'Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee.'

Freedom and Control in Relation to the Women in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* and *Franklin’s Tale*

Anna Smit

Groningen, 12 October 2008

Student number: 1348477

Supervisor: Dr. C. Dekker
Second reader:: Dr. K. E. Olsen

Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

Contents
Introduction

Chapter One
Women, Marriage, Sex and Freedom in Chaucer's Middle Ages

Chapter Two
May: A Woman in Control

Chapter Three
Dorigen: No Desire for Freedom

Conclusion

Bibliography
Introduction

Image of the Ellesmere manuscript
Introduction

A ‘book of wikked wyves’ would most likely have been considered a favourite collection of stories by medieval men. To vilify their wives, but preferably all women, was one of their favourite past times. If the book had been real, it would surely have been a bestseller, but alas, it was not. Instead it was a fictional book invented by medieval author Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer is one of the most well known medieval authors. He wrote *Troilus and Criseyde*, *the Book of the Duchess, the House of Fame, the Parliament of Fowls*, and *the Legend of Good Women*, among others, but his most well known work was *the Canterbury Tales*. *The Canterbury Tales* is a framework narrative which has unfortunately been left unfinished. The work is about a group of people who are on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, and they decide to tell each other stories to pass the time. Initially, Chaucer had intended for each pilgrim to tell four tales; two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back, but he was unable to finish *the Canterbury Tales* before his death. Nonetheless, the tales he did write leave us with much to discuss. Chaucer was greatly interested in a vast number of subjects, and the nature of women was one of them. Chaucer’s fascination with women is evident in his depiction of his most well known female creation: the Wife of Bath.

The male-to-female ratio among the pilgrims tips in the direction of the men quite strongly as only three of the twenty-nine pilgrims are women: the Prioress, the Nun’s priest and the Wife of Bath. Out of those three the Wife of Bath is the most outspoken, and her statements actually cause a reaction from other pilgrims. G.L. Kittredge classifies her prologue and tale as the start of a marriage discussion. In his article ‘Chaucer’s Discussion of Marriage’ Kittredge groups five tales together in what he refers to as ‘the marriage group’, and since then this has been ‘generally accepted as one of the fairly accurate ways of trying to order the tales.’ In this group the Wife of Bath begins the discussion with her prologue and tale, the Clerk responds to

---

that with his tale, which in turn elicits a reaction from the Merchant and the Squire, until the Franklin ends the discussion with his tale about a supposed perfect marriage. With the Wife of Bath Chaucer introduces many issues which are important with reference to a woman’s life in the Middle Ages, such as female oppression at the hands of their husbands. It is the Wife of Bath who is read to by her husband from the ‘book of wikked wyves,’ but she rebels against this. As a result the Wife of Bath is often given as evidence of Chaucer’s feminist convictions, as she is openly allowed to argue the case of women. Through the Wife of Bath Chaucer has shown that he did not cling to the strict rules that medieval women needed to abide by.

In his tales Chaucer deals with topics related to women such as virtue and sovereignty. To be a woman during the Middle Ages was not easy as women were required to live up to immensely high standards. Women were forced to live under the rule of their husbands, who had complete legal control over their wives. Domestic violence was not frowned upon, but often considered a necessary way to control women. Medieval women were also not allowed to have a sexual appetite. To prevent women from choosing to act on their desires they would often be victims at the hands of medieval writers who wrote damaging texts about their devious nature, and one author who wrote such a work is St. Jerome. St. Jerome was actually born in the fourth century, but his works were well known throughout the Middle Ages. He was a Church Father who wrote about topics such as virtue, virginity, and marriage. Another medieval writer who had much to say on how women ought to behave was a woman herself, namely Christine de Pizan. She wrote the *Livre de la Cité des Dames* in response to many of the texts written by men to show that there were women who behaved properly.

To divide women into two groups, the good and the bad, was popular in the Middle Ages. Men spent a vast amount of time pondering over the nature of women, but women still remained a mystery they could not solve. For men the mystery was if women were ‘good or bad, victims or predators, patient sufferers or aggressive shrews.’ In literature women were often either good or bad, yet many of Chaucer’s women cannot be placed into such restricted boxes, because Geoffrey Chaucer is a master at playing with literary conventions; his women are never just good or just bad. The Wife of Bath is an excellent example of this, but so is, for example, Alison from *the Miller’s Tale*. She is an adulterous woman, but at the end of the tale she is exempt from all punishment while the men in the tale are not. However, some women in Chaucer’s works are

---


8 In *the Miller’s Tale*, Absolon is tricked into kissing Alison’s behind, and Nicholas passes wind in his face. Nicholas gets his backside burned by Absolon’s coulter, and John believes Nicholas’s lies about the flood, and is considered to be mad. I (A) 3187 – 3854.
perceived as being either good or bad, and May from *the Merchant’s Tale* and Dorigen from *the Franklin’s Tale* are excellent examples of this. As an inventive, but ultimately adulterous, wife May is often regarded as one of the foulest women in *the Canterbury Tales*. Critics refer to her as vile, or manipulative while Dorigen is referred to as ‘that rare thing in Chaucer’s poetry, a genuinely good, loving, and lovable woman.’ To claim that May is good, while Dorigen is bad simplifies Chaucer’s intentions for these tales immensely. He never intended them to be classified as such; in fact, both women have good sides, as well as bad ones. May and Dorigen both change in their respective tales, and Chaucer’s perception of them changed as well. Chaucer uses the topics of freedom—the freedom of the will and choices—and control as a tool to show the improvement in May’s character, and the degeneration of Dorigen’s.

The Middle Ages was a period of revival for philosophy. Medieval philosophers were reading the texts of Roman and Classical philosophers, and attempted to develop new, or redevelop old, theories on philosophy. Much of philosophy has to do with human nature, and, since he was very interested in human nature, Chaucer had great interest in philosophy. For the purpose of this dissertation, the topic of free will is most important. Chaucer uses the idea of free will often in his tales, especially in relation to choices, and he was especially fascinated by it when it concerned women. For example, in *the Wife of Bath’s Tale* Chaucer has a knight find the answer to the age of question: what do women want? The answer given in the tale is that women want sovereignty, they wish to rule over their husband. In other words, they wish to be free.

For medieval women freedom was an important topic, since so many lacked it within their marriages. In *the Merchant’s Tale* and *the Franklin’s Tale* Chaucer introduces two women who are both newly married, but their positions within their marriages are vastly different. May has no control over her choice of husband and her subsequent role within her marriage, whilst Dorigen has the unusual position of being able to choose her husband and be equal to him within the marriage. *The Franklin’s Tale*, as the last tale in the marriage group, is often regarded as the resolution to the debate, and the depiction of the perfect marriage. Although that seems to be true at the start of the tale, Dorigen’s role shifts dramatically in the tale from a woman in control

---


to a woman under the control of men. Chaucer does not intend to show this as his ideal position for a woman, but rather as the position women will be forced to adopt if they do not take control of their own lives. In *The Merchant’s Tale*, May’s journey is the exact opposite, as she initially has no control over her own life, but finds the courage to take it back from her husband by the end of the tale. Chaucer shows admiration for her attitude. By using control as a reward in *The Merchant’s Tale* and *The Franklin’s Tale* Chaucer shows that women should strive for freedom above anything else.
Chapter One
Women, Marriage, Sex and Freedom in Chaucer’s Middle Ages
Chapter One
Women, Marriage, Sex and Freedom in Chaucer’s Middle Ages

When reading any text a reader cannot help but bring their own views to the table, which means a modern reader cannot refrain from applying their modern views to an older text. However, in order to understand a text in its full details it is most helpful to place it within its own time. In Chaucer’s case this means we need to place the ideas and concepts which we apply to the Merchant’s Tale and the Franklin’s Tale in a medieval frame of mind. We will start by looking at women and their customary place in marriage in the Middle Ages. Another extremely important topic in relation to women during the Middle Ages was sex, especially in relation to the protection of their virtue, on the one hand, and their sexual promiscuousness, on the other hand. It was a popular medieval technique to place women in two separate groups: the good and the bad. Furthermore, women’s desire for freedom also raised many philosophical questions. As a learned man Chaucer had great interest in matters of philosophy, and it was in an age of rediscovering philosophy\(^\text{14}\) that Chaucer pondered over topics as freedom, free choice, and human nature, and how they affected women. Later he would use this knowledge when writing his Merchant’s Tale and Franklin’s Tale.

Women’s role in a medieval marriage

In a medieval marriage the roles of a man and woman were very clear. The woman would be the servant while her husband would be her master. From the day a girl was born, two options were presented to her: she could become a wife or a nun. Naturally, there were other options such as being a labourer or a prostitute, but these were merely unfortunate fallbacks, in case the first two were unavailable. The choice for a woman, therefore, was to either serve the Lord or to serve her husband. As a wife a woman would need to relinquish all control over her life, because from the day of the wedding she would no longer have any legal standing. In English law this was referred to as feme covert, which meant that her legal issues would henceforth be dealt with by her

husband.\textsuperscript{15} The exception to this was if a woman had been raped, or if the matter dealt with was a feminine issue such as pregnancy, virginity, or impotence. Unfortunately for women the control men had over their wives was not limited to the courtroom. She was to be under his rule in all aspects of life. Furthermore, she would do best to obey her husband, because ‘[he], as lord over his wife, was further authorized to enforce his force, since canonical authorities accorded him the right of correction, which might entail tying her up or depriving her of food.’\textsuperscript{16} The only way in which a woman could have control over her own life is if she were widowed, which, incidentally, was a common occurrence in medieval England.\textsuperscript{17} It was then that she could control her own assets which, if she were lucky, her husband would have left to her. Important to note is that the facts above were based on rules that were forced upon married couples by higher authorities like the Church. In theory, it was within a man’s right to rule over his wife and mistreat her, but this does not mean all husbands did. Many women would have been accustomed to this way of life, and they would not rebel. The rules do, however, make for an interesting and powerful literary theme: men and their wives, and the control he ought to have over her. As we will see in more detail later, Chaucer uses this theme frequently and intelligently.

Good Girl and Bad Girls

Sovereignty within marriage could easily be the bane of a medieval woman’s existence, but there is another issue of even greater importance, namely her virtue. To be a virtuous woman was not just a requirement but a top priority for every woman. Before a girl was married it was of the utmost importance that she should guard her virginity, and if she wanted to be truly perfect she would guard it for life. The general consensus was that ‘to be a chaste wife is good, to be a chaste widow is better, but to be a virgin is best.’\textsuperscript{18} One of the great preachers of virginity was St.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\citenum{Elliot, Dyan. “Marriage.” A Cambridge Guide to Medieval Women’s Writing. Ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace. 47.}
\item Evans, Ruth. “Virginities.” A Cambridge Guide to Medieval Women’s Writing. Ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Jerome. St. Jerome was a fourth-century Church Father, and his teachings on women and marriage were greatly influential during the Middle Ages. Chaucer himself refers to him numerous times, for example in *the Wife of Bath’s prologue.* To be a virgin is not as easy as it seems, at least not according to Jerome, since it does not just mean refraining from sexual activity. Jerome believed that ‘virginity may be lost even by a thought.’ If a girl had impure thoughts that meant she was no longer a true virgin, but what Jerome would call a virgin of the flesh rather than the more desirable virgin of the spirit. However, this also holds true if a girl’s virginity is taken from her without her consent through rape. She would still be virginal if she held on to the will to be chaste. To the great disappointment of many clergy it was an impossibility for women to remain virgins after they were married. If all women remained virgins humanity would die out. Therefore, sex within marriage was permitted as long as certain rules were adhered to. Intercourse would only be done in order to procreate, and should never be enjoyed. Pastor Thomas of Chobman wrote an entire manual stipulating when sex was and was not allowed, but men were not alone in preaching for virginity. Christine de Pizan also supports the cause in her work *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames.* In this book she fights for the cause of women, but only those who are morally worthy. About women who are sexually promiscuous she says that she would ‘rather not discuss such women because they’re like creatures who go totally against their own nature [as] there’s nothing worse than a woman who is dissolute and depraved: she’s like a monster, a creature going against its own nature, which is to be timid, meek and pure.’ She shows that even other women agreed with the notion that women should all be outstandingly virtuous.

However, one cannot have light without darkness, and in order for some women to be considered good there would need to be other women who were bad. During the Middle Ages, it


19 Chaucer, III (D) 673 – 692.


22 Thomas of Chobham’s manual is introduced by Dyan Elliot as an example that represented the general discourse. In it he states that sex that was not allowed included sex solely due to lust, all extravaginal forms of intercourse, sex at times stipulated by the Church, sex during pregnancy or a woman’s menstrual period, and a possible fifth, sex with an audience. Elliot, Dyan. “Marriage.” 50 – 51.

was a commonly used critical tool to place women in two groups: one positive and the other negative. This division is often made as part of the discussion of the nature of women. Since the dawn of time men have been trying to solve the mystery of women. When doing so they unfortunately resorted to extremes. Women are either the embodiment of evil, or of perfection. Eve and the Virgin Mary are excellent examples of this. Mary, as the virginal mother of the son of God, is, of course, incapable of being faulty. Unfortunately, her fictional perfection of being a virgin mother leaves all women unable to meet her standard. All that is left for women is to be Eve, and she is far from perfect as she not only indulged in sinful behaviour herself, but she also corrupted her husband. This results in the fall from Paradise, and Eve is blamed for all human suffering. Men often think about this division: as Jill Mann notes they are constantly wondering if women are patients victims without control, or if they are cunning manipulators. In literature both types of women are used, because they each have a function. In nonfictional literature the Eve-like woman is more dominant, and men would be warned against them, while perfect women would be more likely to appear in fictional literature. This is because evil women simply are not useful in most plot lines. No respectable knight would fight to the death in order to win Eve’s affection. This is where a perfect, idealised woman needs to be introduced. She would be the object of affection as he would employ the traditions of courtly love to win her heart. She is beautiful and quiet, like Emily in *the Knight’s Tale* for example, but Chaucer played with these standards. For example, Alison in *the Miller’s Tale* is a character who combines both women. She is beautiful, and the object of many men’s affections, yet she is deceitful. Chaucer plays with the ideas and leaves room for imperfections in women who are generally believed to be good. By allowing women to be good and bad, Chaucer shows more understanding of the diverse complexity of female nature.

Women and their Sexuality

One of the more devious sides, and thus one of the most problematic sides, of a woman’s character would be her sexual promiscuousness, especially outside her marriage. Woman were believed to be interested in nothing else but sex. It was irrelevant what type of woman she was since women were all hungry for it. The Wife of Bath introduces these beliefs in her prologue where she states that it was to be expected that all beautiful women would be unfaithful while the

---

ugly ones would be aching for lovers they could not get. Either way a woman would have the unstoppable desire to be with men, and she would most certainly act on these desires outside of the marital bed if she had to. This was what men believed, and they simply could not stop discussing this topic and developed a true ‘obsession with female infidelity.’ This infidelity would, if discovered, be dealt with harshly; much more severely than adultery committed by a man. This ‘sexual double standard [shows] the injustice of society’s differential attitude towards the adultery of the husband, which was generally tolerated, versus that of the wife, which was severely censured.’ Dyan Elliot continues by claiming there was a religious reason for this distinction. On the surface the Church claimed and acted as though the offence resulted in comparable punishment for men and women. However, at the same time they were formulating theories as to why men should be allowed to commit adultery and women should not. One such theory states that since ‘Christ was married to the Synagogue before marrying the Church, multiple sexual partners could be tolerated in the male, but not in the female (who much represent the virginal and monogamous Church).’ Moreover, since women were required to obey their husband’s every need, including sexual needs, his abundance of desire could easily be her fault. If she had satisfied him fully, he would not have needed to cheat. All in all, when dealing with medieval adultery it is always the woman who is at fault, and never the man.

Women Desire Freedom

The reason for these different theories about women is that the male authors who wrote about them were unsure about female nature. It is Chaucer’s Wife of Bath who asks the pivotal question ‘[w]ho peyntede the leon?’ The vast majority of medieval literature was written by men, and therefore most information we have about medieval women was documented by men. Chaucer is one such medieval author who is trying to answer the question men have asked themselves for centuries; what do women want? Chaucer attempts answers this question in the Wife of Bath’s Tale. In this tale a knight rapes a young girl, and his only way to avoid death is to go

---

29 Chaucer, III (D) 692.
on a quest to discover what women truly want. By making a deal with an elderly hag she gives him the answer.

Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee
As wel over his housbond as hir love,
And for to been in maistrie hym above. [III (D) 1038 – 1040]

Critics have argued that this is not the answer to the question what all women want but merely what the Wife of Bath wanted, but perhaps it is also what Chaucer wanted for women as it is a recurring theme in his tales. Chaucer continually plays with the concepts of control, obedience and freedom within a marriage. He does so very clearly in the Franklin’s Tale where the premise is a marriage in which the man agrees to not rule over his wife. It is understandable that the role of a woman within her marriage is of great interest to Chaucer as he, in his own life, married a woman from a class above his own, and she, therefore, might have been the superior in the marriage. This led him to disregard the simplicity of the husband-ruling-over-wife concept which was prevalent in the Middle Ages. In his tales, Chaucer toys with this by giving his Canterbury wives more control that they should have, and, as we will see, applauding those who make use of the freedom this control gives them.

Medieval Free Will

To Chaucer the idea of freedom, of choosing your own path, was important, as many of his tales show us. He had a great interest in philosophy and used this knowledge in his writing. Many centuries before Chaucer Saint Augustine had stated that he ‘wanted to become as certain about things [he] could not see as [he] was certain that seven and three are ten.’ Augustine wanted to be certain about topics such as human nature, God, love, life and freedom, but he had to come to terms with the fact that it was simply impossible to assess such abstract matters in definite terms. In his attempt to do so Augustine was one of the most celebrated philosophers, and much of his teaching is still alive in modern philosophy. For an author such as Chaucer who was greatly

interested in human nature philosophy was an important part of his writing as ‘[n]othing in medieval philosophy was more fiercely contested than the topic of human nature.’ In fact, Chaucer used Augustine’s teaching in several of his works, and even when Chaucer does not directly refer to Augustine when he discusses philosophical questions about the mind, the soul, intellect and passion traces of Augustine’s teachings are evident in Chaucer’s work. The philosophical question most important to my argument is that of free will. Medieval philosophy is very different from modern philosophy as it is cannot be separated from theology. All the questions philosophers would ask themselves would eventually be traced back to God. In relation to free will the most important question was how people could be in control of their own actions if God was in control of the entire universe. This in turn raised the question that; if people are not in control of their own actions, how can they be held responsible for them. In modern philosophy believers of this theory are called fatalists. It is a slippery slope since a society in which people cannot be held responsible for their own actions is a society of chaos. As a result, most philosophers do not believe in fatalism, but instead have found a way to combine their philosophical beliefs with their belief in an almighty God. God is simply omniscient and already knows which choice you will freely make. For a medieval philosopher the search for answers often resulted in a search for God. Modern philosophers are much more clinical in their research and study human behaviour much more scientifically. In mainstream philosophy three separate belief systems with regard to free will are distinguished; fatalism, determinism, and compatibilism. Determinists believe that all actions and events that take place in the world are caused by a previous event. Fatalists believe people have no control over these events while compatibilists believe that while all events are linked people still have a choice over what to do. Compatibilism, which is a modern term, is most closely related to medieval beliefs, and will henceforth be kept in mind when speaking of free will.

---

33 McGrade, A.S. ed. 208.
34 As Chaucer does in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and the Franklin’s Tale, for example.
36 These terms and the additional information are taken from French, Peter A. and Howard K. Wettstein. Free Will and Moral Responsibility. Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Other texts may use other terms to refer to the same, or similar, concepts.
Inability to Choose

If you remove God and science from the equation medieval and modern philosophers are concerned with the same problem with regard to free will, namely that of moral responsibility. People ought to be held responsible for their own actions, yet they cannot be held responsible for something if they did not freely choose to do so. For fatalists this simply means no one is responsible for anything, but this is an extreme way of thinking. However, even if you do believe that people are free to make their own choices, certain exceptions should be considered. First of all, if someone is coerced into acting a certain way, and secondly, if a person did not have another choice. Both these concepts come with a relatively large grey area. It is difficult to determine when is someone being forced to do something to the extent that he no longer has control over his own actions. Just as it is difficult to decide whether someone really had no other choice. For example, if you kill someone to protect your own life, most would agree that you are not morally responsible, because ‘moral responsibility depends on there being alternate course of action available to the agent.’\textsuperscript{37} This is where moral responsibility intertwines with another important part of the free will discussion: namely the concept of alternate possibilities. The phrase alternate possibilities is a modern one to ask the age-old question ‘what else could I do?’ On might argue that there is always another possible course of action, which is to do nothing, but it is according to human nature to react to a situation; moreover, most people would not consider doing nothing if their life was at stake. Another important note to make about alternate possibilities is that ‘it need not be an alternative to the action for which responsibility is being attributed.’\textsuperscript{38} This means that it is not a simple choice between left and right. The alternate choice need not be the direct opposite of the initial choice. It is not a choice between doing something or not doing it; instead, it includes the decision to do something else entirely. However, the availability of alternate possibilities is greatly restricted by the bounds of human nature. At all times humans need three things: sleep, sustenance and sex. They cannot live without these things, and spend most of their lives in search of them, because without sleep, food and drink humans lose their minds and their lives, and the lack of sex, although not instantly life-threatening, will also greatly affect man’s psyche. The term sex should not be restricted to sexual acts, or indeed solely achieving a climax, as the need for sex is often derived from a need for physical attachments of any kind. Humans need social and physical attachments. When someone is deprived of these things, they will do whatever is needed to find them, and when someone is deprived of food,

\textsuperscript{37} French, Peter A. and Howard K. Wettstein. \textit{Free Will and Moral Responsibility}. 126.

\textsuperscript{38} French, Peter A. and Howard K. Wettstein. 126.
drink, sex, and sleep through actions of others they cannot be held fully responsible for what they will do to have those three basic needs met.

We saw how women in the Middle Ages lived restricted lives that were ruled over by their husbands. They were required to meet ridiculously high standards, especially with regard to their sexuality. It was desired of women to remain virgins for as long as humanly possible if they wanted to be considered ‘good’. Barriers existed to divide women in one of two groups: either they would be good or they would be bad. Chaucer played with this clear divide and showed that women who were sexually promiscuous, or even adulterous, would not immediately be bad. Chaucer also enjoyed playing with women and their desire to be free as his most well-known literary creation, the Wife of Bath, shows us through her prologue and tale. Women’s desire for freedom interested him greatly as well as other philosophical discussions. In relation to free will several other topics are of great importance such as moral responsibility. People can only be held morally responsible if they have control over their actions, and they would be if free will meant that people are still in control of their own actions even if all events are linked. However, if all surrounding events are out of one’s control one cannot be held morally responsible for one’s actions because one would not have alternate possibilities. Moreover, alternate possibilities are, in turn, restricted by human nature. As a rule, humans need three things, sleep, sustenance and sex, and will cross any line in order to have these needs met. While at first glance these different topics may seem to be randomly pulled together, we shall see in following chapters how Chaucer very effectively used them with regard to the freedom of the women in the Merchant’s Tale and the Franklin’s Tale.
Chapter Two

May: A Woman in Control

*the Merchant from the Ellesmere Manuscript*
Chapter Two
May: A Woman in Control

Chaucer was immensely gifted in taking a short uninspiring piece of writing and turning it into a literary masterpiece. One might argue that the earlier texts fade in comparison to Chaucer's work but it does not stop them from being interesting. To establish what Chaucer's intentions for a text were it is essential to examine the stories that inspired him, as the changes Chaucer chose to make will tell us a great deal about what he wanted the tale and his characters to be. *The Merchant's Tale* was inspired by two separate literary traditions, and how May differs from wives in those stories will tell us many things about how Chaucer wanted to portray her. Her role within her marriage is a good example of this. *The Merchant's Tale* was written in a completely different tone from the other pear tree tales, which was caused by the narrator of the tale: the Merchant. There is also a divide between the Merchant's voice and Chaucer's in the tale. The Merchant is openly hateful towards May and Januarie, while Chaucer is more subtle in his judgement of them and of the Merchant himself. Chaucer relies heavily on the intellect of his readers to show who is being mocked and judged, and uses intelligence to condemn Januarie and the Merchant, while rewarding May for her cunning behaviour by re-establishing her control.

Sources and Analogues

For a medieval author it was immensely important to have authority. Authority is a medieval concept meaning that any text an author would write would have its origins in an older text. Writing an original work was considered to be less admirable than a reworking of an existing idea. You might expect this to result in unoriginal and similar stories, but nothing could be further from the truth. In order for an author to be able to claim authority only very few similarities needed to be present between the new and the original text. Geoffrey Chaucer used this technique and perfected it. His *Canterbury Tales* in particular have been influenced by and based on a wide variety of sources. One of such tales is *the Merchant's Tale*. Which precise sources Chaucer used for any given story can never be determined with absolute certainty, but critics who
specialise in researching sources and analogues for Chaucer's works can certainly make an educated guess. According to the authors of *Originals and Analogues of Some of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* the *Merchant's Tale* has its roots in two separate literary traditions. First of all, it can be traced to stories of Asiatic origin about an enchanted tree, and secondly to a European fable about a pear tree. The sources listed here are sources for the third, and final, part of the tale, which is the most important part for this dissertation. Sources for the first two parts include the *Miroir of Mariage* which is widely accepted to be the source for Januarie’s view of marriage in the first part. Focussing on the final part of the tale we find that the stories about the enchanted tree are older and share fewer similarities to the *Merchant's Tale*. They also show a married woman who has an affair in front of her husband’s eyes. She tricks him into believing that the tree he has climbed is magical, and that is why he sees her having sex with another man. To make her deception more believable the wife also climbs up the tree herself and pretends to see her husband having sex as well. Naturally, the tree possesses no such magic but it is simple a fabrication cooked up by the wife. The pear tree stories are similar to the extent that they also include a wife who cheats on her husband right in front of his eyes. In these stories the wife is much younger, and her older husband is blind. Unlike the enchanted tree wife the pear tree wife had not counted on being caught by her husband as gods restore her husband’s sight with their special powers. She needs to fabricate an excuse on the spot, and claims she had sex as part of an agreement she made with the gods to restore her husbands sight. The gods wanted to open his eyes to the misdeeds of his cheating wife but failed as he, much like the enchanted tree husband, chose to believe his wife. Ultimately the themes of the magical tree, adultery, and witty lies are used differently in all versions of both stories, but the ultimate result is always the same; the man is made a fool of my his adulterous, but inventive, wife.

As was noted earlier the enchanted tree stories share fewer similarities with the *Merchant's Tale* than the pear tree stories. Assuming the pear tree tales were Chaucer’s main inspiration for

---


the tale, there are two distinct sources he may have used. First of all, Chaucer could have used the fables. Several versions of the pear tree story exist as fables; there are Latin, French, English and Italian versions. As is required of its genre, the fables are short, simple and comedic in nature. A more extensive version of the tale was also available to Chaucer in the form of the Comedia Lydia, which is a French version of the pear tree tale which Couston assumes Chaucer probably used as a source. A third possible source used by Chaucer is the story written by Giovanni Boccaccio. This option was somewhat disregarded by Couston, but since then Boccaccio has been regarded as one of Chaucer’s most influential sources, not just for the Merchant’s Tale but other tales as well. Boccaccio was a fourteenth century poet who wrote a framework narrative, the Decamorone, which possibly inspired Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. For our discussion of May and Chaucer’s intentions for her Boccaccio’s version of the tale is very important. Assuming Chaucer used Boccaccio as a source, seeing how May differs from Lydia, Boccaccio’s pear tree wife, will tell us many things about Chaucer’s intentions. Any changes he made to the character of the wife he did deliberately, and they will show us how Chaucer wanted to portray May.

May’s Marriage

As was mentioned earlier, May’s marriage to January is not a happy occasion for her. First and foremost there is nothing to suggest that she married him voluntarily. For a young woman of ‘smal degree’ is it likely that her parents made the decision for her. As January is a wealthy man, her parents probably made the decision for financial reasons. On the whole the marriage has more in common with a business arrangement than with a loving courtship. January’s decision to

---

47 Chaucer, IV (E) 1625.
48 This was discussed in chapter one.
be married is based on nothing other than his own desires and wishes. The image of Januarie choosing his wife as if she was an object says a lot of how he views her.

As whoso took a mirour, polissed bright,
And sette it in a commune market-place,
Thane sholde he se in ful many a figure pace
By his mirour; and in the same wyse
Gan Januarie inwith this thought devyse
Of maydens whiche that dwelten hym bisyde.
He wiste nat wher that he myghte abyde. [IV (E) 1582 – 1588]

The women pass by in his mind as cows on a cattle market, and Januarie is waiting for the perfect cow to purchase. The criteria on which he bases his decision are shallow at best and in no way hide Januarie’s true motive for wanting to marry. In his old age Januarie wants a young beautiful girl to pleasure him whenever he desires. The most efficient way to arrange this is by marrying one since she will be obligated to comply. Januarie’s ‘vision of marriage […] is nothing more than […] a sort of sacramentally licensed prostitution,’” and May was his whore of choice. She was not chosen for her quick wit or intelligence, but solely because of ‘Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tender, / His myddel small, hir armes longe and sklendre,’ and in the following two lines Januarie claims to have chosen her for ‘Hir wise governaunce, hir gentillesse, / Hir womanly berynge, and hire sadnesse,’ but these are empty reasons as Januarie has no way of knowing these things about her, and in reality he has no interest in knowing anything about her. She is there to satisfy Januarie’s desires and nothing else. To him she is a blank slate, and for almost a hundred lines she has no name, but that is is exactly what Januarie wants because ‘[t]he longer she remains unnamed, the longer she is unmarked, able to to embody any man’s desire.’ To Januarie, May is unnamed and unimportant, and all his fancy compliments cannot disguise that ‘this marriage is a commercial transaction, and May is a piece of property.’

50 Chaucer, IV (E) 1601 – 1602.
51 Chaucer, IV (E) 1603 – 1604.
Voiced by the Merchant

May’s portrayal, and subsequently how she differs from other pear tree wives, largely depends on how the Merchant chooses to portray her. In the telling of any story voice means everything. Where a narrator comes from, and his thoughts and beliefs, shape a story much more than the material does. Within a framework narrative such as *the Canterbury Tales* Chaucer has limitless possibilities with regard to voice. He has a wide variety of pilgrims at his disposal, all of whom can bring their own experiences to a tale. Chaucer did not pick and choose which pilgrim would tell which tale at random; instead, he would ensure that each pair would be a perfect match. Therefore, Chaucer must have felt that the Merchant would be the perfect person to tell May’s tale in the manner he wanted it told. Before the Merchant properly begins his tale we can already make an educated guess as to how May will be characterised. In the 31-line prologue to his tale the Merchant shares with us how he feels about his own wife.

> “Wepyng and waylyng, care and oother sorwe
> I knowe ynogh, on even and a-morwe,”
> Quod the Marchant, “and so doon other mo
> That wedded been. I trowe that it be so,
> For wel I woot it fareth so with me.
> I have a wyf, the worste that may be;”  

[IV (E) 1213 – 1218]

He continues by saying that if he were ever released from marriage, he would surely never marry again. From this it is clear that we can expect a tale in which the wife is anything but the emblem of perfection. The Merchant lives his own life with a woman he despises, and because of this his entire view of marriage is negative. Therefore, the tale of an old man who marries a young, beautiful, but eventually adulterous, girl in the Merchant’s hands is a recipe for disaster. Before Januarie can be married he speaks with his brothers, Placebo and Justinus, about the pros and cons of marriage. Placebo, as his name of which the Latin translation is ‘I will please’ suggests, simply agrees with Januarie and his archaic views of marriage, but Justinus, who already has a wife, adopts a more critical position. At times this critical view slips into a downright negative one.

---

54 Chaucer, IV (E) 1226 – 1227.

55 Benson, Larry D. ed. 886.
For, God it woot, I have wept many a teere
Ful pryvely, syn I have had a wyf.
Preyse whoso wole a wedded mannnes lyf,
Certein I fynde in it bu cost and care
And observances, of alle blisses bare. [IV (E) 1544 – 1548]

and

Dispeire yow noght, but have in youre memorie,
Paraunter she may be youre purgatorie!
She may be Goddes meene and Goddes whippe;
Thanne shal youre soule up to to hevene skippe
Swifter than dooth an arwe out of a bowe. [IV (E) 1669 – 1673]

It is difficult to distinguish between Justinus’s voice and the Merchant himself. After all, in his prologue the Merchant makes it very clear that he knows nothing positive about having a wife. We can assume this will mean that all the women in his tale would be regarded negatively, as a reaction to the Merchant’s wife’s supposed misdeeds.

The Merchant’s subsequent portrayal of May proves this prediction. He accomplished this partly by never giving May a voice except when she is being deceitful. During the first part of the tale May’s role is small and insignificant. The focus lies solely on January and his needs. May’s role only gets bigger when she first visits Damian. It is only then that she is seen making independent choices. Before this, all we heard of May’s possible thoughts is an offhand remark made by the Merchant.56 Neither Januarie nor the Merchant seems concerned with what May might have felt. Through the offhand comments, deemed unimportant by the Merchant yet included by Chaucer, the question of what May was thinking is put into the reader’s head. In spite of the Merchant’s best efforts to keep May off the page, the inclusion of that remark has readers sympathising with May. Despite our lack of knowledge we can assume that May is not happy in the relationship; therefore, when Damian hands her the note readers can understand May’s eagerness to accept. The thoughts she has regarding Damian are the first that the Merchant chooses to share with us.

56 Chaucer, IV (E) 1851 – 1854.
“Certeyn,” thought she, “whom that this thing displese
I rekke noght, for here, I hym assure
To love hum best of any creature,
Though he namoore hadde than his sherte.” [IV (E) 1982 – 1985]

These few lines show May’s desire for Damian. That the wife is able to express her desire for her lover is not a common occurrence in the pear tree tradition. In fact, it only happens in Chaucer’s version and Boccaccio’s. The difference between May and Boccaccio’s pear tree wife Lydia is that Lydia is also allowed the privilege of explaining why she would want this relationship with another man. She explains how her husband is old and does not satisfy her sexually. She gives a speech that May could easily have given.

Thou seest, Lusca, that I am in the prime of my youth and lustihead, and have neither lack nor stint of all such things as folk desire, save only, to be brief, that I have one cause to repine, to wit, that my husband’s years so far outnumber my own. Wherefore with that wherein young ladies take most pleasure I am but ill provided, and, as my desire is no less than theirs, ‘tis now some while since I determined that, if Fortune has shewn herself so little friendly to me by giving me a husband so advanced in years, at least I will not be mine own enemy by sparing to devise the means whereby my happiness and health may be assured; May, however, does not give this speech. We never hear her explain why she would want to cheat on her husband. It is an interesting omission as it limits the reasons as to why readers might sympathise with May. The first of May’s thoughts that the Merchant shares with us are about her adulterous desires, and from there on her moral character continues to crumble until it is nonexistent. She proceeds to lie, scheme and cheat. Only moments before she climbs up a pear tree to consummate her extra marital affair she gives Januarie a speech in which she claims she is ‘a gentil woman and no wench’ and if she is proved to be a liar Januarie can drown her. As we know May does proceed to cheat on Januarie, and Januarie’s sight is restored right at the moment

57 Thompson N.S.. Chaucer, Boccaccio and the Debate of Love. 249.
59 Chaucer, IV (E) 2202.
60 May says this earlier, IV (E) 2199-2201.
when she and Damian are mid-coitus. Faced with this setback May is forced to come up with more lies. Throughout the tale the Merchant puts dishonest words in her mouth to show she is untrustworthy and deceitful, and he never shows her during a moment when she is not either lying or cheating. To top this off, he leaves May powerless to defend herself.

On the whole, the Merchant's Tale is constructed to hate every character in it. This is what Jay Schleusener argues in this article ‘The Conduct of the Merchant's Tale’.  

Schleusener puts forth a compelling argument as to why critics and readers dislike May to the extent that they do. Because Januarie is such a despicable character during the first part of the poem, readers cannot help but feel for May during those first weeks of the marriage, and since ‘[May] remains untouched by meanness for so long […] we [can] only think the best of her. The victims of senex amans draw on a ready supply of natural sympathy, and the more repugnant their ancient loves are the more innocent they seem by contrast.’

May does appear to be innocent at first, but when she chooses to indulge in an affair for the sake of her own well being May is regarded as the standard evil, promiscuous girl. Schleusener not only blames the Merchant for creating a world in which nothing good can survive, but also blames himself for believing it could. Readers are swept away in a sea of hate created by the Merchant. As Brown puts it ‘[t]he Merchant hates women, wives, his wife and May. He also hates foolish husbands, Januarie and the foolish Januarie in himself.’ No one is spared in the tale, and it is clear who the Merchant wants us to hate. Chaucer’s intentions for the tale appear to be very different though, and so do his intentions for May.

Chaucer’s Influences in the Tale

Chaucer destroys the Merchant’s attempt at vilifying May by making him out to be an uneducated fool. At first glance the introduction of the Merchant in the General Prologue does not seem to be overtly negative.

A Marchant was ther with a forked berd,

63 Schleusener. 242.
In mottelee, and hye on horse he sat,
Upon his heed a Flaundryssh bever hat,
His bootes clasped faire and fetisly.
His resons he spak ful solemnely,
Sownynge alway th'encrees of his wynnyng.
He wolde the see were kept for any thyng
Bitwixe Middelburgh and Orewelle.
Wel koude he in eschaunge sheeldes selle.
This worthy man ful wel his wit bisette
Ther wiste no wight that he was in dette,
So estatly was he of his governaunce
With his bargaynes and with his chevyssaunce.
For sothe, he was a worthy man with-alle,
But, sooth to seyn, I noot how men hym calle.  

In fact, in these lines only positive aspects of the Merchant are listed. These words should not be taken at face value though. That Chaucer chose to stress the Merchant’s debt free existence suggests the opposite is true. This condescending portrayal of the Merchant continues in the tale when the Merchant is continually trying to show he is smarter than Januarie. In the first part of the Merchant’s Tale there is a 135-line section that has always puzzled critics. They refer to it as ‘the marriage encomium.’ It is a stretch of text detailing the positive aspects of marriage. At first glance it would appear to be said by Januarie rather than the Merchant, as it seems to be a glowing review of marriage. However, when reading the text more closely, the ironic tone of the piece becomes clearer and it seems to be ‘the Merchant’s ironic paraphrases of January’s view of marriage.’ In his expression of this view the Merchant introduces several women as positive examples of wives.

Lo, how that Jacob, as thise clerkes rede,
By good conseil of his mooder Rebekke,
Boond the kydes skyn aboute his nekke,
For which his fadres benyson he wan.
Lo Judith, as the storie eek telle kan,
By wys conseil she Goddes peple kepte,
And slow hym Olofernus, whil he slepte.
Lo Abigayl, by good conseil how she
Saved hir housbonde Nabal whan that he
Sholde han be slayn; and looke, Ester also
By good conseil delyvered out of wo
The peple of God, and made hym Mardochee
Of Assuere enhaunced for to be. [IV (E) 1362 – 1374]

The Merchant introduces the biblical figures of Rebecca, Judith, Abigail and Esther as examples, not to show the wonder of a good wife, but to mock the naivety of Januarie’s beliefs. The Merchant knows, and expects his audience to know, that ‘the advice of all four [wives] involved deceit, and in three cases the authority of the husband was subverted.’ In order to truly show Januarie’s ignorance the Merchant also introduces Eve. In case anyone missed the hints about the previous four wives, surely no one would miss this obvious clue.

"Lat us now make an helpe unto this man
Lyk to hymself"; and thanne he made him Eve.
Heere may ye se, and heerby may ye preve,
That wyf is mannes helpe and his confort,
His paradys terrestre, and his disport.
So buxom and so vertuous is she, [IV (E) 1338 – 1333]

Although the words, if taken literally, are positive, not unlike those about the Merchant in the General Prologue, no one will see them this way; no one except Januarie, which is what the Merchant is telling us in this ambiguous section. He puts himself on an elevated level and uses the mention of biblical figures to show Januarie’s stupidity and, in extension, his own superiority. However, further on in the tale Chaucer uses the same method to show the Merchant’s own stupidity. The Merchant refers to the god Priapus in reference to the garden: ‘by Piramus and Tesbee may men leere.’ Unbeknown to the Merchant, Priapus is not only guardian of the

68 Benson, Donald R. 56.
69 Chaucer, IV (E) 2128.
garden, but he is also an ithyphallic god who punishes trespassers into the garden, either male or female, by penetrating them. It is Chaucer’s way of simultaneously mocking the Merchant as well as Januarie. He mocks Januarie by conjuring the image of a man with an everlasting erection protecting his garden, which, incidentally, was a symbol for a woman’s body. Chaucer is suggesting Januarie is a permanently aroused man who stands guard over his younger wife’s body. At the same time, Chaucer mocks the Merchant for his intellectual limitations because he is unaware of the dual meaning of the god Priapus.

Disgust, Control, and Rape: Januarie and May’s relationship

Chaucer intentionally increases Januarie’s vileness to ensure that May’s affair is met with less disapproval. As can be expected in a classic tale of senex amans, a young girl with an old lover, the young girl finds no enjoyment in the relationship. The Merchant’s Tale is no exception to this rule. In fact, the Merchant’s depiction of Januarie is more negative than in for example Boccaccio’s pear tree story, and as a result May’s life is more awful. Januarie is described as so repulsive that even readers cringe at the thought of having sex with him. The Merchant’s attitude towards Januarie reeks of disdain. In Schleusener’s article he includes the comment that ‘the Merchant’s remark about “this olde knight, that was so wyse” was “as near as a sneer as poetry can come.”’ This disgust is especially apparent when the Merchant describes Januarie and May’s wedding night.

And Januarie hath faste in armes take
His fresshe May, his paradys, his make.
He lulleth hire; he kisseth hire ful ofte;
With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte,
Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere --
For he was shave al newe in his manere --
He rubbeth hire aboute hir tendre face,


72 Chaucer, IV (E) 1266.

73 Schleusener. 239.
And seyde thus, "Allas! I moottrespace
To yow, my spouse, and yow greetyl offende
Er tyme come that I wil doyn descendente.
But natheles, considereth this," quod he,
"Ther nys no werkman, whatsoeuer he be,
That may bothe werke wel and hastily;
This wol be doon at leyser parfitly.
It is no fors how longe that we pleye;

The eagerness with which this old man pounches onto this young girl is disturbing, and because Januarie is so repulsive we cannot help but side with May. The [p]hysical revulsion combined with the grotesque implications of his consoling words to make fair, fresh May even fairer and fresher in our eyes. Although the Merchant does not spare May, or keep her safe from his wicked tongue, she is never portrayed to be quite as awful as Januarie. It is out of character for the Merchant to spare anyone, and this may in fact be Chaucer's own influence on the tale. He refuses to tear May to the ground completely, especially since she has already endured the horrors of a sexual relationship with Januarie.

In fact, the sexual acts between Januarie and May are so horrible that they cannot be seen as anything other than rape. The rape is used as a tool to show May’s lack of control over her own life. The subject of rape in Chaucer's works has always been laced with ambiguity. It is a common theme in his writing, but critics are at odds as to what Chaucer’s personal thoughts on the subject were. A problem in establishing this is that 'on May 1 1380 Geoffrey Chaucer was released from all legal consequences of his “raptus” of Cecily Champaigne.' It is not clear what this ‘raptus’ entailed to exactly, as it could refer to abduction as well as rape. Furthermore, as Chaucer was released from any punishment regarding these allegations there may not have been any truth to them at all. Critics, and especially traditional critics, are adamant in claiming Chaucer could never have committed such an act. It will always remain unclear what happened, but Chaucer found the subject of rape fascinating and used it in many of his works. In his *Canterbury* ...

---

74 Schleusener. 241


76 Robertson, Elizabeth and Christine M. Rose, ed. *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature.* 32 – 33.
Tales alone Christine Rose lists as many as eight tales that are to do with rape, and among them is the Merchant's Tale. Chaucer never specifically calls the sex between Januarie and May rape, but, referring back to the above mentioned wedding night, sex between them could not be classified as voluntary from May’s point of view. Rose describes the tale as ‘January’s [...] rape of May under the legal aegis of their marriage.’ It is meant as a humorous encounter between a horny old man and his much younger wife, but to a modern reader the element of rape is too strong to consider the sex funny. By describing May as being ‘as stille as stoon’ when she is brought to Januarie’s bed for the first night Chaucer shows May’s unfortunate situation. Chaucer is actively making a note of her silence to show her submission while the Merchant creates a humorous scene around her. There is a slight rift between the Merchant’s voice and Chaucer’s intentions. While the Merchant works hard to condemn everyone in the tale, Chaucer shows a slight glimpse of May’s hardship that will help excuse her behaviour later on in the tale. Throughout the rest of the tale Januarie continues to use sex as a way to control May. By forcing May to have sex with him he brands her as his property, a property over which he has all control.

When controlling May by objectifying her through forced sex no longer gets Januarie the control he needs, he progresses to physically restraining her. The first step is for Januarie to always be near her. When he loses his eyesight his controlling jealousy becomes severe enough to forbid her from ever being released from his grasp.

Which jalousye it was so outrageous
That neither in halle, n’ yn noon oother hous,
Ne in noon oother place, neverthemo,
He nolde suffre hire for to ryde or go,
But if that he had hond on hire alway; [IV (E) 2087 – 2091]

Januarie creates the image of a guard and his prisoner, and to complete that image he builds an actual prison in the form of an enclosed garden to which only he has the key. The enclosed garden has biblical connotations, as it appears in the song of songs. Those texts are commonly known as the love songs of the Bible, and Januarie quotes parts of them to May.

77 Rose lists The Reeve’s Tale, The Wife of Bath’s Tale, The Merchant’s Tale, Melibee, The Man of Law’s Tale, the Physician’s Tale, the Manciple’s Tale and the Franklin’s Tale. Robertson, Elizabeth and Christine M. Rose, ed. 28.
78 Robertson, Elizabeth and Christine M. Rose, ed. 41.
Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free!
The turtles voys is herd, my dowve sweete;
The wynter is goon with alle his reynes weete.
Com forth now, with thyne eyen columbyn!
How fairer been thy brestes than is wyn!
The gardyn is enclosed al aboute;
Com forth, my white spouse! Out of doute
Thou hast me wounded in myn herte, O wyf!
No spot of thee ne knew I al my lyf.
Com forth, and lat us taken oure disport;
I chees thee for my wyf and my confort.  

These are beautiful words which the Merchant quickly dismisses: ‘Swiche olde lewed wordes used he.’ He comments not on the words itself but more on Januarie’s stupity for uttering them moments before May betrays him. Januarie continues his speech once they arrive in the garden and once again betrays his true intentions: ‘Now kys me, wyf, and lat us rome aboute.’ His motives are sexual in nature, and the Merchant will not let us forget it. Januarie’s objectification of May continues in the symbolism of the garden. As was mentioned earlier, in the medieval tradition a garden was a symbol for a woman’s body. The key which Januarie wears around his neck is the key to May’s body. This image of a prison guard with respect to Januarie is also reflected his name. Januarie’s name has two functions; first of all it reflects his old age as January is one of the final months in the seasonal cycle and the height of winter, but secondly it was also derived from the god Janus. He was the two faced guard of the gate, often depicted with a key around his neck. Throughout the tale references, some big while others small, are given to show Januarie’s role as the abuser and abductor in May’s life. While the Merchant uses these references solely to abuse Januarie Chaucer uses them to show the facts of May’s life.

80 Chaucer, IV (E) 2149.
81 Chaucer, IV (E) 2184.
Pluto and Proserpine: the Parallel relationship

To show without a doubt that he intends Januarie and May’s relationship to be seen as one of rape and imprisonment Chaucer includes the parallel marriage of Pluto and Proserpine.\(^83\) Pluto was the mythological god of the underworld. He was often left unnamed, but his most commonly used name was Hades. As with Januarie, Chaucer has two reasons for naming him Pluto. For a start, it alliterates beautifully with Proserpine, but furthermore, the meaning of the name is also important. It is derived from the Greek word \textit{pluton} which means wealth. It is the first of many reasons why readers should associate Januarie with Pluto. The idea of wealth ties in perfectly with the idea of a rich man like Januarie buying his wife. In the myth of Pluto and Proserpine Pluto kidnaps Proserpine and forces her to be his wife. There is no ambiguity that this included rape which the well known classical poem \textit{the Rape of Proserpine} attests to.\(^84\) Proserpine’s mother Dementer, goddess of corn, grieves for her daughter so profoundly that crops fail and man may starve. Jupiter, as Pluto’s brother and Proserpine’s father, forces Pluto to release her. Pluto manages to trick Proserpine, and she is forced to live in the underworld for half of the year.\(^85\) This myth, designed to explain the seasonal changes, shares many similarities to the marriage between Januarie and May since the relationship between Pluto and Proserpine is also one of an older man with a young woman. As we will see shortly the Merchant uses this relationship to further vilify May, and all women, but Chaucer includes these gods for a very different reason. He relies on the reader’s knowledge of the nature of Pluto and Proserpine’s relationship to disambiguate Januarie’s rape of May.

Taking back the control

Rape is all about control. By raping May, Januarie takes control away from her, but May refuses to accept this and takes it back. Her method for regaining control should not be criticised, as May was unable to do differently due to the countless limitations posed upon her by others. As we saw in the first chapter free will is restricted by the actions of others. Every action has a reaction

\(^{83}\) The details of the story of Pluto and Proserpine were taken from Price, Simon and Emily Kearns. \textit{The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion}. 236 – 237 and 417.


\(^{85}\) Price, Simon and Emily Kearns. 236 – 237 and 417.
and every cause has an effect. We saw in the first chapter that a girl from May’s probable background would be told to marry a man of her parent’s choosing. Once married to Januarie she becomes a powerless creature who is at her husband’s mercy. His controlling nature and their controlled living environment makes it impossible for May to have any freedom. Due to the choices of others, she is forced into a corner. By now her choices have been restricted to the point where she no longer takes notice of the morality of her decisions. Through her experiences she has developed a yearning for physical contact of her choosing and she finds that in Damian. Humans are very simple creatures in the sense that they act upon their desires, and will continue to do so if the results are positive. In May’s situation acting on her desires is human nature. This is not simply a desire to be with Damian, but also the desire to make her own choice. In fact, May’s feelings for Damian or Damian’s feelings for her are irrelevant, just as it is irrelevant as to whether or not either of them is sincere. What is important is that May has the option to choose whether or not she wants to pursue the relationship. By making that choice May regains a little bit of control over her life.

Through the tale May undergoes a transformation from being a defenceless victim to becoming a manipulative, but independent, woman. Jill Mann also took note of this difference in May’s character in the tale, but rather than regarding this as a change she views it as a revelation: ‘If we […] put together January’s assurances that he will settle his entire inheritance on her […] it becomes clear that so far from being forced into wedlock, she has willingly married this old fool for his money.’ Mann is very dismissive of May’s quiet entry into the tale as a young innocent girl, but at the same time acknowledges that ‘male selfishness creates the female shrew.’ The second statement contains the truth in my opinion, as it is Januarie’s attitude towards her that creates the new May. There is no evidence in the tale to suggest May had an ulterior motive when she married Januarie. There is, in fact, no motive at all. The shift in May’s character has two sides to it. The first, which is what the Merchant wants reader to see, is that May has become an adulterous liar who has fooled her husband, and is planning on fooling him repeatedly in the future. The other possibility, the one designed by Chaucer, is that May has taken the control away from her abusive husband and will continue to control her own life in the future. Either way, May escapes rather unscathed as is common in Chaucer’s tradition. None of his adulterous

---

86 Assumptions about May’s background can be made in reference to IV (E) 1625 which says that ‘she were of smal degree;’


Canterbury wives were punished severely for their crimes. In the Miller’s Tale the men are victims of pranks while Alison remains as she was, and in the Shipman’s Tale there are no consequences for the wife either. One critic argued that perhaps ‘Chaucer, the indifferent male author, treats the female as a plot device. Not as an autonomous human worthy of attention in the dénouement.’ If that were true, it is very suspect that not one of the women suffers any negativity as a result of the affair. The fact that none of them do suggests that Chaucer purposefully ensures they live on with as much happiness as he can provide for them.

From the start of the tale Chaucer has been working towards a certain goal, and he started by changing the character of the kind husband in the pear tree stories, and making Januarie a despicable human being. He did so not only in order for readers to sympathise with May, but also to create an understanding for her behaviour in the later part of the tale. Her marriage is one filled with misery, yet this is undermined by the attitude of the narrator. The Merchant does not sympathise with anyone in the tale as he vilifies May and mocks Januarie. To the Merchant, May’s adultery is enough of a crime to make her seem on par with Eve. Chaucer, who thus far has let his narrator run amuck, steps in by subtlety letting us know what he thinks. By using small intellectual clues Chaucer shows that he feels the Merchant is the real fool. Januarie and May’s marriage is based on kidnapping and rape, and he rewards May with control, now and in the future, for having the spirit to take control of her own life back from Januarie. That May chose to free herself by having an affair is irrelevant at this point, because she was forced into the position by the choices of others. Once backed into a corner she chose the one option that had been left to her, even if this meant breaking moral laws. Her position in the marriage at the end of the tale shows that Chaucer rewards women who are strong enough to seek control, and, as we will see in the Franklin’s Tale, he punished those who are too weak.

Chapter Three
Dorigen: No Desire for Freedom

The Franklin from the Ellesmere Manuscript
Chapter Three
Dorigen: No Desire for Freedom

The women in *the Merchant’s Tale* and in *the Franklin’s Tale* make a very similar journeys, but do so in opposite directions. While May started under the control of her husband and eventually took back the control over her life, Dorigen does the exact opposite. The tale opens with her being asked to marry Arveragus, and her excepting happily. Chaucer uses this example of the perfect marriage to show that not every woman deserves to be in such a marriage. The women in earlier versions of the story will show the degradation of Dorigen’s character, as well her carelessness in terms of making decisions. By showing us her foolish promise, her whiny lament, and her ultimate obedience, Chaucer shows us his contempt for Dorigen’s lack of appreciation for her exceptional position in which she can make her own choices.

Origins and Analogies of *the Franklin’s Tale*

As May’s origins were important to the discussion of *the Merchant’s Tale*, so are the origins of *the Franklin’s Tale* to the discussion about Dorigen. Although Chaucer used different sources for this tale, our focus will be on the source for Dorigen’s promise, as it is most significant for our discussion. *The Franklin’s Tale* is based a tradition of stories about a damsel’s rash promise.90 Coustom traced the origin of the tale back to no fewer than twelve versions of the tale, starting with an Indian original.91 The oldest versions are found in the Orient. The plot of the stories is generally very similar. A woman promises herself to a man who is not her current or prospective husband. When she tells her husband about this promise he allows her to meet her would-be

---


91 Beside the Indian original Coustom also mentions a Burmese, two Persian, an Indo-Persian, Hebrew, Germano-Jewish, Siberian, Turkish, and Gaelic version, as well as the versions written by Italian authors Boccaccio and Boiardo. Furnivall, F.J., Edmund Brock and W.A. Clouston, ed. *Originals and Analogues of Some of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* 291 – 297.
lover. On her way she will meet another man, who wishes to harm her, but when he hears of her tale he allows her to go on but makes her promise to return to him to be robbed or assaulted. All the men, and in one version even one lion, are so moved by the generosity and kindness of the men she met before him, all of whom allowed her to continue on her journey, that they release her from her promise. The man she meets on the road is usually a thief of some kind who serves an important purpose. This story is usually told as a story within a story in which three or four men have a dispute over money when one of them has stolen some. To resolve the dispute a woman tells the story of the damsel and her promise, and asks the men who they believed was most generous. Whoever’s answer is the thief would be revealed as a thief himself. Once again it is unclear as to what extent any of the above versions have influenced Chaucer when he wrote his version. Like with the Merchant’s Tale, a version of this tale was also written by Boccaccio. His version is very short, which is Couston’s motivation for claiming Chaucer did not use it as his source. He says that ‘Chaucer’s treatment of the story is immeasurably superior to that of Boccaccio, which is throughout very artificial, exhibiting none of those fine touches which render the old English poet’s tale so pleasing from beginning to end.’ It is not a particularly strong argument as Chaucer was known for turning very little into much more. Couston’s other reason is that Chaucer claimed that the tale is a Breton Lay, which is questionable. Although critics have difficulty deciding why Chaucer claims it to be a lay, but they do not dismiss Boccaccio as a possible source. In fact, since Couston critics have agreed that ‘Boccaccio’s Filocolo is […] Chaucer’s primary source.’ Therefore, in our further discussion of the Franklin’s Tale and Dorigen, Boccaccio’s version will be very important.

The reasons why the damsels make their rash promises vary greatly throughout the versions. In the original Indian version the young woman is afraid that the man will ravish her if she does not make the promise; therefore, she makes the promise in order to protect her honour. In other versions the girl does not know what she is promising before it is too late, or she wants something in return for the promise. In the Burmese version the girl drops her

---

92 This happens in the Persian version also taken from Furnivall, F.J., Edmund Brock and W.A. Clouston, ed. 306 – 310.

93 Furnivall, F.J., Edmund Brock and W.A. Clouston, ed. 333.


95 In the original Indian version, Furnivall, F.J., Edmund Brock and W.A. Clouston, ed. 291 – 297.


writing quill and the man refuses to return it unless she promises to give him her virginity.\textsuperscript{98} This reason seems to be rather silly and simply a way for the author of this version to bring forth the promise. In these stories the promise is the important aspect, not how the girl came to promise this. In later versions of the text the promise becomes more complex: for example in the Gaelic version where the promise is made out of love.\textsuperscript{99} It is Boccaccio’s version which bears the closest resemblance to Chaucer’s version. Boccaccio is the first to attach a demand to the promise. In his case the woman asks her admirer to create a spring garden filled with flowers in the midst of January. She sets him this seemingly impossible task to rid herself of his advances. With such a wide array of reasons for the promise before him, Chaucer still decides not to use a reason at all. Although it appears that Dorigen made the promise for the same reason as Boccaccio’s woman, the two situations are quite different. In Dorigen’s case Aurelius is not pestering her for attention, and the encounter between them was coming to a close. Chaucer lets Dorigen make the choice of whether or not she makes a promise. There is nothing that coerces her to do so. She actively chooses to make her promise.

The Choices Dorigen Made

Dorigen’s freedom to make her own decisions is an important theme in the tale, and it starts with her decision to marry Arveragus. In the other stories in the damsel’s rash promise genre the reasons why the wife marries her husband are either because she was betrothed to him, or are unknown. Chaucer makes a special note of the mutual acceptance of the marriage in \textit{the Franklin’s Tale}. As was previously mentioned \textit{the Franklin’s Tale} is thought to be the depiction of the perfect marriage.\textsuperscript{100} In the first few lines of the tale a picture of a marriage between two equals is sketched.

\textit{In Armorik, that called is Britayne}

\textsuperscript{98} In the Burmese version, Furnivall, F.J., Edmund Brock and W.A. Clouston, ed. 298 – 305.
\textsuperscript{99} In the Gaelic version, Furnivall, F.J., Edmund Brock and W.A. Clouston, ed. 326 – 328.
\textsuperscript{100} This idea originates from an article by George Lyman Kittredge. The version used for here is an E-text from Harvard University. Kittredge, George Lyman. ‘Chaucer’s Discussion of Marriage.’ \textit{The Geoffrey Chaucer Page}. 14 April 2008
\texttt{<http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/canttales/franklin/marriage.html>
Ther was a knyght that loved and dide his payne
To serve a lady in his beste wise;
And many a labour, many a greet emprise,
He for his lady wroghte er she were wonne.
For she was oon the faireste under sonne,
And eek therto comen of so heigh kynrede
That wel unnethes dorste this knyght, for drede,
Telle hire his wo, his peyne, and his distresse.
But atte laste she, for his worthynesse,
And namely for his meke obeysaunce,
Hath swich a pitee caught of his penaunce
That pryvely she fil of his accord
To take hym for hir housbonde and hir lord,
Of swich lordshiphe as men han over hir wyves.
And for to lede the moore in blisse hir lyves,
Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knyght
That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,
Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie
Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie,
But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al,
As any lovere to his lady shal,
Save that the name of soveraynetee,
That wolde he have for shame of his degree.  

[5 (F) 729 – 752]

It shows an exceptional image of a marriage. As was shown in earlier chapters a medieval woman had no real choice in who she would marry; instead, she would have to abide by her parent’s wishes. Moreover, once married, a woman would need to give up all her rights to her husband. This passage shows that Dorigen is exempt from doing either. First of all, Arveragus asks Dorigen for her hand in marriage with honesty and humility, and she chooses to agree. Secondly, he promises her a marriage in which he will not rule over her, nor will she rule over him, instead they will be equals. The Franklin uses this marriage to show us and his fellow pilgrims how a marriage ought to be, but on another level Chaucer shows us Dorigen’s unique position in the marriage, in which she is in control of her own life. At the start of the tale this carries very little significance, but later on, when Dorigen is once again presented with a situation in which she has
complete control of the outcome of a situation, this freedom to make a decision becomes more important.

This happens several months into her marriage when Dorigen is confronted by Aurelius. He is a young squire who is desperately in love with her. He offers her his undying love, and, as her way of rejecting him, Dorigen promises to love him most if he removes all the rocks from the shoreline. Dorigen chooses to make the promise without any type of duress, and by doing so is entirely responsible for the outcome. Much has been said about the promise she makes to Aurelius as people often wonder why she is so determined to keep the promise. As a modern reader we cannot help but wonder ‘[w]hy doesn’t she simply explain to Aurelius what her real intention had been?’\(^{103}\) It would certainly seem like the most logical course of action to explain to Aurelius that she had only been joking. However, we must place the tale within its medieval context, which means that if Dorigen wants to remain a true and honest woman she must honour her promise. Moreover, we must also remember that Dorigen was fully aware of this when she made her promise.\(^{102}\) Firstly, we should look at the situation in which Aurelius approaches Dorigen. He does so for the first time, since before that day ‘[n]e dorste he nat to hire his wo biwreye’.\(^{103}\) It is a very different situation from Boccaccio’s woman whose would-be lover stalked her with messages of undying love. It was only after this had persisted for a period of time that she made her demand along with the promise. She did so in order to free herself from his presence.\(^{104}\) This is not the case for Dorigen since Aurelius revealed his love for her for the first time that day; yet, she chooses to make the promise on that day.

Aurelie,” quod she, "by heighe God above,
Yet wolde I graunte yow to been youre love,
Syn I yow se so pitously complayne.
Looke what day that endelong Britayne
Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,
That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon --
I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene
Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene,


\(^{103}\) Chaucer, V (F) 954.

Thanne wol I love yow best of any man;
Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I kan."  [V (F) 989 – 998]

At this point Dorigen has made the promise, and if Aurelius is able to meet her demands she is obligated to fulfil her promise. Why she should choose to make the promise is a mystery, especially since just before she makes this promise she very clearly tells him ‘no’.

But now, Aurelie, I knowe youre entente,
By thilke God that yaf me soule and lyf,
Ne shal I nevere been untrewe wyf
In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit;
I wol been his to whom that I am knyt.
Taak this for fynal answere as of me."  [ V (F) 982 – 987]

By saying this the conversation between her and Aurelius had come to a clear end. Dorigen had given him her final answer, and with that she could have walked away. Instead, she made the choice to stay and make the promise. It could be said she did so as an act of kindness, to, perhaps, soften the blow of her refusal. Anne Scott wonders ‘[w]hy […] Aurelius doesn’t hear the “spirit” rather than the “letter” of Dorigen’s rash promise’ as there seems to be a clear distinction between the two.¹⁰⁵ Aurelius simply heard what he wanted to hear which was a possibility of being with Dorigen. It was Dorigen who should have listened to the “letter” as well as the “spirit” of the promise, but she did not. Anne Thompson Lee argues that the demand of the promise is a direct link to her worries about Arveragus’s safety.¹⁰⁶ In this exchange between her and Aurelius, Dorigen only seems to be thinking of her husband. While this, on the one hand, shows how much she cares for him, on the other hand, it also shows a complete disregard to Aurelius’s feeling. Moreover, the promise Dorigen makes is made ‘in pley’.¹⁰⁷ Dorigen only meant it as a joke which only adds to the image of a woman who could not care less about this man’s feelings. If we focus on Dorigen’s role in the tale, it is odd that her reason for making the promise is a joke. In the various versions of the damsel’s rash promise stories there are many

¹⁰⁷ Chaucer, V (F) 988.
reasons to choose from, yet the Franklin, or more likely Chaucer, decided Dorigen’s reason should be a joke. Not only does it add a sense of meanness to Dorigen’s character, but it also shows how Dorigen once again disregards her exceptional position of being able to take her own decisions. Rather than using it to reject this man definitively, she puts herself in an situation where she must either break her promise, or lose her honour.

Dorigen’s Lament

In order to show us how dire Dorigen finds her situation she laments over her impossible decision. Dorigen’s lament is a section in the tale that runs a little over 100 lines, and its function has been debated by many critics. In his article ‘Dorigen’s Lament and the Resolution of the Franklin’s Tale’ Warren Smith lists the different responses to the lament, ranging from irrelevant to incoherent. As a whole the lament is a very difficult piece that seems to stop the tale in its tracks. It is a long list of examples of women who met miserable fates, and the lament’s ‘utter dreariness’, as Anne Thompson Lee calls it, makes it difficult to see what the function of the lament is. The lament includes roughly 22 examples of women who have either died after the shame of rape or in order to prevent it, or women who were extraordinarily faithful to their husbands in their lives. All examples are taken from Jerome’s Against Jovinian 1.41-46. The first selection of women all committed suicide in response to their, prospective, dishonour. It shows that Dorigen clearly sees her future encounter with Aurelius as rape, and indentifies with the women she is speaking off. As Dorigen refuses to defoul herself with Aurelius, the only other option that is available to her is death, as she says at the beginning of her lament.

“Allas quod she “on thee, Fortune, I pleyne, That unwar wrapped hast me in thy cheyne, Fro which t’escape woot I no socour, Save oonly deeth or elles dishonour.” [V (F) 1355 – 1358]
As Smith noted, the resolution to the problem is already given in the first lines.\textsuperscript{111} The following lament must, therefore, serve a different purpose. In Smith’s opinion the difference in tone between Jerome’s text and Dorigen’s lament provides an answer to that question.\textsuperscript{111} In his article he argues that by ‘giving [the women in the lament] a lesson and a moral tone sympathetic to women and disapproving of the violence of men’ Chaucer evokes ‘human reactions’ to the women in the text but to Dorigen as well.\textsuperscript{112}

In my opinion, however, a distinction needs to be made in this case between the narrator of the tale, the Franklin, and Chaucer as the author of the entire framework narrative. Like in the case of the Merchant, Chaucer chose with care the pilgrim to tell this tale. As a middle class man the Franklin has great respect and adoration for the higher class in which Dorigen and Arveragus live, and, therefore, he has ‘every motive to tell a gentleman’s story and to tell it like a gentleman.’\textsuperscript{113} All of Chaucer’s works have more than one dimension and the Franklin’s Tale is not different. While the Franklin intended Dorigen’s lament to be a sign of her struggle and of the difficulty of her decision, Chaucer was mocking her for her self-created problem. Looking at a few examples of the women mentioned by Dorigen, we will see how different their situations are from Dorigen’s. Dorigen starts her lament with the daughters of Phidon.

\begin{quote}
Whan thritty tirauntz, ful of cursednesse,
Hadde slayn Phidon in Atthenes atte feste,
They comanded his doghtres for t’ areste
And bryngen hem biforn hem in despit,
Al naked, to fulfille hir foul delit,
And in hir fadres blood they made hem daunce
Upon the pavement, God yeve hem meschaunce!
For which thise woful maydens, ful of drede,
Rather than they wolde lese hir maydenhede,
They prively been stirt into a welle
And dreynte hemselven, as the bookes telle.  \[V (F) 1368 – 1378\]
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{111} Smith, Warren S.. 375.
\textsuperscript{112} Smith, Warren S.. 381.
\textsuperscript{113} Kittredge, George Lyman. ‘Chaucer’s Discussion of Marriage.’
\texttt{<http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/canttales/franklin/marriage.html>}

44
Thirty men had murdered their father and forced them to dance in his blood. Having witnesses the tyrants cruelty first hand, they had no doubt as to what their future would hold, and the girls drowned themselves in a well. Dorigen gives this horrendous situation as an example of women who had been in the same predicament as she is in now. Next she speaks of Lucretia.

Hath nat Lucresse yslayn hirself, alas,
At Rome, whan that she oppressed was
Of Tarquyn, for hire thoughte it was a shame
To lyven whan she hadde lost hir name? [V (F) 1405 – 1408]

Lucretia was a woman who was captured and raped, and whose story was very well known to Chaucer as she is one of the women featured in his *Legends of Good Women*.¹¹⁴ It is another horror story about a woman who was taken by a man and then raped. Many more examples of women who met similar fates are given by Dorigen, and she identifies with them. She is completely disregarding the fact that she made the promise to Aurelius and was in no way forced. Once again relying on the intellect of the reader, Chaucer adds several women to Dorigen’s lament to ridicule her complaint. For example, in the penultimate line of her lament Dorigen says that ‘the same thing I seye of Bilyea.’¹¹⁵ Bilia is woman known for enduring her husbands bad breath.¹¹⁶ Smith claims in his article that Chaucer added this example in an attempt to mock Jerome for including such a ludicrous example in his work.¹¹⁷ Dorigen’s situation in the tale is not nearly as grave as that of the vast majority of the women in her lament. By adding the ridiculous example of a woman whose sole virtue is that she kept quiet about her husband’s bad breath, Chaucer is not sneering at Jerome, but he is sneering at Dorigen. She made her own bed, and Chaucer feels that now she has to lie in it.


¹¹⁵ Chaucer, V (F) 1455.

¹¹⁶ Details about Bilia can be found in the explanatory notes in Benson, Larry D. ed. *The Riverside Chaucer.* And also in Smith, Warren. 387.

¹¹⁷ Smith, Warren S.. 381.
Who Was Least Generous

An important part of *the Franklin's Tale* is the final question that the Franklin asks his fellow pilgrims: ‘Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?’ Which of the three men in the tale was most generous? Was it Arveragus who allowed his wife to meet another man to protect her honour? Was it Aurelius who let Dorigen out of her promise upon hearing of Arveragus’s generosity? Or was it the Clerk who relieved Aurelius of payment for removing the rocks? Dorigen is not given as a possible answer. There are several possible reasons as to why she is not given as a choice. First of all, it is not part of the damsel’s rash promise tradition to include the woman. Perhaps Chaucer simply continued the tradition; however, this would also mean that Chaucer saw no specific reason for including her. Mary R. Bowman argues that Chaucer could not have included her because, as a woman, she was not an active agent in the tale. Two other possible reasons for excluding her are that she would either never be chosen, or, on the other hand, she would definitely be chosen. As a woman who is described by Anne Thompson Lee as ‘that rare thing in Chaucer’s poetry, a genuinely good, loving, and lovable woman,’ Dorigen would most likely be considered a worthy choice for the title of most generous person. Thompson Lee claims that ‘the generous actions of the three men pale beside the generous and loving integrity of Dorigen.’ In my opinion this is not only a gross exaggeration of Dorigen’s good character, but also completely immaterial to discussion of who acted most generously in the tale. The reason why Chaucer did not include Dorigen as one of the options is because at that point in the tale Dorigen has become irrelevant as an active character in the tale, because she has given up all rights to make her own choices.

During the first part of the tale Dorigen participates in all decision making, but because of her poor performance Chaucer strips her from the exceptional right to make decisions in the latter part of the tale. The loss of control serves as a punishment for Dorigen’s misuse of her exceptional gift. Nina Manasan Greenberg states that Dorigen is ‘an active participant in three out of the four contracts’ that are made in the tale. She distinguishes between the promises made by ‘Arveragus to Dorigen, Dorigen to Arveragus, Dorigen to Aurelius and Aurelius to the

---

118 Chaucer, V (F) 1622.
120 Thompson Lee, Anne. 174.
121 Thompson Lee, Anne. 177.
clerk." Had it not been for Dorigen, the final promise would never have been made, and it thus shows the incredible amount of control that Dorigen has at her disposal. As we saw in the first chapter, women and control was an important topic for Chaucer throughout his works. Equality within a marriage is a beautiful thing but must also be dealt with carefully. Dorigen shows no appreciation for her superior role in the tale by joking to Aurelius in a matter as important as his love. Once Chaucer has made clear through her lament that Dorigen is not to be taken seriously, he places her in the more traditional role for women: that of a passive object. Dorigen is no longer in charge of her decisions. For a woman who spent one or two days lamenting over a rape that would never happen, since it had been her own choice to make the promise, it is ironic that she now finds herself the victim of rape at the hands of her husband. Arveragus takes control away from Dorigen when he tells her to meet Aurelius. He claims to do so to protect her honour, but disregards her unhappiness in the decision. Upon meeting Aurelius he asks her where she is going, to which she responds ‘unto the gardyn, as myn housbonde bad, / My trouthe for to holde – alsa, alsa!’ She is there solely because her husband wants her to be. This again is a deviation from the traditional version of the damsel’s rash promise tradition in which the women always undertakes the journey to meet the man of their own free will. They are keen to keep their promise because it is the honourable thing to do. They are strong and wilful and in many ways the complete opposite of Dorigen. At the end of the Franklin’s Tale Dorigen is no longer the active participant she was, but, instead, she has become an object for the men in the tale to bargain about.

Dorigen’s problems begin when she makes the much discussed promise to Aurelius. Chaucer makes sure that there is no reason for her to make such a promise; unlike for example in Boccacio’s version in which the woman is being harassed. It is the first of several bad choices made by Dorigen. Her ability to make a choice is a gift that she squanders. She disregards how privileged she is that she was asked if she wanted to marry Arveragus. Her promise to Aurelius is meant to be nothing other than a joke, but as she made the promise she would be obligated to keep it. Aurelius’s completion of the task means she must ‘love him best of all men.’ Unlike the women in the older versions of the story who all went willingly, Dorigen laments over this horrible fate for over 100 lines. In this lament Chaucer uses examples of women who were truly


\[123\] Chaucer, V (F) 1512 – 1513.
brutalised by men and who were powerless to stop them. By doing so, Chaucer shows his readers how ridiculous Dorigen’s lament is, for she put herself in this position. As a punishment for not appreciating her freedom to make decisions, he strips her of her control. She has become like the women in her lament, completely under the control of men. Dorigen is sent by her husband to be raped by another man. After all the control and freedom Dorigen had at the beginning of the tale, at the end of it she finds herself kneeling at the feet of one man before rushing home to live under the rule of another.\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{124} Chaucer, V (F) 1545 – 1546.
Conclusion
Conclusion

Women today still struggle to have the same opportunities as men. It is a struggle that has lasted many centuries, and the end is not yet in sight. In some parts of the world the struggle is nearer to the end than in others. In Western countries such as our own women have the right to vote, to work, and to marry whomever they please. Women, and men as well, have fought hard to ensure that women have the rights and freedom they have today, and the battle will continue to ensure improvements in the lives of women around the world. In his own way, Geoffrey Chaucer contributed to this struggle by writing about women in the way that he did. Women featured often and prominently in his works, and frequently they were at the very heart of the story. Different tales addressed different aspects of women’s lives, and through *the Merchant’s Tale* and *the Franklin’s Tale* Chaucer showed the freedom he believed women ought to have within their marriage.

In an average medieval marriage the men would be superior to their wives. Chaucer’s marriage was unusual in the respect that he married a woman who was from a higher class than he was. This may have been the reason why Chaucer was adamant about playing with the roles of man and wife within a marriage. His most famous literary character was the Wife of Bath who spoke candidly about her many marriages and her position in them. Through her Chaucer asks, and answers, the question all men would like to know the answer to: what do women want? In Chaucer’s opinion women want sovereignty in their marriage. They do not want to live under the rule of their husbands. To Chaucer the greatest reward for a woman was the be in control of her own life.

Chaucer showed this by using this freedom as a reward and as punishment for the women in *the Merchant’s Tale* and *the Franklin’s Tale*. Although these women, on the surface, share several similarities, such as that they are both young, newly married, and caught up in a love triangle, there are also many differences. These differences have caused them to be divided into two different groups. While May is placed with the Eves of this world, Dorigen is more closely related to the Virgin Mary. The main reason for this divide is based on the women’s sexual behaviour. Dorigen’s desire to die rather than cheat on her husband stands in sharp contrast to May’s eagerness to betray her blind husband with a young lover. However, Chaucer created a whole
world around these two women that shows the reasoning behind their actions, and through those reasons Dorigen is the woman who is regarded less favourably than May.

May's initial portrayal in the tale is that of a young innocent girl who, through no fault of her own, is forced to marry an old, and disgusting man. By the end of the tale there is very little left of that girl, and instead we are faced with a manipulative, adulterous woman. Her portrayal is worsened by the narrator of the tale, the Merchant, who in his prologue to the tale has already announced his hatred towards women. Two voices are present in this tale: the Merchant's and Chaucer's. At times it is difficult to distinguish between the two, as Chaucer is very subtle in voicing his own opinions. By using, and relying on, the intellect of his readers Chaucer introduces biblical and mythological clues to undermine, and mock characters in his tales. In *The Merchant's Tale* Chaucer introduces well known figures, who the Merchant does not know, to show his audience that the Merchant may be claiming that Januarie is an idiot, but the Merchant himself is also lacking in intelligence. We should therefore not trust the Merchant too much when he is vilifying other people. Chaucer uses this method in *The Franklin's Tale* as well, but this time he uses it against the generally positively viewed Dorigen. In this case we can conclude that Chaucer is mocking, and even judging, Dorigen for her behaviour.

The reason for Chaucer's attitude towards Dorigen and his lenience to May is due to their views on freedom. *The Franklin's Tale* is an unusual tale because it features a marriage in which the man and the woman are equals. Women were very rarely given such freedom, and yet Dorigen makes no use of it. Dorigen is often asked for her acceptance of offers, but does not appreciate the importance of this gift. She never acts according to the freedom given to her by her husband, nor does she appreciate the power she has over Aurelius when he offers her his affections. Dorigen squanders the gift of freedom. On the other side of that coin May never had an ounce of freedom. She was forced into a marriage to an older man, and never knew a happy moment in his presence. Rather than accepting this, May struggled to improve her own situation. Many critics may struggle to accept May's decision to have an extramarital affair, but that was the only option available to her. Other options were taken from May through the actions of others, and, therefore, she cannot be held morally responsible for her actions. Chaucer does not punish her for the affair; instead, he rewards her for her desire to be free by giving her control over her husband, while he does the exact opposite for Dorigen.

In the final scene of *The Merchant's Tale* we see May being led into the house by Januarie, perhaps expecting a child. However, this happens only after May has convinced Januarie that her affair was something he viewed incorrectly due to the sudden regaining of his sight, and that he will probably see such strange things more often in the future. May has convinced him that she is
truly faithful to him, and that it is a trick of light any time he sees her with another man. Dorigen’s ending is far more tragic. She is last seen on her knees at the feet of one man while she thanks him for his kindness. After this she is sent back to the husband who had sent her to be raped by another man. The agreement to be equals which they had made at the start of the tale has vanished into thin air, and Dorigen is forced to live under Arveragus’s rule for the rest of her life. Both women have gone through a complete transformation, and with this Chaucer has shown that it does not do well to always be good. If a woman needs to behave badly to get what she wants Chaucer sees no fault in that, because he understood that a ‘book of wikked wyves’ was completely inaccurate. By introducing the manipulative May, the weak Dorigen, the outspoken Wife of Bath, the brassy Alison, the quiet Constance, and many more in his *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer did not write a book of wicked wives, nor of good wives; instead, he wrote the more valuable book of real wives.


