoted Saunders as saying the poem poses questions but fails to answer them. She is only half correct. The poem suggests, unequivocally, that blind obsession does not lead to true love. In its portrayal of the love of Diomedes and Criseyde, it says unequivocally that true love involves give and take, and that true love empowers women. For all the tragedy of her betrayal, Criseyde is made stronger by her love of Diomedes. Moreover, the illicit love of Pandarus fails. Above all, the poem asserts that true love is physical. Platonic love is not love.

*Troilus and Criseyde*

The poem poses questions, but they are unanswerable. These questions revolve around involve free will versus predestination—we do not know, for example, whether Troilus has a choice in his physical and mental deterioration. Similarly, we do not know whether Eros planned Troilus's deterioration; we do not know whether Criseyde was doomed to betray Troilus, or, indeed, whether Eros planned the betrayal. That Chaucer failed to present a solution to the questions is unsurprising.

Troilus is the main character in the poem, but the message he sends is relatively simple: obsessive love does not work. The more complex message, that love is multifaceted, comes from the interplay between Troilus, Criseyde, and Diomedes.



## CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion shows the main aspect of Chaucer's erotic poetry. It was subversive. Chaucer subverted notions of courtly love and chivalry; he distorted gender roles; he highlighted the corruption of the clergy. He presented a range of challenges to exclusive rights of jurisdiction over marriage, sexuality, and the family. This jurisdiction had for centuries been claimed by the Church.

He exposed courtly love as being, not genteel, but violent, obsessive, and foolish. The violence is exposed in *The Knight's Tale*, in the scene of Palamon and Arcite fighting in the forest and in the horror of the tournament. The obsessiveness is shown both in *The Knight's Tale* and in *Troilus and Criseyde*. In *The Knight's Tale* Palamon and Arcite are so obsessive that neither has time to consider Emily's feelings—instead, they break their knightly vows. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Troilus is similar; save that his obsession is so deep it leads, literally, to his self-destruction. The foolishness is evident because, not only does it lead to self-destruction, it fails. Troilus loses Criseyde; Palamon wins Emily, but we have no indication that their marriage is happy. Foolishness is also evident in *The Miller's Tale*, in which Absolon imitates the manner of courtly love, albeit badly, only to be humiliated by Alison.

Chaucer further subverts chivalry in his repeated portrayal of medieval warfare: he shows that it was savage and ignoble. This is most evident in *The Knight's Tale*, with its descriptions of the destruction of Thebes and the Temple of Mars. It is also evident in *Troilus and Criseyde*, with Troilus's murderous foray against the Greeks in his hunt for Diomedes. Chivalry is further subverted by *The Physician's Tale*, in which Virginius's notions of honour lead him to murder his daughter.

Chaucer's distortion of gender roles is most evident in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. It is not only that it is the loathly lady who dominates the knight; it is also that she is wiser, better educated, and nobler than the knight, and that it is women—the loathly lady, Guinevere, and the ladies at court—who make virtually all decisions in the tale. In doing so, they “cure” the knight of his chivalry—his male chauvinism and his penchant for rape. It is also apparent in the Wife herself, for from her *Prologue* we

learn she is feisty, something of a dominatrix, and, most important, unapologetic about being so. The Wife has masculine attributes, and, in her tale, she has the loathly lady cure the knight by, in effect, feminising him. There is also gender role ambiguity in Absolon in *The Miller's Tale*. He has female attributes in his squeamishness and his liking for fine clothes. This femininity is apparent in his wooing of Alison, in which, although trying to behave like a knight, he makes a mockery of courtly convention.

The corruption of the clergy is exposed and parodied in three tales discussed in the present thesis: *The Shipman's Tale*, *The Miller's Tale*, and *The Reeve's Tale*. In the first, the monk Daun John pays the merchant's wife to have sex with him. In the second, the hapless Absolon is a priest. In the third, Malyne's grandfather, we are told, is a venal parson.

Chaucer's tales allow for female sexuality. Some of his female protagonists are licentious—Alison in *The Miller's Tale*, May in *The Merchant's Tale*, the Wife of Bath. Even the otherwise haughty wife in *The Reeve's Tale* enjoys herself, and even Criseyde fantasises about sex, and it is she, not Troilus, who, in effect, does the seducing. Alongside this, there is the range of sexual behaviour alluded to in Chaucer's *oeuvre*, much (though not all), of which requires female consent and, presumably, enjoyment. He alludes, not only to copulation, but also to oral sex, sadomasochism, bestiality, incest, prostitution, and rape.

Of course, Chaucer was not the first to criticise the clergy; nor was he alone in being sympathetic to women, or in depicting adulterous women and in mocking chivalric codes. But his critique is far more powerful, and subtle, than that of simple *fabliaux*, or even Boccaccio's *Decameron*. This power and subtlety derived from his innovativeness.

Chaucer adds details not found in his probable sources. *The Merchant's Tale* has the flattering Placebo and the honest Justinus; these characters are absent in its Arabic predecessors and in other plausible sources; *The Wife of Bath's Tale* adds a rape absent in its folklore sources; *Troilus and Criseyde* concentrates on the romance and the tragedy, not, as did medieval sources, on the Trojan War, and it contains

delicious, and original, symbolism—Pandarus’s placing the candle in the chimney, for example.

Chaucer’s originality can also be seen in his blending of genres. Not only is *The Canterbury Tales* a compendium of different genres—*fabliaux* (e.g., *The Reeve’s Tale*), courtly romance (e.g., *The Knight’s Tale*), fable (e.g., *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*), black comedy (e.g., *The Pardoner’s Tale*)—the tales themselves blend genres. *The Merchant’s Tale* has elements of a romance: Januarie is a *knight*, he sings May an *aubade*, he builds her a *walled garden*, and so forth. But it is not a romance: it is a *fabliau* parody of romance. Conversely, *Troilus and Criseyde* has elements of *fabliaux*. Chaucer further blends genres by using the language of one genre when writing in another. Absolon uses the language of romance (e.g., the *Song of Songs*) when courting Alison. Similarly, in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* it is the loathly lady, not the knight, who speaks of courtesy and philosophy.

The blending of genres is also seen in the blending of audience. Within *The Canterbury Tales* the pilgrims come from all social groups prevalent in the Middle Ages: the Cook (lower class), the Reeve (middle class), the Knight (upper class), the Nun’s Priest (clergy). This blending of social groups is reflected by Chaucer’s probable intended audience. This was, most likely, eclectic.

Chaucer’s use of symbolism is also innovative. Although his narratives utilise symbols current in the medieval world—windows and other openings for the female pudendum, grain for sex, animal imagery, grinding, gardens, colour, sight, food, footwear, a gamut of Freudian symbols, including phallic ones—some are subtle—Absolon’s *poulaines* with the image of a window, Criseyde’s fantasy about copulating with Troilus, Troilus’s simulated cunnilingus. Much is left to the imagination; as argued in Chapter one, eroticism, unlike pornography, mostly suggests. Related to this is Chaucer’s insight into psychology. He not only used Freudian symbols; he also anticipated some of Freud’s more plausible notions, most notably the defence mechanisms, sublimation, and projection. This is something not seen in French *fabliaux*.

This symbolism served three main purposes. First, it added depth to the characters—Troilus in his battered armour, John and Aleyn’s rampaging horse. Second, it set the tone of the tales—the repeated references to grain and grinding in *The Reeve’s Tale*, the *double entendre* in the word *taile* in *The Shipman’s Tale*, Third, it facilitated comedy—John and Aleyn’s theft of bread in *The Reeve’s Tale*, St Paul’s window on Absolon’s *poulaines* in *The Miller’s Tale*.

But Chaucer did not rely only on symbols. Where appropriate, he described sex in graphic detail. Nicholas’s quinting of Alison, Aleyn’s “pricking” into Malyne, and Troilus’s dream of Criseyde fornicating with a boar are each purposefully brutal. We know that Nicholas’s motivation is lust, that Aleyn’s motivation is revenge, and that Troilus is sick at heart.

There is also Chaucer’s humanity. Against Januarie’s coarseness and stupidity in *The Merchant’s Tale*, there is his humanity after he becomes blind; the rape of Malyne in *The Reeve’s Tale* is counterbalanced by Malyne’s seeming affection for Aleyn the morning after; the love goddess elements of Virginia in *The Physician’s Tale* are negated by her humanity (and pleading) prior to her death. Related to this, there is Chaucer’s economy of expression, an economy he uses to create ambiguity. We do not know the extent of Damyan’s affection for May, nor the extent of Virginia’s sexuality; we do not know how much the transformed loathly lady becomes besotted with sex, and therefore loses at least some of her sovereignty over the knight; we do not know how much or if Alison and Nicholas love each other. Such ambiguities serve both to force the poems to omit irrelevancies, and to keep to the points they are making—marriage of old men to young women is foolish, for instance—and to reflect the realities of everyday life. Chaucer appreciated this. This appreciation adds to his poems’ verisimilitude.

This then is what gives Chaucer’s erotic poetry its greatness. Chaucer does not use eroticism gratuitously. He uses it to explore human nature and to criticise the mores of England’s High Middle Ages, and he uses it subtly.

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