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Content warning for sexual violence

Gender, Genre, and Sex in Selected *Canterbury Tales*

“The Miller’s Tale”
“The Reeve’s Tale”
“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale”
“The Clerk’s Tale”
“The Merchant’s Tale”

The *Canterbury Tales* abounds with couples having sex, sometimes enjoyably, sometimes problematically. Nearly every tale features a heterosexual couple, and for many, the conflict that arises from this relationship becomes a dynamic source of conflict in the plot. Despite the number of encounters, however, the *Tales* rarely expresses judgment or approval on the circumstances of these meetings. The complicated status of consent in English law and broader Christian theology, compounded by the varying conventions of genre, affect how seriously the expression of sexual desire, and the violence which often accompanies it, comes across to the audience of the *Canterbury Tales*. This collection explores some of the most troubling sexual encounters in the *Canterbury Tales* in order to highlight that, despite Chaucer’s troubling biography and the weight of misogyny, the women against whom the sexual violence is most often directed remain dynamic and compelling figures.

Medieval Christian theology took a firm stance on the need for consent in relationships. In the first half of the twelfth century, an influential legal text, the *Decretum* of Gratian, strongly connected marriage (and by extension intercourse) with the consent of the people being married, especially the woman, rather than simply the man or their families. The definition set forth by the *Decretum*, the first version of which was finished in 1139, was confirmed and even improved

by Pope Alexander III (Winroth 112). This definition, however, was mostly theoretical and was contradicted by English law. By Chaucer's fourteenth century, the right of autonomy had shifted from a woman to her family, diminishing the importance of her consent and replacing it with the wishes of her kinsmen (Cannon, "*Raptus*" 81). This shift in authority can be seen in the ambiguity of medieval English law regarding the act of *raptus*, alternately defined as rape or abduction (Cannon, "Chaucer and Rape" 68). The two crimes, in medieval legal thought, were different forms of the same transgression: someone taking something that was not theirs. The transgression in rape was not the non-consensual sex but rather the theft of valuable property from the woman's family, be it her virginity or her entire person (Cannon, "Chaucer and Rape" 76). Because of this, even consensual sex could be legally called rape if a woman's family objected (Cannon, "Chaucer and Rape" 73-4).

In short, Chaucer lived in a world in which consent was theologically necessary but legally became a blurry and sometimes irrelevant line. The *Canterbury Tales* certainly seems preoccupied with the perceived ambiguity between these categories: each tale in this collection features what may conservatively be called problematic sex. Nor did Chaucer limit his involvement in *raptus* to the page. On May 4, 1380, a woman named Cecily Chaumpaigne released her legal right to prosecute Chaucer *de rapu meo*, about her rape, in exchange for a significant sum of money (Cannon, "*Raptus*" 74, Boenig and Taylor 12). It is through this lens that this collection of tales must be viewed: namely, that a rapist wrote them.

Genre is another crucial lens for interpreting the *Canterbury Tales*, which frequently uses genre as a means of establishing boundaries around a tale. Genre categorizes the tales, so that some, like the fabliaux "The Miller's Tale" and "The Reeve's Tale," more clearly belong together than the quasi-Romances "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and "The Merchant's Tale." A

modern information scientist, Eviatar Zerubavel, proposes that creating categories like genre is a characteristically human enterprise, and that, when these frames are constructed, they determine how we interpret the phenomena which occur within them (11). Although the *Canterbury Tales* predates Zerubavel by centuries, it skillfully employs this theory in the context of a frame narrative. The ever-changing genre of the tales controls how much weight the audience gives the narrative by clearly placing a tale within the world of the genre. For example, a troubling domestic situation like the unhappy marriage of Alison and John in the fabliau “The Miller’s Tale” may take on a humorous spin more easily than the equally troubling marriages of the Wife of Bath, which she relates in the form of a confessional sermon.

The degree of the audience’s distress is largely determined by the genre, specifically the verisimilitude and interior logic of the genre. The fabliaux-worlds of the *Canterbury Tales* are peppered with specific details so that they have the appearance of the real world (Cooper 98). Despite this seeming, however, they lack substance, operate according to different rules, and prize different virtues, namely cleverness (Cooper 95). The events which take place in a fabliau do not have the same weight—any violence which occurs will not seem as horrible to the audience—as the events and violence which take place in the Wife of Bath’s confessional sermon, however similar those events seem.

The *Canterbury Tales* also uses frames to create or collapse distance between the audience and the narrative. The frame narrative controls how many layers removed the audience is from the fictitious events; they are much closer to the Wife of Bath, who ‘tells’ her story directly to the audience of pilgrims, than they are to the characters in the tale she then tells. Even then, the world the pilgrims inhabit is not the same as the real world, either. It has the verisimilitude of the real geography of London and Canterbury, but it also has pilgrims from

every walk of life spouting, *ex tempore*, elegant tales, apparently in verse (II.96). Still, it is the closest and supposedly truest layer to the audience, giving it the most weight. It is the last lens through which the audience views the sexuality and violence of the *Canterbury Tales*.

1. "The Miller's Tale"

The first tale of this collection, "The Miller's Tale," is a fabliau. It concerns John, the aged carpenter who has recently wed Alison, who is described,

Of eighteteene yeer she was of age.
 Jalous he was and heeld hire narwe in cage,
 For she was yong and wylde and he was old
 And demed himself been lik a cokewold (I.323-6).

After this foreshadowing, Alison is sexually assaulted by their border, the young Oxford student, Nicholas, who, in the manner of the fabliau, is young and clever while John is old and stupid. In order to distract him long enough to have sex with Alison (which, the Miller assures us, is apparently now consensual), Nicholas persuades John that a second Biblical flood will come and that he must hide on the roof in a bathtub. Complications ensue when another suitor, the clerk Absolon, comes calling for Alison. Alison and Nicholas' prank on the lovesick clerk backfires when he anally penetrates Nicholas with a hot iron. Nicholas' cries for water cause John to fall from the roof and break his arm. All is resolved when Alison and Nicholas persuade the bystanders that John is mad, protecting the secret of their relationship. Everyone is pleased, except for John, who has broken his arm and is now thought mad, Nicholas, who has been anally penetrated with a hot iron, and Absolon, who has accidentally kissed his beloved's ass.

The most prominent sexual relationship in "The Miller's Tale" occurs between Alison and Nicholas, and its details shift throughout the tale. It begins explicitly without consent: "As clerkes been ful subtile and ful queynte, / And prively he caughte hire by the queynte" (I.3275-

6). The description of this moment emphasizes Alison's attempts to escape Nicholas: "The Miller compares Alisoun's reaction to that of a colt being shod, her response to Nicholas's assault a visceral animal reaction to bodily pain with nowhere to escape... She utters specific and unequivocal refusals-- "I wol nat," "Do wey [remove] youre handes," and a twofold "lat be" (let go, leave me alone)" (Harris 44).

Later in the tale, however, the nature of their relationship has apparently changed: the Miller lingers on Alison's consent when he says, "And if so be the game wente aright, / She sholde slepen in his arm al nyght. / For this was his desir and hire also" (I.3405-7). This illustrates the cavalier nature of the fabliau, which is characterized by its light, humorous tone (Cooper 95). Despite the hyper-real verisimilitude of the Oxford setting, nothing about the fabliau seems real. It is all surface and no substance. Aside from the haunting description of Alison as a struggling animal, the audience gains no conception of her reaction to the events of the tale or her interiority as a person. The violence against her is so trivialized that it actually becomes a pun (I.3275-6). Nor does the violence of the narrative have any real effect to the characters: after being agonizingly stabbed, Nicholas is quick to rush out in the street and explain John's fall, and his injury is never mentioned again. Instead, the narrative is swept up in the alchemical process of the fabliau, transmuting Alison's assault into a joking courtship and Nicholas' injury into the punch line.

Nicholas is not the only man to abuse Alison in "The Miller's Tale." Her husband, John, begins a theme which will further develop in later tales: the problem of an age gap in marriages. The Miller says, "Jalous [John] was and heeld [Alison] narwe in cage, / For she was yong and wylde and he was old / And demed hymself been lik a cokewold" (I.3224-6). As stated earlier, English law did not require Alison's consent for their marriage to take place. John's greater age

and the privilege afforded to him by his gender indicate that Alison would have lacked the cultural currency to refuse him. In support of this reading, the Miller says, “Man sholde wedde his simylytude,” or equal, suggesting that marriages are healthy when each partner has a say in them (I.3228). This is, admittedly, an optimistically feminist reading of the *Canterbury Tales*’ concerns about mixed age marriages. A more misogynistic reading, which the descriptor “wylde” seems to suggest, is that Alison, as a woman (especially a young one) cannot control her appetites, which will lead to John’s cuckolding. But Alison is not the one who cannot control her desires in “The Miller’s Tale,” as suggested by its weighty ending.

The genre of fabliau often concludes with the punishment of the foolish. Based on that, it is worth noting that it is Absolon, Nicholas, and John who come off for the worse at the end of the tale. It is clear why. Absolon is too in love with love to notice the reality of the situation, while Nicholas is too drunk on his own cleverness to quit when he is ahead. John takes a young wife and jealously guards her, so much so that she fears he will kill her if he finds out about Nicholas (I.3295-6). On the other hand, Alison concludes “The Miller’s Tale” in fine style, unharmed and better than she started. In this way, it is possible to read “The Miller’s Tale” as a tale about the triumph of Alison. Her husband’s cultural currency is diminished by his apparent madness. Nicholas requires some serious medical attention, which will likely distract him from his pursuit of her. Absolon is humiliated from kissing her ass by mistake. Alison has gone from three men ardently and un-consensually pursuing her to having space of her own, the winner of the fabliau.

2. “The Reeve’s Tale”

“The Miller’s Tale” is followed by another fabliau, “The Reeve’s Tale”. The Reeve chooses this genre deliberately: enraged by the cuckolding of a fellow carpenter in “The Miller’s Tale,” the Reeve crafts a similar story to ‘quite’ him (I.3863-4)¹. These tales converse implicitly through their thematic interaction; they converse explicitly when the two pilgrims bicker (I.3913-8). The Reeve tells the story of Simkin, an overly proud and violent man who is, coincidentally, a dishonest miller, stealing flour from his customers. Two cunning Cambridge clerks, Allen and the significantly named John, discover that he has stolen their flour and resolve to take revenge. That night, as John and Allen sleep in Simkin’s house, they rape his daughter, Maline, and his nameless wife. At daybreak, Simkin discovers what has happened and attacks Allen. For the second time in the tale, Simkin’s wife confuses someone’s identity and strikes Simkin instead of Allen. Maline returns the stolen flour, now baked into a cake, and the clerks escape with their revenge.

“The Reeve’s Tale” differs from “The Miller’s Tale” because it never quite achieves the tone of a fabliau. It has the standard elements: adultery provides the central conflict, it takes place in a hyper-realized Cambridge, and it even has the seemingly requisite element of sexual violence. None of this, however, can disguise the fact that, even for a fabliau, it is horrifying, and the Reeve seems to linger on the moments which are most difficult to laugh at. The tale has two instances of rape, neither of which the Reeve manages to place in the amorality of the fabliau. Maline’s weeping and her mother’s cries for death are too bleak for the fabliau’s light tone (I.4248, I.4289). Similarly, the Reeve dwells on the details of Maline and her mother which are most pathetic. The Reeve describes Maline’s mother’s great pride in her lineage, even

¹ ‘To quite’ has a particular usage in Middle English, especially in Chaucer. Literally, it means ‘to repay’ (MED). In the context of the *Canterbury Tales*, a better translation is ‘to pay back,’ with a malicious connotation. It is used in situations like this, when a pilgrim responds to a previous tale in a biting fashion.

though she is only the daughter of a parson, meant to be celibate (I.3942-3). Her mother's pride and the hope of her parents rest on Maline's future marriage, which Allen endangers when he rapes her (I.3981-2). To contrast their lofty hopes, the Reeve focuses on how drunk Maline and her mother become from the ale at dinner (I.4153-5, I.4159-60). This "[touches] on the misogynist myth that women's choice to drink functions as preemptive consent to anything that happens to them while they are intoxicated... We are encouraged to read [Maline's] state when [Allen] rapes her not simply as sleep but as alcohol-induced unconsciousness" (Harris 58). The contrast between Maline's present and future and her weeping gives the audience what the Miller fails to provide for Alison in his tale: it makes the events of the fabliau feel real.

Additionally, "The Reeve's Tale" breaks from the model of the Miller's fabliau in terms of the main characters, Allen and John, who are very different characters from Nicholas. Nicholas tricked Alison's husband because he wished to have sex with her. Allen and John, on the other hand, rape Maline and her mother to spite Simkin. The women's bodies are, instead of the prize, the unwilling means by which they achieve their revenge (Cooper 113). The means of obtaining this revenge are different, as well. Nicholas relies on a humorously complicated trick to persuade Alison's husband to spend the night on the roof. Whatever else he does, he is a funny and dashing figure who plays the psaltery, the fourteenth-century equivalent of a cool guy playing guitar. Allen and John, on the other hand, are not particularly clever, and neither is their revenge. Earlier in the narrative, the Reeve describes Simkin easily duping them by untying their horses (I.4079-80). They act with no plan; they rape Maline and her mother, the one by impulse, the other because of envy (I.4177-8, 4201-6). It is significant that Maline's mother persistently mistakes her husband for the clerks: they are all thugs, difficult to tell apart. In short,

“The Reeve’s Tale,” by telling the same type of story as “The Miller’s Tale” but less well, serves to reveal what the style of “The Miller’s Tale” hid: it is a deeply problematic tale.

The heightened problematic nature of “The Reeve’s Tale” causes the audience’s mind to uncomfortably turn back to events in “The Miller’s Tale” and reconsider what the structure of the fabliau managed to alleviate. As Patterson writes, “In its bitter “quiting” of the Miller the Reeve’s “jape of malice” (4338) indulges the fabliau’s dark undercurrent of violence and victimization that the *Miller’s Tale* managed to contain if not fully to efface” (245). The similarity is deliberate, as is its connection to the moments of sexual violence in particular: the Miller and the Reeve use ‘swyve,’ a word for sexual intercourse, to refer to the rape of both Alison and Simkin’s wife (MED, I.3850, I.4317). This word uncomfortably connects the sanitized violence of Alison’s rape to the explicit lamentation of Maline and her mother. The verisimilitude of the victimization is too much for the fabliau. It breaks its airy and amoral tone and forces the audience to reconsider the quited pair as a whole.

3. “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”

The theme of articulating women’s suffering continues in the next segment of this collection, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue.” Although not itself a tale, it converses intertextually with the other tales of this collection, especially on the topic of women’s desires. In her prologue, the Wife delivers a confessional sermon about her life and her views on women. It is significant that this is a prologue and not a tale: it exists within the frame rather than as an extension of it, bringing it closer to the audience so that the Wife gives her sermon directly to them. She embarks on a spirited defense of the character of women, claiming they have been historically misrepresented by male authorities. She draws upon Biblical, classical, and

theological authorities, which she deftly (and inaccurately) reads in favor of women's desires. Her sermon bleeds into a confessional account of her life, particularly her five marriages, three of which were good, two bad (III.195-7). The narrative concludes with her current marriage to the saucy clerk, Jankin. After their fiery romance, their domestic situation proves unsatisfying to the Wife, as her husband engages in increasingly misogynistic rhetoric. The matter comes to a head when the Wife burns his misogynistic texts, leading to a fistfight. The Wife falls down as though dead, and Jankin, panicked, agrees to abide by her wishes. She claims they are happy, or at least no longer fighting (III.821).

Like "The Miller's Tale," this prologue features different mixed-age marriages, but in ways which subvert the concerns the Miller expressed. It is significant that Alison from "The Miller's Tale" shares a name with Alison, the Wife of Bath; to a certain degree, the Wife quotes the experience of Alison. Her most prominent husband is even named Jankin, a variation of the name John (MED). Although the Wife is only twelve when she marries for the first time, she has a very different response to marrying an older man (III.4-6). While John the carpenter's age made him jealous, the Wife describes her husbands as "goode and riche and olde" (III.197). What Alison struggles with, the Wife uses to her own advantage. Nor is she sexually abused, as Alison was; she says, "I laughe whan I thynke / How pitously anyght I made hem swynke!" (III.201-2). The Alison of "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," unlike the Alison of "The Miller's Tale," uses her overwhelming personality to get what she wants, bowling over the expectations and power of her husbands. It is difficult to feel that the Wife does not hint that Alison also should have been able to control her husband, placing the blame squarely on the victim. Nor does the Wife criticize the structures of power which allowed her to be wed at twelve years old; she is matter-of-fact at worst and more often triumphant when describing her life.

The narrative comes full circle, however, when she, a forty-year-old woman, marries twenty-year-old Jankin, because she “hadde alwey a coltes tooth” (III.602). In a subversion of the Miller’s warning about old men taking young wives, it is this marriage which gives her the most trouble. When she first casts her eye on him, she tempts him with a detailed and fictional description of a dream she had:

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 (III.575-82).

Miller unpacks this effectively when he says that the Wife “reports using the dream... as a sign of her erotic availability to [Jankin], given in the hope of arousing him and receiving signs of his desire for her. He is supposed to find this sexy, and since, in contrast to her first three husbands, Alisoun finds him sexy... and since this is the way she thinks to initiate things between them, apparently she finds it sexy, too” (193). A bed full of blood has multiple connotations, and perhaps the most obvious are fertility and sexuality. But Miller rightfully does not discount the explicit violence in this scene, which the Wife disturbingly and accurately anticipates being arousing. Certainly it tells more about Jankin’s desire than hers, but it shows that she recognizes the male fantasy and has no problem manipulating it for her own benefit. The Wife has more power than Alison because of her age and experience, but she still does not have more than Jankin, who physically abuses her (III.505-6).

The prologue concludes with a fistfight between the two, which the Wife wins by losing. Her collapse frightens Jankin so badly that he swears, “Do as thee lust to terme of al thy lyf. / Keepe thyn honour and keepe eek myn estat,” which, the Wife says, solves all their problems (III.820-1). This conforms to the conclusion of her tale, which names sovereignty as women’s

foremost desire (III.1038). This raises a problem, however; the Wife herself listed another desire for women in her prologue:

I trowe I loved hym best for that he
 Was of his love daungerous to me.
 We womman han, if that I shal nat lye,
 In this matere a queynte fantasye.
 Wayte, what thyng we may nat lightly have,
 Therafter wol we crie alday and crave!
 Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we.
 Press on us faste, and thanne wol we fle (III.507-20).

In short, the Wife believes that women ultimately wish for the forbidden. She desires Jankin the most when she knows that he is bad for her, and when she first approaches him about her erotic dream, she is still married to her fourth husband (III.567-8). By the end of the tale, however, she has gained sovereignty, and nothing about Jankin is forbidden to her, in a perverse reversal of consent that appears later in “The Clerk’s Tale.” It is unclear whether that removes the dangerous element the Wife loves most about their marriage, or if sovereignty will suffice.

4. “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”

Women’s desire remains important in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.” It is a Romance in which a wandering knight rapes a nameless girl. Condemned to die, the knight is saved by the nameless queen, who is surely Guinevere. She spares him on the condition that he discover what women truly desire. The knight finds the answer from an old hag, who demands that he marry her against his will. She offers him a choice: he may have a true but ugly wife, or a beautiful but faithless one. The knight agrees to let her choose, granting her what women truly want: sovereignty. As a result, she becomes young, fair, and true, all at once.

Although rape serves as the fulcrum of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” the Wife pays little attention to its initial occurrence. “The casualness of [the description of rape] is striking: it just

happened that the knight raped a young woman, as though it were the most routine of acts” (Miller 210-1). The Wife describes the rape in three lines, with no visual description or imagery (III.886-8). She does not name the woman, nor does the woman have any significance to the plot after the violence against her catalyzes it. According to the Wife, the moral dilemma created by the rape is solved, or quited, when the knight must submit to an unwilling marriage to the hag (III.1054-5). The way in which rape and marriage bookend this tale highlights how the Wife attempts to negotiate the equivalency of the two. The knight’s cry, “Taak al my good, and lat my body go!”, certainly echoes the forcible act of rape, suggesting that it counterbalances and therefore erases the violence done by the knight (III.1061).

The placement of this justice in a court of women, and more broadly in the mouth of the Wife of Bath, coyly suggests that this is some perfect justice, meted out by the injured party. As the tale continues, however, and the language becomes loftier and more religious, the audience perhaps remembers that the Wife of Bath, after all, is not real. By the hag’s speech on gentleness, it is clearly Chaucer speaking, not the Wife: “The lady’s speech uses ‘man’ for the whole human race as the Wife never does; even its ‘we’ and ‘us’ have become universalized, where the Wife’s usages are always explicitly female” (Cooper 164). The unsatisfying quiting of the nameless woman’s rape also alludes to this. The notion that rape is a crime which can be recompensed maps onto Chaucer’s experience. After all, it worked for him. He paid over half his yearly salary to Cecily Chaumpaigne as part of the settlement. In this way, the knight serves as a stand-in for Chaucer. He raped a woman, repaid the debt he owed in some way, and then was free. In fact, the knight does even better; he is not only free, he has a beautiful, young, and faithful wife. “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” is a seam in the fabric of the *Canterbury Tales*,

uncomfortably reminding the audience of the fictionality of these characters and the living events which precede them.

5. "The Clerk's Tale"

The *Tales* turn once again toward women's desire in "The Clerk's Tale." This tale is either a quasi-hagiography about a grievously abused but strangely acquiescent wife or an allegory about the relationship between man and God, depending on which attempt at interpretation by the ambivalent clerk the audience believes. In the tale, Walter, an Italian marquis, agrees to marry after long being asked to by his subjects. He finds among his people the poorest man's daughter, Griselda, who is poor in worldly goods but rich in virtue (IV.215-7). On the day of his wedding, Walter obtains her father's permission and asks her to marry him, on one condition: that she be entirely in accord with his will and never object to it (IV.325).

Griselda agrees; they are married and soon have two children. After the children's birth, however, Walter questions his wife's devotion and, as a test, pretends to kill their children, then threatens to take a new, younger wife. Griselda responds enthusiastically to all these events except the new wife: with a rare show of personality, she warns Walter that not every woman could endure what she has but still agrees to plan their wedding. At last convinced of his wife's devotion, Walter reveals that he did not murder their children and that his supposed new wife is, bizarrely, their daughter instead. The family joyfully reunites, with all parties satisfied. The clerk rather weakly admits that this is not a good model for marriage but is rather an allegory on the relationship of God and the human soul. He then laments the absence of Griseldas in the world, leaving the true meaning unclear.

Of all the relationships in the *Canterbury Tales*, the marriage of Griselda and Walter is simultaneously the most consensual and the most problematic. The clerk suggests that everything which occurs between them happens fully with Griselda's consent, from their marriage to the supposed deaths of their children. When Walter approaches Griselda's father on the topic of marriage, he says,

For I wol axe if it hire wille be
 To be my wyf and reule hire after me.
 And al this shal be doon in thy presence.
 I wol noght speke out of thyn audience (IV.326-9).

Gratian, at least, would find this proposal acceptable, as it prioritizes the consent of the woman but takes into account the feelings of her father. Even the vow Walter requires in exchange for marriage, which states that “ye be redy with good herte / To al my lust... And eek when I say ye ne sey nat nay, / Neither by word ne frowning contenance” is a request, not a command (IV.351-6, IV.348). This is a significantly constraining oath which would render obsolete whatever autonomy Griselda has. She, however, not only consents but raises the stakes of their agreement.

Wondrynge upon this word, quakyng for drede,
 She seyde, “Lord, undigne and unworthy
 Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede.
 But as ye wole yourselfe, right so wol I,
 And here as I swere that never willingly
 In werk ne thought I nyl yow disobeye (IV.351-63).

Walter asked for her eagerness, obedience, and no outward resistance to his desire. What Griselda offers, however, is her obedience in word and thought. What was largely external, Griselda has shifted to the internal. According to her promise, Griselda is consenting to Walter's will all the time—or never, as this oath makes it impossible for her to consent in the first place. The Clerk does not clarify which is the case, aside from Walter's curious insistence that Griselda

agree to this willingly. It is worth noting, however, that the Clerk glosses over the same problems the Miller only hints at in “The Miller’s Tale”: Walter, by virtue of his status, gender, and wealth, has significantly more power than Griselda has, who is the daughter of his poorest subject (IV.204-5). However insistent he is about it, Walter requiring Griselda’s consent to marry is a formality: Gratian would advocate for her rights, but Walter reputedly kills his children and gets away with it. He doesn’t need Griselda’s consent for anything.

The Clerk tells his audience how to interpret “The Clerk’s Tale.” He suggests that Griselda, rather than being a real woman, represents the humility and acceptance the human soul should have toward God. The notion that the fickle and ridiculous Walter somehow maps onto God, however, is not satisfactory. Even the internal audience of the frame story, Walter’s subjects, come to despise him (IV.729-31). Nor does the audience of pilgrims respond favorably to this idea: the Host responds, “Ther is a long and lare difference / Bitwix Grisildis grete pacience / And of my wif that passing crueltee,” demonstrating that he, at least, has failed to grasp the nuance of Griselda as the human condition and interprets this as a model for a real couple (IV.1223-5).

The saving grace of the allegorical approach is that it is slightly more comfortable than a literal reading of the tale, which suffers from the same lack of interiority as “The Miller’s Tale.” The only character whose thoughts the audience overhears is Walter, whom they uncomfortably discover is enjoying himself immensely, however he hides it (IV.512-3). Even more uncomfortable is the indefinable sense that Griselda is enjoying herself, too. When Walter informs her that their marriage is over and he will take a new wife, Griselda says,

“O thing biseke I yow and warne also,
That ye ne prikke with no tormentynge
This tender mayden as ye han doon mo,
For she is fostred in hire norissyng

Moore tenderly, and to my supposynge
 She koude nat adversitee endure
 As koude a povre fostred creature” (IV.1037-43).

This is the closest the audience comes to Griselda’s inner life, when she expresses her pride at her long-suffering nature and perhaps also jealousy at Walter recreating their idiosyncratic relationship with a second woman. Griselda’s enjoyment is also suggested when she first makes her oath to Walter and is described as “Wondrynge upon this word, quakyng for drede” (IV.358-9). ‘Drede’ has multiple meanings (*MED*). It may simply mean fear, but when paired with wonder, it can also mean awe or reverence, such as what man holds for God. It can also, however, mean danger, which echoes the Wife of Bath’s comments on women’s desire: “I trowe I loved hym best for that he / Was of his love daungerous to me” (III.508-9). In the same way, so does Griselda seem eager for her husband, even after he has ostensibly murdered her children.

The sense of Walter and Griselda’s enjoyment is heightened by what the Clerk leaves out of his tale: their sexual relationship, which never appears despite the couple having two children together. However dry the Clerk’s description of Griselda’s virtue, “The Clerk’s Tale” is still characterized by “its sense of *scandal*, of being a collecting site for a powerful sense of shame and disgrace that can never quite be located or localized, even as it demands to be named and spoken of” (Miller 218). Some of this stems from the plot, which causes the tale to resemble Boccaccio BDSM fanfiction. Some of it as well comes from the very secrecy of its existence, promising that whatever happens between Walter and Griselda privately is even more bizarre than what happens publicly. Either way, the audience is left feeling that they much prefer not to know.

6. "The Merchant's Tale"

Walter and Griselda's invisible sex life becomes important in "The Merchant's Tale," which follows it. It is the tale of January, a knight who, after sixty years of bachelorhood, decides he wants to take a wife and that she can't be older than twenty (IV.1417). He consults the opinions of his brothers, Placebo and Justinus. As may be expected from their names, Placebo wholeheartedly agrees with this plan, but Justinus advises that January not take a wife, especially not a young one, whom he will not be able to please (IV.1562). January decides to listen to Placebo and marries the aptly named, very young May.

On their wedding day, May is noticed by Damion, January's squire. After a ghastly wedding night with January, May decides to have an affair with Damion, who is now sick with love for her. This proves difficult, however, even once January suddenly loses his vision. The would-be lovers are forced to communicate through silent gestures because January never leaves May alone. One summer day, however, January and May walk through their romantic, enclosed garden. May hints that she has pregnancy cravings, but January cannot climb a tree to fetch her a pear. May climbs the tree instead, where Damion is hidden, and they have sex. January's vision is suddenly restored, however, by the defensive Pluto (an older husband himself), and he sees them in the tree. May explains that sight cannot always be trusted and that she in fact helped restore his vision. January agrees with this interpretation, and they return home.

The main function of "The Merchant's Tale" is to quite the elements of "The Clerk's Tale" which the Merchant seems to have found as uncomfortable as the rest of the audience. The narrative structure parallels "The Clerk's Tale" in the same way the Reeve paralleled "The Miller's Tale," and for the same reason: to call attention to the most problematic elements of the previous tale. Both tales are about powerful and privileged men who marry less powerful wives.

But what the Clerk presents as a sanitized and ultimately harmless account, the Merchant relabels as problematic and horrifying. This is most evident in the Clerk's leaving out of any sexual elements from his tale. The Merchant pretends to set up his tale in the same way: like Walter, January claims that he wants such a young wife in order to have an heir, but the Merchant indicates that this is not the full truth (IV.1437-40). The first details he gives about January are that he is sixty years old "and folwed ay his bodily delyt / On wommen theras was his appetyt" (IV.1249-50). This appetite is demonstrated on the couple's wedding night, for which the Merchant saves his most awkward poetry.

Soon after that this hastify Januarie
 Wolde go to bedde...
 Out of the chambre hath every wight hym dressed.
 And Januarie hath faste in armies take
 His fresshe May, his Paradys, his make.
 He lulleth hire. He kisseth hire ful ofte.
 With thilke brustles of his berde unsoften
 Lyk to the skyn of houndfyss sharpe as brere...
 He rubbeth hire aboute hir tender face (IV.1805-25).

In this drawn-out description of their wedding night, the Merchant barely mentions May, and only in the possessive; rather, it centers January's clumsy desires and self-interest. The unpleasant sensory details which the Merchant chooses to include make the audience uncomfortably present in a one-sided scene of pleasure, from which May has almost disappeared. The specifics of these details are important as well, such as when the Merchant compares January to a houndfish, a name for small sharks with an unpleasantly toothy and biting connotation (MED). The Merchant more than makes up for the Clerk's omission of Walter and Griselda's sex life by suggesting what it may have looked like using January and May.

Similarly, the Merchant flatly denies Griselda's enthusiasm for Walter's poor behavior with the words of Justinus: "Ye shul nat plesen hire fully yeres thre" (IV.1562). This proves to

be an overly optimistic prediction: the Merchant finishes the wedding night scene with, “[May] preyseth nat his pleyng worth a bene” (IV.1854).

By including these details, the Merchant is challenging the Clerk not to use genre, in this case allegory, to obscure the events of the tale, just as the Reeve challenged the Miller. “The Merchant’s Tale” is already one of the most difficult tales to categorize: its fabliau structure is complicated by the inclusion of high-class characters and the sudden, bizarre appearance of Pluto and Proserpina, sending it into the territory of Romance (Patterson 333-5). The names January and May, signaling their age and youth respectively, even invite the audience to interpret “The Merchant’s Tale” as an allegory. In short, the tale exists at the intersection of three genres (fabliau, Romance, and allegory), all of which allow the audience to distance the sometimes horrible events through generic conventions of realness or un-realness. By including such graphic sex scenes, however, the Merchant prevents his tale from slipping into the fictional distance. He forces the audience to stand at the bedside of January and May and see for themselves what happens when powerful men take wives they can easily dominate.

Troubling sexual encounters abound in the *Canterbury Tales*, but, despite the personal history of its poet and the attempts to disguise the sexual violence with the conventions of genre, the women who are victimized and survive in it remain its most vivid characters. In some way, Chaucer’s biography makes it more powerful, not less. Now, when the reader meets the nameless woman of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” they can think of Cecily Champaigne, who came to the court of London on her own to take money off one of England’s most famous poets. When the reader encounters the toxic masculinity and abusive power of John the carpenter or Walter the marquis, they can think of the British Library Manuscript Additional 35286, where,

within living memory of Chaucer's death, readers scratched out the belittling and graphic sexual violence of "The Reeve's Tale," "repelling the "force" of rape with the equal, opposite "force" of resistance to rape's gratuitously explicit representation for comic purposes" (Harris 64-6). The *Canterbury Tales* is undoubtedly misogynistic in origin, but, just as the Clerk chose to interpret Griselda's abuse as the love of God, so too can we choose to interpret the *Canterbury Tales* as an imperfect but still affirming narrative of women's resilience and survival.

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