

# A Feminist Perspective on *The Canterbury Tales*\_\_\_\_\_

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In looking at *The Canterbury Tales* from a feminist perspective, it is important to remember the caveats expressed by critics Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson: that one cannot ignore the differences between the medieval past and the present day; that, in the poststructuralist period, no character in a literary work can or should be reduced to a single interpretation; that most of the stories in *The Canterbury Tales* are told by males; and that both Chaucer the pilgrim and Chaucer the author are also males (1-2). Moreover, since the work was not finished, we cannot know whether it would have been structured around the Seven Deadly Sins, as some scholars believe, or around the theme of marriage, as others have claimed. Feminist critics differ among themselves as much as do their male predecessors about the implications of individual tales, as well as about Chaucer's views of women. Certainly Chaucer was more sympathetic to the plight of women than most other male medieval writers; however, it is evident that the relations between his men and women are rarely, if ever, harmonious. Chaucer's women are imbued with a variety of traits—courage and cunning, purity and duplicity—yet, reflecting the society that Chaucer knew, they are nearly all dependent upon male protectors, whether ruler, father, brother, husband, or lover.

It is perhaps not surprising that many feminist critics have looked toward the colorful Wife of Bath as a feminist model. Her life story is a blueprint for success in the rapidly changing society in which she lives. She is a successful cloth maker, a skill she may have acquired as a child or perhaps after she married her first husband at the age of twelve. She confides to the company that she married three elderly husbands, won them to her will, and acquired their goods and land; her fifth, scholarly husband was more difficult to handle, but she was intelligent enough to hold her own with him in argument and, after he struck her, clever enough to use his sense of guilt to subdue him. Now she answers to no one. Her wealth and her self-confidence allow her to travel wherever she likes. Meanwhile, when she is at home on the Sabbath, she continues to remind her community of her high social status by leading the parade “to the offering” (450) [“Toward the altar steps” (15)].<sup>1</sup>

Though the Wife of Bath does not mention her parents, it can be assumed that her first marriage was arranged, likely by her father, for she lived in a patriarchal society. Chaucer's tales reflect the feudal tradition: an inferior expects protection from a superior, and the superior, in turn, is assured of the inferior's obedience. Where a female is concerned, the protector is a male—a father, a husband, a brother, or a ruler. Thus “The Knight's Tale” begins with appeals to Theseus, the king of Athens, from a group of highborn Theban la-

dies whose protectors, their husbands, have been killed in the Theban civil war and are being denied burial. Theseus promptly disposes of the tyrannical ruler, Creon, and permits the burials. Then he makes two young knights who have survived the battle his prisoners, transports them to Athens, and places them in a tower keep.

At this point, the romance begins. From their prison, the two Theban princes, Arcite and Palamon, can see Theseus's young sister-in-law, Emily, wandering in the garden, and soon they are both in love with her. The young men have always been as close as brothers; they had thought that the bond between them would be unbreakable. Now, however, their love for Emily makes them enemies. Eventually, it is Theseus who must decide between them; in fact, an even higher authority takes a hand, for after Arcite, the votary of Mars, has won Emily's hand in a tournament, Saturn, the grandfather of the gods, takes the side of Venus, whose help has been enlisted by Palamon, and Arcite is eliminated after a fatal fall from his horse.

However, a feminist reader cannot help noticing that, unlike most of Chaucer's heroines, Emily is so passive as to appear spiritless. Even during the year or so that Arcite spent in her household, first as her page and then as a favorite squire of Theseus, Emily seems to have been immune to his charms. In fact, in a prayer to Diana, she reminds the goddess of chastity that she, too, would like to remain a "maiden all my lif" (2305) ["a virgin all my life" (65)] and "nought to been a wife and be with childe" (2310) ["not to be a wife or be with child" (65)] or ever to "knowe compaignye of man" (2311) ["to know the company of man" (65)]. Diana informs Emily that she cannot grant her wish: Emily will marry one of the men, but the goddess cannot tell her which one.

When Arcite is on his deathbed, Emily is by his side, and after his death, she mourns appropriately, though she would hardly qualify for the rather smug comment the knight makes about widows who die of grief. After the funeral and a suitable period of mourning, Theseus sends for Emily and suggests that she accept Arcite's death as reflecting the will of Jupiter; it would be wise, he continues, "To maken vertu of necessitee" (3042) ["To make a virtue of necessity" (84)]. Theseus bestows Emily's hand in marriage upon Palamon, and their union is a happy one. According to the pilgrim who is telling the story, a man, "Emelye him loveth so tendrely,/ And he hir serveth so gentilly/ That nevere was ther no word hem bitwene /Of jalousye, or any oother tene" (3103-6) ["He's tenderly beloved of Emily/ And serves her with a gentle constancy,/ And never a jealous word between them spoken/ Or other sorrow in a love unbroken" (86)]. It is unusual for what began as courtly love to end up in a happy marriage, for, as Barbara Feichtinger points out, "a skeptical attitude toward marriage is an integral part of the code of courtly love, which idealizes extramarital love" (202). Indeed, the glorification of extramarital relationships,

which presented such obvious temptations, was the primary reason the Church so strongly opposed the courtly love movement.

Though Emily's story is set in the ancient world, her initial desire to remain a virgin would not have been improbable in a medieval setting. As Jocelyn Wogan-Browne explains, for the women who read them, the lives of saints became "an important critique of courtly love" (181), with its erotic implications, and even, by extension, of marriage, which involved sexual relations, childbearing, and, too often, death in childbed. Moreover, young girls like Emily, who was never given the opportunity to express an opinion about her own destiny, might have seen that saintly virgins were given choices. In "The Physician's Tale," for example, Virginius gives his daughter Virginia a choice, "death or shame" (446) ["death or shame" (237)], and, at her request, he allows her some time to consider her decision. The outcome is not surprising, given her training in virtue: rather than surrender her virginity to a corrupt judge, she chooses to have her father strike off her head. Nevertheless, she is given more freedom than Emily. Moreover, if her power is limited, she is equal to men in at least one respect—she has the kind of courage that Chaucer apparently believes is as valuable in a woman as in a man.

Virginity is also presented as an ideal in "The Second Nun's Tale," which appropriately is preceded by Chaucer's invocation to the Virgin Mary, who, he reminds his audience, was the undefiled mother of Jesus Christ. Then the Second Nun begins retelling a saint's story she has read. Cecilia, the heroine, is a young Roman woman of noble birth who has long prayed to God, "Biseking him to kepe hir maidenhede" (617) ["Beseeching Him to guard her maidenhead" (437)]. Even at her wedding, she continues to pray for virginity. That night, she explains to her young husband, Valerian, that if he touches her, her guardian angel will kill him. Understandably, Valerian insists on seeing this angel, and Cecilia says that he must first profess his faith in Christ and be baptized. Valerian does so, and when he returns home, he does indeed meet Cecilia's angel. As a result of these events, Valerian's brother Tiburce, too, is converted. In due course, the two men are sentenced to be executed, but before they die, they are responsible for the conversions of the Roman officer and of the torturers assigned to kill them.

Brought before the prefect, Almachius, Cecilia not only proclaims her faith but also argues with him as if she were his equal, infuriating him, and when he offers her a choice between abjuring her faith and dying, she compounds the insult by laughing at him. When Almachius tries to burn her alive, her body remains cool. Though an executioner finally succeeds in wounding her mortally, Cecilia continues to preach and teach for the three days before she dies and ascends to Heaven. As Wogan-Browne puts it, in the lives of such saints it was evident that such courageous "virgin heroines can both gaze and answer

back and are shown as much cleverer than their tormenters” (181). At least in martyrdom, a female can attain equality.

One of the most difficult of Chaucer’s stories for feminists to deal with is “The Clerk’s Tale.” It is true that the medieval Church emphasized the subordination of the individual will to that of a higher power as a means of attaining grace, pointing out that such an act was indeed an imitation of Christ. What feminists find disturbing is that in his story of Patient Griselda, Chaucer’s Clerk applies this principle to marriage. It is interesting to note that the Clerk begins his tale by describing Walter, the marquis of Saluzzo, as a man who, though he is generally benevolent and courteous, lives in the moment, with no thought for the future. Walter’s subjects’ chief concern then is that the marquis has made no provisions for succession. When they finally confront him with the problem and urge him to take a wife, they present marriage in the most favorable terms: it is a “blissful yok/ Of sovereyntee, noight of servise” (113-114) [“blessed yoke!/ It is a kingdom, not a slavery” (323)]. Yet Walter is not so sanguine about matrimony: “I me rejoised of my libertee,/ That selde time is founde in marriage” (146-146) [“I go rejoicing in my liberty,/ And that and marriage seldom go together” (324)]. Still, he agrees to place himself in what he insists on calling servitude, but on two conditions: that the choice of a wife will be left up to him and that his subjects will accept the woman he selects. Walter decides on a poor girl called Griselda, who is both beautiful and virtuous. He asks her father, Janicula, for her hand in marriage, and when the old man consents, Walter proposes to the maiden herself. Before she accepts, however, he makes one stipulation: she must promise to obey him unconditionally and cheerfully, no matter what he asks of her. She agrees.

The marriage begins well. Griselda proves to be a good mediator in disputes that arise among Walter’s subjects, and, after she bears Walter a daughter, it is evident that she is not barren and the realm can hope for a male heir. However, while their child is still at her mother’s breast, Walter decides to test his wife. Telling her that their subjects are objecting to the child because of her mother’s lowly birth, he has the baby taken away, supposedly to be killed. Griselda does not protest the loss of her child, nor does she ever mention the subject to Walter, to whom she continues to be an affectionate and considerate wife. Four years later, Walter and Griselda have a son, and this time Walter waits until the child is two years old before having him seized. Again, Griselda does not let her husband see how grievously he has wounded her.

However, Walter is still in the grips of his obsession. He devises a third test of his wife’s promise, and again he lies to her. Although their subjects have come to love Griselda, Walter insists that they are unhappy with her because of her low birth, and therefore he feels it is his duty to replace her with someone more suitable. He pretends to obtain a divorce, sends for the girl who is

supposedly his new bride, and watches as Griselda leaves for her father's house, dressed only in a smock like that in which she first came to Walter. At this point, Walter does feel some pity, but nevertheless he has one final test for Griselda. He sends for her and when she appears before him, he asks her to supervise the decorating of his house so that all will be in order for the reception of his new wife. Again Griselda makes no objection. At last, Walter is satisfied. He declares, "This is inogh, Griselde min" (1051) ["It is enough, Griselda mine" (351)] and takes Griselda into his arms. He now proceeds to introduce Griselda to her long-lost daughter, who is identified as the supposed bride, and to their seven-year-old son, explaining that both children have been reared by his sister, the countess of Bologna. As for what motivated his behavior toward Griselda, Walter tells her that it was not "malice" or "crueltee" (1074) ["cruelty" (351)] but "t' assaye in thee thy wommanhede" (1075) ["for the trial of your womanhood" (351)].

The Clerk ends by saying that the purpose of his story is not to suggest that women imitate Griselda's humility—for even if they wished to, they would be incapable of withstanding such trials—but instead to present a model of constancy in adversity when it is God, not a human being like Walter, who is testing us. This explanation addresses one of the persistent critical issues plaguing "The Clerk's Tale": what are we to make of Walter?

Jill Mann asserts, "There is no shred of support for Walter's behavior in the narrative; on the contrary, Chaucer carefully adds to it explicit condemnations of his obsessive desire to test Griselda" (117), and she points out a specific passage in the text. Just before Walter informs Griselda that their daughter is to be taken from her, Chaucer has the Clerk comment, "ivele it sit/ T' assaye a wif whan that it is no need,/ And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede" (460-62) ["what was the need/ Of heaping trial on her, more and more?/. . ./For my part, I should say it could succeed/ Only in evil; what could be the gain/ In putting her to needless fear and pain?" (333-34)]. Thus, despite his later protestations, Walter is branded as having behaved in an "evil" manner. One can hardly argue with that. By choosing a woman from such a humble social position for his wife, Walter guaranteed that the communication in his marriage would run in only one direction. He would speak; Griselda would listen. The implication is that her feelings are unimportant. Again, when he takes away the two children, Walter expects Griselda to smother her maternal instincts. She cannot even protest. Afterward, she continues to express her love for the man she believes is the murderer of her children.

Walter's final tricks are less surprising—he is hardly the first man to trade in the mother of his children for a new wife—though his demand that his former wife prepare his house for his new one is unusual. It should also be pointed out that Walter further fails as a husband in that, while testing his wife,

he has no compunction about lying to her. Not only does he lie to her about what will happen to their children, about the validity of the divorce, and about his plans for a remarriage, but he also lies about how his subjects feel about Griselda. By pretending that they resent her because of her lowly birth, Walter isolates her from a populace that in fact has come to love her and has lost respect for him.

As Mann points out (118), there are serious flaws in Bernard Levy's theory that Walter tests Griselda to prove her worthy of joining the ruling class (403). Aside from the fact that Chaucer explicitly remarks that it was unnecessary to test Griselda, critics have noted that so elitist an attitude is not consistent with *The Canterbury Tales* or with the poet's other works (Brewer 89-109). Chaucer makes it clear that gentillesse is not a matter of rank but of values. Marquis or not, Walter's disregard for the truth and his discourteous treatment of his wife both bar him from possessing gentillesse.

"The Clerk's Tale" has sometimes been interpreted as a religious parable. Certainly Griselda's patience under adversity has much in common with the behavior of Virginia and Cecilia. However, if one equates Walter with God, serious issues must be confronted. For example, as Mann notes, Walter is motivated not by love—as the biblical God is—but by a selfish obsession (123). On the other hand, the biblical God is often shown testing human beings, as he does when he demands that Abraham sacrifice his son, Isaac, or when he casts his faithful servant Job upon an ash heap to see whether or not Job will curse his Maker. The most profound significance of "The Clerk's Tale," according to Mann, is the presentation of Griselda as "the divine in woman's form" (123). Thus she should not be viewed as a model for wives to emulate but as a Christlike suffering servant. Feminists who are wary about a story that seems to advocate relinquishing sovereignty to human males may find this religious view of "The Clerk's Tale" more acceptable than other interpretations. As Mann puts it, "If Walter's tyranny caricatures God's 'governance', Griselda's patience *truly* reflects God's suffering. Her 'vertuous suffraunce' is not opposed to God's 'governance'; it is one with it" (128).

Any feminist interpretation of "The Clerk's Tale" should focus on Chaucer's ironic "Envoy" to the story, in which Chaucer warns husbands not to expect to find women like Griselda and even encourages wives to seize control of their marriages through verbal aggression and by making their husbands jealous. The male pilgrims apply the story of Griselda to their own lives. The Host wishes his wife could have heard the tale; the Merchant describes his own wife of two months as a cruel and malicious shrew. January, who is the elderly hero of "The Merchant's Tale," entered into marriage expecting it to be a "paradis" (1265) ["paradise on earth" (357)]. Bitterly the Merchant outlines January's expectations of marriage, his reasons for abandoning a long life of

libertinism, his decision to marry a young, beautiful virgin, whom he can mold into an ideal wife. January dismisses the warnings of his friend Justinus and instead listens to Placebo, who characteristically voices his support of the decision January has already made. January makes his choice, a lovely creature named May, and the two are united.

Throughout the wedding feast, January anticipates the bliss of their first sexual encounter. He is not disappointed. However, May is put off by his person and his performance. As Chaucer puts it, “Whan she him saw sitting in his sherte,/ In his night-cappe, and with his nekke lene; She preiset nat his pleying worth a bene” (1852-54) [“Seeing him sit there in his shirt apart, Wearing his night-cap, with his scrawny throat./ She didn’t think his games were worth a groat” (373)]. Meanwhile, January’s lusty young squire, Damien, is so overcome with desire for May that he has taken to his bed. When January sends May to visit his ailing retainer, Damien manages to slip her a love letter, and the two begin corresponding. In time, January goes blind, and he becomes so possessed by jealousy that “He nolde suffre hire for to ride or go/ But if that he hadde hond on her alway ” (2090-91) [“nor anywhere/ Would he allow his wife to take the air/ Unless his hand were on her, day and night” (379)]. By now, May is so desperate with desire for Damien that “she moot outhir dien sodeinly,/ Or ellis she moot han him as hir leste;/ She waiteth when hir herte wolde breaste!” (2094-20) [“sudden death was her design/ Unless she could enjoy him; so at first/ She wept and waited for her heart to burst” (379)]. Finally, she hits upon a plan. Knowing that January likes to make love in a walled garden, she waits until the garden’s pear trees bear fruit and then entices her husband inside. Damien is hidden in one of the trees and, saying that she’d like a pear, May has January support her while she climbs into the tree. While they are perched there, Damien satisfies her. Pluto spies them, however, and, siding with the old man, restores his sight to him. Yet the quick-witted May convinces January that because his eyesight was restored so suddenly, he is mistaken about what he saw, and January accepts her answer.

One of the questions that this story raises is whether Chaucer means to portray May as sexually passive or as equal to any man in her desire for sexual pleasure. Susan K. Hagen points out that if indeed May is so desperate that she feels she will die without Damien’s love, it can be argued that her primary motivation for arranging the pear-tree episode is not her desire to make her lover happy but her need to attain sexual satisfaction for herself (139). In contrast, Alcuin Blamires insists that though May is “less inhibited and less passive than many Chaucerian women,” the language used in the description of the act in the pear tree is more applicable to a female’s passive role in sex than to the posture of an aggressor (96).

“The Miller’s Tale” involves some of the same issues. Again, the husband

in the story is an old man, newly married to a young and beautiful wife, and, again, he has a young man living with him. Yet for some reason, though he is extremely jealous, the elderly carpenter, John, does not suspect that his poor young lodger, the clerk Nicholas, is determined to have his way with Alison, John's young wife. Alison is initially described as "yong and wilde" (3225) ["wild and young" (89)], and, in a later passage, the Miller says, "Winsing she was, as is a joly colt" ["Skittish she was, and jolly as a colt" (90)]. One cannot miss the implication: she is equal to anyone in her sexual impulses and undoubtedly superior to her elderly husband. Though she coyly dodges away when, in the absence of her husband, Nicholas "caught hire by the queinte" (1376) ["caught her by the quim" (91)], in time she promises the clerk her love, and the two hatch a plan to get John out of the way. They convince him that a biblical flood is coming and that they will survive it only if they suspend themselves in three separate tubs. With John hanging in a tub, Alison and Nicholas have the run of the house. Alison is as eager as Nicholas for their rendezvous: "ful softe adoun she spedde/. . . / And thus lith Alison and Nicholas/ In businesse of mirthe and of solas,/ Till that the belle of laudes gan to ringe" (3649, 3653-55) ["Came Nicholas and Alison, and sped/ Softly downstairs, without a word, to bed/. . . / And thus lay Nicholas and Alison/ Busy in solace and the quest of fun,/ Until the bell for lauds had started ringing" (101)].

The situation in "The Reeve's Tale" is somewhat different. Because Symkin, the miller in the story, has stolen flour from them, the clerks feel justified in stealing his young daughter's virginity as well as romancing his wife. It must be admitted that the wife is surprised and pleased with the new vigor of the man she thinks is her husband and that, before they part, the daughter calls her clerk her "deere lemman" (4240) ["my sweet" (116)] and tells him where to find the cake made from the flour the miller had stolen from the clerks. The fact that the loss of her virginity reduces her value in the marriage market does not seem to occur to her at the time. However, as Blamires notes, in a patriarchal society, women belong to the male head of the household, and, therefore, what might be regarded as offenses against the women are considered thefts of property—in this case, the property of the miller—and thus constitute an appropriate revenge for the miller's theft of the clerks' flour (98-101). Again, in this situation Chaucer seems sympathetic to the women while at the same time he recognizes that in his society women are owned by men.

Whatever the Church and her society might say, the Wife of Bath does not consider herself the property of any male. However, unlike many of her male companions on the pilgrimage, she likes being married—likes it so much, in fact, that she has defied Church doctrine by taking not just one husband but five. Virginity and marital continence may be all right for some, she admits, but her vocation is different. If sex is wrong, she argues, why would God have

equipped human beings with the appropriate instruments? Moreover, “Why sholde men ellis in hir bokes sette/ That man shal yelde to his wif her dette?” (129-130) [“Why else the proverb written down and set/ In books: ‘A man must yield his wife her debt’?” (262)]. Clearly, the Wife believes that women enjoy sex and that men are obligated to pleasure them. This idea may well explain why Chaucer allows some of the female adulterers in his fabliaux to emerge unscathed from their escapades, like the young wives in “The Merchant’s Tale” and “The Miller’s Tale,” whose families were too poor to give them dowries and who were therefore effectually sold as sex slaves to well-to-do elderly men. It seems only just that such a girl would be allowed at least one fling with a young man who can give her pleasure. Since the Wife of Bath was married at twelve to a rich, elderly husband, we can assume that her situation was no different from that of the young wives in the other stories.

However, both in her prologue and in her Arthurian fairy tale, the Wife of Bath defines a happy marriage as one in which the woman rules. She did not find it difficult to gain sovereignty over her first three husbands, all of whom were old, she tells us. First, she charmed them into giving her control of their property and then she wore them out sexually; whenever they became suspicious of her extramarital activities, she flattered them by accusing them of adultery, then refused to have sex with them until they bought her off. Her fourth husband was younger, and though she could not force him to abandon his paramour, the Wife of Bath did make his life miserable by pretending to have affairs of her own. Her fifth husband, a student half her age who was steeped in antifeminism, was more difficult to control. However, after he deafened her with a hard blow to the head, she was able to prey upon his sense of guilt and win sovereignty over him.

“The Franklin’s Tale” has traditionally been seen as the cornerstone of Chaucer’s “Marriage Group,” a mean between the extremes represented by “The Clerk’s Tale” and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.” Before Arveragus and Dorigen are married, Arveragus seems to have solved the problem of sovereignty: he promises Dorigen that he will continue to obey her as he has during their courtship, though he must appear to be her ruler “for shame of his degree” (752) [“lest it should shame his honour” (409)]. Thus courtly love merges with knightly ideals. As Blamires points out, there is a widespread assumption that the theme of “The Franklin’s Tale” is generosity (149-51). This knightly virtue is displayed by Arveragus, when he tells his wife that she must keep her promise and sleep with the squire Aurelius; then by the squire, when he refuses to take advantage of her; and finally by the magician, who refuses payment for aiding the squire and thus shows that a clerk, too, can “doon a gentil dede” (1611) [“come as near to nobleness/ as any” (432)]. However, in Dorigen, Chaucer presents a woman who is not preoccupied merely with the

honor of chastity but with what was viewed as a more masculine ideal of honor—keeping one’s word. As she broods about her dilemma, Dorigen focuses on the loss of her chastity and seriously considers escaping by committing suicide. However, after Arveragus returns and is told of her situation, he insists that she honor her promise to Aurelius, for, as he puts it, “‘Trouthe is the hyeste thing that man may kepe’” (1479) [“Truth is the highest thing in a man’s keeping” (429)].

By endowing Dorigen with a knightly virtue, Arveragus—and Chaucer—places her on a higher level than that of the passive ladies of courtly romance; by showing her communicating with her husband rather than simply outwitting him, the Franklin—and Chaucer—removes her from the company of the shrews and scolds with whom a number of the married male pilgrims complain they are afflicted. However, Dorigen is not the independent heroine one might like to find in *The Canterbury Tales*, for, after making a foolish promise, she does not solve the problem herself; rather, when her husband returns, she turns the problem over to him. Though one can sympathize with her decision, it cannot be denied that she thus relinquishes any pretense of equality. Certainly Chaucer was more sympathetic to the plight of women than were most other male medieval writers; however, it is evident that he did not actually envision a relationship in which men and women would be truly equal.

Admittedly, a feminist reading of Chaucer is, as Elaine Tuttle Hansen puts it, both “biased and partisan.” However, it is valuable in that it may “make masterworks more available and interesting,” particularly to “those [such as women] whom they have hitherto helped to silence and exclude from the game” (291-92).

## Note

1. Quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* are first cited by line number from the edition edited by Jill Mann and then cited by page number from the edition translated by Nevill Coghill.

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