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Jenna D. Kingsley   April 6, 2016

Women with Wit: Desire, Coercion, and Comedy in Chaucer's Middle English Fabliaux

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Abstract

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This thesis argues for a proto-feminist reading of Geoffrey Chaucer's fabliaux. By equating a woman's wit with agency, Chaucer comes to terms with the power he inevitably draws from his own wit and poetry. In this way, the poet aligns himself with womanly wile and suggests that a woman's wit was a powerful tool in the Middle Ages.

This thesis explores female sexuality in secular law and Church doctrine by examining the medieval English court's definition of *raptus* and the Church's stance on virginity. In addition, my project aims to discuss common stereotypes about women in medieval England and explore truths about their everyday lives. By offering historical background on female sexuality during the Middle Ages, my thesis equips the reader with the proper framework to approach Chaucer's medieval texts.

Through his portrayal of women in the *Reeve's* and *Shipman's Tale*, Chaucer suggests that if the woman in the fabliau is not the creator of a joke, she is the victim; due to her own foolishness, Chaucer suggests she is particularly deserving of her misfortune—usually sexual coercion. Though this type of sexual coercion would be labeled as rape today, one must be careful forcing a modern framework on a medieval text. Based on the medieval legal definition of *raptus*, I argue that Chaucer and his audience would not necessarily label all instances of the sexual trickery against these women as rape. Therefore, Chaucer is not arguing that some women are deserving of rape. Rather, he maintains a common theme in the genre of fabliau: foolish people must pay the penalty for their foolishness.

Through his portrayal of Alison and May, Chaucer proves that wit—more so than sexuality or beauty—makes a woman powerful. By manipulating comedic aspects of the fabliau i.e. bawdry and irony, each woman bends her story's outcome to her will while outsmarting men and evading consequences. Additionally, by tying power to wit, Chaucer slyly pays tribute to his own poetry and the power his humor grants him. Therefore, Chaucer identifies himself as a proto-feminist by aligning himself with womanly wile.

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Introduction

Blinding farts, "arse" kissing, and treetop fornication—these certainly are not what one would expect from the widely proclaimed "Father of English literature." Yet, Geoffrey Chaucer's bawdy and raunchy stories remain his most beloved—and funniest—tales. Each of Chaucer's raunchiest stories, deemed "fabliaux," appear in his magnum opus, the *Canterbury Tales*. The *Tales* follows a group of travelers on their religious pilgrimage from London to Canterbury; on their journey, the 30 travelers—one of whom is the narrator, Chaucer—share stories in an attempt to entertain each other on the ride and win a free meal at the Host's tavern when they return. These tales range from fabliaux to fables to stories of courtly love. The fabliaux in particular are short, bawdy, immoral tales usually featuring a young, beautiful wife, her lover, and a cuckolded husband.

Scholars have debated for centuries the true intentions behind Chaucer's fabliaux. This thesis argues that, besides making the audience laugh, the fabliaux actually display the author's progressive view of women as witty, powerful creatures. In the stories, Chaucer suggests that a woman's agency comes from her wit; specifically, women manipulate comedic devices such as irony and bawdry to get what they want in the end. By aligning his own comedic talents with womanly wile, Chaucer identifies himself as a proto-feminist who realizes the power inherent in his own poetry.

The thesis arrives at this conclusion in three distinct sections. The first chapter offers relevant historical background on female sexuality during the Middle Ages, equipping the reader with the proper context to approach Chaucer's medieval texts. The chapter also explores female sexuality in secular law and Church doctrine by examining the medieval English court's definition of *raptus* and the Church's stance on virginity. In addition, Chapter 1 aims to reveal

common stereotypes about women in medieval England and explore truths about their everyday lives.

Chapter 2 works towards the argument of a proto-feminist reading of Chaucer by refuting any claims that the poet was an anti-feminist. Through his portrayal of women in the *Reeve's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale*, Chaucer suggests that women lacking wit also lack agency. If the woman in the fabliau is not the creator of a joke, she is the victim; due to her own foolishness, Chaucer suggests she is particularly deserving of her misfortune—usually sexual coercion. However, this cause-and-effect does not necessarily mean Chaucer is an antifeminist. Though this type of sexual coercion would be labeled rape today, one must be careful not to force a modern framework on a medieval text. Chaucer is not arguing that some women are deserving of rape; rather, he maintains a common theme in the genre of fabliau: foolish women—and foolish people in general—must pay the penalty for their foolishness.

The third chapter provides evidence for my overarching argument: a proto-feminist reading of Chaucer's fabliaux. Through his female characters in the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*, Chaucer proves that wit—more so than sexuality or beauty—makes a woman powerful. By manipulating comedic aspects of the fabliau such as bawdry and irony, each woman humorously bends her story's outcome to her will while outsmarting men and evading consequences. Additionally, by tying power to wit, Chaucer slyly pays tribute to his own poetry and the power his humor grants him. Therefore, Chaucer identifies himself as a proto-feminist by aligning himself with womanly wile.

THE FRENCH FABLIAUX

Fabliaux exist most commonly as short, raunchy stories written in Old French between 1200 and 1350. About 150 fabliaux remain. Most fabliaux originate from the northeastern corner of France, where the term "fabliau" originated between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. According to scholar John Hines, the word's etymology does little to clarify the types of stories that fit within the genre; in his book *The Fabliau in English*, Hine explains that the French root word, *fable*, is "as broad and adaptable as Modern English 'story.'" What, then, defines these popular French fables? Put simply by French scholar Joseph Bédier, fabliaux are "*contes à rire en vers*," or "stories to be laughed at, in verse" (Hines 2). Many distinct characteristics exist, however, within this noticeably broad framework.

First and foremost, fabliaux are narrative stories designed to surprise, shock, and amuse their readers. The stories are brief, and their plots are "complicated and problematic"; however, these problems exist "only for some of the characters within the tales, not for the well-informed reader or audience of the piece" (Hines 3). Frequently, a character in the story is just as knowledgeable about the situation as the reader; this distinction of circumstances creates the basis for the verbal and dramatic irony typical to most stories in the genre. This irony exists as "a relationship between writer and reader," perhaps allowing the audience to laugh both at the irony within the plot and the irony of "common humankind" (Hines 11-12). Two "indispensable" elements of the fabliaux exist within this plot structure: "a *deception* played by one or more characters on one or more other characters followed by a *misdeed* committed by the deceiver(s)" (Hines 4). Typical themes of these deceptions and misdeeds span from "tales of sensual appetite" to "greed, adultery, and fornication" to "a lavatorial tale of turds" (Hines 4).

Because these tales are often brief, the French fabliaux lack much "rhetorical ornamentation" (Hines 16). Instead, the tales rely on colloquial terms for sex, body parts, and excretion. Additionally, due to this brevity, the characters in the stories are not necessarily well developed; most figures, states Hines, "are simply sketched types rather than carefully constructed characters" (Hines 9). The characters repeat themselves time and time again in the fabliaux: the beautiful and mischievous wife, the foolish husband, the clever lover. Of the 150 fabliaux, around 110 are "triangle stories" in which these three characters "engage in in trickery, in a battle of wits, [and] in sexual deception." Other erotic fabliaux narrate seductions or disputes between married couples or "evenly matched lovers." The 40 remaining non-erotic fabliaux focus on "tricks and pranks and farces of all kinds" (Dronke 276).

Tricks and pranks are essential to the fabric of the fabliaux; however, the stories show "less interest in exposing the wickedness of the tricksters than in ridiculing the tricked" (Hines 10). Victims of ridicule are almost never given sympathetic qualities; the audience's laughter, therefore, is intentionally directed towards the characters who fail. The deceived character is usually a husband, who is not only cuckolded but also occasionally berated or physically abused. The deceiver is, many times, the young and beautiful wife who has taken up a younger, cleverer lover. These women, the "daughters of Eve," are portrayed as "morally reprehensible and dangerous to man." They are "insatiable and extravagant sexual sirens with their bodies" as well as "perjurers, temptresses or endless naggers with their tongues" (Hines 31).

These fabliaux, according to scholars Raymond Eichmann and John DuVal in their book *The French Fabliau*, "must have existed for a long time in their elusive oral form" before being added to the private library of a wealthy collector. "Scribes in the libraries of wealthy amateur collectors," they suppose, "copied down onto wax tablets the poems and stories recited by

jongleurs who entertained there" (Eichmann and DuVal *xv*). Additionally, abbreviated manuscripts likely existed for these minstrels to use as memory aids for oral performances. Estimating how many additional fabliaux once existed in these manuscripts but were destroyed or lost is difficult; perhaps "only about one-eighth of the original corpus survives" (Hines 2). However, "the corpus of fabliau seems to be constituted of a certain stock of recognized tales rather than being the product of widespread and prolific extemporization," suggesting that a greater percentage of the original corpus remains than lower estimates (Hines 2).

THE MIDDLE ENGLISH FABLIAUX

While there are a multitude of French fabliaux, only six remain in Middle English. Five of these six fabliaux were written by Chaucer in the late 1300s; the author of the sixth fabliau, *Dame Sirith*, is unknown, and the story is dated between 1272 and 1283. The manuscript containing *Dame Sirith*, most likely written in the diocese of Worcester, includes many other works in English, Latin, and Anglo-Norman. Most of these other works, in contrast to the fabliau, are serious or religious texts (Hines 43). Dame Sirith, however, follows in the raunchy footsteps of its French predecessors. The fabliau, a triangle story, recounts the tale of a clerk, Wilekin, in his pursuit of Margery, a merchant's wife. When Margery spurns his advances, the clerk enlists the help of an older woman, Dame Sirith. Though she is hesitant to help at first, Dame Sirith eventually agrees to help the clerk; she feeds mustard to her dog, making the dog's eyes run, and laments to Margery that the dog is actually her daughter. Dame Sirith claims her daughter was turned into a dog when she spurned a clerk's advances, and Margery, quick to connect the dots, fears the same fate for herself. She begs Dame Sirith to help her locate Wilekin, and Wilekin aggressively has his way with Margery.

Chaucer's Fabliaux

Though the author of Dame Sirith remains unknown, the other five fabliaux share one author: Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer's fabliaux include his famous *Miller's Tale*, *Reeve's Tale*, and *Merchant's Tale* along with his lesser-known *Shipman's Tale* and the unfinished *Cook's Tale*.[1] This thesis will also explore the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*; though her tale is not a fabliau, her *Prologue* contains many elements of the genre, and the Wife herself ruptures multiple narrative levels within the existing fabliaux. The following summaries aim to bring to light "the zealous pursuit of intercourse in [Chaucer's] fabliaux," focusing on how "love's frustrations, rather than its succors, lay the foundation for the plots of Chaucer's tales" (Pugh 2).

The *Miller's Tale* offers a classic example of Chaucer's archetypal mischievous, sexually-empowered woman. In the tale, the Miller tells a raunchy story about an old carpenter, John, and his young wife Alison. A clerk, Nicholas, comes to lodge at their house, and he lusts for the young Alison. After initially rejecting Nicholas's aggressive advances, she agrees to be with him if they can find a time and a place. The two devise a plan; Nicholas pretends to have a vision and insists that he, John, and Alison must sleep in tubs hanging from the roof of a barn to stay safe from a flood he has "foreseen." When John falls asleep, Nicholas and Alison climb down from the tubs and spend a passionate night together. At the same time, another clerk—the vain, foppish Absolon—also lusts for Alison. He comes to her window while she is with Nicholas and demands a kiss. Instead of the kiss he wants, Alison tricks Absolon into kissing her backside. Later, Absolon goes in for revenge and instead gets a fart in the face from Nicholas. Seeking revenge, Absolon brands Nicholas's backside with a red-hot poker. Nicholas's cries for help wake John, and he cuts the tub from the rafters, thinking the flood has come. But there is no

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[1] The *Cook's Tale* will only be mentioned in passing; as an unfinished tale, one can only speculate the role the tale might have played, if finished, in my larger argument.

flood, and John falls to the floor of the barn, breaking his arm and eventually being ridiculed by the townspeople.

An old husband is cuckolded yet again in the *Merchant's Tale*, which recounts the story of a wealthy old knight January and his new, beautiful wife May. One of January's servants, Damian, is immediately drawn to May, and becomes physically ill at his unrequited love. January has his wife visit Damian to console him; during this time, Damian passes a note to May detailing his love, and May reciprocates. When January suddenly goes blind, he demands that May stay by his side at all times, but May slips Damian a key to January's private garden and tells him to climb up a pear tree. Telling her husband she yearns for a pear, May climbs January to get up the tree to Damian, where the couple spends a few blissful moments. Just then, January's sight is restored, and he howls with anger at what he sees. However, May claims that January's sight must be still adjusting, and January believes her, pulling her into a fond embrace.

The *Reeve's Tale* also deals with a corrupt man; this corrupt man is a miller, Simkin, who steals corn and meal from the manciple of a nearby college. John and Alan, two students at the college, volunteer to go to the mill to prevent another theft. The miller tricks the students by untethering their horse and replacing the flour with bran. The students ask to lodge at Simkin's house for the night; to get back at the him, they rape Simkin's wife and daughter and accidentally tell Simkin what happened in the morning. Enraged, the miller swears at the two students, and mistaking her husband for a student, the wife grabs a club and strikes him down. The students then grab what has been stolen and flee.

In the *Shipman's Tale*, sex is again used as a type of currency. A rich merchant has a beautiful wife, and they open their home to a young monk named John. John sees that the wife looks upset, and he promises to give her money to buy new clothes to impress her husband if she

sleeps with him. He also promises to stay quiet about their deal, a promise he does not keep. The money he supplies to the wife is actually money he goes to the husband to borrow, and the monk admits this to the husband after he sleeps with the wife. The husband then chides the wife for her foolish actions. The wife promises to pay her husband back in bed, an apology he eagerly accepts.

An important factor in each of these tales is the link between narrative and narrator. The bond between teller and tale is critical to understanding the *Canterbury Tales*; yet, the bond is a tricky concept to grasp and even harder to quantify. Pinning down the true speaker in the poem is difficult—one can never be quite sure what version of Chaucer is speaking in each tale. Indeed, Chaucer himself is a character in his story, and the line between Chaucer the man and Chaucer the pilgrim is tricky enough to navigate. However, one must also navigate additional narrative layers when studying the *Canterbury Tales*; is one of Chaucer's pilgrims speaking, or is it one of Chaucer's pilgrims' characters? This question will be integral to Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of this thesis. Because there are multiple characters on each narrative level, keeping the characters and levels straight can prove tricky. In an effort to provide clarity for readers, I have created the following chart on the next page (Figure 1) that maps the narrative structure of each tale discussed in this thesis.

Additionally, this thesis discusses the fabliaux out of the order in which they appear in the *Canterbury Tales*. Rather, I group the fabliaux by the theme I wish to discuss in each chapter. I discuss the *Reeve's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale* first because Chapter 2 offers instances of possible *raptus* that might be used to claim an anti-feminist reading of Chaucer. Because anti-feminist claims are refuted in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 can then claim a proto-feminist reading by discussing tales displaying women in power: *Merchant's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*.

Figure 1: Chaucer's Narrative Layers:

		Oswald the Reeve Narrator of the Reeve's Tale		*CHARACTERS*: John, Alan, Simkin the miller, Simkin's wife, and Malyne
		The Shipman (Unnamed) Narrator of the Shipman's Tale		*CHARACTERS*: John, the merchant, and the merchant's wife
Chaucer the Man Author of the Canterbury Tales	Chaucer the Pilgrim Narrator of the Canterbury Tales	The Merchant (Unnamed) Narrator of the Merchant's Tale		*CHARACTERS*: January, May, and Damian
		Robin the Miller Narrator of the Miller's Tale		*CHARACTERS*: Alison, Nicholas, Absolon, and John
		Roger the Cook Narrator of the Cook's Tale		*CHARACTERS*: Perkin, Perkin's friend, and Perkin's friend's wife
		Alison, the Wife of Bath Narrator of the Wife of Bath's Prologue		

IRONY AND BAWDRY IN CHAUCER

Most of Chaucer's fabliaux, like their French predecessors, rely on dramatic irony and raunchy humor to amuse their audiences. Irony in particular remains a staple of the fabliau. Though irony can be simply defined as saying the opposite of what is meant, this definition is too broad; as scholar Claire Colebrook points out in her book *Irony*, this interpretation "covers everything from simple figures of speech to entire historical epochs" (Colebrook 1). Colebrook defines dramatic irony, the brand of irony most commonly employed by Chaucer, as "an irony that plays on a disjunction between character and audience point of view" (Colebrook 182).

Scholar D.C. Muecke extends this definition, insisting that dramatic irony seems "more effective when not only the audience or reader but also someone in the play or narrative is aware of the victim's ignorance" (Muecke 64).

Dramatic irony is certainly employed in Middle English fabliaux, but Colebrook argues that, before scholars theorized irony in the nineteenth century, irony was "a recognized but minor and subordinate figure of speech" (Colebrook 6). Until the Renaissance, she claims, irony was just a type of allegory; in the Middle Ages, irony was a "specific device, not a sensibility or attitude" like it is today (Colebrook 7-8). A text or a person, therefore, could not be 'ironic.' However, Colebrook acknowledges that medieval writers were certainly aware of the rhetoric of irony and used the device as a tool in their works.

According to Colebrook, one must make some assumptions when analyzing irony in a text. Irony relies on the audience recognizing that what a speaker says is not actually what the speaker means; this rhetorical device, therefore, relies heavily on context. To perceive irony, one must perceive the social, conventional, and political nature of language as "not just a logical system" but also a system that "relies on assumed norms and values" (Colebrook 17). Additionally, Muecke suggests that all irony is tied to morality; "It is probable," he states, "that no one ever presents an ironic situation without some kind of moral purpose" (Muecke 63). Fabliaux, however, present the reader with an 'anti-morality' of sorts. Instead of the righteous triumphing over the immoral, generally the deceived "remain deceived" while the deceivers "go free" (Ruggiers 50). This twisted morality may have served as a reprieve from the biblical literature of the time and, perhaps, as a temporary escape from biblical moralities.

In addition to irony, Chaucer frequently employs bawdy and raunchy humor in his tales. According to scholar Thomas W. Ross[2], Chaucer "uses risqué words" with one major aim: "to delineate comic characters and thus to make us laugh" (Ross 1). Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this brand of humor was written off simply as "Chaucer's jest," a humor both "indecent" and "disgusting" (Ross 8). However, modern scholars recognize that these puns and "indecent innuendos" signal a much more intricate intetnion than first assumed (Ross 1, 13). Though Chaucer "views copulation with healthy and effervescent good humor," he often relies on *double entendre* rather than explicit terms for sex or genitalia. Additionally, because excretion was "an accepted and semipublic event" rather than a "[rite] performed in the shamefast privacy of a closed room," his reliance on this vein of humor is rare (Ross 18). However, Chaucer relies heavily on "secondary excretory phenomena—belching and farting," which were seen as common and funny in his day. It is no surprise, then, that the poet "has amusing disquisitions on the 'reverberacioun' and 'soun' of farts, and his 'buf' is a precise echoic word for a belch" (Ross 18-19).

WOMEN IN CHAUCER'S LIFE

Although it is a slippery slope to surmise much about Chaucer from his comments in his poems, knowing basic background information about the poet is beneficial for an overall understanding of his poetry. Chaucer married his wife, Philippa, sometime before September 12, 1366, according to a grant she received as a *domicella* of the chamber of Queen Philippa (Pearsall 49). In his biography *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Derek Pearsall points out that "the fact that she is given her husband's surname in the 1366 grant rather than, as was common for

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[2] In Ross's 240-page book *Chaucer's Bawdy*, the scholar offers glossary-style definitions and short explanations of Chaucer's raunchiest words.

young married women, her maiden name… may indicate that she was well established and well known by this time as Chaucer's wife" (Pearsall 50). Chaucer and Philippa had at least one child, Thomas, soon after their marriage.

A perplexing female figure in Chaucer's life is Cecily Chaumpaigne,[3] who in May of 1380 agreed to release Chaucer from the allegations of *raptus* —"from all actions concerning her rape or anything else" (Pearsall 135). Because the court documents were written in Latin, as was customary during this period, modern scholars disagree over the meaning and implication of this *raptus*; the word translates literally to an abduction or seizure, but also has implications of rape. *Raptus* was not an uncommon crime in the courts of the time, but this term usually meant "the seizing and holding of a young person against his or her will with the purpose of gaining some financial advantage" (Pearsall 135). It is with this medieval idea—*raptus*—that I begin the opening chapter of my thesis. The history involving the rape and ravishment of women is a complicated one; in the following sections, I will offer a brief history of rape and define consent as it is used in this thesis.

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[3] The Chaumpaigne case is discussed in full in Chapter 1.

Chapter 1: Women, Sex, and Sexual Violence in Medieval England

INTRODUCTION

The definition of rape has changed over time, but one distressing fact remains constant: "Rape has always been a part of human culture." While the "physical reality" of rape has stayed the same over the course of human history, what has invariably changed are the ideas, perceptions, and laws concerning this violent crime. Modern distinctions between rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment have become increasingly important in the dialogue about sexual violence. In *Encyclopedia of Rape,*[4] Merril D. Smith defines rape as "the penetration of a vagina, or other orifice, by a penis (or other object) without the consent of the woman or man being penetrated" (Smith ix). On the other end of the spectrum lies sexual harassment, a broad category that includes "any unwelcome conduct that is sexual in nature" (Smith 115). Smith identifies sexual assault as another broad term, one that "falls between the more specific crimes like rape and the more general categories like sexual harassment" (Smith 224). The introduction of the term 'sexual assault' into the conversation about sexual violence paved the way for a more inclusive discussion of sex crimes, as not all victims' experiences are accurately reflected in the word "rape" or harassment.

Though quite flexible, this modern definition of rape does not accurately represent the issue throughout history. As Corinne Saunders points out in her book *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England,*[5] "The temptation is to assume the transhistorical nature of

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[4] Merril D. Smith's *Encyclopedia of Rape* explores the historical and societal implications of sexual violence through its 185 essay-format entries.

[5] In *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England,* Corinne Saunders explores the shifting Middle English definition of rape. The book, separated into 7 chapters, explores rape in

contemporary premises" and to use those premises to expose the problems within that period of history (Saunders 13). Saunders warns against forcing contemporary structures on medieval discourse, as this "broad-brush approach is dangerously reductive" and paints the past as "unenlightened by contrast to the politically correct present" (Saunders 14). She points out that this assumption of the politically correct present, within the discussion of violence against women, "[takes] for granted the modern understanding of rape as an issue of female freedom and the woman's body" (Saunders 13). Indeed, the debate concerning rape in medieval England was not centered on the ideas of female body or freedom; much more important were the issues of a woman's virginity and "protecting the woman's role in the system of exchange" (Saunders 10).

Using contemporary frameworks, it is easy to dismiss this medieval English discourse on rape as ignorant or misogynistic. Yet, rape was not "simply accepted" or "dismissed as trivial" in medieval England. Rather, the issue was the subject of a "lively, often politicized, dialogue" in the Middle Ages (Saunders 14). This dialogue was the result of many interacting cultural, political, and religious factors. The relationship between rape and abduction played a large role in secular and Canon law, as did the Church's acute interest in female virginity. Additionally, scholar Marjorie Curry Woods[6] suggests that rape as a motif had a rhetorical and an emotional impact on the art and literature taught in the medieval classroom (Woods 60-61). Scholar Evelyn Birge Vitz,[7] extending rape's rhetorical impact outside the classroom, explores the possibility

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secular law and canon law, in addition to exploring the rape of famous women. Additionally, in her book, Saunders pays special attention to the works of Sir Thomas Malory and Geoffrey Chaucer.

[6] Woods is the author of "Rape and the Pedagogical Rhetoric of Sexual Violence," found in *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*.

[7] Vitz is the author of "Rereading Rape in Medieval Literature: Literary, Historical, and Theorhetical Reflections," found in *Romantic Review*.

that medieval women may have viewed some rape narratives as compelling or entertaining (Vitz 1).

Therefore, it is important to approach the issue of rape in the Middle Ages with a thorough understanding of the medieval perspective. This chapter aims to recognize this medieval perspective by offering key historical background on the violence against women in medieval society. The first section will explore the medieval legal definition of rape through secular law. The second section will discuss the Church's complication of the definition of rape by exploring attitudes towards female sexuality and virginity. The third section will address and complicate the stereotypes and prevalent perspectives on women's sexuality in medieval England by presenting an image of the "living, breathing" medieval woman who does not necessarily fit into the stereotypes set up by the secular law and the Church. Overall, this chapter will explore the legal, religious, and cultural climate in which the Middle English fabliaux were written.

SECTION 1: SECULAR LEGAL ENVIRONMENT OF *RAPTUS*

Medieval English secular law was the result of hundreds of years of preceding legal traditions. Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and Anglo-Norman law formed the foundations upon which medieval English law was built, shaping both the medieval legal definition of *raptus* and the impact of *raptus* on medieval English culture. Medieval courts recorded their proceedings in Latin; the closest court term for rape, *raptus*, translates from Latin to 'theft' or 'seizure.' As the translation suggests, *raptus* didn't always refer to a sexual violation; a sexual violation could be described as *raptus* or *rap*, but never exclusively so (Saunders 20). In the Middle Ages, the crime of rape was invariably tied to the crime of abduction; Saunders states that, today, it is "frequently

impossible to distinguish which crime, rape or abduction, is the subject of medieval discourse" (Saunders 20). *Raptus* consisted of sexual violence *and/or* abduction; abduction was the constant, not sexual violence. In addition to abduction, rape was also tied to femininity; women were the exclusive victims of the crime, as only women could legally appeal *raptus (*Saunders 20*)*. However, the crime of ravishment—"the taking of the woman's person, either in abduction or enforced marriage"—could happen to both genders. Yet, in the eyes of the court, men could not be raped; though men of that time certainly could be and were sexually assaulted, the crime would be regarded as a straightforward assault in legal terms (Saunders 20). The crime of *raptus*, therefore, was related to other gender-specific issues like virginity and marriage. This consideration of *raptus* as a crime exclusively against women stayed relatively constant throughout the formative periods of English secular law.

Influences on Medieval English Law

Early Middle Ages: Roman Law

Early Roman law focused on "devaluation caused by abduction" rather than rape; this definition of *raptus* did not expand to include sexual violence until the 4th century decrees of Constantine and the 6th century decrees of Byzantine emperor Justinian (Saunders 34). Even then, the code only extended *raptus* to include unmarried women, widows, or nuns. The focus was still on devaluation; these women were devalued by rape just as they were devalued by abduction. It is unclear whether rape or abduction was the crime; Saunders argues that Justinian's definition of *raptus* "seems to include the possibility of rape, but by no means to require it" (34). However, in Book IX, Title XIII of Justinian's *Codex Iustinianus*, titled "De raptu virginum seu viduarum nec non sanctimonial" (Concerning the ravishment of virgins or

widows or nuns), Justinian does not seem to make a direct distinction between rape and

abduction:

> Raptores virginum honestarum vel ingenuarum, sive iam desponsatae fuerint sive non, vel quarumlibet viduarum feminarum, licet libertinae vel servae alienae sint, pessima criminum peccantes capitis supplicio plectendos decernimus, et maxime si deo fuerint virgines vel viduae dedicatae (quod non solum ad iniuriam hominum, sed ad ipsius omnipotentis dei inreverentiam committitur, maxime cum virginitas vel castitas corrupta restitui non potest): et merito mortis damnantur supplicio, cum nee ab homicidii crimine huiusmodi raptores sint vacui.

> We decree that ravishers of respectable or free-born virgins, whether betrothed or not, and of widows of all kinds, including freedwomen and the slaves of others, shall, guilty of the worst of crimes, be visited with capital punishment, especially if the virgins or widows were dedicated to God, since the crime committed in that case is not only an outrage on men, but is also in mockery of the Omnipotent God himself, particularly because corrupted virginity or chastity cannot be restored. And they are deservedly condemned to the punishment of death, because ravishers of this sort are also guilty of murder.[8] (*Justinian*: Book IX, Title xiii)

Justinian does not define *raptus* as rape or abduction in this passage, but he does mention how a

woman's "corrupted virginity or chastity" could not be restored after this crime. Though

abduction might also call into question a woman's virginity and chastity, the violation of these

two virtues seems much more likely tied to sexual violation or rape. It is therefore likely that, in

this passage, Justinian uses *raptus* to indicate rape in the modern sense of the word.

However, an objective term for rape as it is defined today does not seem to exist in

Roman law; the term *stuprum* referred to pollution of the body though an illicit sexual action, but

this act was "not necessarily non-consensual." In the act of *stuprum*, one person usually

emphasized his or her extreme lust, but the term could apply to a number of acts, such as sex

between men or adultery. In both *raptus* and *stuprum*, consent and coercion were "blurred"

(Saunders 35). Justinian's *Digest* reinforces this idea; except in warfare, sexual violation of a

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[8] Translation by Fred H. Blume.

woman was considered a "blemish on the woman" rather than an "offence committed against her" (Saunders 35).

Early and High Middle Ages: Anglo-Saxon Law

Anglo-Saxon law contained more Germanic than Roman influence. In Germanic law, rape was a serious crime for which "restitution"—usually marriage—was sought (Saunders 36). The crime was regarded as serious because it devalued the victims in the eyes of their male authority figures—usually husbands or fathers—who, consistent with Anglo-Saxon tradition, viewed women as valuable property. However, the distinction between rape and abduction in Anglo-Saxon law was much more defined than that of Rome or medieval England. Rape was described as explicitly sexual, while abduction was described as a type of seizure. The earliest existing laws, decreed by Æthelberht, king of Kent, between 601 and 604 AD, forbid both adultery and abduction, warning specifically against the violation of virgins (Saunders 37). The laws of Ælfred, king of Wessex, became even more sophisticated; these laws, decreed in 890 AD, addressed various details of sexual assault, including illicit touching, throwing women to the ground, and rape. Ælfred's laws extended to many women—virgins and non-virgins, low-born and high-born, freewomen and slaves. Still, virginity was a central theme of these laws; the loss of a woman's virginity required the same compensation as that required for killing a young man, implying that "loss of virginity was equated with death." Though rooted in the idea of virginity, Ælfred's laws did place emphasis on the will of women. Saunders draws attention to the importance of consent in these laws, stating that "Female refusal of consent [distinguished] the crime from simple fornication or adultery" (Saunders 41). This emphasis on consent perhaps illustrates that women may have held high legal status as valuable property—or valuable additions to society. However, as time passed, the influence of the Church and Roman law

caused both a "blurring of the legal distinction between rape and abduction" and a "narrowing from general condemnation of rape to the specific prohibitions of violation of nuns, widows or virgins" (Saunders 46).

High Middle Ages: Anglo-Norman Law

Saunders argues that "the assumption that the Normans brought a set of new laws with them to England is not entirely true" (Saunders 48). Instead, the Normans tended to take over existing legal structures. Because the Normans had no written laws, their adoption of the "sophisticated Anglo-Saxon legal tradition" was a "natural enough outcome of the Conquest" (Saunders 48). The influence of the Anglo-Saxon tradition is evident in the similarities between Anglo-Saxon laws and the laws of the first Norman kings. Like the laws of Ælfred, twelfth-century Anglo-Norman documents such as *Leis Willelme* and the *Peterborough Chronicle* focused on sexual violence and the punishment for such violence in detail. These manuscripts generally rejected the death penalty in favor of castration; for example, the *Peterborough Chronicle* states:

> Gif hwilc carlman hæmde wið wimman hire unðances, sona he forleas þa limu þe he mid pleagode.

> If any peasant has intercourse with a woman against her will, let him immediately lose the limb with which he played. (*The Peterborough Chronicle*, lines 93-94)

At the same time, the Normans were gradually restructuring English society; this restructuring had "profound implications for women." Women lost much of their legal independence and became unable to inherit land "except in absence of a male heir" (Saunders 51). Additionally, the Normans reinforced the importance of marriage and the power of the Church, two institutions that consequently "affirmed patristic notions of the secondary status of

women" (Saunders 52). Therefore, by the twelfth century, the crimes of rape and abduction were yet again collapsed into the crime of *raptus*.

Medieval English Law

High Middle Ages

England's early medieval treatises, following preceding legal traditions, distinguished between the crimes of rape and abduction. The earliest treatise in English law, *Tractatus de legibus et consuetudinibus regni Angliae*, clearly defined *raptus* as rape. This document, translated as "the treatise on the laws and customs of the realm of England" was known commonly as *Glanvill* (Hall 175). *Glanvill* was written near the end of the reign of Henry II in 1189 and named after his justiciar,[9] Ranulf de Glanvill (Turner 97). Though scholars disagree over whether the document's namesake was also the author, general consensus appoints *Glanvill* as "the first textbook of the English common law" (Richardson and Sayles 319). This "textbook" defined *raptus* as a distinctly sexual crime in the late twelfth century:

> *Raptus crimen est quod aliqua mulier imponit uiro quo proponit se a uiro ui oppressam in pace domini regis.*
>
> In the crime of rape a woman charges a man with violating her by force in the peace of the lord king.[10] (*Glanvill*)

Like the laws of Justinian, *Glanvill* deemed *raptus* a capital offense. However, contrary to Justinian, *Glanvill* placed no emphasis on abduction in the crime (Saunders 52-53).

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[9] The OED supplies the most helpful definition of a justiciar: "A high-ranking officer entrusted by an English or Scottish monarch with special judicial or administrative functions in a particular division of the realm." In the time of Henry II, a medieval justiciar served a role similar to that of a modern Prime Minister.

[10] Translation by G.D.G. Hall, found in *Tractatus de Legibus et Consuetudinibus Regni Angliae qui Glanvilla Vocatur: The Treatise on the Laws and Customs of the Realm of England Commonly Called Glanvill*

Another early treatise, attributed to Henri de Bracton in the 1230s, also defined the crime

of *raptus* specifically as rape:

> *Est inter alia appella quoddam appellum quod dicitur de raptu virginum. Et est raptus virginum quoddam crimen quod femina imponit alicui, de quo se dicit esse violenter oppressam contra pacem domini regis, quod quidem crimen si convincatur, sequitur pœna, scilicet amissio membrorum, ut sit membrum pro membro, quia virgo cum corrumpitur membrum amittit. Et ideo corruptor puniatur in eo in quo deliquit. Oculos igitur amittat propter aspectum decoris quo virginem concupivit. Amittat etiam testiculos qui calorem stupri induxerunt. Non autem sequitur huiusmodi pœna de de qualibet femina, licet vi opprimatur. Sequitur tamen alia gravis et gravior, secundum quod fuerit nupta vel vidua honeste vivens, sanctimonialis, vel matrona. Item concubina legitima, vel alia quœstu faciens sine delectu personarum, quas quidem omes debet rex tueri pro pace sua, sed non erit de qualibet par pœna.*

> Among other appeals there is an appeal called the rape of virgins. The rape of virgins is a crime imputed by a woman to the man by whom she says she has been forcibly ravished against the king's peace. If he is convicted of this crime [this] punishment follows: the loss of members, that there be member for member, for when a virgin is defiled she loses her member and therefore let her defiler be punished in the parts in which he offended. Let him lose his eyes which gave him sight of the maiden's beauty for which he coveted her. And let him lose as well the testicles which excited his hot lust. Punishment of this kind does not follow in the case of every woman, though she is forcibly ravished, but some other severe punishment does follow, according as she is married or a widow living a respectable wife, a nun or matron, a recognized concubine or a prostitute plying her trade without discrimination of person, all of whom the king must protect for the preservation of his peace, though a like punishment will not be imposed for each.[11] (*Bracton*)

Bracton's emphasis on "member for member" in retribution for *raptus* signifies the sexual nature

of the crime. Because a man uses his "member," a virgin loses her "member"; this description

conjures an image of sexual violation rather than abduction. Additionally, in the section

concerning this crime's legal appeal process, *Bracton* makes no mention of abduction. Rather,

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[11] Translation by Samuel E. Thorne.

Bracton's discussion of abduction later in the treatise pertains to the abduction of heirs, where the author "employs the term *abductio* rather than *raptus*" (Saunders 54).

Both *Glanvill* and *Bracton* therefore demonstrate an "intellectual awareness of forcible coition as a serious and distinct crime against women" by emphasizing the abhorrent, primarily sexual nature of the crime (Saunders 57). However, while this rhetoric—both the distinction between rape and abduction and the comprehensive punishments outlined in the treatises—may demonstrate some "respect for the woman's person" within the legal process, the fact remains that most *raptus* cases rarely came to trial (Saunders 56). Instead, most cases were dismissed or settled through marriage and/or financial compensation (Saunders 58). Additionally, both documents showed that not all women's cases would be treated with equal scrutiny. For example, *Bracton* admits that *raptus* is not exclusive to virgins, but the document concedes that, in the case of a raped virgin versus a raped wife or widow or prostitute, "like punishment will not be imposed for each." Because *Bracton* delineates the highest offense to be defiling a virgin, the document privileges loss of marriageability over sexual violation.

After *Glanvill* and *Bracton*, English law turned away from distinguishing rape and abduction as two separate crimes. Ravishment became the crime of forced abduction, usually of heirs or heiresses, while *raptus* could refer to either crime. By 1275, the two ideas "seem to have been thoroughly blurred," as evidenced by the first statute of Westminster during the reign of Edward I (Saunders 59):

> *E le roy defend qe nul ravyse ne prengne damysele* de *deinze age, par soun gre ne sanz soun gre, ne dame ne damisele de age, ne autre femme maugre soun.*

> And the king forbids anyone to rape, or take by force a damsel under age, either with her consent or without, or a married woman or damsel of age or any other woman against her will.[12] (Westminster I)

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[12] Translated by Henry Rothwell, found in *English Historical Documents*, volume III.

Saunders points out that while Westminster I did differentiate between rape (*ravyse*) and abduction (*pregne*), the two terms were deliberately and "very clearly" paired (59). Additionally, the statute's inclusion of married women and "any other woman" signified a shift away from the importance of loss of virginity in favor of an emphasis on abduction.

The penalty for the crime of *raptus* was also decreased in Westminster I. When not tried as an appeal, *raptus* was treated as a lesser crime; because most cases were not prosecuted as appeals, the most common punishment consisted merely of two years of imprisonment and a fine. This contrasted starkly with the punishments previously assigned to *raptus* cases, including death and dismemberment. According to Saunders, this "early emphasis on fitting punishment for irrevocable defloration of the woman was lost" and was instead "replaced by concern for rights of king and family rather than of the victim" (Saunders 60).

Because most *raptus* cases were dropped based on technicalities, Westminster I was largely seen as inadequate (Saunders 60). Ten years later, in 1285, the law was rewritten as Westminster II; in this new statute, rape and abduction were completely indistinguishable:

> *Purveu est ensement qe si homme ravise femme espose, damousele, ou autre femme deshormes par la ou ele ne se est assentue ne avaunt ne apres eit jugement de vie e de member; ensement par la ou homme ravise femme, damoysele, dame espose, ou autre femme a force, tut seyt ele assentue apres, eit tel jugement come avaunt es dist, sil seit atteint a la swte le roy, e la eit le roy sa sywte.*

> It is provided that henceforth if a man ravishes a married woman, a maiden, or other woman, without her consent before or afterwards, he shall have judgement of life and limb; and likewise where a man ravishes a woman—married woman, maiden, or other woman—by force even though she consents afterwards, he shall have the judgement before stated if he is convicted at the king's suit, and there the king shall have his suit.[13] (Westminster II)

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[13] Translated by Henry Rothwell, found in *English Historical Documents*, volume III.

Unlike Westminster I, Westminster II did not distinguish between *ravyse* and *pregne*. Instead, the two words were collapsed into one crime. Additionally, this statute aimed to deal with the problem of consenting abductions; now, the king could sue in the cases of willingly abducted wives and nuns. *Raptus* was reinstated as a felony, but Westminster I's emphasis on the rights of king and family rather than the rights of victims remained.

 Late Middle Ages

 The statutes of Westminster influenced two major trends in the fourteenth century: first, an "increasing legal concern" with *raptus* as a crime, and second, a "legal marginalization of the raped woman." Rape victims retained their right to appeal, but the "complex, humiliating" process was "not likely to succeed" if the victim was of low social status. Additionally, rape became hard to prove if not accompanied by an abduction (Saunders 62). Victims wishing to press charges had two choices: an appeal or a bill of indictment. Bills of indictment were typically offered by guardians; if a woman did not have a guardian to bring the indictment, the "onus of appeal, accusation, and proof" were placed on her (Saunders 62). Most often, victims chose the process of appeal, which was slightly more private and could result in the detainment of the accused (Saunders 62-63). Additionally, this process allowed the possibility of settling outside of the courtroom (Saunders 63).

 The legal appeal process, outlined in *Glanvill* and *Bracton*, had strict rules and weak accountability. An appeal started with the victim appearing to the township within 40 days and showing physical evidence of the assault. For example, a victim might show "blood, torn clothing, and bruises" to the king's sergeant, coroner, and sheriff. Then she had to make two separate appeals: one to the first county court and another to the justice's court. These appeals were often delayed or deserted. If a suspect was arraigned, the process was drawn out even

longer; he had to wait for one of the three times per year when the judges visited town. Therefore, the process was "rarely set into motion" unless the sexual assault was "explicitly related to theft of property through abduction" (Saunders 63).

Granted, the crime of rape, by itself, was difficult to prove in a medieval court. Appeals were "frequently dismissed on the grounds of doubt," and the "primitive nature" of medieval gynecological exams did little to help the cases of victims (Saunders 63). Lack of understanding about the role of orgasm in sexual intercourse, based on the works of Greek physician Galen, led medieval medical scholars to believe both men and woman produced "seed" that, when joined, resulted in impregnation. Scholars believed seed was only released through orgasm, and thus that orgasm was necessary for conception. Therefore, according to Galen, pregnancy via rape was deemed impossible; for a woman to conceive, she must have taken pleasure in the act (Saunders 29). This argument was "familiar" and "carried a good deal of credence" in the Middle Ages; the conception of a child was therefore a "commonplace defense" against the charge of *raptus* (Saunders 74).

The **Raptus** *Case of 1380: Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecily Chaumpaigne*

In 1380, Geoffrey Chaucer himself was involved in a *raptus* case. In May of that year, a woman named Cecily Chaumpaigne brought forth a deed in which she agreed to release Chaucer of "omnimodas acciones tam de raptu meo tam de aliqua alia re vel causa," or "all manner of actions such as they relate to my rape or any other thing or cause"[14] (*Chaucer Life Records* 343). The direct meaning of "de rapto meo" is a point of contention among scholars, especially given the broad definition of the crime of *raptus* during that time. In his biography "The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer," Derek Pearsall argues that this particular crime was of a sexual nature. He

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[14] Translation provided by Christopher Cannon in his article "Raptus in the Chaumpaigne Release and a Newly Discovered Document Concerning the Life of Geoffrey Chaucer."

admits that the crime of *raptus* commonly meant "the seizing and holding of a young person against his or her will with the purpose of gaining some financial advantage"; Chaucer's own father was abducted in a similar scheme in 1324 and Chaucer himself investigated a similar case as a commission member in 1387. However, Pearsall points out that in both instances, instead of "de rapto meo," the "nature of the offense is made clear" by the use of two words: "rapuerunt et abduxerunt." Therefore, when *raptus* or *rapere* are used alone, Pearsall argues that "they must mean rape (enforced and completed sexual intercourse), for which no other word is used in law without qualification." Additionally, Pearsall refutes the interpretation of this *raptus* as abduction on the grounds that this crime usually referred to minors and that Cecily "would barely qualify as a minor in 1380," her father having died 20 years prior (Pearsall 135). Yet, the mystery is not as easily solved as Pearsall implies. Previous sections of this thesis have provided evidence that, while the crime of *raptus* could include rape, abduction was typically the defining factor of a *raptus* case. Westminster II in particular collapsed the two crimes into one word and placed special emphasis on the ability of the king to bring a suit in cases of consenting abductions.

Christopher Cannon, on the other hand, provides more convincing evidence that Chaumpaigne released Chaucer of a sexual crime rather than an abduction. He cites the differences in the close roles for the first eight years of the reign of Richard II—from June 22, 1377 to June 21, 1385—as evidence that the Chaumpaigne case was sexual in nature. The Chaumpaigne case was the only case in that period to use the phrase "de rapto meo," a phrase that stands out against the other, more general releases; according to Cannon, these other releases "do not specify any claim or wrong in their terms of release at all." Of the cases that did provide specifics, only two used the form of the verb *rapere* and only one used *raptus* as a noun (Cannon 77). Additionally, of these three cases, *raptus* or *rapere* was cited as only one in a long list of

offenses, placing little emphasis on the specific crime. In the Chaumpaigne case, however,

Cannon argues that the "sharp contrast between the specificity of the phrase 'de rapto meo' and

the much vaguer blanket clause that follows it ('omnimodas acciones… de aliqua alia re vel

causa') assures that the noun stands out" (Cannon 78). Cannon points to a document filed three

days later, one that releases Chaucer of "felonies, trespasses, accounts, debts, and any other

actions" (Cannon 89). This time, the crime of *raptus* is missing; Cannon suggests that perhaps

Chaucer's friends at court were able to make the revisions, with or without the consent—forced

or otherwise—of Cecily Chaumpaigne. Cannon's article provides strong evidence that the case

was distinctly sexual in nature. However, Cannon himself admits that his evidence offers

"precious little new information about the Chaumpaigne release itself and virtually nothing new

about the events which prompted any version of the release, let alone the original." However, his

article does prove that the phrase "de rapto meo" seemed "just as inflammatory to Chaucer's

contemporaries" as it has seemed to modern readers (Cannon 93).

Cannon succeeds in assessing the reality of the situation—chiefly, that one would be

foolish to draw assured conclusions about a rape case from the 1300s, especially given so few

data points. Though I do agree with Cannon that the Chaumpaigne case seems skewed towards a

sexual offense rather than an abduction, I must disagree with scholars such as John Gardner—

whose work has been largely discredited in the academic community—who attempt to judge

Chaucer as guilty or innocent based on so little evidence. In his biography *The Life and Times of

Chaucer*, Gardner treats the case with irreverent amusement in his suggestion that Chaucer was

"more or less innocent." In light of the situation, he suggests that "there are reasons for taking a

darker—or perhaps more cheerful—view" of the *raptus* case (Gardner 252). In her article "The

Use of Biography in Medieval Literary Criticism: The Case of Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecily

Chaumpaigne," Susan S. Morrison refutes Gardner's "more cheerful" view—specifically, that

the best possible way to spin the case would be as a one of seduction—which, in Morrison's

eyes, "reveals more about Gardner than the subject he investigates" (Morrison 72-73). She

discredits Gardner's interpretation, grouping him with a long list of biographers who tended to

"read Chaucer's life as belonging to the genre of fabliau" (Morrison 81). However, in widening

the possible scope of the case to one of sexuality and violation rather than simply money and

jealousy, Morrison is careful to allow the documents to speak for themselves, as opposed to

clouding the documents with her own personal opinions. Morrison aptly acknowledges that even

the documents might not represent the situation accurately, as "something could have been lost

in translation" (Morrison 82). Her article provides a helpful, if somewhat unsatisfying, dose of

reality: only Cecily and Chaucer—both of whom are long since dead—can know the whole truth.

SECTION 2: CHURCH INFLUENCE ON *RAPTUS* AND MEDIEVAL SEXUALITY

The medieval Christian Church also blurred the lines between rape and abduction in their

definition of *raptus*.[15] However, while the ideas of virginity and chastity were still relevant in

secular law, virginity and chastity dominated discussion in Canon law. Because the Church

played an important part in everyday medieval life, this fixation with virginity had widespread

cultural impact.

In his article "Sex Education in Medieval Christianity," Vern L. Bullough discusses both

the origins of the Church's concerns about chastity and the subsequent ramifications these views

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[15] This chapter offers a brief overview of the Medieval Christian Church's outlook on rape and female sexuality. Though Jewish and Muslim faiths were also present in Medieval England, a thorough understanding of the Christian Church is the most relevant to the following chapters.

brought upon medieval doctrine.[16] Bullough points out that the medieval Church's opinion of sex illustrated an "intellectual hostility to bodily pleasures" (185). This view, developed by Neo-Pythagoreans and Neo-Platonists, was not the dominant view within the classical period. Rather, this view of sexuality can be traced back to St. Augustine (354-430 AD), whose writings on sex and marriage influenced western Christian thought. St. Augustine was "particularly offended by the act of coitus" because a woman's touch overwhelmed a man's mind and required him to perform "bestial movements" (Bullough 185-186). Augustine argued that sexual lust was a residual punishment from the Fall of Man; Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise resulted in the ungodly "quest for sexual satisfaction" for all of mankind (Bullough 186).

Mankind's quest for sexual satisfaction, however, was not the fault of men in the eyes of the Church. Rather, one woman—and therefore, perhaps all women—was responsible for the Fall of Man. As the perpetrator of original sin, Eve stood as a symbol for women, a sex with a "reputation for weakness" and a "responsibility for temptation" (Saunders 25). This weakness and temptation was a fixed component of womanhood. Women were perceived as physical and sexual by the Church, who defined womanhood as being deeply rooted in the body (Saunders 26). Men, on the other hand, were rooted in the spirit and the soul. Men were rational, women irrational. These differences were seen as "divinely ordained," especially because the genesis of the sexes was "rooted in their essential differences" (Saunders 25). God created Adam by breathing life into dust; Eve, on the other hand, was formed from man:

> But for Adam there was not found a helper like himself. [21] Then the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon Adam: and when he was fast asleep, he took one of his ribs, and filled up flesh for it. [22] And the Lord God built the rib which he took from Adam into a woman: and brought her to Adam. [23] And Adam said: This now is

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[16] Though Bullough offers a somewhat overgeneralized or perhaps reductive and anachronistic view of the medieval Church, his view is a helpful point of departure for this discussion.

> bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man. (*The Vulgate Bible*, Genesis 2:20-23)

While Adam was made directly by God, Eve was made from man. As a derivative of man, woman was therefore frailer and easier to corrupt (Saunders 25).

Eve confirmed this potential for corruption by giving into the temptation of Satan and tempting her husband to join her. Before eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the pair had roamed the Garden of Eden unclothed and unashamed: "they were both naked: to wit, Adam and his wife: and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25).[17] However, after both had committed original sin by eating from the tree, "the eyes of them both were opened: and when they perceived themselves to be naked, they sewed together fig leaves, and made themselves aprons" (Genesis 3:7). Adam and Eve were no longer innocent; guilt took the place of innocence after the Fall. God cursed the pair for their loss of innocence, defining the patriarchy in his comment to Eve: "thou shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shall have dominion over thee." (Genesis 3:16). This comment supports the medieval Church's opinion that men were "biologically superior" to women and therefore had a right to dominate the "weaker" sex (Saunders 25).

As a result of this Biblical story, women were portrayed as temptresses and men the victims of feminine wiles. This narrative was popular in the Middle Ages, where the "notion of bodiliness" dominated generalizations about women (Saunders 26). Other common generalizations about women included that they were "governed not by rationality but by nature, by instinct rather than intellect" and that their "potential threat to men was such that their temptations needed to be kept strictly under control" (Saunders 26-27). Even married women posed a threat to their husbands through seduction. A contradictory attitude existed within the Church about sex between a husband and wife. Sexual intercourse, because it came from God

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[17] Quotations from the Douay-Rheims translation of *Vulgate Bible*.

and was necessary for procreation, must be inherently good. At the same time, the "carnal union of husband and wife" was often driven by lust, and therefore reprehensible. Sex between man and wife was therefore either good or evil, and "only through procreation" could intercourse be deemed good. "All other kinds of intercourse," in the eyes of the Church, "were evil" (Bullough 187). According to Augustine, the highest good came from celibacy (Bullough 186).

The temptation to stray from celibacy led the Church to construct a negative reinforcement model penalizing both genders for sexual impurity. Along with idolatry and homicide, sins of sexual impurity were classified as a spiritual illness (Bullough 187). Specific sins within this category included adultery, incest, bestiality, and masturbation, each with a unique penance to pay. The sinner initiated the penance process by confessing to a confessor; this confessor had his "patients" describe their "symptoms." The confessor would then assign a penance, which "came to be regarded as a healing medicine for the soul" (Bullough 188). This process is indicative of the Church's negative stance on sex in the Middle Ages.

In addition to this negative teaching technique, the Church also constructed a positive reinforcement model to emphasize the importance of virginity and virtue. This model utilized the lives of pure or chaste saints to positively reinforce good behavior. Saints such as Pelagia and Wilgefortis were praised after their deaths for altering their appearance to preserve their chastity. Saint Pelagia, for example, was a dancer and prostitute known in Antioch for her great beauty. After being converted to Christianity, Pelagia wished to escape her life of sin; with the approval of her converter, Bishop Nonus, she left the city, disguised as a man. When she finally settled on Mount Olivet, she continued her life as a man, calling herself Pelagius. As Pelagius, she was revered by the religious community, and her womanhood remained secret until her death (Bullough 189). Pelagia and other similar saints—such as Saint Marina, who also lived her life

disguised as a man—"suffered greatly" to conceal themselves and their genders rather than "reveal themselves as weak, sex-minded, frail females" (Bullough 190).

On the other hand, bearded female saints, such as Wilgefortis, were praised for their chastity. A Portuguese princess, Wilgefortis vowed a life of virginity, but her father did not accept this choice to dedicate her life to religion. When her father declared that she was to marry the king of Sicily, she prayed to God for help, who bestowed upon her a mustache and long beard. When Wilgefortis revealed her face to her suitor from under her veil, the king of Sicily called off the wedding. In retaliation, Wilgefortis's father ordered her to be crucified. Though the authenticity of the tale seems questionable, Wilegefortis's story spread "everywhere in medieval Europe" (Bullough 190). Each area produced a unique version of the story and a different name for the heroine; Wilegefortis's name in England, for example, was Uncumber. Other bearded saints like Saint Galla and Saint Paula had similar stories (Bullough 191).

Reformed prostitutes also served as saints whose lives depicted the importance of repentance and the significance of chastity. Mary Magdalene, a significant New Testament figure and follower of Jesus, was largely understood to be a converted prostitute. Though the Bible does not state this explicitly, Luke 7:37 describes a woman washing Jesus's feet as "a woman who was in the city, a sinner"; most scholars agree that this woman was Mary Magdalene, and that her life of sin included prostitution. Mary Magdalene, in addition to other saints such as Saint Mary the Harlot and Saint Afra, proved the old adage that "a great sinner could become a great saint." These saints provided a biblical basis for the largely "ambivalent" attitude toward the medieval prostitute, who was seen both as a "temptress" and as a "possible convert" (Bullough 192). The medieval Church viewed prostitution as a necessary evil; even St. Augustine conceded that not all Christians could be perfect, and that it was better to "tolerate

prostitution with all of its associated evils than to risk the perils which would follow the successful elimination of the harlot from society" (Bullough 191).

While a great sinner could become a great saint, the medieval Church largely preferred virgins to reformed women. However, the rape of virgins complicated the Church's definition of virginity. The issue of raped virgins was divisive for the Church; while some believed that a woman could not lose her virginity against her will, others regarded raped virgins as impure. Saints and holy women would rather die than lose their virginity by force, but for everyday women who did not prefer martyrdom, the issue of virginity was harder to define. The topic was fiercely debated by thirteenth century theologians. Alexander of Hales, for example, distinguished between virginity and chastity in the case of raped virgins. While virgins who had not been raped received the 'aureola,' or heavenly crown of the virgin, Alexander indicated that raped virgins would receive a heavenly reward for chastity instead of virginity (Saunders 92). Gratian, in his *Decretum magistri Gratiani*, suggested a more spiritual view of virginity, illustrated through the story of Saint Lucy:

> Nihil enim virtutis deperit, si per violentiam rupta fuerit repagula carnis. Unde dixit Lucia: 'Si invitam facias me violari, castitas mihi duplicabitur ad coronam.' Si ergo crescit in huiusmodi virginibus patientia, crescit et virtus virginitatis, licet non maneat integritas carnis.

> For nothing of virtue is destroyed, even if the constraint of the flesh is ruptured through violence. Whence Lucy said, 'If you cause me to be violated against my will, my chastity will be doubled for the crown.' Therefore if suffering increases for such virgins, the virtue of virginity increases, although the integrity of the flesh does not remain. (Gratian XXXII)

Gratian's depiction of rape in this passage is quite graphic; the "constraint of the flesh" being "ruptured," in this case, signifies the hymen breaking. However, for Gratian—and for Lucy—this physical violation had no impact on virginity. Instead, virginity was spiritual, and violating a

virgin's flesh couldn't destroy her virtue. Rather, if a virgin suffered such horrors, her virtue increased.

On the other hand, some theologians, such as Phillip the Chancellor and Albertus Magnus, were not as sympathetic. They viewed raped virgins as less pure than "true" virgins. Though these theologians argued that God would provide final judgement, they insisted that only true, physically pure virgins could be consecrated. Raped virgins would have to reap their rewards, if any, in heaven (Saunders 97). Some even went so far as to claim that God would protect the virtuous women he valued most from rape altogether. In either case, the stance of the Church was abundantly clear: the rape of a virgin "came to be viewed not as a crime for which the perpetrator was to be punished, so much as a circumstance whereby the woman's spiritual strength and purity were tested" (Saunders 99).

SECTION 3: REALITY FOR MEDIEVAL WOMEN

Although secular law and Church doctrine tended to paint women as one of two archetypes—the virtuous virgin or the tricky temptress—living, breathing medieval women were not as easy to define. In *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*[18], Judith Bennett and Ruth Karas concede that "Medieval people considered 'man' the human standard and 'woman' peculiarly capable of both extraordinary good, as with the Virgin Mary, and evil, as exemplified by Eve." However, they assert that this polarizing view of women as "ladies on pedestals" or "witches at the stake" does not seem to be the reality of the situation (Bennett and Karas 1).

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[18] In *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, Judith Bennett and Ruth Karas offer an overview of the history and historiography of the medieval woman. The seven chapters of their handbook—with topics spanning from religious thought to domestic life to gender and sexuality—are comprised of essays from a diverse set of scholars. The following cited articles by Kowaleski, Green, and French all appear in the handbook.

The best place to start when attempting to understand the reality of women's lives in medieval England, according to scholar Maryanne Kowaleski, is the numbers. In her article "Gendering Demographic Change in the Middle Ages," Kowaleski traces the lives of medieval women through extant demographics. Life span was significantly shorter in medieval England than it is today; average life expectancy at birth for the generation of males in England and Wales born in the years 1276-1300 was 31.3, and that average declined significantly to 17.3 for males born 1348-1375, during the Black Death (Usher 5). However, averages do not paint the complete picture; if the boy born in 1276-1300 reached 20 years of age, his average life expectancy increased to 45, and if he lived to 30, he could expect to live well into his fifties ("A Millennium of Health Improvement."). Because infant and child mortality rates were so high, making it out of childhood was a key factor in determining overall life expectancy.

However, these statistics only tell us male life expectancy; Kowaleski admits that these measures fail to offer any "firm data" on female mortality. Nevertheless, Kowaleski agrees with most scholars that female life expectancy was lower than that of men during this period, despite the "scarcity of hard evidence." She cites Carolingian estate surveys and polyptychs,[19] which recorded a sex ratio of men to women as 105 at birth,[20] which in adulthood decreased to 100 (Kowaleski 183). Scholars cite varying reasons for this low number of adult women, including female infanticide,[21] the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, and differential susceptibility to

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[19] The OED defines polyptych as "An inventory or record of the landholdings, tenants, possessions, services due, revenues, etc., of a medieval estate or religious house."

[20] The ratio of 105 indicates 105 boys born for every 100 girls.

[21] Kowaleski argues that female infanticide was "more through differential neglect than than deliberate exposure," citing varying access to food or higher rates of child abandonment for females in hard times (Kowaleski 184).

the plague.[22] Overall, Kowaleski concedes that "we currently have more debate than consensus in understanding the relationship between mortality and gender" (Kowaleski 185).

Kowaleski cites fertility rates as equally important in understanding the everyday life of medieval women. Because fertility rates are "rarely available" for the Middle Ages, Kowaleski cites the marriage rate—the number of married women per thousand—as a "key element" in measuring fertility, as most medieval births happened within wedlock (Kowaleski 187). In the introduction of her book *Daughters, Wives, and Widows after the Black Death*, Mavis E. Mate explains that "a young girl, if she did not choose to enter a religious order, would be expected to marry" (Mate 3). In his book *Medieval Households*, David Herlihy speculates that the average marrying age for women in England during this time was 17 or under (Herlihy 105). The proportions of women who married in northwestern Europe was lower than women in the south; according to Kowaleski, "Almost 30% of all women recorded in the 1377 English poll tax were single, with a higher proportion in towns" (Kowaleski 187).

Of the women who were married, factors such as "subsistence crises" and "nutritional deficiencies" could impact their ability to become pregnant, because the age of menarche is "strongly influenced by nutrition." While the average age for menstruation in the modern world is between 12 and 13, the average age for women in the Middle Ages was 14 or later. Therefore, because "peak fertility lags behind menstruation by several years," most medieval women reached peak fertility in their late teens (Kowaleski 189). Effective birth control was limited in the Middle Ages, though evidence exists that methods such as *coitus interruptus* were widespread by the early 1300s. Deliberate birth control was vehemently discouraged by the Church, but prolonged breastfeeding and poor nutrition may have served as indirect methods of

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[22] Kowaleski admits that interpretation of this "often conflicting" data tends to vary (Kowaleski 185).

birth control, especially for poorer women (Kowaleski 190).

In her article "Caring for Gendered Bodies," Monica Green examines the physical reality of childbirth for women during the Middle Ages. Not much is known about medieval childbirth; Green points out that most pictorial representations of childbirth were nativity scenes rather than birth scenes, which—similar to modern representations—illustrated the aftermath of labor and featured a "refreshed" mother and "swaddled" newborn. What scholars do know about the act of childbirth, however, is that it was a distinctly female affair; until the 1400s, "Midwives or other women were preferred whenever ocular or manual assessment of female reproductive organs was needed," with elite women as the exception to this rule (Green 347). The midwives of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries maintained little respect in the eyes of the public; only a small number of female practitioners owned medical books, and most were illiterate (Green 347-348). Most medieval births were therefore attended by a midwife and were vaginal as opposed to surgical. Caesarian sections were a rare and grisly affair; if a woman died in childbirth, a male practitioner could oversee the removal of the fetus by cutting open the mother in an effort to save the newborn's eternal soul. Resuscitation of stillborn babies was a "common saintly miracle"; because Augustinian doctrine stated that unbaptized souls went to Limbo, most midwives knew how to administer emergency baptisms for infants who were ill at birth (Green 352).

Though medieval women had little control over demographic and biological changes, they were able to exercise agency through the items they owned and the spaces they inhabited. In her essay "Genders and Material Culture," Katherine L. French points out that clothing, in particular, was an area where women could express choice, especially in regards to color, detail,

and silhouette (198). Women typically wore three layers of clothing: a smock and hose, a kirtle,[23] and an outer tunic (French 199). Belts and girdles were important accessories, from which hung "purses, pouches, daggers, prayer beads, amulets, and house keys" (French 201). Women usually wore head coverings and did not cut their hair, which signaled their "controlled sexuality" and "deference." In the thirteenth century, these head coverings were usually linen caps or kerchiefs, though this style was less popular in the fourteenth century, when intricate braiding and hairnets became fashionable. Elite women began wearing increasingly elaborate and restrictive headpieces constructed of metal wires and scarves or veils. French explains that some men also wore head coverings, but they were "less restrictive" and "did not hold the same sexualized meaning" (French 200).

French argues that clothing was more than just a way to distinguish between the two sexes; rather, clothing had "social and moral significance" which "spoke to status and respectability" (French 202). Clothing was particularly important on a woman's deathbed, where she would bequeath clothing and accessories to "imprint the virtues with the object on the recipient," usually a daughter (French 201). Additionally, legislation about clothing aimed to distinguish between prostitutes and respectable women; in 1351, London prostitutes were required to identify themselves by wearing striped hoods. Jews and Muslims were also required to wear distinguishing clothing when living in Christian areas (French 203).

Medieval women also expressed agency through their choice of household furnishings and their control of domestic spaces. Medieval households usually consisted of a receiving hall and an enclosed room for intimate use. Some households also had a service room, which could be used for storage or cooking. Small houses contained these three features in one room, while

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[23] A kirtle was a long garment with short or no sleeves and was worn over the smock and hose. Kirtles became "increasingly fitted" over time while their sleeves lengthened (French 199).

larger houses owned by the elite expanded into more specialized rooms. In houses with no kitchens, food was prepared on a hearth in the hall or bought in town (French 204). Most houses contained "limited and moveable furnishings" (French 205).

Though French posits that "moralists urged husbands and fathers to keep their women at home occupied with household chores," she agrees that most families could not afford or simply did not confine women to the home. Though the housewife did cook, clean, and care for children, men also aided in childcare and "mended tools or broken household items" (French 205). Additionally, even if the household had servants, the wife controlled all food preparation, which was "an important marker of identity and occasion" (French 207). However, according to Eileen Power in her book *Medieval Woman*, "marriage by no means always meant that a woman devoted herself to the home and was exempt from some industry" (53). Young girls were "often apprenticed to trades in the same way as boys"; many unmarried women earned wages as shopkeepers and many married women worked as assistants to their husbands in their trade (Power 57, 55). Additionally, widows frequently carried on their husbands' businesses after death. Though women were "rarely admitted as full members to English craft guilds," Powers insists there was "hardly a craft" in which women did not work:

> They were butchers, candlers, ironmongers, net-makers, shoe-makers, glovers, girdlers, haberdashers, purse-makers, cap-makers, skinners, bookbinders, gilders, painters, silk-weavers and embroiderers, spicers, smiths, and goldsmiths along with many other trades. (Power 59-60)

Women also held significant ownership of intimate spaces in the home. French points to beds in particular as a space dominated by both both the masculine and the feminine:

> On the one hand, as the place where male heirs were conceived, beds were symbols of patrimony and patriarchy. On the other hand, beds were also female spaces that spoke to the labors of childbirth. Even though most women used stools to give birth, they returned to beds to recover, nurse, and receive guests. Among

those with means, special furnishings such as new bed linens transformed the chamber into a birthing room. (French 207-208)

Beds additionally served as places where mothers would nurse and sleep with their children. Medieval people also frequently died in their beds, where women would tend to the ill and prepare them for burial, again "transforming the bed and the bedroom into another sort of female-controlled space." The day-to-day upkeep of a bedroom was also under the supervision of the wife (French 208).

The preceding articles provide evidence that, in reality, women were far more diverse and developed than the archetypes of the virtuous virgin and the tricky temptress. However, the fact remains that, in much of medieval discourse—both secular and canonical—illustrations of women were limited to these two choices. Though a woman was clearly comprised of much more than her sexuality, scholar Lisa Colton points out that it was "commonplace" in medieval literature for a woman to be described "from the perspective of her sexual or marital status: as virgin, widow, or wife." While this female sexuality was natural, it was still a "potentially dangerous" element, which "carried memory of original sin via… childbearing and menstruation" (Colton 159). The following chapters will explore and complicate the aforementioned archetypes of women within the Middle English fabliaux, paying special attention to agency and sexuality. Though women in Chaucer's fabliaux were certainly not saints, Eileen Power insists that the stories demonstrate a general truth about the Middle Ages: "the woman of fabliaux, odious as she is, shows something of the practical equality which prevailed between men and women in the middle class" (11).

Chapter 2: *Raptus* in Chaucer's Fabliaux

INTRODUCTION

One major theme of the French fabliaux is tricks or pranks that aim to ridicule the tricked rather than expose the trickster; this deceived character is oftentimes berated and physically abused. These characters are rarely given any redeeming qualities, which intentionally directs audience laughter to characters who fail (Hines 10). Chaucer's fabliaux certainly fit within this framework; this thesis in particular argues that unwitty characters suffer the consequences—especially physical consequences—of their own idiocy. However, while both women and men suffer physical consequences at the hands of their tricksters, the consequences women suffer in Chaucer's fabliaux tend to be sexual in nature. In the *Reeve's Tale*, John and Alan obtain sex with Simpkin's wife and daughter as a form of retribution for his crimes; similarly, in the *Shipman's Tale*, John demands to sleep with the merchant's wife, offering money to her that he cannot honestly give. Modern scholars tend to deem these instances rape, and indeed, using a modern framework, I too would label these cases sexual assault. However, this thesis will primarily explore these instances using a medieval framework. It is unsurprising that a woman's consequences in the fabliaux were sexual in nature, given that a woman's personhood in the Middle Ages was inexorably tied to her sexuality. Meanwhile, men in the fabliaux suffer more general consequences; in the *Miller's Tale*, for example, Absolon receives an unwanted fart in the face, Nicholas is branded with a hot poker, and John falls from atop a barn and breaks his arm.

Raptus in particular is a common motif in much of Chaucer's works; as discussed above, both the *Reeve's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale* directly address this issue of sexual violence against women. However, as Chapter 1 of this thesis suggests, the issue of rape in medieval texts

is difficult to define and tricky to evaluate. Assessing this issue within Chaucer's intricate narrative structure in *The Canterbury Tales* is even more complex; attributing an opinion to Chaucer through so many layers of narrative proves difficult, especially given the controversial nature of the dialogue surrounding rape. Additionally, the dynamic definition of rape is hard to pin down; which lens is appropriate when evaluating a modern concern in a medieval context? This chapter therefore aims to come to terms with Chaucer's discussion of rape in the fabliaux through both a modern and medieval framework.

By addressing and refuting claims that Chaucer's portrayal of raped women in some fabliaux is anti-feminist, this chapter clears the path for the proto-feminist reading of Chaucer argued in Chapter 3. However, before refuting claims that Chaucer's poetry shows contempt towards women, I must acknowledge the modern frameworks under which these claims find ground. This chapter will therefore concede that Chaucer's use of rape as a form of comic retribution is indeed problematic when viewed through a modern lens. However, I argue that this modern lens is an inappropriate framework with which to interpret the medieval text. Instead, I advocate for a medieval approach to the text based on the research and historical context presented in Chapter 1. Overall, by refuting anti-feminist claims about Chaucer's poetry, I aim to strengthen my overarching thesis that Chaucer attributes power to witty women and that he therefore aligns himself with womanly wile.

The Modern Framework

Although applying the modern framework to Chaucer's medieval texts is anachronistic, I feel it is important to describe and discuss this modern approach to rape for two key reasons. First, in order to claim that today's framework is an unsuitable method of evaluation, I feel I must demonstrate a thorough understanding of said framework—both for the sake of my

argument and to provide clarity for readers. My second aim is more personal; as a feminist, I

wish to clarify that I both understand and agree with these modern definitions. This thesis does

not, by any means, aim to criticize or condemn modern notions of consent. Indeed, I initially

approached this project with the modern framework in mind, intending to denounce Chaucer's

treatment of rape as problematic. However, further research in the subject revealed that this

reductive approach is simply poor scholarship; as discussed in Chapter 1, this method privileges

the "politically correct present" over the "unenlightened" past (Saunders 14). Yet, in order to

gain a more thorough understanding of the medieval framework, we first must explore

assumptions about rape and sexuality today.

While key themes in the medieval discussion of *raptus* were abduction and virginity, the

key to today's discussion of rape is the concept of consent. The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National

Network (RAINN[24]) defines consent as "an agreement between participants to engage in sexual

activity"; modern feminists advocate for a "yes means yes" and "active consent" approach to the

topic (RAINN "What Consent Looks Like"). These theories teach that consent is an active—

rather than passive—process in which each sexual partner offers a clear, enthusiastic "yes" as an

agreement to participate in sexual contact. This "yes means yes" approach contrasts with the

formerly popular "no means no" model; activists Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti discuss the

difference between these two approaches in their book *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual

Power and a World Without Rape*:[25]

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[24] RAINN is the largest anti-sexual violence organization in the United States. The charity
operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline in partnership with over 1,100 nationwide sexual
assault service organizations.
[25] In *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape,* co-editors
Friedman and Valenti offer a variety of perspectives on the way our culture approaches rape and
consent through 27 essay-style contributions from a diverse set of authors and activists. Themes

> So often it seems as if the discourse is focused solely on the "no means no" model—which, while of course useful, stops short of truly envisioning how suppressing female sexual agency is a key element of rape culture, and therefore how fostering genuine female sexual autonomy is necessary in fighting back against it. (Friedman and Valenti 6)

In contrast with the "no means no" model, the "yes means yes" approach insists that consent is explicit rather than implicit; consent is not implied, nor is it the absence of a no. Rather, as defined by Project Respect,[26] consent is a "mutual, verbal, physical, and emotional agreement that happens without manipulation, threats, or head games." Additionally, consent should be enthusiastic and engaged; specifically, enthusiastic consent means "being as excited and into someone else's enjoyment" as one is in their own enjoyment of sexual contact (Project Respect "Consent"). One can withdraw consent at any time if they feel uncomfortable, and consent to one activity at one point in time does not imply consent for "increased or recurring" sexual contact (RAINN "What Consent Looks Like"). Additionally, consent does not include using fear or intimidation to force someone into agreeing to sex. Most importantly, non-consensual sex is rape. Today, rape is categorized as a type of sexual assault; in addition to rape, sexual assault includes attempted rape, other forced sexual acts, and unwanted sexual touching (RAINN "Sexual Assault"). Rape in this context usually refers to sexual penetration without consent. Many activists today advocate for a sexual assault victim's right to label their own experience as rape, sexual assault, or some other term.

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of the collection include survivor advocacy, queer identity, sexual taboos, rape in the media, and the intersection of sexuality and race.

[26] Project Respect is a group that works towards raising awareness about sexual violence and engaging the public in critical thinking about rape and consent. Their website, yesmeansyes.com, offers resources for sexual education as well as access to a 24-hour crisis hotline.

Under this framework, each of the sexual unions in the *Reeve's Tale* and the *Shipman's Tale* could be defined as non-consensual sex, or rape.[27] In the *Reeve's Tale*, neither Simkin's wife nor his daughter Malyne offer clear, enthusiastic yeses to their sexual partners. In the *Shipman's Tale*, the merchant's wife agrees to sex with John, but under false pretenses; using a modern consent framework, this agreement would be deemed sexual coercion and therefore could also be defined as rape. Each of these instances, when defined as rape under this modern framework, suggests that women had no agency to accept or reject sexual advances in these stories; the implication could follow that perhaps women lacked agency to consent to sexual intercourse in medieval England in general. Therefore, if a modern writer were to set up similar scenarios with matching outcomes in their own narrative, we might classify the piece as problematic and anti-feminist. However, we must remember that Chaucer did not write his fabliaux in this modern context and that these "yes means yes" and "active consent" frameworks did not exist when Chaucer was writing. Therefore, though we can acknowledge that the implications of these stories for modern women could be quite upsetting, we must be careful not to evaluate Chaucer based on frameworks that did not exist during his time. Instead, we must evaluate Chaucer's commitment to female empowerment and equality based on the medieval context in which he wrote his fabliaux.

SECTION 1: THE *REEVE'S TALE*

Introduction to the Reeve's Tale

In the *Reeve's Tale*, Chaucer implies that people with wit win in the end. The tale recounts the exploits of two witty young clerks, John and Alan, who seek revenge on a

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[27] Each instance will be described in detail later in Chapter 2.

"deynous," or haughty, miller named Simkin (3941). When Simkin steals an outrageous amount

of corn and meal—"An hundred tyme moore" than he had previously stolen—from their

college's manciple, John and Alan decide to go to the mill and watch the miller closely during

his next job (3996). However, Simkin senses that the clerks are watching him, so he sets free

their horse to cause a distraction. While John and Aleyn are searching for their steed—a task that

takes "til that it was verray nyght"—Simkin steals "half a busshel of hir flour" and tells his wife

to bake the stolen flour into bread (4103). When the two clerks finally catch their horse, they

realize they have been robbed, and they devise a plan to get back at the miller. Their plan

involves asking to lodge in Simkin's small house, where Simkin, his wife, their young baby, and

their twenty-year-old daughter, Malyne, all sleep "in the same chambre" (4143). During the

night, Alan sneaks up on and has sex with Malyne. John, jealous of how Alan is having "his

nedes sped," moves the baby's cradle away from Simkin's bed and places it next to his own

while the wife is "out to pisse" (4205, 4215). When the wife mistakes John's bed for her own

based on the placement of the cradle, John initiates a vigorous session of lovemaking (4215). In

the morning, Alan—also fooled by the new cradle placement—unwittingly enters Simkin's bed

recounts his night of debauchery to Simkin. In a rage, Simkin starts to fight Alan and trips,

waking his wife, who is distraught upon realizing someone has fallen on her during her slumber.

The wife attempts to hit who she thinks is Alan over the head with a club. Instead, she hits "the

millere on the pyled skulle," allowing John and Alan to beat the miller, getting away with their

meal and their baked flour.

     However, John, Alan, and Simkin are not the only main characters in this tale. Equally

important to the *Reeve's Tale* is the Reeve himself, Oswald. Oswald tells his tale as a reaction to

the tale immediately preceding his own—the *Miller's Tale*. This tale, told by Robin the Miller,

recounts the cuckolding of a foolish old carpenter named John by his cunning, beautiful wife Alison and the young clerk Nicholas. Oswald the Reeve, because "he [is] of carpenteris craft," resents the Miller's negative portrayal of carpenters (3861). Oswald's tale about a foolish miller is therefore a direct response to Robin's tale about a foolish carpenter. The Reeve's biases against millers are integral to the tale.

With the Reeve's biases in mind, I break this section up into four distinct arguments. First, I argue that John and Alan derive their power over Simkin and his family from their wit; they are responsible for the irony and bawdry of the tale and use it ultimately to get their revenge. On the other hand, the women in the tale lack wit and therefore lack sexual agency. My second argument analyses this disempowerment of women in the tale as a function of the Reeve's biases against Robin the Miller. Because the Miller's tale features an empowered woman, perhaps the Reeve purposefully disempowers the women in his tale to further discredit Robin's story. Given the Reeve's biases, my last two arguments deal directly with the interaction of the clerks and Simkin's wife and daughter. First, though I concede that even under a medieval framework the sex between John and Simkin's wife might be considered rape, I argue that the sexism inherent in their union can be attributed to the Reeve rather than Chaucer. Second, I argue that using this same medieval framework, the sex between Malyne and Alan would not be considered rape by Chaucer or his audience. By attributing sexism to the Reeve and evaluating each "rape" in a medieval context, I aim to disprove claims that the *Reeve's Tale* displays Chaucer's anti-feminist sentiment.

Men with Wit: John and Alan

John and Alan, more so than any other characters in the tale, have power and agency. They are, indeed, the classic "tricksters" and "deceivers" of the fabliaux, and true to genre,

Chaucer does nothing to create a sense of sympathy in his audience toward their unwitting

victims. However, these victims—Simkin, his wife, and his daughter—are not tricked simply for

the sake of being tricked; rather, they are deceived as a result of their own ignorance. These three

characters completely lack wit and humor, and their antics are amusing to the audience only as a

reaction to the wit and humor of John and Alan. Chaucer paints John and Alan as men with

wit—and therefore power—through their manipulation of the fabliau's dramatic irony, bawdy

actions, and raunchy *double entendres*.

Although Alan at one point briefly becomes the victim of the tale's dramatic irony when

he unknowingly tells Simkin of his exploits with Malyne, in the end, both clerks ultimately

manipulate this comedic device to their advantage. A major ironic element of the tale is

mismatched identities; the motif appears four times, including when John tricks the wife into his

bed, when Alan mistakes Simkin for John, when the wife mistakes John for Simkin, and when

the wife hits her husband over the head instead of Alan. These instances of mismatched identities

ultimately allow John and Alan to beat the miller—both physically and in the grander sense of

the word. It is John himself who sets up this motif by taking the cradle "in his hand" and placing

it "softe unto his beddes feet" (4212-4213). Upon realizing that Alan is enjoying a "wikked jape"

with "the milleris doghter in his arm," John realizes he must make a bold move, lest he be "halde

a daf, a cokenay" by the others who hear of this tale (4201, 4204, 4208). His action is therefore

purposefully brazen, because he insists that those who are not bold are unlucky: "I wil arise and

auntre it, by my fayth!/ Unhardy is unseely, thus men sayth" (4209-4210). He realizes he is

taking a chance, but the chance pays off—he gets revenge on Simkin by sleeping with his wife.

In a way, John momentarily resembles the author of the tale; he creates a situation in which only

he and the audience are in the know. Not even his fellow clerk is in on the joke; this lack of

shared information results in Alan accidentally telling Simkin of his exploits, yet it also protects him when the wife thought she "hit this Aleyn at the fulle," and instead "smoot the millere on the pyled skulle" (4305-4306). Therefore, the ironic situation John creates paints him as a comedic mastermind, a title that ultimately benefits both him and his fellow clerk.

Yet, John is not the only witty clerk in the pair. Rather than in ironic situations, Alan's wit lies in puns and *double entendre*s. Upon meeting Simkin at the mill, "Aleyn spak first," asking the miller "'Hou fares thy faire doghter and thy wyf?'" (4022-4023). At first, this seems like a harmless—and perhaps polite, familiar—greeting. It is clearly not John and Alan's first visit to the mill. However, later in the tale, this initial greeting has a much raunchier significance. Given the two clerks' impending relations with Simkin's wife and daughter, Alan's opening acts as a sort of playful wink to the audience, foreshadowing the bawdy scenes to come. Additionally, he makes a direct pun right before engaging with Malyne, dependent on the double meaning of "esement":[28]

> "For, John," seyde he, "als evere moot I thryve,
> If that I may, yon wenche wil I swyve.
> Some **esement** has lawe yshapen us,
> For, John, ther is a lawe that says thus:
> That gif a man in a point be agreved,
> That in another he sal be releved.
> 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 amendment
> Agayn my los, I wil have **esement**.
> By Goddes sal, it sal neen other bee!" (4177-4187)

The Middle English Dictionary (MED) offers one definition of "esement" as "compensation" or "redress"; therefore, in this speech, Alan insists that he is entitled to and will indeed seek redress

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[28] The emphasis on "esement" in the quote is my own, for the sake of clarity.

for Simkin's wrongs. However, scholar Thomas W. Ross[29] points out that this redress, or

"esement," certainly had a double meaning to Alan and Chaucer: "Aleyn, the lively clerk in the

'Reeve's Tale' uses this word in the learned (being a clerk) legal sense, but also in the sense of

intercourse" (Ross 84). Ross points to another definition of "esement" in medieval England—

"Relief of the body by evacuation" (MED). Alan therefore again utilizes a bawdy double

meaning to elicit audience laughter and to take control of the situation in the fabliau.

Although Simkin also succeeds at trickery in the beginning of the fabliau by stealing

from the manciple and untying the clerks' horse, his trickery is not particularly witty or funny to

the audience. Simkin lacks power because he lacks wit; any jokes he does make, he makes

unknowingly. For example, in an aside to the audience where Simkin implies John and Alan will

never fool him, he unknowingly makes a pun foreshadowing the impending sex between John,

Alan, his wife, and Malyne: "The moore queynte crekes that they make,/ the moore wol I stele

whan I take" (4051-4052). Ross points out that "queynte" in Middle English was a vulgar way to

refer to the vagina, synonymous with the Modern English word "cunt." However, "queynte"

could also mean curious, strange, elaborate, graceful, neat—the list goes on (Ross 175).

"Crekes," on the other hand, could mean cracks, clefts, or tricks (Ross 65). Ross indicates that

Simkin "suspects that the clerks will make 'queynte crekes' glossed as 'clever tricks.'" The

clerks are indeed up to some clever tricks, but not the tricks Simkin means to imply. Ross

suggest that John and Alan "also become closely acquainted with the 'queyntes' of their host's

wife and daughter," an implication Simkin certainly did not intend (Ross 178). By unknowingly

uttering a bawdy pun about his own wife and daughter, Simkin identifies himself as an ignorant

character. Simkin is not in control of the irony and bawdry of his situation because he lacks wit;

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[29] Thomas W. Ross offers this definition in his book *Chaucer's Bawdy*, a text discussed in the introduction of this thesis.

consequently, he holds no power in the tale. It is therefore not only the miller's wife and daughter who lack agency in the fabliaux; Simkin himself lacks influence over his own situation.

The Reeve's Influence on His Tale

Though the women are not the only characters lacking agency in the fabliau, women in the *Reeve's Tale* are sexually disempowered in a way that men are not. Saunders points out that, particularly, "the Reeve depicts a world where men make the economic transactions." As discussed in Alan's speech about esement and redress, Saunders agrees that the clerks seem to think "sex will effect a reversal of circumstance, 'amendment' against the loss caused by Simkin's theft of their grain" (Saunders 299). The women in the tale are, then, depreciated to the value of the clerks' stolen flour and meal. The sex both clerks engage in "becomes both the means of revenge and the source of male competition, while the woman is silent, her body objectified and used as currency" (Saunders 300). This negative view of women cannot be ignored; however, the tale's portrayal of women can be attributed more to the Reeve than to Chaucer. The *Reeve's Tale* has a particularly strong bond between teller and tale; as previously discussed, Oswald the Reeve's tale is a direct reaction to Robin the Miller's tale. Oswald expresses his displeasure with Robin's tale as early as the *Miller's Prologue*; once Oswald hears the story will be about a foolish carpenter, he attempts to stop the tale from being told:

> The Reve answerde and seyde, "Stynt thy clappe!
> Lat be thy lewed drunken harlotrye.
> It is a synne and eek a greet folye
> To apeyren any man, or hym defame,
> And eek to bryngen wyves in swich fame.
> Thou mayst ynogh of othere thynges seyn." (3144-3149)

In this passage, the Reeve reveals his own hypocrisy. Though Oswald admonishes the Miller for telling a tale of ribaldry, Chaucer the pilgrim notes that "The Millere is a cherl; ye

know wel this./ So was the Reve eek and othere mo,/ And harlotrie they tolden bothe two" (3182-3184). As a churl himself, Oswald does not hold back in his revenge against Robin. After hearing Robin's tale—and after a failed attempt at preaching to the other pilgrims using lofty language—Oswald resigns himself to his ultimate goal: to "quite anoon," or deliver payback, to the Miller by using the Miller's own "cherles termes" (3916-3917). His anger is quite violent; Oswald remarks "I pray to God his nekke mote to-breke," and indeed, the miller in his tale is severely beaten (3918).

The sex between the clerks and the women in the tale is also violent and perhaps a reaction to the preceding tale. In his quest for revenge, the Reeve seeks retribution from all characters who wronged the carpenter in the *Miller's Tale*—both the Miller himself as teller of the tale and the Miller's empowered female character, Alison. Therefore, the Reeve's disempowerment of women in his own tale can be seen as a direct response to the empowered Alison in the *Miller's Tale*. The Reeve is generally an unfavorable, ill-tempered character; in the General Prologue, Chaucer the pilgrim even describes Oswald as a "sclendre colerik man" (587). Saunders agrees that this negativity towards women seems more the Reeve's than Chaucer's, noting that "the tale seems finally to work against its narrator, by opposing the reductive view of sex as revenge and the objectification of women" present in the fabliau (Saunders 300).

Sex as Revenge

What is the implication, then, of this sex-as-revenge model? In a modern context, this sex would certainly be labeled rape; but would this sex be considered the shocking crime of *raptus* to Chaucer and his audience? Let us consider both passages in full, starting with what could be considered the more troubling of the two in a modern sense—sex between John and Simkin's wife:

> But faire and wel she creep in to the clerk,
> And lith ful stille, and wolde han caught a sleep.
> 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. (4226-4233)

First, the wife is tricked into John's bed; it is clearly not her conscious choice to have sex with the clerk. John quite literally leaps on the wife, giving her no choice to consent to sex, and failing to identify himself as one of clerks. Yet, the Reeve implies that the wife thoroughly enjoyed herself; though she does not give a yes to John, she also does not give him a no. However, when the wife wakes to being trod on by who she thinks is John, she makes her lack of consent to any physical contact clear, calling to her husband for help: "Awak, Symond! The feend is on me falle./ Myn herte is broken; help! I nam but deed!/ Ther lyth oon upon my wombe and on myn heed" (4288-4290). The wife does not realize, of course, that it is her husband who has fallen on her in the night. Either way, we see no consent to this sex either before or after the fact.

Given this lack of consent after the fact, I would concede that this act could qualify as *raptus* in a medieval context. As explored in Chapter 1, Westminster II states that a woman could provide consent to sex/abduction before or after the fact: "It is provided that henceforth if a man ravishes a married woman, a maiden, or other woman, without her consent before or afterwards, he shall have judgement of life and limb" (Westminster II). While the crime of *raptus* was linked heavily to abduction and virginity, Westminster II allows the legal definition of *raptus* to include married women. Though I would still deem this instance *raptus*, a key issue in this instance seems to be adultery. Other social and ecclesiastical norms, including a wife's inability to accuse her husband of rape—deemed "the marital exemption"—are further explored in Chapter 3.

While this *raptus* is supposed to elicit laughs from the audience, I would argue that Chaucer shifts the blame of laughing at *raptus* from himself to the Reeve by so heavily connecting the pilgrim to the tale. It is the Reeve who suggests the wife quite enjoyed her romp with the young clerk, despite being jumped on in the middle of the night: "So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yoore" (4230). With his sexist assumption that the wife—and perhaps all women—enjoy *raptus* to some extent, the Reeve, rather than Chaucer, implies that being tricked or coerced into sex can be a jolly or even funny affair. The Reeve's word choice when describing the sex between John and the wife further demonstrates his disregard for women. The sex is quite violent; despite the fact that John both "on this goode wyf…leith on soore" and "priketh harde and depe as he were mad," Oswald ignores the violence and claims the wife had a great time (4229, 4231). These passages in particular suggest that perhaps Oswald even believes women enjoy the sexual violence perpetrated against them.

Additionally, Oswald's depiction of the wife during coitus is quite demeaning and implies that she, to some extent, wanted or deserved this *raptus*. Ross points out that "pricketh" as a synonym for penetration "does not really occur very often in Chaucer," and rather usually means "to spur a horse" (Ross 167). However, he agrees in this instance that Oswald is making a horse-riding pun; the Reeve offers the vivid image of John riding the wife as he would a horse.[30] Perhaps the Reeve even uses this metaphor as part of John's revenge against Simkin for untying his horse. Indeed, the wife plays a part in this trick: "The wyf cam lepynge inward with a ren./ She seyde, 'Allas! youre hors goth to the fen/ With wilde mares,[31] as faste as he may go" (4079-4081). Does she then want or deserve this violent intercourse? The Reeve certainly thinks so; he

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[30] In a modern context, the use of "pricketh" could also have a third meaning; however, Ross admits that "the noun 'prick' for penis was not yet in use" (Ross 167).
[31] One can imagine what the wife implies John and Alan's horse is doing out in the fields with the wild mares.

also makes a point earlier in his tale to describe the wife as "light" and "jolyf" with her "whistle

wel ywet" (4154-4155). Ross points out that "joly" in Chaucer's works almost always is

"associated with the play between sexes"; he also suggests that "light" could, in this instance,

have meant "morally irresponsible" (Ross 120, 136). However, the OED shows Chaucer using

"light" in the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* and *Tale* to mean "lightly armed or equipped" (OED).

Therefore, the Reeve could be implying that because the wife's whistle is wet with drink, she is

deserving of unwanted intercourse because her defenses are down. However, the supposition that

the wife both enjoyed the unwanted sex and perhaps deserved it is distinctly the Reeve's, due to

his ulterior motive of discrediting empowered women in the *Miller's Tale* by disempowering

women in his own tale. In this way, Chaucer exposes the Reeve, rather than himself, as a sexist.

While the sex between John and the wife is clearly violent, the sex between Alan and

Malyne is not as easy to categorize as *raptus*:

> 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. (4192-4298)

Again, the Reeve offers the image of a sleeping "wenche" being pounced upon during the night.

This instance seems particularly troubling because Alan makes a point to creep up on Malyne so

she will not see him and therefore will not cry out until it is "to late" (4296). However, this

troubling image is made slightly less troubling when Malyne says goodbye to her bedfellow:

"'Now, deere lemman,' quod she, 'go, far weel!'" Malyne's designation of Alan as her

"lemman," or lover, rather than her ravisher, implies that, at some point, the sex became—or

always was— consensual. Malyne goes on to tell Alan where to find the cake, or loaf of bread,

that her family made with the stolen flour. She tenderly wishes Alan goodbye, regretful of her part in her father's deceitful game: "'And, goode lemman, God thee save and kepe!'/ And with that word almoost she gan to wepe" (4247-4248).

It is possible that Malyne and Alan had been lovers much longer than this one night; both Malyne's tender goodbye to her "lemman" and the fact that Alan asks Simkin about his wife and daughter earlier in the tale hint that the two might have had a previous relationship. The baby in the cradle is another clue that Malyne and Alan might be long-term lovers; the Reeve mentions that Simkin and his wife have a daughter, Malyne, "Of twenty yeer, withouten any mo,/ Savynge a child that was half yeer age" (3970-3971). It is curious that Simkin and his wife would have two children so far apart in age; perhaps the child's real father is Alan and his mother is Malyne, rather than Simkin and his wife. At twenty years old, Malyne would certainly be closer to childbearing age than her mother. Though a previous sexual relationship is not enough to assume consent under a modern framework, these circumstances in a medieval context could imply that Malyne and Alan's sex was consensual and perhaps that Alan did not take Malyne's virginity— at least not on that particular night. The consent Malyne offers after sex, according to Westminster II, is a valid form of consent; I would therefore argue that Chaucer's intent was not to display this sex as *raptus*.

In one instance, then, Chaucer's audience may have considered the sex *raptus*, but in another, he almost certainly defines the sex as consensual. Chaucer himself would have been familiar with the legal codes, having been a member of Parliament and having experienced the law himself through the Chaumpaigne case. However, given the questionable nature of defining these cases as *raptus*, Chaucer's emphasis as author of the fabliau does not seem to be the shocking perpetration of a legal crime against women. Rather, while the disempowerment of

women can be attributed to the Reeve, Chaucer's own emphasis is simply that unwitty male and female people suffer consequences. In the case of Simkin's wife, a woman is fooled by mismatched identities—both in sleeping with the wrong man and attacking another wrong man with a club. The wife goes unnamed throughout the entire tale, further emphasizing her lack of autonomy and this motif of unknown identities. On the other hand, in the case of Malyne, a woman loses respect and value in the eyes of her father. Simkin prides himself on the purity of his daughter because he wants to marry her off to the parson of the town; when Simkin is told that Malyne is no longer pure, he is distraught: "Who dorste be so boold to disparage/ My doghter, that is come of swich lynage?" (4271-4272). In both instances, Chaucer attempts to point to the irony of the situation rather than the images of violence against women. It is the Reeve, rather, whose vulgar images aim to disempower women. At the end of the falbiau, Oswald articulates that his ultimate goal has been achieved: "His wyf is swyved, and his doghter als./ Lo, swich it is a millere to be fals!" (4317-4318).

SECTION 2: THE *SHIPMAN'S TALE*

Introduction to the Shipman's Tale

In the *Shipman's Tale*, Chaucer offers another image of intercourse that could today be identified as rape. The Shipman launches into a raunchy story about a "riche" French merchant, his wife "of excellent beautee," and a "boold" young monk named John (2, 3, 25). Because the merchant considers young John to be part of his family, he often invites John to his home, and indeed, the monk "was famulier…/As it is possible any freend to be" at the merchant's house (31-32). The merchant spends much of his time at home counting the money in "His books and

his bagges," leaving little time to pay attention to his wife (82). One early morning, the merchant's wife comes upon John while walking in the garden. John asks why the wife is so upset, and she confides in him about her dismay over her husband's lack of attention—in and out of bed. She tells John she needs "An hundred frankes" to pay for new clothing. Suddenly, grabbing her "by the flankes" and kissing her, John admits his desire for her and agrees to lend her the money when the merchant leaves for his trip to Bruges (201-202). John goes to the merchant to ask for the money, insisting the loan is for "For certein beestes that [he] moste beye," and the merchant happily obliges, unaware that the "beeste" John intends to buy is actually his wife (272). When the merchant is on his trip, John comes to the house with the money; the wife agrees that "for thise hundred frankes he sholde al nyght/ Have hire in his armes bolt upright" (315-316). The two spend their night "In myrthe," and John leaves the house without suspicion the next day (318). However, when the merchant comes back from his trip, he inquires about his loan with John; the monk tells the merchant that he gave the gold to the wife without specifying the terms of their agreement. At home, while they are enjoying a night in bed, the merchant scolds his wife for not telling him John's loan had already been "payed/ By redy token" (389-390). Though the wife expresses her frustration that John did not keep their arrangement a secret, the merchant does not catch onto the sexual nature of John and the wife's agreement. She admits that she used the money for clothes and promises to repay her husband with her "joly body" in bed (422). The merchant happily agrees to this proposition and forgives his wife, warning her not to be so generous again.

The *Shipman's Tale*, unlike the *Reeve's Tale*, lacks a prologue and a strong connection to the pilgrim telling the tale. The original assignment of the *Shipman's Tale* is a point of contention among scholars; based on the female pronouns used in lines 11-19, many believe

Chaucer's intention was initially to assign this tale to the Wife of Bath. These lines indeed seem to be spoken by a wife:

> 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,
> And if that he noght may, par aventure,
> Or ellis list no swich dispence endure,
> But thynketh it is wasted and ylost,
> Thanne moot another payen for oure cost,
> Or lene us gold, and that is perilous. (11-19)

Because the only other female pilgrims are holy women—and as holy women, they would not tell such raunchy tales—many assume the original speaker was the Wife of Bath and that Chaucer forgot to change these lines upon assigning the story to the Shipman. Additionally, a strong case can be made for the Wife of Bath because her tale is about what women desire; similarly, the wife in the Shipman's tale speaks of the six desires of all women. However, scholar Robert L. Chapman disagrees; in his article "The Shipman's Tale Was Meant for the Shipman," Chapman argues that this wife-focused passage follows a husband-focused passage and perhaps was just a dramatic flair on the part of the Shipman:

> It is likely that [the Shipman] can tell an entertaining story with some flair, even with touches of mimicry. Such a raconteur would speak the burgher's lines in a rueful basso, and the wife's in a piping falsetto, and thus fitly set the characters and the theme of his story. This is precisely what the Shipman does, and such a reading transforms one of Chaucer's "inconsistencies" into a slight but pleasing dramatic stroke. (Chapman 5)

Chapman's argument is convincing. However, scholar Peter Nicholson, in his article "The 'Shipman's Tale' and the Fabliaux," offers an equally convincing argument that the intended teller of the Shipman's Tale is not as important as the tale itself. Nicholson positions the Chaucerian persona as the true teller of the tale:

The 'Shipman's Tale' must take no explicit position at the expense of any of the characters because it is his good-humored willingness to portray their way of life uncritically that allows the multiple incongruities of the poem to emerge. The narrator is less likely any of these pilgrims therefore than he is like the persona that Chaucer customarily adopted when speaking in his own name… Chaucer's final choice of the Shipman is neither inappropriate nor significantly appropriate, and shows most clearly that the meaning of the tale depends less upon its assignment than it does on the unprecedented way in which the poet made use of the model provided by the fabliaux. (Nicholson 594)

I am inclined to agree with Nicholson; the tale shows no true bias towards one particular character, be it the Shipman or the Wife of Bath. Though Chaucer does assign the tale to the Shipman, the separation between Chaucer and the teller of the tale is less pronounced than it is in the *Reeve's Tale*. Because Chaucer's own purpose is easier to pin down without this extra layer of narrative, we can therefore make a more direct connection between Chaucer's characters and his intentions than in the previous tale.

With this lack of separation between Chaucer and the tale's narrator in mind, we can move to the issue of *raptus*. While the sexual coercion between John and the merchant's wife might be deemed rape today, I argue that Chaucer and his audience would certainly not label this instance *raptus* nor would they have considered this sex nonconsensual or violent. Rather, the woman in the tale shows a surprising amount of sexual agency, especially when contrasted to the stories on which Chaucer based the story. John is clearly the comic mastermind in the tale, manipulating both the irony and bawdry of the story to his own benefit, and the merchant is the clear loser, cuckolded and swindled out of money because he lacks any comic wit. The wife is neither clear winner nor loser; though she ultimately is tricked because she does not have control over the dramatic irony in the tale, she does use her bawdy wit to get what she wants to some degree.

Raptus *in the Shipman's Tale*

In a medieval context, the sex between John and the wife does not seem as disempowering as a modern framework might suggest. Though Saunders argues that, like the *Reeve's Tale*, the *Shipman's Tale* "also presents sex as commodity," she admits that, in this instance, "the woman sells her own body" rather than the man controlling the financial transactions (Saunders 299). This willing transaction—sex for 100 Francs—is much closer to prostitution than *raptus*. The statutes of Westminster provided legal redress for women in cases of nonconsensual abductions and/or sex; this definition of *raptus* certainly did not expand to include nuances such as sexual coercion where force or threat of violence were not present. Chaucer portrays the union between the two characters as consensual. The Shipman recalls that the wife seems to name her own terms: "This faire wyf acorded with daun John" to sleep with him for 100 Francs. Additionally, in his tale, the Shipman implies that both participants equally enjoyed themselves, a striking contrast to the condescending sexism of the Reeve: "In myrthe al nyght a bisy lyf they lede/ Til it was day, that daun John wente his way,/ And bad the meynee 'Farewel, have good day!'" (*Shipman* 318-320). Though the wife is ultimately deceived by John, this deception certainly would have been perceived as trickery rather than *raptus* by a medieval audience.

Rather than a wife tricked into *raptus*, Chaucer portrays a woman who has been tricked out of a business deal. Indeed, the wife's "momentary anger at the monk makes it clear that it is in business not amatory affairs that she feels she has been cheated, and when she acknowledges her "disjoynt" (411) it is only in financial terms" (Nicholson 591-592). And though she is tricked, the wife's agreement with John is more sexually empowering than disempowering. The wife enters into the deal first and foremost to get money—which she does obtain. Her larger goal

is to catch the attention of her husband and enjoy better sex with him—another objective she achieves. In her quest, she also enjoys sex with John, who Chaucer portrays as a much younger and more virile man than her husband. Though ultimately the wife does end up tricked by John in the end, she does express some sexual agency in her position. Again, this illustrates Chaucer's permission of agency as a function of wit. The wittiest character, John, deceives the least witty character, the merchant, and the wife is left somewhere in between. The wife's role—neither full trickster nor fully tricked—remains in the middle because the wife does not completely lack wit in the tale; though she does not manipulate the irony of the tale, she does draw limited power from her use of bawdy humor and raunchy puns.

Characters with wit—and those without

The young monk John is the clear comedic mastermind of the tale. John controls the dramatic irony in the story as an author would—only he and the audience know all details of his trickery. He leverages his close relationship with the merchant to borrow money and have sex with his beautiful wife and then uses his deal with the wife as a disguised excuse not to pay back the money. As the Host indicates after the Shipman finishes his tale, the monk's clever bargains allow him to "putt in the mannes hood an ape"; he warns the party of pilgrims to "beth ware of swich a jape" (439-440). Nicholson points out that an important part of John's clever jape is the "alarming frankness" in which he conducts his affairs; "in this poem," he argues, "it is that which is not stated openly that is most striking" (Nicholson 589). Nicholson refers to a particular conversation between John and the merchant as as an example:

> The richest irony occurs in the conversation between the two men. The monk…
> mentions very courteously his need for a sum of money, "For certain beestes that
> I moste beye" (272). His request has a striking appropriateness both to his normal
> professional activity and to his real need for the loan. The merchant's reply
> unwittingly acknowledges both: "Now sikerly this is a smal requeste./ My gold is

youres, whan that it yow leste,/ And nat oonly my gold, but my chaffare" (283-285). (Nicholson 590)

John's ability to talk so frankly without the merchant suspecting his scheme—and the fact that it is so funny—clearly demonstrate John's power over the plot and outcome of the tale.

Yet it is not only through irony that John draws his power. John is also master of the *double entendre*. The garden scene alone is enough proof of John's mastery. In the Shipman's introduction of John, he foreshadows John's erotic aims, remarking that the young monk was well "Aqueynted" with the merchant. This word, derived from queynt, signifies "knowledge of a woman's private parts" (Ross 33). John himself confirms the double meaning of the word by repeating it in the garden; he admits to the wife that his relationship with the merchant has only been "To have the moore cause of aqueyntaunce" to her (152). Indeed, he intends to acquaint himself with her queynt soon enough. John shows his wit and bawdry again in the garden when he asks the wife why she is so pale: "'I trowe, certes, that oure goode man/ Hath yow laboured sith the nyght bigan/ That yow were need to resen hastily'" (107-109). This allusion to sex is less veiled; John "very boldly suggests that his host's wife is pale because she has been kept up by her husband" in bed (Ross 128). Additionally, when he proclaims his love for the wife in the following lines, he "swere[s]… on [his] professioun" that his love is true (155). Quite literally, he is swearing on his profession as a monk—on his chastity vows—that he wants to have sex with a married woman. This declaration is bold, and indeed, it is John's bold vulgarity that gives him his power in the tale.

John's manipulation of the merchant is also specific to *double entendre*. However, in this case, it is the merchant's unwitting use of *double entendre* that solidifies John's power. The Shipman hints at this relationship in the beginning of the tale when he says that the merchant sent a messenger to John "That he sholde come to Seint-Denys to pley/ With hym and with his

wyf a day or tweye" (59-60). The word "pley" is of particular interest; this word often had a double meaning in Chaucer's works. The OED offers multiple definitions of the word, including both to occupy oneself and to engage in sexual intercourse. In this instance, the merchant therefore unknowingly invites John to his home to sexually "pley" with his wife. Additionally, when offering the loan of 100 Francs to John, the merchant offers "nat oonly my gold, but my chaffare" to the monk; though the merchant intends "chaffare" to mean goods or wares, he unknowingly offers up his wife as a sexual object (Ross 55). The merchant unwittingly uses another *double entendre* when chiding his wife for being so "large," or generous; he means for her to be less generous with his money, unaware that the real generosity has been with her body (431, Ross 129). Therefore, though townsmen in Saint-Denis "helde hym wys," the merchant's own ignorance to jokes and puns in the tale proves that, to Chaucer, wisdom is not the same as wit, and that witty men—rather than wise or rich men—win in the end (1).

The wife's wit and subsequent power are trickier to define than John's or the merchant's. The wife does, to some extent, have wit—and therefore, to some extent, she does have agency. However, the wife is also duped in the end, suggesting that she is not as powerful as the young monk John. The wife gets duped in the end because she is not manipulating the dramatic irony of the tale. Unlike John, the wife has no control over the master plan; both the audience and John stay more informed than her. However, the wife's suffering due to her lack of influence on the irony of the tale is not very dire. She does get tricked, but she easily smooths things over with her husband, who does not find out the truth behind her dealings with John. Additionally, in her article "Domestic Opportunities: The Social Comedy of the 'Shipman's Tale,'" scholar Cathy Hume points out that the wife's punishments are relatively less severe than they are in the stories from which Chaucer drew inspiration:

> The closest analogues to the *Shipman's Tale*, Boccaccio's *Decameron* 8.1 and
> Sercambi's *Novella* 19, end with the adulterous wife tricked out of payment for
> sex by her lover's double-dealings, humiliated by him in her own home in front of
> her husband and servants, and morally condemned in the bargain. Chaucer, by
> contrast, allows the wife to keep the money, avoid all exposure, and finish the tale
> happy and uncensured. Moreover, he transforms the story from one about a
> lover's plan to dupe the avaricious object of his desire (where the focus, and our
> sympathy, is with the male lover) into one about a housewife's endeavors to pay
> her dress bill without arousing her husband's annoyance. (Hume 138)

Chaucer's version certainly gives more agency to the wife. Though she does not manipulate the irony of the tale, this agency perhaps arises due to the wife's control of bawdy humor in the story. If John is the king of puns, then the wife is the queen; within her first few lines, the wife is already making puns about her husband's erectile dysfunction:

> "Nay, cosyn myn, it stant nat so with me;
> For, by that God that yaf me soule and lyf,
> In al the reawme of France is ther no wyf,
> That lasse lust hath to that sory pley.
> For I may synge 'allas and weylawey
> That I was born,' but to no wight," quod she,
> Dar I nat telle how that it stant with me." (114-120)

Ross insists that, in this instance, "stant" means "to make the penis stand; to have (get) an erection" (Ross 208). The wife is equally bawdy when describing the six things women desire, two of which are a husband who is "buxom unto his wyf" and "fressh abedde" (177). Buxom, in this case, means obedient or willing; fresh, on the other hand, "is so often associated with sexual prowess that it can almost be taken as a synonym" (Ross 89). The wife lays it out simply: she wants a husband who is obedient and skilled in bed, yet her reality is a husband who is unable to keep an erection. She therefore uses her wit to express her desires—and to obtain them.

Though Chaucer displays sex as a commodity in this tale, he also offers the image of a sexually empowered woman. Rather than portraying the sex between John and the wife as

raptus, he displays it as a lucrative business deal for both parties. Although ultimately, the deal is broken and the wife is duped, Chaucer allows the wife to retain some agency based on her control of bawdy and raunchy humor. His portrayal of women in this tale certainly leaves room for the proto-feminist reading explored in the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

Today, the *Reeve's Tale* and *Shipman's Tale* offer troubling images of raped women as pawns in male-dominated transactions of pleasure and revenge. However, when analyzed in a medieval context, the tales offer a positive view of women in the Middle Ages. The sexism in the *Reeve's Tale* can largely be accredited to the Reeve himself rather than Chaucer; the Reeve makes a point to disempower women in his tale as a reaction to empowered women in the *Miller's Tale*. The Reeve's use of sexual violence against women as comic retribution therefore says more about the Reeve than it does about Chaucer. On the other hand, in the *Shipman's Tale*, Chaucer uses sex as an economic transaction to empower women. In each tale, power and agency are rewarded to characters based on wit—specifically, manipulation of dramatic irony and bawdy puns. Though each story does not offer strong enough evidence to prove Chaucer's proto-feminist stance, both instances certainly clear the way for this argument in Chapter 3 by refuting anti-feminist claims.

Chapter 3: May and Alison as Women with Wit

INTRODUCTION

In Part II of his article "Chaucer, the Merchant, and their Tale: Getting Beyond Old Controversies," scholar Emerson Brown, Jr. argues that "There is simply too much antifeminism in Chaucer's works for him to be casually absolved from the prejudices of his sex and age" (Brown 245).[32] Brown's point is valid; there is nothing to gain from a casual exemption of sexism in Chaucer's works. However, I argue that there is certainly much to gain from a close analysis of Chaucer's powerful, witty women. This chapter does not aim to "casually absolve" Chaucer from medieval prejudices; rather, I aim to prove the author's proto-feminist stance through his equation of wit with power. In both the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*, Chaucer portrays sexually empowered women who manipulate the bawdry and the irony of their tales. Both women draw power from these comedic devices and use their power to ultimately evade consequence. As a poet, Chaucer himself surely recognized that his own power came from wit; Chaucer therefore aligns himself with womanly wile by proving that witty women possess power.

SECTION 1: THE *MERCHANT'S TALE*

***Introduction to the* Merchant's Tale**

The *Merchant's Tale* follows the story of the sixty-year-old January, a once "worthy knyght," in his quest for a happy marriage (1246). Specifically, January is searching for a

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[32] Part I and II of Brown's article explore the popular controversies surrounding the Merchant's Tale, including the intended teller of the tale and the discrepancy between the Merchant's unhappiness with his wife and the cheery nature of the tale.

beautiful, young wife; despite his age, he tells his close friends that he is searching for a young woman "nat passe twenty yeer," because he "wol in noon oold wyf han in no manere" (1416-1417). While one friend, Placebo, supports January's search for a young wife, the married Justinus—a voice of reason among the old men—warns January that "it is no childes pley/ To take a wyf withouten avysement" (1530-1531). Yet, January ignores Justinus's advice, choosing to marry a twenty-year-old townswoman named May with low birth but great beauty. January hurries through his wedding night, eager to "go to bedde" with his new bride (1806). As January consummates the marriage, May's disgust towards her new husband is clear—the "thikke brustles of his berd" are "sharp as brere" and the "slakke skyn aboute his nekke shaketh" (1824-1825, 1849).

Meanwhile, January's young manservant Damian falls ill, lovestruck by the beautiful new woman of the house. January does not know the cause of his servant's illness, so he sends May to "conforten in siknesse/ His squier" (1918-1919). When May comes to visit, Damian slips her a note that she hides "inwith hir bosom"; the note details Damian's love for May (1944). May, also of low birth, decides she loves Damian too, "Though he namoore hadde than his sherte," and slips him a letter granting him "hire verray grace" (1985, 1997). But the two young lovers are unable to find a time or place to meet under January's watchful gaze. The problem of January's gaze is soon eliminated when he goes blind; however, without his sight to watch over his fresh wife, January becomes a jealous old man and insists he must have a "hond on hire alway" (2091). May nonetheless hatches a plan to meet with Damian in January's secret garden, imprinting January's key with warm wax and handing it off to Damian to counterfeit.

One morning when January and May go for a stroll in the garden, May tells Damian to "go biforn with his cliket," or key, and to "sit under a bussh" in waiting (2151, 2155). Just as

May scolds January for his jealousy, she "with hir fynger signes made she/ That Damyan sholde clymbe upon a tree" (2209-2210). As Damian scrambles into the pear tree, the god Pluto and his wife Proserpina interrupt to give their thoughts on the story. While Pluto sides with January, Proserpina sides with May. Therefore, though Pluto plans to restore January's sight so that he may see what is happening in the tree, Proserpina plans to make sure May has an excuse to provide to her husband. Back in the garden, May asks to climb up her husband so she can pick a pear; once she is in the tree, Damian "Gan pullen up [her] smok, and in he throng" (2353). As Damian is swything May, Pluto restores January's sight, and the old man is filled with rage at what he sees. However, May manages to smooth things over by insisting a man who has been blind for so long "Ne may nat sodeynly so wel yse,/ First whan his sighte is newe come ageyn" (2402-2403). January, tricked by these words, accepts this explanation and kisses his young wife.

Similar to the tales of the Miller and the Reeve, a strong bond exists between teller and tale in this fabliau. The Merchant, after hearing of the patient wife Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*, reflects upon his own marriage: "Ther is a long and large difference/ Bitwix Griseldis grete pacience/ And of my wff the passyng crueltee" (1223-1225). Though the Merchant admits he has only been married for two months, he insists that wives are harbingers of sorrow and grief. However, his tale is surprisingly cheery for a man so bitter about marriage. Many scholars cite this discrepancy between the Merchant's tone and his tale as evidence that the Merchant may not have been Chaucer's intended narrator for the story. However, Brown points out that the prologue and tale are "joined by a common pattern of imagery in which the language of binding, trapping, and imprisonment describes the effect of marriage on the once free spirit of the husband" (Brown 144). Rather than existing as two conflicting parts, Brown insists that prologue and tale "reveal two sides of the same personality, both crippled by the failure to love" (Brown

143). The Merchant hates wicked wives, but he also hates foolish husbands, and therefore he criticizes both. By the end of the tale, it is clear that the Merchant aims to portray May in a negative light; however, underneath this bitter narrator is Chaucer himself, who through these layers of narrative still manages to demonstrate that a woman's wit yields agency. Despite the Merchant's sexism, Chaucer's portrayal of *raptus*, wit, and power in the tale prove his proto-feminist stance.

Raptus *in the* Merchant's Tale

The sex between January and May in the tale certainly seems nonconsensual today. May likens January's face to "the skyn of houndfyssh" and notices how the slack skin of his neck shakes as he moves (1825). On their wedding night, May "preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene," and later in their marriage, the Merchant "dar not… telle" whether May considers sex with January "paradys or helle" (1854, 1963-1964). Though to a modern audience, May clearly does not give her consent, this sex would not have been deemed *raptus* in Chaucer's time. Indeed, nonconsensual sex between a husband and a wife would not be considered illegal by the English courts for another 600 years. Marital rape was finally criminalized by the Commonwealth in the 1991 case *R v R*, which ruled that it was indeed possible—and illegal—for a husband to rape his wife. The defendant was convicted of raping his wife but appealed under the common law's marital rape exemption, a notion exempting spouses from rape allegations on the grounds that wives give blanket consent to sex through the marriage contract. This idea of implied consent was certainly relevant to Chaucer's audience, who would have been more likely to consider this sex a wifely duty than a violent crime.

Yet, within this medieval framework, Chaucer pays careful attention to May's displeasure with her wifely duties; even the bitter Merchant recognizes May's aversion to her

husband, drawing a parallel between sex with January and eternal damnation. By identifying May's disgust toward January, Chaucer grants the young wife far more consideration than the legal codes of the time. Chaucer's recognition that May must "obeyeth, be hire lief or looth"—whether she wants to or not—clearly demonstrates Chaucer's awareness that not all wives enjoy their wifely duties. Furthermore, Chaucer directly questions the medieval standard of marital implied consent by illustrating May's repulsion towards consummating her marriage. Even the Merchant realizes that, far from the medieval stereotype of the subservient wife who obeys without question, real women have a far more abstract and complex inner dialogue. Perhaps this realization comes from his relationship with his own wife; the Merchant clearly understands the capacity for women to resent their wifely duties and take matters into their own hands. Though the Merchant discredits May for these qualities, writing her off as a wicked wife, Chaucer demonstrates an appreciation for this womanly wile. His recognition of the complexity of May's feelings towards her husband and her actions against him display Chaucer's progressive, proto-feminist understanding of women.

Wit in the Merchant's Tale

In addition to acknowledging the intricacy of a woman's inner dialogue, Chaucer indicates that women can both possess wit and draw power from that wit. But before Chaucer illustrates this idea of a witty, powerful woman, he sets up a counter-example: January, the foolish husband. Like Simkin in the *Reeve's Tale* and the husband in the *Shipman's Tale*, January lacks power over his wife and servants because he lacks wit. Quite simply, the audience laughs *at* January, not *with* him. This is because January unknowingly makes several jokes at his own expense; he does not manipulate the greater irony or the bawdry of the story. Perhaps the

best example of January's own foolishness is his assumption that a young wife will be as malleable as wax in his hands:

> "Womman of manye scoles half a clerk is.
> But certeynly, a yong thyng may men gye
> Right as men may warm wex with hands plye." (1428-1430)

The audience certainly knows that this will not be the case. But the irony exists not only in the falsity of January's statement. Rather than being metaphorical warm wax in January's hands, May actually uses warm wax to create a key to January's secret garden for Damian:

> This fresshe May, that I spak of so yoore,
> In warm wex hath emprented the clyket
> That Januarie bar of the smale wyket,
> By which into his gardyn ofte he wente;
> And Damyan, that knew al hire entente,
> The cliket countrefeted pryvely. (2116-2121)

The tale does not specify how May gets the key, but it does imply that the trick took cunning to execute. January considers the key to his secret garden a prized possession, and, quite like May, he keeps the key on his person at all times: "He baar alwey of silver a clyket" (2046). Thus, January is betrayed by the very wax he wished to mold and the key he holds so dear.

Indeed, January always seems to say the exact opposite of what the audience knows to be true. One argument January uses to justify his lust for a young wife is that, with an old wife, he could "'han no plesaunce'" and therefore he would "'lede [his] lyfe in avoutrye'" and "'go streight to the devel'" in the afterlife (1434-1436). January's poorly disparate concerns are comically absurd; while January is worried about an old wife causing him to commit adultery with another woman, he *should* be worrying about a young wife committing adultery against him. January's mismatched priorities are cause for laughter yet again when he worries that the afterlife will surely pale in comparison to the "'hevene in erthe'" he expects to lead after his

wedding (1647). As the story draws to a close, the jokes at January's expense become even more obvious. In the garden with May and a hiding Damian, January wishes that he "had heer a knave/ That koulde clymbe" and get a piece of fruit for his wife (2338-2339). Little does he know, a climbing knave is certainly near—Damian is already up in the tree, waiting for May. Finally, at the end of the tale, January is so daft that he is quite literally tricked by his wife into believing the opposite of what he has just seen. January certainly does not win in the end, and he is too unwitting to even realize that he has been tricked. Chaucer therefore demonstrates through the character of January that people without wit lack control of the tale.

May, rather than January, is in control of the irony of the story. In the metaphor about the wax, May is the true sculptor—both literally and figuratively. Quite literally, she presses wax into a key to get what she wants, but she also refuses to be molded and manipulated by her husband. Within her own sphere, then, May is the mastermind. It is certainly true that May's sphere of control seems limited by her title; she only exercises control over her husband and her lover within the domestic framework of being a wife. However, this limitation is a source of historical accuracy rather than disempowerment on the part of Chaucer. Women during this time had little say over who and when they married, and the treatment of women as property in martial transactions persisted for hundreds of years after Chaucer wrote the *Canterbury Tales*. Therefore, though Chaucer does not challenge the notion that women were generally virgins, wives, or widows, he does empower women within these societal roles. Furthermore, Chaucer's particular equation of May's wit with power parallels his own wit and power. In this case, Chaucer clearly aligns his own poetic skill with May's womanly wile, suggesting both that Chaucer feels he is as powerful as his female characters and that his female characters are as powerful as him.

Perhaps the funniest bit of the tale is when May tricks January into believing the opposite of what he has seen. She insists that January's vision of May and Damian in the tree is just a trick of the eyes, claiming that "'a man that longe hath blynd ybe… may nat sodeynly so wel yse'" (2401-2402). May tells her outraged husband that "'Til that youre sighte ysatled be a while/ Ther may ful many a sighte yow bigile'" (2405-2406). Though January understands the scene in the tree to be the beguiling sight May warns of, May herself is also a precious sight to January, a sight who will certainly deceive him for the rest of their marriage.

Another of May's ironic tricks in the final garden scene is when she weeps to January about his jealous habits. She insists that January alone holds the "'tendre flour'" of her "'wyfhod'" in his hands and claims she is a "'gentil womman'" rather than a "'wench'" (2190, 2202). She even goes so far as to scold January for being so jealous, arguing that men, rather than women, are "'evere untrewe'" (2203). Yet, while May is giving this impassioned speech, Damian is hiding in the bushes, waiting for his moment to have sex with the young wife. Indeed, "with that word," May coughs and gestures to Damian to climb the pear tree. May says the exact opposite of what she means and what the audience knows to be true, but she does it deliberately and to comic effect. These words and actions demonstrate that May, quite like a comedic author, understands the irony of the tale and manipulates it to comically engage the audience. The power May demonstrates is quite similar to Chaucer's own power as a poet.

Chaucer therefore pays tribute both to his own wit and to the wit of women in this tale. By showing young, fresh May's disgust towards sex with her old, decrepit husband, Chaucer successfully refutes the popular standard of implied consent and offers a progressive portrayal of women as lively, complex creatures. Additionally, Chaucer equates wit with power through the characters of January and May, specifically indicating that women can be powerful through

prank and pun. By recognizing May's power within her domestic sphere, Chaucer ultimately aligns his own power with womanly wile. This portrayal of powerful, witty women and the implications of such a portrayal on Chaucer's own role as a poet strongly imply Chaucer's proto-feminist intentions.

SECTION 2: THE *MILLER'S TALE*

Introduction to the Miller's Tale

The *Miller's Tale*, like the *Merchant's Tale*, recounts the cuckolding of an old, foolish husband by his beautiful wife and her young lover. John, a "riche gnof" and carpenter, lives in Oxford with his "wylde and yong" wife, Alison (3188, 3225). Nicholas, a "poure scoler" keen on astronomy and lovemaking, lodges with the couple in his own room (3190). Both John and Nicholas are smitten with the beautiful Alison; her golden hair shines "Ful brighter" than coins forged in the Tower of London, "Hir mouthe was sweet" as honeyed mead, and her body is as "gentl" and "smal" as a woodland creature (3255, 3261, 3234). One day when John is away, Nicholas makes his move on Alison, grabbing her "by the queynte" and demanding that she love him immediately, lest he die. Alison initially twists away and rejects the clerk's advances, but after two more lines of protestation from Nicholas, "hir love hym graunted atte laste" (3290). She agrees to be "at his comandement" when they find the right opportunity to sneak away from John; Nicholas assures her that a clerk can beguile a carpenter (3292).

At the same time, a particularly squeamish and foppish parish clerk named Absolon is pursuing Alison. Though he visits her nightly, singing to her and showering her with gifts, Alison regards him a fool and "al his ernest turneth til a jape" (3390). Instead, Alison desires Nicholas, and the two hatch a plan to trick John. Nicholas feigns an illness, pretending to have a

spiritual vision that he then interprets to John. Nicholas tells John that the next Monday night, a rain will fall "so wilde and wood" that it will rival Noah's flood (3517). In order that they may all live, Nicholas recommends hanging three tubs with axes in them to the top of the barn with rope; he, John, and Alison can hack away at the rope and float when the water rises until the flood subsides. Nicholas commands that "'oon of us ne speke nat a word'" during the flood (3586). Rather, he insists God wants them to stay quiet and pray.

When the night comes, the three characters use a ladder to get into the tubs. Nicholas and Alison in particular wait for John to fall asleep before using the ladder to climb back down. The two enjoy the "bisynesse of myrthe and of solas" in the carpenter's bed "Til that the belle of laudes gan to rynge" (3654-3655). When Absolon arrives in the early morning to serenade Alison and demand a kiss at her window, she refuses his request, calling him a "Jakke fool" and telling him she loves someone else (3708). She demands Absolon go away so that she can sleep, which he promises he will do if she gives him a kiss. Alison agrees to these terms and meets Absolon at the window. However, rather than giving the foolish clerk a kiss, she sticks her bare backside out of the window; in the darkness, Absolon "kiste hir naked ers/ Ful savourly" until he realizes what body part he is kissing (3734-3735). Furious, Absolon starts forming a revenge plan, going to a blacksmith and demanding his "'hoote kultour,'" or poker, from the hearth (3776). When he comes back to the carpenter's house, he tells Alison he has a golden ring for her, which she must kiss him to receive. Wanting to get in on the joke, Nicholas goes to the window and "out his ers he putteth pryvely" (3802). Absolon asks Alison to speak so that he can find her at the window, and Nicholas responds in kind:

> 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. (3086-3810)

Nicholas howls for water in response to the hot poker; John, thinking Nicholas's cries are signs the flood has come, cuts himself down from the roof and falls to the ground, breaking his arm and later being ridiculed by the townspeople. The locals scoff at John's ridiculous "fantasye," and his ordeal becomes a joke throughout the town (3840). Though John is ridiculed, Absolon is mortified, and Nicholas is scalded, Alison escapes unscathed.

Like the *Reeve's Tale*, the *Miller's Tale* is closely connected to its teller. Indeed, the tale even serves as a provocation for the *Reeve's Tale*. Robin the Miller tells a tale about a foolish carpenter; in response, Oswald the Reeve—formerly a carpenter—tells a tale about a foolish miller. In the *Miller's Prologue*, Oswald even tries to stop Robin from telling his tale upon hearing the story is about a cuckolded carpenter. Yet, the *Miller's Tale* is not only complementary to the *Reeve's Tale*. Just as the *Reeve's Tale* is a direct response to the *Miller's Tale*, the *Miller's Tale* is a response to the directly preceding story: the *Knight's Tale*. The Knight, the highest-ranking pilgrim in the poem, is the first character described in the *General Prologue*, and therefore is the first pilgrim to speak. The Knight tells a tale of courtly love: two knights, Palamon and Arcite, both fall in love with and duel over a woman named Emily. Yet, in his state of drunkenness, Robin completely disregards the story order set forth in the *General Prologue*. Though the Host tries to quiet Robin and let a "'bettre man'" tell the next story, the Miller insists on telling his tale—though he does admit he is drunk and blames any misspoken words on the ale (3130). In response to the Knight's "noble storie" (3111), the drunken Miller vows to tell a noble story of his own:

> "By armes, and by blood and bones,
> I kan a noble tale for the nones,
> With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale." (3125-3127)

Robin vows to "quite," or repay, the Knight's tale. In an attempt to quite the Knight, the Miller

parodies the very heart of the Knight's story: courtly love. Courtly love, a modern trope in

medieval literature, is an idea about the expression and acceptance of love based on chivalry and

nobility. Typically, a knight sets out on a series of tasks to impress a stoic, beautiful woman. The

woman generally spurns the knight's advances until the end of the tale. The focus on a woman's

beauty and her refusal—this idea that women say no to men even when they mean yes—are

explored in this thesis as inherently sexist.

While the Miller merely aims to spite the Knight with his parody of courtly love,

Chaucer—on a deeper level—uses the Miller to point out the flaws of courtly love's absurd and

sexist standards. The sexist ideals of courtly love seem much more appropriate coming from a

drunken churl like Robin than a man of honor like the Knight. The Miller's obsession with

Alison's beauty and body seen in Robin's extended *effictio* seem more fitting of a rude, drunk

man than one of knightly origins. Additionally, the assumption that women are so easily swayed

to sleep with men—from Alison proclaiming "'Do wey youre handes, for youre curteisye!'" to

her granting "hir lov" and "hir ooth" in only two lines—feels more realistic coming from a ribald

miller than from a courtly knight (3287, 3290-3291). Therefore, Chaucer uses Robin to expose

the sexism inherent in courtly love.

Both Nicholas and Absolon use ridiculously exaggerated courtly language in their efforts

to seduce Alison, and their gallant language contrasts comically with their lewd intentions. Yet,

Alison sees through both men's embellished prose and counters it with her own straightforward

retorts and bawdy actions. Though Nicholas and Absolon both display some level of wit in the

story, they are ultimately the butt of the Miller's—and Chaucer's—jokes because their courtly

demeanor is so ridiculous. Meanwhile, Alison sees through Nicholas and Absolon's absurd

expressions and remains the wittiest character, a position that allows her to escape consequence altogether. In this way, Alison is able to control the story's overall irony; her straightforward manner and her command of bawdry in the tale give her power similar to that of the poem's author.

Raptus *and sexism in the* Miller's Tale

Indeed, there is sexism inherent in the Miller's Tale, but this sexism reflects on the Miller rather than Chaucer. When Robin first introduces Alison, he offers a classic courtly *effictio*—yet, the audience is aware of the topic truly on Robin's mind: sex. The Miller describes Alison's small and gentle body by emphasizing her sexuality. The Miller depicts Alison as a woman wearing an apron "as whit as morne milk/ Upon her lendes," or loins, who has a "likerous ye," or lecherous eye (3236-3237, 3244). She's like a plaything to the Miller: "There nys no man so wys that koude thenche/ So gay a popelote or swich a wenche" (3253-3254). Certainly, Robin makes it clear that he only values one thing about Alison:

> She was a prymerole, a piggesnye,
> For any lord to leggen in his bedde,
> Or yet for any good yeman to wedde. (3268-3270)

But this *effictio* does not seem shocking coming from the Miller or ill-matched with his demeanor; rather, Robin's obsession with Alison's body seems very fitting from a man of his profession and level of intoxication. By displaying how natural this *effictio* seems coming from a man like Robin, Chaucer calls into question the validity of this courtly device.

The initial interaction between Nicholas and Alison in the tale also seems problematic. Saunders points out that "Nicholas's desire for Alisoun, although couched in terms of *fin'amor*, is accompanied by rather more forceful gestures" (Saunders 299). Nicholas grabs Alison quite literally "by the queynte," holding her "harde by the haunchebones" and insisting that she submit

to him lest he die (3276, 3279). Alison vehemently protests, but Nicholas manages to sway her resolve with only two more lines of begging and crying. However, the encounter certainly would not be *raptus* by medieval standards, considering that the two do not engage in intercourse in this instance, and, when they do, Alison enthusiastically consents. Yet, Saunders identifies a remaining problem with the passage: "The narrative suggests the basic and violent sexual impulses underlying love, but also implies that female resistance is feigned: Alisoun's denials are as transparent and swiftly overturned as Nicholas's 'illness'" (Saunders 299). These implications about female resistance are not accidental; Chaucer uses this as another instance to parody and question courtly love. A standard motif in most courtly romances is the perpetual rejection of a persistent knight by a stoic lady; once again in this fabliau, a sexist implication with courtly roots seems more fitting coming from a drunken churl than a noble knight.

Characters with Wit: Alison, Nicholas, and Absolon

After Alison's initial encounter with Nicholas, the couple's desire is clearly mutual: "For this was his desir and hire also" (3407). Alison's lust even rivals that of Nicholas, and indeed, she certainly sets the stage for the rest of the tale's bawdry. Alison specifically manipulates the ribaldry of the tale by committing the first shocking and hilarious jape: she offers a butt cheek rather than the cheek on her face to an unsuspecting Absolon. Alison offers a literal and figurative "kiss my ass" to her irritating suitor; both Alison's audacious act and Absolon's horrified response are uproariously entertaining. But Alison's antics do more than just amuse the audience; she is in full control of the comedy, using it both to entertain her guest—"And unto Nicholas she seyde stille,/ 'Now hust, and thou shalt laughen al thy fille'"—and herself: "'Tehee!' quod she" (3721-3722, 3740).

Alison also controls the comedy of the tale by seeing through the courtly ridiculousness

of Nicholas and Absolon's speech. Her directness is jarring compared to the embellished speech

of her suitors. In his article "Courtly Love in the Canterbury 'Tales,'" Jerome Mandel comments

on this embellished speech: "Although Nicholas and Absolon both use the language of courtly

love, it is language empty of meaning, devoid of the very passion by which it pretends to be

inspired, and designed to attract by deception rather than by any honest expression of desire"

(Mandel 283). In contrast, Alison uses "hard, realistic" language, effectively cutting through the

silliness of her suitors' speech:

> When Nicholas calls Alison his "lemman" (A 3278, 3280) and claims that he will
> die if she does not have mercy upon him and let him have his way with her, his
> speech is hyperbolic ("I spille," "I wol dyen"), imperative ("love me al atones"),
> insistent ("but if ich have my wille"), and metaphoric ("deerne love"). But her
> response is eminently sensible, straightforward, realistic, and devoid of images:
>
> > "I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!
> > Why, lat be," quod she, "lat be, Nicholas,
> > Or I wol crie 'out, harrow' and 'alias'!
> > Do wey youre handes, for youre curteisye." (A 3284-87) (Mandel
> > 283-284)

Absolon's extravagance, too, is met with the same realism. Though Absolon refers to Alison

with epithets such as "Lemman, thy grace, and sweete bryd," Alison's epithet for Absolon is

"Jakke fool" (3726, 3708). Alison's "simple directness… contrasts with the empty puffery of her

lovers' mock-courtly language and points up the discrepancy between the courtly and the real—

to the detriment of courtly love" (Mandel 284). Even more, Alison's exasperation is comical; one

can picture the young woman rolling her eyes or throwing up her hands in frustration as she yells

to Absolon "'As help me God, it wol not be 'com pa me''" and "'lat me slepe, a twenty devel

wey!'" (3709, 3713). Alison's frank demeanor gives her power over the men in the story and the

tale's larger irony. By manipulating the tale's irony, Alison both gets over on the men in the tale and ultimately escapes consequence.

Yet, supposing that Nicholas and Absolon are completely witless is a reductive view. Both men do knowingly contribute to the comedy in some instances. Nicholas in particular manipulates the bawdry of the tale to the same effect as Alison. Following her lead, Nicholas "thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape," wanting Absolon also to "kisse his ers er that he scape" (3799-3800). Nicholas's fart is so powerful that Absolon is "almoost yblent," or blinded (3808). This slapstick moment—the image of one man violently farting into another man's face—was uproariously amusing to Chaucer's medieval audience and remains humorous today. Therefore, it becomes clear that Nicholas intentionally contributes to the comedy of the tale. Yet, Nicholas is not the mastermind of bawdry in the story. It is Alison, rather than Nicholas, who makes the first bawdy move; Nicholas's is a copycat prank. Additionally, Nicholas's ridiculous courtly language undermines his power in the tale. Though he does express some wit, it is not enough to save him from his ultimate consequence—a hot coulter.

Absolon is generally a fool in the tale, but his choice of a hot coulter as a punishment for Alison—his intended victim—is witty indeed. In his article "The 'Cultour' in the 'Miller's Tale': Alison as Iseult," James H. Morey traces the history of the coulter—the blade fastened to the front of a plough—as a tool used to determine a woman's guilt in adultery cases:

> Two types of ordeal involving parts of the plow should be distinguished: treading barefoot on nine hot plowshares, and carrying a hot coulter in the hands for a certain distance (usually three paces or, sometimes, the length of the church nave). Simply accomplishing the ordeal was not enough; the real test was whether the wound scabbed cleanly or putrefied. Such trials were always super vised by clergy and were most common from the ninth to the twelfth centuries in cases without witnesses or physical evidence. The body served as the "text" of last resort upon which guilt or innocence would be written. (Morey 374)

Morey insists that Absolon, as a parish clerk, would have been an "appropriate administrator of the *iudicium Dei.*" Furthermore, Absolon's choice of a coulter is far from "serendipitous"; rather, Absolon "chooses the implement most appropriate for an adulteress." Because Alison, not Nicholas, was the coulter's intended target, Morey argues that "the implication is inescapable"— Absolon's choice was certainly intentional (Morey 375). In this way, Absolon does show some wit and some control over the tale's larger irony. Yet, Absolon misses his mark, branding Nicholas instead of the intended adulteress. Again, Absolon's courtly language ultimately undermines him: he insists, "'Spek, sweete bryd, I noot nat where thou art,'" to which Nicholas responds by letting "fle a fart" (3805-3806). Both men, in their quest for revenge or jape, unknowingly put themselves in the line of fire, where Absolon suffers a fart to the face and Nicholas suffers a coulter to the "ers" (3810). Meanwhile, Alison remains unscathed.

John's absence of wit is far too obvious to spend much time on; even the Miller admits John's "wit was rude" (3227). John is tricked time and again into ridiculous situations, and he remains a fool from the beginning to the end of the tale. John's lack of wit ultimately stands in contrast to his wife's possession of power. Alison defies even the Miller's expectations of women; her manipulation of bawdry and her straightforward demeanor allow her to see through the ridiculousness of courtly love and acquire power over the classic medieval device. As a poet, Chaucer, too, draws his power from wit and bawdry, and in this way, Chaucer aligns himself with the wile of his famous female character.

SECTION 3: THE REMAINING "FABLIAUX"

Perhaps the most famous of Chaucer's powerful women is the Wife of Bath. Though

Alison[33] of Bath does not tell a fabliau, her lengthy prologue contains many elements of the

genre. Though a detailed analysis of the Wife of Bath could be the subject of an entirely separate

dissertation, her prologue is certainly worth briefly mentioning in this thesis. Also worth

mentioning is Chaucer's remaining fabliau—the *Cook's Tale*. Because the *Cook's Tale* remains

unfinished, we can only speculate the direction Chaucer intended for the tale. Yet, this fabliau

seems to have followed the formula of the two fabliaux discussed in this chapter and perhaps

might have been another of Chaucer's attempts to display a witty, powerful woman. While both

not fully "fabliaux," the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the *Cook's Tale* do offer further evidence

that Chaucer tied wit to power in his stories.

The Wife of Bath as a Powerful Female Figure

In the Wife of Bath's prologue, the Wife establishes herself as an authority on sex and

marriage. She insists her "auctoritee" comes from her experience with her five husbands,

deeming it "right ynogh" for her to "speke of wo that is in mariage" (2-3). The Wife contends

that that virginity is overrated, and that sex, to her, is a satisfying, pleasurable act. Alison

manipulates her husbands with her sexual power, three of which she claims were "goode"

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[33] Whether Alison of Bath is the same Alison from the *Miller's Tale* is a point of contention
among scholars. While some scholars cite the unmistakable similarities between the two
characters—both Alisons lived with old husbands and fell in love with young clerks lodging at
their house—other scholars insist that Alison was simply a popular name in Chaucer's time. For
example, Chaucer recycles the name John in many of his fabliaux, including three of the tales
mentioned in this thesis—the *Miller's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale,* and the *Shipman's Tale*.
Furthermore, Chaucer's choice of Alison for the Wife of Bath could be tied to the name of her
fifth husband, Jankyn. In her book *Chaucer Name Dictionary*, Jacqueline de Weever points to a
popular lyric "Jolly Jankin," which includes the lines "Jankyn syngyt merie/ with 'aleysion.'"
According to de Weever, "Chaucer's mating of Alison and Jankyn follows popular tradition" (de
Weever 19).

because they were old, rich, and easy to control, and two of which were "badde" (196). The Wife

remarks that one of the bad husbands—the last man, Jankyn—was impossible to control. He

would respond to the Wife's abuse by abusing her back; however, the Wife declares that this

only made her desire him more. In her tale, the Wife finally reveals what she considers to be the

ultimate truth: "'Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee'" and "'maistrie'" over their lovers

(1038, 1040). This *Prologue* introduces the Wife as a cunning, mischievous, sexually-

empowered woman.

The *Prologue* obviously paints the Wife as a powerful female figure; however, I would

go further and argue that the wife derives her agency—her "auctoritee"—from her wit. Her

reasoning about virginity is certainly humorous: "And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe,/

Virginitee, thann whereof should it growe?" (71-72). Furthermore, the Wife seems in control of

her puns more so than any other pilgrim:

> We wommen 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 al day and crave.
> Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we;
> Preesse on us faste, and thanne wol we fle. (515-520)

This is the first instance where a queynte pun comes from a pilgrim who—to put it frankly—

actually has a queynte. Furthermore, this is not an instance of one of Chaucer's characters talking

more intelligently than they realize; the wife certainly understands the double-meaning of the

word. In this instance, she means to make a pun—her "queynt fantasye" is both a curious fantasy

and a sexual fantasy. We know the Wife certainly understands the double-meaning of queynte;

earlier in the *Prologue*, she uses queynte twice as a textbook definition of her own genitalia.

Therefore, the Wife leverages her wit to prove her authority to author a tale. Indeed, Alison of

Bath is an author in her own right, and Chaucer's equation of the Wife's wit with power certainly stands as another instance of the poet aligning himself with womanly wile.

The Cook's Tale: Informed Speculation

The *Cook's Tale*, Chaucer's unfinished fabliau, is quite short. The Cook, Roger, recounts a "litel jape that fil in [his] citee" (4343). The cook begins by describing Perkin Reveler, a young man who enjoys gambling and carousing. Roger insists that "Wel was the wenche with hym myghte meete"; we can therefore speculate that, had Chaucer finished the fabliau, Perkin may have fulfilled a role similar to that of Damian or a Nicholas in the previous tales (4374). After being dismissed from his job, Perkin joins another corrupt man for a night of debauchery. This man's wife has a shop that presumably fronts for a prostitution service: she "heeld for contenance/ A shoppe, and swyved for hir sustenance" (4421-4422). However, the tale cuts off here, and the tale is too short to accurately predict would have happened to the young Perkin Reveler or his friend's wife. Because Perkin is an immoral man, we might foresee a triangle story forming between the protagonist, his friend, and his friend's wife; however, this is only conjecture. Perhaps the wife may have proven to be witty; as a shop owner, she certainly is in some sort of position of power. But again, this is only speculation. The key takeaway from the tale is that Chaucer was certainly setting up another raunchy, bawdy fabliau. Within this framework, perhaps Chaucer could have created another witty woman—unfortunately, without the rest of the fabliau, it is impossible to know.

CONCLUSION

In the *Merchant's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*, Chaucer offers a progressive view of the wily, witty medieval woman. Because both Alison and May exercise power in their domestic

spheres, Chaucer suggests that women who can pull off pranks possess power over the men in their lives. However, Chaucer does much more than suggest witty women have agency in these tales. In the *Merchant's Tale*, Chaucer also refutes the age-old marital rape exemption standard by emphasizing May's disgust at her "wifely duties." In the *Miller's Tale*, Chaucer goes even further in his quest for a realistic portrayal of women; he parodies the common motifs of courtly love by suggesting the casual sexism inherent in this device seems more fitting coming from a drunken miller than a noble knight. Additionally, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the *Cook's Tale* offer extra—if somewhat speculative—evidence supporting a progressive reading of the poet. In each instance, Chaucer's progressive understanding of women places females in positions of power; this qualifies the poet's works as proto-feminist.

Conclusion

I initially approached this project with the goal to prove how Chaucer's use of rape—or *raptus*—as a comic device allowed or even encouraged violence against women in medieval discourse. However, as I more closely examined the texts and attempted to view them using the medieval frameworks in which they were constructed, I realized my initial goal would not be possible. Rather than to disempower women, Chaucer inflicts physical consequence on all foolish characters in his tales. Some of these characters are women—but many, perhaps most, are men. Both men and women have the capacity for wit in Chaucer's fabliaux; those who possess it also possess power.

Therefore, wit is not gender-specific in Chaucer's fabliaux. Yet, Chaucer does seem to identify himself with a particular brand of humor: womanly wit. Women with wit in the tales are ultimately able to escape consequence and are thus powerful creatures indeed. By suggesting that humorous women are cunning enough to avoid punishment, Chaucer slyly equates wit with power. As a poet, Chaucer's sharpest tool was certainly his wit; the poet's equation of wit with power is indicative of his knowledge of the power he drew from his own poetry. Chaucer therefore aligns his authorial power with womanly wile, suggesting he is as powerful as his female characters and perhaps vice versa. Chaucer's alignment with womanly wit carries a message of gender equality.

I came to this conclusion by formatting my argument into three distinct sections. The first section—Chapter 1—focused primarily on relevant historical context. In the chapter, I aimed to gain a medieval understanding of topics still controversial today, including the secular definition of *raptus* and the Church's views on female sexuality. I also examined Chaucer's personal connection to the topic of *raptus* by analyzing the curious case with Cecily Chaumpaigne;

Chaucer's *raptus* acquittal surely proves that he was cognizant of the secular laws surrounding

the crime at the time. Additionally, I also aimed to explore certain realities about medieval

women not found in legal or religious texts, including female spheres of control over medieval

life. Overall, I found this chapter gave me the necessary historical context with which to

approach my broader argument.

My second chapter aimed to support my overall argument for a proto-feminist reading of

Chaucer's fabliaux by refuting claims that Chaucer's treatment of women was misogynistic or

anti-feminist. Specifically, I focused on instances in the *Reeve's Tale* and *Shipman's Tale* that

could be considered sexual violence or rape today. By supplying a modern definition of rape and

consent and then juxtaposing it with the medieval framework explored in Chapter 1, I aimed to

clarify the medieval terms with which I would approach the texts. I argued that holding Chaucer

to a framework of consent that did not exist in his lifetime is poor reasoning and privileges the

"enlightened" present over the "primitive" past. With this medieval framework in mind, I

asserted that two of the seemingly problematic instances of sexual intercourse—the sex between

Alan and Malyne in the *Reeve's Tale* and the sex between John and the merchant's wife in the

Shipman's Tale—certainly would not have been considered *raptus* and may have even been

empowering for the women engaged in them. Though I did deem the third instance—the sex

between John and Simkin's wife in the Reeve's Tale—*raptus* by Chaucer's standards and rape

by modern standards, I attributed this sexism—this invitation to laugh at sexual violence—to the

disgruntled narrator of the tale rather than to Chaucer himself.

My third chapter—focusing on the *Merchant's Tale* and *the Miller's Tale*—built upon

my previous chapters by extending the premise that Chaucer was not anti-feminist; specifically, I

offered evidence to prove the poet was actually a proto-feminist. Again, the connection between

teller and tale was integral to my argument; the Miller in particular became an unknowing contrasting figure against whom Chaucer compares noble knights and courtly love. Additionally, the chapter used Chaucer's famous female figures, Alison and May, as examples of witty women in positions of power. Chaucer's remaining "fabliaux"—namely, the *Cook's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Prologue,* offered further support for this argument. Overall, the chapter aimed to prove Chaucer's proto-feminist intentions by exploring the womanly wile and wit with which Chaucer aligned his own authorial power.

Chaucer certainly would not qualify as a modern-day feminist; his violent, ribald tales have no place amidst the safe spaces and trigger warnings of today. But once again, we must not evaluate Chaucer using standards that did not exist when he was writing. The OED does not record the word "feminism" appearing in the English language until the late nineteenth century; widespread advocacy for the principles and objectives behind the word "feminism" did not emerge in Britain until this time, during the suffragette movement in the late 1800s. But the heart of both the word and the movement shines through in Chaucer's fabliaux: equality. Witty people are rewarded, and foolish people are punished—regardless of gender. Indeed, the OED defines feminism simply as "Advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex," and at its heart, feminism remains an issue of equality. Though Chaucer certainly did not set out to advocate for equality with his tales, his fabliaux nevertheless promote the idea that women can be just as powerful—and funny— as men.

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