

1997

In search of a female self : the masculinization of May in Chaucer's Merchant's tale

Kimberly Diane Whitley

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/masters-theses>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Whitley, Kimberly Diane, "In search of a female self : the masculinization of May in Chaucer's Merchant's tale" (1997). *Master's Theses*. Paper 1097.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

IN SEARCH OF A FEMALE SELF:
THE MASCULINIZATION OF MAY IN
CHAUCEUR'S *MERCHANT'S TALE*

Kimberly Diane Whitley

Masters of Arts in English

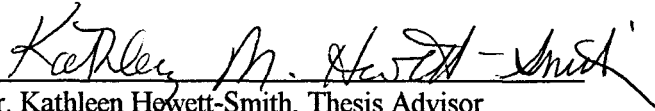
University of Richmond

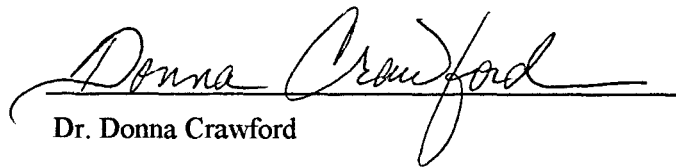
1997


Kathleen Hewett-Smith, Thesis Director

This examination of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* was undertaken as a response to existing scholarship. While criticism in the past tended toward a literal reading of the text, viewing it as a misogynist Merchant's story attesting to the innate depravity of women, more recent feminist criticism has leaned toward a reading which endeavors to defend the actions of May, claiming an evolvment on her part towards autonomy and self-knowledge. This thesis, taking its cue from French feminist theoretical assertions concerning self, refutes both of these readings. While it acknowledges the subversive nature of May's actions, it is unable to recognize any attainment of subjecthood on her part. Having a masculine engendered identity forced upon her, May eventually learns to accept and imitate those values which had initially been used to define her as object or Other, locking herself in the dualistic structure which confined her in the first place.

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.


Dr. Kathleen Hewett-Smith, Thesis Advisor


Dr. Donna Crawford


Dr. Elisabeth Gruner

IN SEARCH OF A FEMALE SELF:
THE MASCULINIZATION OF MAY IN
CHAUCER'S *MERCHANT'S TALE*

By

KIMBERLY DIANE WHITLEY

M.A., University of Richmond, 1997

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

in Candidacy

for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

in

English

April, 1997

Richmond, Virginia

Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* is one which operates on two different levels. On its most literal level, it is a story of female infidelity and deceit. Told by a man who claims that "We wedded men lyven in sorwe and care" (1228), it is cynical about marriage and hateful towards women.¹ May is presented as cunning and disloyal, taking advantage of her husband's blindness to rendezvous with her lover in a pear tree. Because the reader knows that the Merchant's story is corrupted by his own personal situation, however, the slant that he puts on the story becomes suspect and a second level of reading the tale comes into play. We begin reading against what is said and red flags start popping up everywhere within the text. With a reading such as this, the character of May becomes more complex and less the female stereotype so prevalent in the anti-feminist tradition of Chaucer's time. The reader begins to sense that there exists not one May--the May of the narrator or the May that January has fashioned in his mind--but two. There is a May that the reader is never allowed fully to know; she is May the victim, the unhappy and dissatisfied wife, the commodity, and the one who is acted upon. She has been deprived of her subjecthood, and, unlike Proserpyna, is never able to say, "I am a womman, nedes moot I speke" (2305).

While the overt misogyny of the tale has caused some critics to view the story as a "traditional misogynist justification of the view that women are not to be trusted, and that marriage is to be avoided--in other words, as a bitter Merchant's sorrowful autobiography,"² there has been much feminist criticism in recent years that contends with a reading such as this. Feminist criticism of this tale, however, has tended toward

¹ All quotations from the works of Chaucer are taken from Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

² Elizabeth Simmons-O'Neill, "Love in Hell: The Role of Pluto and Proserpine in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 51 (3) (1990): 392.

readings which claim a movement towards autonomy and self-knowledge on the part of May throughout the course of the story. For example, in "The *Merchant's Tale*, or Another Poor Worm," Elaine Tuttle Hansen explores the possibility of an "awakening" on the part of May to an autonomous female consciousness: "From the beginning, the development of May might at crucial moments suggest that she has a problematic, uncontrollable selfhood that escapes the narrator's mastery and understanding as easily as the wife escapes her husband's most jealous attempts to control and confine her".³ Hansen arrives at this notion of female difference in a logical manner. Within the context of the Biblical story of Eve's creation from Adam, she examines the anti-feminist belief in the innate depravity of women. She then suggests that if Eve has been made in the image of Adam, her innate corruption can either be attributed to Adam or can be explained by way of her difference from Adam--and it is this idea of difference that Hansen focuses in on. She goes on to suggest that through various techniques employed by the narrator--irony, illusion, simile and what Hansen calls "occupatio" (the narrator's frequent reference to May's feelings but refusal to give voice to them)--the tale gives rise to the possibility of May's evolvment towards a female independence and subjecthood.

In "The Merchant's Wife's Tale," Deborah M. Ellis echoes this belief that May's development is one which moves toward self-assertion. It is my contention that the connection between self-assertion and self-knowledge must be acknowledged. In a reading of the tale which focuses on the connections between language, commerce and sex, Ellis claims that through the manipulation of language (which Ellis deems as a medium of exchange), May is able to liberate herself from the role of woman as object. Speaking of Margery Kempe's autobiography and *The Merchant's Tale*, she says, "What

³ Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1992), 258.

we can read in these texts is a process of self-making in which two female-identified voices, both mediated by men who hold the power of discourse, break into and eventually subvert that discourse."⁴ As an example of May's emancipation from male ownership, Ellis cites her ability to delude January with words as the end of the tale.

Both of these readings, then, insist on some type of arrival at self-knowledge on the part of May. There is, however, another way to read this tale--one which acknowledges the subversive nature of May's actions but is unable to recognize any attainment of subjecthood on her part. This reading takes its cue from the feminist assertion that a woman's entrance into and procurement of power within a male-created structure should not be misconstrued with female independence and self-identity. Both Hansen and Ellis equate May's subversive force with female autonomy and the assertion of this self-awareness. Hansen, at one point, claims that May's appropriation of her husband's language coincides with her entrance into selfhood. Similarly, Ellis places much emphasis on May's use of language. Claiming that women can subvert a ruling discourse (in this case, the patriarchal discourse which constrains and defines them) most effectively by exploiting and manipulating the inherent tension within it, she places herself in the same arena as those feminists mentioned above. But in order for a woman to assert herself in a manner which subverts a discourse, she must first know her *self*. May at no time in the narrative expresses such an understanding. When Ellis, at the end of her article, asserts that May is able to "overcome male ownership through female language," she is making a claim which has not been substantiated anywhere within the tale.

⁴ Deborah S. Ellis, "The Merchant's Wife's Tale: Language, Sex and Commerce in Margery Kempe and Chaucer," *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 2 (1990): 600.

May's identification with the masculine within the patriarchal structure serves as an example of what Julia Kristeva has referred to as a "paranoid type of counterinvestment in an initially denied symbolic order".⁵ Kristeva, along with other French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, contends that the ruling discourse in our society--that of the patriarch--is founded on the structure of the binary. This structure of oppositions is hierarchical, with one side occupying the privileged position while the other side is defined in terms of its lack. Just as absence is defined in terms of presence, so too is woman defined in terms of man. While the masculine side of this pole is characterized by ideas such as knowledge, permanence, reason and the soul, the feminine side is distinguished by its opposition to these ideas, representing concepts such as opinion, change, sensation, and the body. In order for a woman to break free from this dualistic construct, these feminists say, she must first recognize the presence of the construct. American and French feminists have often been at odds with regard to this notion, with the French believing that the Americans strive towards equality with the patriarchal discourse rather than recognizing it as a construct of those who wield power. Hélène Cixous, addressing this problem in the preface to the translation of Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness*, has asked whether American women would ever discover repression in the binary reasoning which underlies the very discourse promoting their particular brand of women's liberation.⁶

⁵ Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl ed., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1993), 453.

⁶Domna C. Stanton, "Language and Revolution: The Franco-American Dis-Connection," in *The Future of Difference* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1985), 78.

Thus, when Julia Kristeva speaks of a “logic of identification” with the “logical and ontological values” of the dominant rationality, she is speaking of the tendency existing in this dualistic structure for women, in their striving towards “equality,” to adopt a logic of reversal in which they accept and imitate those values which had initially been used to define them as object or Other.⁷ Women who do this have in no sense liberated or freed themselves because they still remain locked within the binary structure which has confined them in the first place. Hansen’s assertion that May’s awakening coincides with the use of her husband’s language, when seen in this light, becomes invalid. Ellis, on the other hand, uses the same language as the French feminists. But her application of this idea to the character of May is groundless. May, in fact, exemplifies the very logic of reversal to which Kristeva refers.

For example, May is granted “victory” over January not through a recognition of herself as subject, but, rather, through a manipulation of her position within the patriarchal structure. At the end of the tale, she has learned to play what I will call the game of naming, taking my cue from Carolyn Dinshaw’s critique of language and literature as gendered activities. In the introduction of *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, Dinshaw connects the idea of literary activity with the masculine and the concept of the blank text with the feminine.⁸ Her reasoning falls straight in line with the dualistic understanding of masculine presence and feminine absence. For a man to put forth anything, he must do so onto a space which is blank. January, in fact, conceives of May in these terms, creating her, body and spirit, before she is ever introduced to the reader. Thus, when I claim that May has learned to play the game of naming towards the end of

⁷ Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” 447.

⁸ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison, Wisconsin: The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 3-27.

the text, I am saying that, within the dualistic construct, she has learned to occupy the space once occupied by January and to mimic those same nominative skills with the authority that was originally ascribed to her husband. She has, in fact, turned the tables on her aging spouse. But if we are to follow the logic of French feminists such as Kristeva, May has merely duped herself in this dualistic reversal. To name is, in a Lacanian sense, to accept the Law of the Father: "To enter the symbolic order is to be placed in a restrictive and repressive subject/ed position within a structure of meaning encoding patriarchal law".⁹ May's acceptance of and participation in this male structure reveal the gulf which exists between self-knowledge and the role that May has assumed for the purpose of social survival.

Before examining the second level on which to read this story (or more concretely, the figurative level), a brief overview of the literal level--the actual story that the Merchant is telling-- is in order. Although there has been some critical disagreement as to whether the teller of the tale is actually the Merchant, I will be working from the assumption that the Merchant found in both the *General Prologue* and the *Merchant's Prologue* is also the narrator of this fabliau. In the *Merchant's Prologue*, the reader learns that the Merchant has been unhappily married for two months. He considers his wife a shrew whose iniquity could outmatch the devil's: "For thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were,/ She wolde hym overmacche, I dar wel swere" (1219-1220). The tale which follows will be colored by the reader's knowledge of the Merchant's attitude. All that the Merchant says in praise of marriage and wives may be understood as cynical and ironic in tone.

⁹ Pam Morris, "The Construction of Gender: Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan," in *Literature and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 104.

The tale begins with the Merchant's introduction of January, an old knight who desires to be wed. Amidst the narrative are various commendations of marriage. While some of these are January's, others are very clearly those of the Merchant. The Merchant, for example, claims that to "take a wyf it is a glorious thyng " (1268), and that "a wedded man in his estaat/ Lyveth a lyf blisful and ordinaat" (1283-84). He asks the reader to defy Theofraste (Theophrastus), a Greek philosopher whose criticisms of marriage are incorporated into the text, and refers to the story of Adam and Eve in his endeavor to justify the connubial state. This justification is carried even further with the Merchant's enumeration of Biblical wives who have been true and wise. Both of these examples, however, ring with irony. Just as the Paradise of Adam and Eve is counterbalanced--and, perhaps, outweighed--by the Fall of man, so too are the good deeds of the Biblical women offset by the guile and cunning used by them to achieve their ends. The Merchant's use of these ambiguous examples is mirrored in his own equivocality concerning his glorification of marriage.

The Merchant, at times, goes so far as to ask the reader to judge for herself all that he has said in his commendations of marriage. During the marriage ceremony, for example, he praises the differences in age of the couple but follows this with an appeal to the reader which makes the irony of the initial statement apparent: "When tendre yuthe hath wedded stoupyng age,/ Ther is swich myrthe that it may nat be writen./ Assayeth it youreself; thanne may ye witen/ If that I lye or noon in this matiere" (1738-1740). By appealing to the reader to judge whether or not he is lying, the Merchant is bringing his bitterness and misogynist impulses (displayed so overtly in the *Merchant's Prologue*) into play; his praise of marriage cannot possibly be taken seriously. At other times, he subtly hints that marriage may not be as beneficial to men as he has been saying. In the following lines, for example, he suggests that it is the wife who profits most from the

marriage contract: "They been so knyht ther may noon harm bityde,/ And namely upon the wyves syde" (1391-1392). Referring to January's decision to get married, the narrator questions whether this idea had been born out of senility or devotion: "Were it for hoolynesse or for dotage/ I kan nat seye, but swich a greet corage/ Hadde this knyght to been a wedded man" (1253-1255).

Alongside descriptions of marriage as a terrestrial paradise and a "ful greet sacrament"(1319), the Merchant places another traditional conception of marriage, that of being "ybounde" under a "yok of mariage" (1285). This idea of marriage, one which suggests constraint and imprisonment, calls into question the more ideal portrayals offered by the Merchant and echoes the anti-feminist strain found in both the Church and secular society. St. Jerome, an early Church Father whose antifeminist beliefs are often alluded to in the works of Chaucer, believed that women were the origin of all evils, capturing the souls of men and ultimately leading them to their downfall.¹⁰ This idea of a man being entrapped by marriage is echoed in the secular literature of the time. As Shulamith Shahar has pointed out, "...few works depict marriage as a source of felicity or as based on love, and there are few love tales which end in marriage".¹¹ The fabliau, a popular genre during Chaucer's time, serves as an example: "Marriage in this literature, which is mainly satirical, is torture to man, at best because of the objective problems entailed in supporting a wife and children. The husband is described as having been caught in a trap".¹² As Henry Ansgar Kelly has pointed out in his commentary on

¹⁰ For more on early ecclesiastical commentary on women and marriage, see chapter 1, "For Mannes Helpe y-Wrought?", in Angela M. Lucas's book *Women in the Middle Ages: Religion, Marriage and Letters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 3-18.

¹¹ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Methuen, 1983), 72.

¹²Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 77.

love and marriage in secular literature, "When a character is antifeminist, or when an author is [in] an antifeminist mood, he is usually opposed to marriage...because love itself, in the romantic and ennobling sense, is impossible, given the fundamental and irremediable peversity [sic] of women. Women can only pretend a genuine love in order to entrap men into marriage...".¹³

The comparison made by the Merchant is obviously one which views the husband as being restrained and confined by marriage--a view which runs contrary to the actual realities of the subservient wife as property. When an unmarried women reached her majority, she became free of guardianship. A married woman, however, was under the guardianship of her husband, having limited legal rights and possessing the status of a minor. A wife could not sell or exchange her property without the consent of her husband. Similarly, she was not allowed to draw up a contract, assume a loan, or take any person to civil court without her husband's permission. Disobedience on the part of a wife could be remedied with physical punishment. As the following example shows, in the marital relationship, the wife assumed the subservient role: "In England and in France, the murder of a husband by his wife was equated by law to a murder by a subordinate, i.e. of a lord by a vassal, master by servant, or bishop by a cleric or lay/person in his diocese".¹⁴

The Merchant allows the character of May to contradict all that he has espoused early on in the tale concerning the good qualities of wives. She, of course, serves as example through her actions of what it is that the Merchant really wants his listeners to

¹³ Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), 47.

¹⁴ Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 89.

take away from his story. She is, quite literally, cunning, deceitful and adulterous. At one point, through a play on words, he even allows May to unwittingly indict herself. In the garden, she defends her character to January and promises fidelity, saying, "I prey to God that nevere dawe the day/ That I ne sterve, as foule as womman *may*,/ If evere I do unto my kyn that shame,/ Or elles I empeyre so my name,/ That I be fals" (2195-2199; italics are my own). While asserting her innocence, May has linked her name with "foule" or dishonest women. Although the word "may" in line 2196 can be interpreted as a verb (i.e. this is how dishonest women act), it can more figuratively be read as a proper noun (i.e. as dishonest as the woman named May). Thus, in her effort to defend her name, she has inadvertently "empeyred" it. This notion of deceit and guile, within which May ironically implicates herself, will be brought up again and again within the text with respect to its specificity to women. Eve, Judith, Rebekke, Abigayl, Ester, and May each display this defect. Furthermore, Proserpyne, as a countermove against her husband's decision to grant January his sight, bestows upon all women the power to deceive with words: "And alle wommen after, for hir sake,/ That, though they be in any gilt ytake,/ With face boold they shulle hemself excuse" (2267-68).

While a misogynist comprehension of women is intended by the Merchant, the authorship which lies behind that of the Merchant's, that of Chaucer's, is one which works against such a reading. Although the narrative is that of the Merchant's, it is framed by a larger narrative which obligates the reader to read figuratively. By exposing the Merchant's biases in the *Merchant's Prologue*, Chaucer puts the reader on guard with respect to the Merchant's perception of things. Furthermore, by creating a character as offensive and repellent as January, he incites sympathy on the part of the reader for the character of May. In short, this tale ends up bestowing a harsher criticism on January than on his adulterous young wife. This irony, however, completely escapes

the Merchant, who is unable to apprehend the subtler designs of his tale. While he believes that he is telling a tale about the cuckolding of a wise old knight by his lecherous and lusty young wife, there are too many things in this text which work against such a reading. January's lecherous behavior, his commodification of May, Chaucer's insertion of Pluto and Proserpyne into an already existing tale, and the placement of the last scene in a garden (which calls to mind the Garden of Eden) produce a forum in which medieval attitudes regarding women and marriage--those handed down from the Church and those found in secular society--can be further explored, debated, and challenged.

The reader first becomes more understanding towards May when January's intentions regarding marriage are revealed. While he espouses many different reasons for wanting to marry--the need to bear an heir (1272), the need to be taken care of (1288-1292), and the desire to end his lusty ways in order to achieve salvation(1435-1436, 1650-1652)--these are mere rationalizations for a more ignoble intention. He has specific criteria regarding his choice of wife, and when examined more closely, these criteria expose the baser motives behind his desire to marry. He tells his friends that he will have no old wife: "I wol no womman thritty yeeare of age;/ It is but bene-straw and greet forage." (1421-1422). In an offensive metaphor, he compares any woman over the age of twenty to "oold fissh" (1418) and "old boef" (1420). January goes on to explain to his friends that if he were to marry an older woman, he would be compelled to be adulterous, and would, therefore, rule out his chances for Heaven. He continues with this defense, saying that he would beget no heir with a wife that was old, causing his "heritage" to "falle/ In straunge hand" (1439-1440). January's motivations for marrying a young wife, therefore, ostensibly revolve around his concern for his afterlife and his property. Behind these two concerns, however, lies the desire for control and manipulation.

His explanation of why he must have a young wife is one which involves power, the need to master and, ultimately, narcissistic impulses: "But certeynly, a yong thyng may men gye,/ Right as men may warm wex with handes plye." (1429-1430).

Immediately preceding this explanation is a diatribe against widows. January claims to find them objectionable due to their craftiness and mischief: "And eek thise olde wydwes, God it woot,/ They konne so muchel craft on Wades boot,/ So muchel broken harm, whan that hem leste,/ That with hem sholde I nevere lyve in reste" (1423-1426). Although January describes widows as being old, they need not necessarily be so. The chances of May's widowhood, for example, are quite high. There exist, however, much more likely reasons for January's rejection of widows. As Margaret Hallissy has pointed out, medieval widows enjoyed quite a bit of independence--an independence in which self knowledge could be fostered: "But in widowhood, a woman indeed became what Criseyde calls her 'owene womman' (Bk. II, 1.750), 'no longer forced to accept the authority of another.' If that other, now deceased, had been affluent, she could also be 'wel at ese' (Bk. II, 1.750) economically as well as psychologically, as Criseyde describes herself in a self-congratulatory mood."¹⁵ A widow, therefore, would be less pliable than a young maiden who had no knowledge of independence, and it is precisely this quality of malleability that January finds so attractive.

Although all of January's intentions regarding marriage serve to objectify May, it is his desire to mold and transform that is the most detrimental to any sense of subjecthood on her part. Significantly, when January speaks to his friends of his not-yet-known future bride, he uses the term "shapeth," which carries with it connotations of creating and molding: "Unto som mayde fair and tendre of age,/ I prey yow, shapeth for

¹⁵ Margaret Hallissy, "Widow-To-Be: May in Chaucer's 'The Merchant's Tale,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 26 (3) (Summer 1989): 295-96.

my mariage/ Al sodeynly" (1406-1408). Although the mold to which this bride-to-be must conform is not stated explicitly, the Biblical allusions to Adam and Eve within the marriage encomium may provide a clue: A woman, the reader is told, is "for mannes helpe ywrought" (1324); Eve was made in the image of Adam: "'Lat us now make an helpe unto this man/ Lyk to hymself" (1328-1329); and man and woman are of one flesh and heart: "O flesh they been, and o flesh, as I gesse,/ Hath but oon herte" (1335-1336). It must be noted that the particular creation story that is alluded to in the marriage encomium serves to further reinforce the idea of woman being made for man and in his image. The Bible contains two different stories of creation. The first account, Genesis 1.27, suggests that both male and female were created together: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them".¹⁶ The second version is found in Genesis 2.18. This version stresses the creation of Eve for Adam: "And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him". In the marriage encomium, it is the second version which is mentioned. By referring to this version of creation, the speaker stresses the lack of subjecthood and identity attributed to women since Biblical times.

With these images in mind, it becomes plausible that one possible mold to which January would desire May to conform would be that of his own. Eve is made because man is lonely, and her entire existence is based upon this. Similarly, May exists in the narrative because January desires her--or more exactly--he desires what he has envisioned her to be. And what he desires her to be is a mirroring of what he desires himself to be. While he certainly does not wish for May to be old and lecherous--those

¹⁶ Biblical quotations are from the King James version.

things that he actually is--he does desire for her to have those qualities which he foolishly tricks himself into believing that he possesses.

Carolyn P. Collette, in "Umberto Eco, Semiotics, and The Merchant's Tale," casts light on this dilemma, saying, "January tries to appropriate to himself the world of light and fruitfulness signified in the tale by May, by the mirror of his imagining, and by the blossoming garden".¹⁷ January speaks of his old age to his friends, saying, "Freendes, I am hoor and oold,/ And almoost, God woot, on my pittes brynke" (1400-1401). Being young and fresh, May represents what January no longer has. It is her fecundity, specifically, which provides the sharpest contrast between herself and January. Medieval medical knowledge, with which Chaucer and his audience would have been familiar, held that a man of January's age would possess little chance of fathering a child due to a lack of procreative fluids and body heat needed for fertility.¹⁸ This coldness and dryness attributed to old age is something which January denies: "I feele my lymes stark and suffisaunt/ To do al that a man bilongeth to" (1458-1459). He goes on to compare himself to a blossoming tree: "Though I be hoor, I fare as dooth a tree/ That blometh er that fruyt ywoxen bee" (1461-1462). Considering the vast array of aphrodisiacs that he must ingest on his wedding night and the deep sleep that ensues after the marriage has been consummated, January is clearly being dishonest with himself. He will never be able to reclaim the youth, sensuality and vigor that May has. He can, however, attempt to lay claim to such things through his possession of May--and

¹⁷ Carolyn P. Collette, "Umberto Eco, Semiotics, and *The Merchant's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 24 (2) (1989): 136.

¹⁸ For more on this subject see Carol A. Everest, "Pears and Pregnancy in Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale' " in Melitta Weiss Adamson ed., *Food in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995).

it is particularly his possession of her identity which is at stake here. Because January has determined or constructed her, he does, in a sense, possess her. She can, and will, in fact, subvert this construction. But until she does, her identity--or, more specifically, the identity that January has imputed to her-- will be completely within his power.

As Elaine Tuttle Hansen has pointed out, the use of the Genesis 2.18 account of creation brings to light another issue regarding the innate depravity of women. If Eve has been created from the flesh of Adam and is made to be like him, why is she instinctually duplicitous and carnal? Hansen posits that there are two answers to this question: "On one hand, the matter that Eve is made of, Adam's flesh itself, might be pervasively corrupt; this idea is a commonplace of medieval world-hating...". She goes on to say that the second answer is one which raises the notion of female difference: "On the other hand, it might be argued that Woman has some quality not derived from Adam, some carnal drive of her own that justifies the need for male mastery".¹⁹ While Hansen tends to explore the latter answer to the question, asserting an awakening on the part of May to identity, I feel that the first answer is more applicable to the story at hand. Although the May that January has fashioned in his mind serves to symbolize all those things that he wishes to have--youth, fertility, beauty--there is a flip side to this image. Because May exists as a creation of January's imagination, her deceitfulness can also be seen as mirroring his inherent faults. May's adultery, bargaining and ultimate ability to influence January's perception through equivocation merely reflect January's lechery, his mercantilistic rendering of his world and his use of language to create and justify.

January's search for a wife is characterized by "Heigh fantasye and curious bisynesse" (1577). The way that he goes about this quest is compared to someone

¹⁹ Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*, 248-249.

setting up a mirror in the market square: "As whoso tooke a mirour, polished bryght,/ And sette it in a commune market-place,/ Thanne sholde he se ful many a figure pace/ By his mirour; and in the same wyse/ Gan Januarie inwith his thoght devyse" (1582-1586). January's mental mirror not only reflects the maidens of his imagining, but more revealingly, reflects himself, exposing the narcissism involved with regard to the Other. Elaine Tuttle Hansen comments on this narcissism and its effects upon May, saying, "...if January is looking as if in a mirror, he is likely at some point to see a part of himself; hence the figure confirms the way in which May, the woman, is at the beginning at least a sharp reflection of January's problematic, erring, threatened masculine perception. May is, in the terms of this narrative, devised out of January's thoughts just as Eve is made out of Adam".²⁰ Furthermore, Hansen points out that on the narrative level, May does not exist until January marries her. She does not appear in the narrative until she has been fashioned completely in the imagination of January.

After deciding upon May, January retires to his bed and begins to portay her imaginatively: "Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tendre,/ Hir myddel smal, hire armes longe and sklendre,/ Hir wise governaunce, hir gentillesse,/ Hir wommanly berynge, and hire sadnesse" (1601-1604). This description is conventional and familiar. In *The Book of the Duchess*, for example, White is portrayed as "sadde" (860), "fresshe" (905) and as having "atempre governaunce" (1008). She also physically resembles January's descriptions of May: "Ryght faire shuldres and body long/ She had, and armes" (952-953). Hansen comments on this use of convention, saying, "It hardly bears repeating that these lines do not represent some 'actual' May. We see once more how January visualizes what medieval literary texts repeatedly say that men admire".²¹ January's

²⁰ Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*, 250-251.

²¹ Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*, 252.

understanding of female desirability, then, is determined by the dominant discourses of his time. When this dominant discourse asserts that a captivating woman must be fair, tall, sad and fresh, this leaves little room for individual preferences and inclinations. Men often did desire women whose characteristics were quite opposite to those just listed. The Wife of Bath, for instance, was married many times, and she certainly does not resemble the desirable woman that is defined by medieval literary texts. She is, in fact, the exact opposite of this image. Yet not just one, but many men were attracted to her. Physical, spiritual or moral beauty are not qualities which can be determined within the confines of an either/or construct. And it is precisely this dualistic construct which continues to confine the characters in this tale--moving them further and further away from any knowledge of self.

May is also described as a commodity. A wife is considered the "fruyt" of a man's "tresor" (1270). Both of these metaphors, "fruyt" and "tresor", are quite interesting and can be tied into other factors within the tale. When recalling January's assertion that he is like a tree blossoming with fruit, the association of his wife with fruit becomes more complex. This fruit/May, then, is, much like Eve's creation from the side of Adam, something which owes its existence to the tree/January. Just as the tree has determined what type of fruit it will bear, so too has January determined the type of woman May will be. Ironically enough, however, just as the fruit will naturally fall away from the tree, so will May fall away from her domineering husband. The comparison of May to a "tresor" can also be tied into the narrative. Treasures are things which are hoarded and kept under lock and key for fear that they may be stolen from the possessor. May will become, in a quite literal sense, a treasure to January: "That neither in halle, n'yn noon oother hous,/ Ne in noon oother place, neverthemo,/ He nolde suffre hire for

to ryde or go," (2088-2089). Like another of his treasures, his garden, all access to her is barred. Being assigned to the realm of goods, however--and goods will almost always change hands--she is in the end stolen from the old knight. May's involvement with Damyan, in this sense, does not suggest freedom on her part. It merely emphasizes her devaluation to object. Because she is guarded as a treasure and eventually stolen as a treasure, she remains an economic medium of exchange.

Not only is May to be owned, this ownership is sanctioned by the Christian God. During the marriage encomium, the speaker echoes the Genesis story of creation when he says, "A wyf is Goddes yifte verrailly" (1311). Because she is the gift of God, she is to be valued more than other commodities such as "londes, rentes, pasture, or commune,/ Or moebles" (1313-1314). This bestowal of a higher valuation of her, however, does not remove her from the realm of goods. The speaker of the encomium goes on to undermine all that he has just said concerning a wife's value: "A wife wol laste, and in thyn hous endure,/ Wel lenger than thee list, paraventure" (1317-1318). By saying that a wife may last longer than a man wishes, the speaker is cynically suggesting that the property bestowed on a man by Fortune is more desirable. Theofraste, who is mentioned in the tale, would certainly agree. Believing that men take wives for domestic economy, he claims that a servant would be more beneficial (1298).

Within the tale, the words "make" and "mate" are used interchangeably several times. During the marriage encomium, the speaker asks, "Who is so trewe, and eek so ententyf/ To kepe hym, syk and hool, as is his make?" (1288-1289). May is described as January's "paradys, his make" (1822). The recurrent use of this word brings to mind the desire on the part of January to make May--to mold and form her. January is never called May's "make" until the end of the tale when May has turned the tables on him. The narrator tells us that Damyan understands May better than January, "her owene

make"(2214). This singular usage of the phrase in describing January in relation to May follows a long speech in which May defends her honor. She is, as the ensuing action will illustrate, lying to January. Yet she is also determining or "making" his reality.

By the time that May actually enters the story, she has already been conceived of by January. She is, in Chaucer's words, "his fantasye" (1610). Any sense of her real identity is something that the reader will have to search for. The May that is presented to us has been so fully infused with the imagination and fancy of January that it will be difficult to locate the real May. Appropriately enough, she is initially introduced to the reader as Mayus, the masculine form of her name. Mayus and May will continue to be used interchangeably throughout the remainder of the tale, signifying the tension existing between the male-created identity that has been forced upon her and the actual identity that is never revealed.

During the wedding ceremony, May's beauty is described in conventional terms: "I may yow nat devyse al hir beautee./ But thus muche of hire beautee tell I may,/ That she was lyk the brighte morwe of May,/ Fulfild of alle beautee and plesaunce" (1746-1749). She is clearly feminine in the traditional sense. And yet, she exerts a masculine force over both January and Damyan. Both are described as being "ravysshed" by her, a term which is usually used to describe what a man will do to young maiden. As Hansen points out, May will come to "dominate and to resemble the men who foolishly desire to be 'o flesh' with her".²² In other words, they have created a *Frankenstein*. May will learn to mimic their actions and values in order to ensure a sense of freedom in their world.

²² Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*, 255.

On the night of her wedding, May's plight engenders much compassion from the reader. If she is to be criticized for her subsequent deceit and adultery, this particular scene somewhat serves as an excuse for these later actions. During the wedding feast, January begins to look forward to the consummation that will ensue: "But in his heart, he gan hire to manace/ That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne/ Harder than evere Parys dide Eleyne" (1752-1754). The words employed in this passage--"manace" and "streyne"--are threatening, and in no way suggest a consensual act. Prior to the act, January describes it in terms of working: "Ther nys no werkman, whatsoevere he be,/ That may bothe werke wel and hastily" (1832-1833). The actual union is described in similar terminology: "Thus laboureth he til that the day gan dawe" (1842). The narrator will not tell the reader what May thinks or feels regarding this, but by drawing attention to the fact that he is withholding this information, he suggests that she has not found her wedding night particularly enjoyable: "But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,/ Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte,/ In his nyght -cappe, and with his nekke lene;/ She preyseth nat his pleyng worth a bene" (1851-1854).

In the one other sexual act between January and May that is described in the tale, the reader is even more appalled: "Anon he preyde hire strepen hire al naked;/ He wolde of hire, he seyde, han som plesaunce" (1958-1959). May obeys January, "be hire lief or looth" (1961). Once again, January is described in terms of laboring: "But heere I lete hem werken in hir wyse/ Til evensong rong and that they moste aryse" (1965-1966). The narrator, as earlier, will not tell us whether May thinks it "Paradys or helle" (1964). Given the choice, however, she must certainly deem a sexual act "helle" in which she is forced to strip naked so that an aging man who has stubble as sharp as briars and slack, shaking skin around his neck can have some pleasure of her.

Hansen comments on the narrator's unwillingness to expose the thoughts of May, claiming that this refusal (what she calls "occupatio") suggests the existence of these thoughts. When the narrator, for example, announces that he dare not tell us whether May deemed a sexual act with her husband heaven or hell, he is ultimately rendering these feelings--whether they be good or bad-- existable. Hansen asserts that what the narrator eludes is the possibility of the real May: "I do not mean to argue that the picture of May that we begin to glimpse through the narrator's irony and sarcasm, or in what he can't or won't say about May, is any more accurate a representation of some historical female experience or position than January's mental image; my point is that the narrator's strategy inevitably raises the *possibility* of a female subjectivity...".²³ This possibility is crushed, however, when one considers the language attributed to May after the first sexual act. By esteeming January's performance not worth a bean, she merely mimics January's earlier use of this expression, when he claims that the life of a bachelor when compared to that of a married man is not worth a bean. Hansen says that "May, like the Wife of Bath, quite literally borrows her husband's idiom as she enters into selfhood".²⁴ May cannot, however, both appropriate her husband's language for herself and enter into a female selfhood simultaneously; the two acts contradict each other. This appropriation of her husband's language will later be augmented by her taking on of more of January's characteristics.

In the introduction to *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, Carolyn Dinshaw speaks of the ways in which language, gender and power are interrelated. She divorces the terms "masculine" and "feminine" from biologically determined sex in order to show how they

²³ Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*, 259.

²⁴ Hansen, *Fictions of Gender*, 260.

operate in terms of power: "I am concerned with masculine and feminine as roles, positions, functions that can be taken up, occupied, or performed by either sex, male or female (although not with equal ease or investment...)"²⁵ Dinshaw goes on to say that literary activity has a gendered structure and that the act of writing is masculine, whereas the actual text--the object upon which something is written--is feminine. In short, "Whoever exerts control of signification, of language and the literary act, is associated with the masculine in patriarchal society..."²⁶ During the first part of the *Merchant's Tale*, both January and the Merchant wield the pen, while May is the surface onto which they write. At the end of the tale, however, it is May who controls signification, thereby controlling reality. This is not something to be applauded by those with feminist leanings, however. May comes no closer to knowing herself; she merely assumes a masculine role within a structure which creates this dichotomy, and by doing so, assumes power.

It is in May's relationship with Damyan that her masculinization first becomes apparent. Her original effect on Damyan is powerful, causing him to almost faint. After his initiatory letter, May takes control of the relationship. She revisits Damyan in order to give him her letter: "And sotilly this lettre doun she threste/ Under his pilwe; rede it if hym leste./ She taketh hym by the hand and harde hym twiste" (2003-2005). The language used in these lines--the thrusting of the letter and the hard twisting of the hand--is language that is usually reserved for male Chaucerian characters. Similarly, May employs the mercantile language of male characters such as the Merchant and January when she assesses Damyan in terms of his monetary worth: "To love him best of any

²⁵ Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, 9.

²⁶ Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, 10.

creature,/ Though he namoore hadde than his sherte" (1984-1985). Although she has placed "love" above money, she seems to do so in a way which attests to her knowledge of the importance of material wealth. January, it must be remembered, has also chosen to marry May even though she is of "smal degree" (1625). This act, however, does not diminish his mercantilistic qualities.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the relationship between May and Damyan is the fact that the reader is never given a view of May through the eyes of Damyan. Damyan, in fact, only speaks two lines throughout the entire tale. At no time is the reader confronted with a glimpse of May's beauty or gentleness from his perspective. It is as if the narrator has allowed her to escape objectification with regard to her young lover, who will "dooth al that his lady lust and lyketh" (2012). This is due to the fact that May has become the signifier in this relationship; she directs all of the action. When January loses his sight and becomes so jealous that he will not allow May to leave his house, it is she who devises a means of meeting her lover. Furthermore, in the garden, it is May who directs the actions of Damyan. She gives him the signs, and he acts accordingly.

The masculinization of May is an occurrence in which the figurative or imaginative becomes literal. In *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, Lee Patterson points out that the tale is replete with such transformations: "...the *Merchant's Tale* is on several levels about 'fantasy' and self-enclosure, a theme expressed in the various acts of ironic literalization that mark the narrative".²⁷ He goes on to list examples: the warm wax used to describe a potential wife materializes into the wax onto which May imprints the key; the paradise of marriage reappears with the paradise of the garden; and

²⁷ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 339.

the laurel tree to which January compares himself manifests itself as the pear tree. Although not cited by Patterson as an example, May's transformation can be viewed as following this pattern. Because she is, figuratively, the creation of men, it only follows that her own female identity will be pushed aside in order to accommodate all that the masculine conception of her entails. Having no female identity left, she assumes a masculine selfhood.

Having had a masculine-engendered identity forced upon her, May is left with two options. She can either assume the role of the good woman and conform to the male fantasy and imagination or she can reverse the equation and take hold of the signifying process, thereby becoming the bad woman of men's nightmares. May, of course, opts for the latter. It is precisely this choice, combined with the fact that May actually gets away with it, that has caused so many critics to claim that the tale is devoid of morality.²⁸

May's act of adultery is preceded by language which resonates with that attributed to January earlier in the tale. At the beginning of the fabliau, January's lust for women is described in terms of appetite: "And sixty yeer a wyfleees man was hee,/ And folwed by his bodily delyt/ On wommen, ther as was his appetyt"(1248-1249). Similarly, May speaks of her desire to climb into the pear tree, saying, "I telle yow wel, a womman in my plit/ May han to fruyt so greet an appetit/ That she may dyen but she of it have." (2235-2236). While May's desire for pears can be taken as a sign of pregnancy, this desire has another possible interpretation as well—one which is more closely aligned with the appetite earlier attributed to January. Carol A. Everest, for example, calls attention

²⁸ For a more detailed exploration on the question of morality, see A. S. G. Edwards, "The Merchant's Tale and Moral Chaucer," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 51(3) (1990) : 409-426.

to the link between pears and male sexual organs. She points out a manuscript of *Roman de la Rose* being translated by C.R. Dahlberg in which images of women picking fruit in the form of male genitalia decorate the margins. Thus, May's appetite could be construed as sexual. January's restoration of sight and his subsequent fury, for example, do not come about because he discovers May sating her appetite on pears.²⁹

Directly prior to the adulterous act in the pear tree, May tells January that she will always be faithful and true: "I am a gentil womman and no wenche" (2202). After being caught in the act with her lover, she is able to miraculously convince January that what he saw did not occur. When she tells her husband that she had to struggle with a man in a tree in order to bring back his eyesight, January falls back on the use of this very eyesight, saying that he *saw* a sexual act occur. She responds by saying that January must be dazed and is like a man waking from sleep. January, by accepting May's version of the event, becomes subject to her account of reality. It is at this point that May's power to name becomes most apparent. Lee Patterson comments on this, saying, "...although he has witnessed a scene of appetite and betrayal, January is deluded by May's words into believing that she has actually performed an act of physical restoration and marital loyalty. It is this capacity of language to deceive and befuddle--'he that mysconceyeth, he mysdemeth' (2410), is May's final apothegm--that is the target of attack".³⁰ As was pointed out earlier by Carolyn Dinshaw, the ability to signify is linked with the masculine. Thus, May assumes the masculine role, buying into the structure that actually serves to constrain and define her. While it cannot be denied that May's usurpation of male language is subversive--something that would be considered quite

²⁹ Everest, "Pears and Pregnancy", 170.

³⁰ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 334.

dangerous by both the Merchant and January had they the wits to figure it out—it is still merely a borrowing of the dominant discourse. If she had, on the other hand, appropriated this language in a conscious effort to destabilize the dichotomy maintained by the structure, much like Proserpyna will do, she would have engendered greater respect from the reader. May's actions, however, are taken out of desperation; and it is this desperation and lack of self-knowledge which obliterate her chances of ever being deemed a heroine.

The final scene of the tale takes place in a garden. The placing of this scene here is significant for a number of reasons. The garden is something that January has created—much like his creation of May—in an effort to mirror those procreative qualities that he lacks but so strongly desires. Priapus, the Greek god of fertility and protector of gardens that is usually represented as a grotesque individual with a huge phallus, is alluded to during the description of January's garden. It must be noted that this ithyphallic god is, like Pluto and January, also associated with a rape. During the mid-winter Bacchic festivals, Priapus attempts to rape the nymph, Lotis. Awakened by the braying of an ass, Lotis fends the god off and is able to flee.³¹ But not even Priapus, the reader is told, would be capable of relating the beauty of January's garden (2034-2037). The garden is walled in with stone and kept locked. January alone has the key, opening the gates to pay his wife her marital debt during the summer season. The garden, in many ways, is a natural equivalent of May. Both have been created or fashioned by January. Both are kept under lock and key. Most significantly, however, they both have a life of their own within the confines of a certain structure. Just as May's attainment of selfhood will be arrested by the patriarchal structure in which she has confined herself in her pursuit of

³¹ Ovid, *Ovid's Fasti: Roman Holidays*, trans. Betty Rose Nagle (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1995), I.415-440.

power, the growth and flourishing of the garden will be checked by the walls which surround and define it. Thus, it is quite apt that May's final act of power occurs in an arena which mirrors her own predicament.

The setting of the final scene in the garden serves another purpose as well. Due to the Biblical imagery in the tale, particularly the allusions to Adam and Eve, Chaucer's garden cannot help but to evoke images of the Garden of Eden. While the garden existed in the sources from which Chaucer drew, the similarities to the Biblical garden were non-existent. Chaucer's reasons for drawing this comparison may have some relation to Church debate concerning culpability with regard to the Fall.

While popular conceptions of the Church's stance tended to view it as placing blame upon Eve, there did exist some contention over this matter within Church discussion. St. Paul, St. Jerome, and St. Ambrose, for example, viewed Eve as the origin of evil and lies, responsible for the fall of Adam. Adam of Courlandon, writing in the thirteenth century, reasoned that Eve had to be tempted first because she was the weaker of the two. According to his line of thought, Adam would have been able to withstand the temptation of the serpent by falling back on his reasoning abilities. Others, however, disagreed with the placement of blame solely upon Eve. Hugh of St. Victor, for example, insisted on equal culpability since Adam consented so easily to Eve's wish for him to eat of the fruit. Ernaud of Bonneval agreed with this stance, but treated Adam more sternly, comparing his weakness to Job's strength.³² This debate over blame is of great importance to the narrative because it calls into question any smugness on the part of the reader concerning the placement of blame upon either January or May. Just as the apportionment of guilt and responsibility is shown to be a moot point with regard to

³² See Ch. 1, "For Mannes Helpe Y-Wrought?", " in Lucas, *Women in the Middle Ages*.

Adam and Eve, so it is also with January and May. This debate--one which revolves solely around gender and the characteristics attributed to each sex--will be later taken up by Pluto and Proserpyna in the garden.

In addition to what actually unfolds within the narrative, there are other forces at work within the text which function to render a more complicated reading of May. The most obvious of these is the insertion of Pluto and Proserpyna into the tale. As Elizabeth Simmons-O'Neill says in "Love in Hell: The Role of Pluto and Proserpine in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," "Chaucer's conjuring of Pluto and Proserpine before the eyes of the readers--while invisible to January and May--invites us to renegotiate the journey of the *Merchant's Tale*".³³ The insertion of the mythological pair into a tale which already existed is an innovation of Chaucer's. In the versions of the pear tree tale with which Chaucer would have been familiar, the Italian prose *Novellino* and the Latin fable of Adolphus, either God or St. Peter intervenes in the husband's interest, having the last word on the unfaithfulness of women.³⁴ By inserting Pluto and Proserpyna in the role formerly occupied by God or St. Peter, Chaucer does two things: he allows a debate to ensue concerning the traditional views of women and he links the characters of May and January with those of Proserpyna and Pluto.

The insertion of the mythological pair into Chaucer's tale also serves to offset the Biblical story of the Fall. Although, as it has been shown, the blaming of Eve for this event had been debated within the Church, the predominant belief was that she was the originator. In the mythological story, however, it is the male who brings about the

³³ Simmons-O'Neill, "Love in Hell", 391.

³⁴ William F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster ed., *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1941), 333-356.

devastation of the earth. After the abduction of Proserpyna, the earth becomes desolate with the death of vegetation and the onslaught of famine. Whereas in the Biblical story, Adam's culpability was a definite issue, Proserpyna is strictly a victim. The mythological text, then, works against medieval views which equated woman with death and destruction.

The similarities between May and Proserpyna are abundant. Both are life forces, signifying fecundity. Proserpyna's story--one of abduction and rape--serves to illuminate the predicament of May. It must be noted that Chaucer goes out of his way to point out the rape of Proserpyna by Pluto--an incident that is so inextricably tied to this particular mythological pair that it needs not repeating. Chaucer's choice to do so, one which emphasizes the ravishment of an innocent woman gathering flowers and her subsequent abduction in a grisly cart, must be weighed as important. The similarity between her situation and that of May's is unavoidable. The reader is told, for instance, that May is not of the same social caste as January. Most likely, due to her lack of high birth, she did not have a choice in marrying January. The few sexual acts that are narrated within the tale are suggestive of rape, and the reader is told that May must obey her husband's sexual demands whether she likes it or not.

By allowing a debate between the couple on the issue of female infidelity, Chaucer is clearly bringing into question the system which fosters such a view. Pluto, representing the patriarchal system that Chaucer is challenging, speaks of the wickedness of women, saying, "...ther may no wight seye nay;/ Th'experience so preveth every day/
The tresons whiche that wommen doon to man" (2237-2239). He goes on to cite Solomon's condemnation of women, a man whom he deems as "wys, and richest of riches,/ Fulfild of sapience and of worldly glorie" (2242-2243). Solomon claimed that although he could only find one good man among a thousand, he could find no good

women among them all. In a move which anachronistically echoes both modern feminist and post-structuralist claims, Proserpyna calls into question the very authority of Solomon, revising the traditional story and exposing his views as suspect: "What make ye so much of Salomon?...So he made a temple of false goddis./ How myghte he do a thyng that moore forbode is?/ Pardee, as faire as ye his name emplastre,/ He was a lechour and an ydolastre,/ And in his elde he verray God forsook" (2292 & 2295-2299). The discourse surrounding Solomon as sage is exposed as a reality or conception which must exist side by side with one which runs contrary to it: Solomon is both a wise man and a lecher and idolater. The disclosure of this contradiction, however, serves to undermine patriarchal understandings of truth. As Simmons-O'Neill says, the placement of Pluto and Proserpyna within the tale "suggests a concern with the need for change in both class and marriage relations, and the larger political and religious institutions which they mirror".³⁵

One very important aspect of the legend of Proserpyna is that of rebirth and renewal. When Proserpyna calls into question her husband's assertions about women, she says that she shall answer for May and all women: "That I shal yeven hire suffisant answere,/ And alle wommen after, for hir sake,/ That, though they be in any gilt ytake,/ With face boold they shulle hemself excuse,/ And bere hem doun that wolden hem accuse,/ For lak of answere noon of hem shal dyen" (2266-2271). She then proceeds to reinterpret the words of Solomon concerning the goodness of man that were cited by her husband: "Amonges a thousand men yet foond I oon,/ But of wommen alle foond I noon" (2247-2248). While Pluto understands this as proof of the "untrouth and brotilnesse" (2241) of women, Proserpyna interprets it as demonstrative of the fallibility

³⁵ Simmons-O'Neill, "Love in Hell", 393.

of both genders: "Though that he seyde he foond no good womman,/ I prey yow take the sentence of the man;/ He mente thus, that in sovereyn bontee/ Nis noon but God, but neither he ne she" (2287-2290).

In her boldest claim to female identity and autonomy, Proserpyna claims: "I am a womman, nedes moot I speke,/ Or elles swelle til myn herte breke" (2305-2306). Simmons-O'Neill comments upon Proserpyna's act of insurgency in her re-reading of Solomon: "Proserpine's revision of misogynist authority, granting a voice to the oblivious May, suggests an alternative no character in the *Merchant's Tale* is able to see".³⁶ While Proserpyna has called into question the very system of beliefs that inhibits female autonomy through her revision of a traditional story, May merely accepts the structure and works within it: "She believes she has manipulated January and Damian into believing they have won, but all three remain deluded, locked in the system of signification and authority they have accepted without question...".³⁷

Just as May's masculinization parallels what Lee Patterson called the "ironic literalizations" that characterize the narrative, Proserpyna's reversal in perception of a traditional Biblical figure and her ensuing reinterpretation of his words echo a larger movement in the text towards reversal of Biblical stories. The garden, which is so clearly suggestive of the Garden of Eden, is locked prior to the actual act which would bring about the fall. The eating of the fruit never takes place in this tale. Simmons-O'Neill points out how the tale reverses many of the scenes in the *Song of Songs*. For instance, in the *Song of Songs*, "the young woman offers her lover spiced wine made from the juice of pomegranates (8:3); January drinks spiced wine to be able to ravish his

³⁶ Simmons-O'Neill, "Love in Hell", 401.

³⁷ Simmons-O'Neill, "Love in Hell", 400.

wife against her will, a rape which suggests that we remember Proserpine's sentence to Hell because of a pomegranate".³⁸

While Proserpyna's revision of Solomon and his statement brings to light the possibility of multiple interpretations of the same thing, the inclusion in the tale of the Biblical women referred to in the marriage encomium serves as example. The speaker cites the stories of Abigail, Esther, Judith and Rebecca as exemplars of the good advice that women have given to men: "For which, if thou wolt werken as the wyse,/ Do alwey so as wommen wol the rede" (1360-1361). While these women are traditionally viewed as Biblical heroines, the cynical tone of the *Merchant's Tale* distorts this conventional interpretation and stresses the duplicity and cunning employed by these women. The Merchant's reading is literal, claiming that although they have performed a greater good for the Christian religion, they have had to do so through trickery and deceit.

The first woman alluded to is Rebecca: "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" (1362-1365). Rebecca advised Jacob to trick his father, Isaac, into blessing him. The story of Rebecca can be read in two different ways. While the Merchant obviously wants to emphasize her falseness, the more positive reading of the story, with which Chaucer's readers would have been familiar, excuses Rebecca's deceit because of the greater deed towards which it is employed. Rebecca's actions cause Jacob to obtain the birthright of his brother Esau. Esau was understood to represent carnality and all that was opposed to God's will. By helping to bring about the downfall of Esau, Rebecca had been viewed by the Church as a combator of evil.

³⁸ Simmons-O'Neill, "Love in Hell", 402

The additional stories follow along the same pattern. Abigail, who "Saved hir housbonde Nabal whan that he/ Sholde han be slayn (1370-1371)," persuaded David to spare her husband's life. Yet, shortly after the death of Nabal, Abigail became the wife of her husband's potential murderer. As anyone familiar with *Hamlet* knows, such a hasty act is viewed suspiciously. Although this literal reading is exactly what the Merchant intends, the medieval understanding is of a different sort. Nabal, it must be remembered, was the son of Belial, and Abigail's marriage to David was seen as a turning to a better man.

The characters of Judith and Esther are often paired together because of the vast effect of their actions. Judith, for example, saves the Israelites from King Nebuchadnezzar II by charming his general, Holofernes, and then beheading him in his sleep. She carried the head of Holofernes back to her people, inspiring them to drive off the Assyrians. Esther, like Judith, saves her people by appealing to her husband, Ahasuerus. As Emerson Brown, Jr. points out, she achieves this through "slyness and dissembling," and does so in a way which causes the reader to question whether her devotion lies with her husband or the Jews: "...Esther's devotion to her husband is less than absolute. Even an uncritical observer might look upon her impassioned defense of the loathing she feels towards him (14.3-19) as qualifying somewhat her position in a speech ostensibly praising wives and marriage".³⁹ Both of these women, however, were seen as defenders of the Church, defeating the enemies who ran in opposition to the will of God.

Although the misogynistic slant of the Merchant would call for a literal reading of these stories, this literal reading goes against the accepted tenets of Christian

³⁹ Emerson Brown, Jr., "Biblical Women in *The Merchant's Tale*," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 5 (1974): 397.

interpretation: "Such literalism in spiritual matters contradicts the basic theory of Christian exegesis established by Saint Paul (2 Corinthians 3.6), richly developed by the early Fathers, and popularized and widely disseminated throughout the Middle Ages. To the medieval Christian the historical truth of biblical events was only one of several levels of meanings and was often not the predominant one".⁴⁰ These tenets of Christian interpretation would be part of the cultural accoutrement that medieval readers would bring to Chaucer's text. Not only would it be the proper Christian way to interpret stories such as those of Rebecca, Judith, Abigail and Esther, it would be the way that Chaucer would expect his audience to approach these stories.

A deeper understanding of medieval allegory might illuminate this predicament. As Emerson Brown Jr. has pointed out, the medieval attitude towards language was one which took its cue from St. Paul's assertion in II Corinthians: "...for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (3.6). Language was thought to reveal to man his highest spiritual purpose. Thus, a medieval approach to reading would always be one which looked behind the literal in search of the spiritual. Saint Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* explains this attitude. Referring to St. Paul's comments on language, he warns against taking figurative expressions in a literal way: "That is, when that which is said figuratively is taken as though it were literal, it is understood carnally. Nor can anything more appropriately be called the death of the soul than that condition in which the thing which distinguishes us from beasts, which is the understanding, is subjected to the flesh in the pursuit of the letter". Saint Augustine goes on to set guidelines to determine when something should be read figuratively, saying, "...whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behavior or to the truth of faith you must take

⁴⁰ Brown, Jr., "Biblical Women in the *Merchant's Tale*," 398.

to be figurative".⁴¹ Thus, the proper way to approach the stories of these Biblical women should be figurative, and the reading that the Merchant calls for, one in pursuit of the letter, is one which is suggestive of the death of the soul.

The Biblical women referred to, contrary to the reaction desired by the Merchant, actually help to emphasize the victimization of May: "As with the Old Testament heroines, once we see that the male is responsible for his own downfall, the female agent of that downfall is relieved of final responsibility".⁴² Like the heroines enumerated by the speaker, May's actions arise through the provocation of January's behavior. Similarly, Pluto's behavior can be blamed for the anger of Proserpyna. As Karl Wentersdorf has pointed out, "The Pluto episode, therefore, simultaneously emphasizes not only the inevitability of May's urge to be unfaithful to her husband but also, and this more importantly, the ultimate responsibility of January himself for his wife's infidelity, on account of the wrongness of the initial action--the 'ravishment' of May".⁴³ January ravishes May, and she goes on to mirror this action, ravishing both January and Damyan.

It must be pointed out, however, that although May's story can be read as one of victimization, this is not to say that January cannot be viewed as a victim as well. While he is literally a victim of May's infidelity, he is also a victim of the system that he accepts unquestioningly. It is this very system and May's functioning within in it that allow her to get away with her actions. This system, the patriarchal order, can be compared to the "lawe" referred to in the following lines: "A man can do no synne with his wyf,/ Ne

⁴¹ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1958), 84, 88.

⁴² Brown, Jr., "Biblical Women in the *Merchant's Tale*," 402.

⁴³ Wentersdorf in Brown, Jr., "Biblical Women in the *Merchant's Tale*," 402.

hurte hymselfen with his owene knyf/ For we han leve to pleye us by the lawe" (1839-1841). As Carolyn P. Collette points out, this metaphor brings to light the danger of a "lawe" or order which allows a view of man as controller of his wife just as he is controller of a tool: "In the midst of a comparison designed ostensibly to show Januarie's blind confidence that he can control and dominate his wife utterly, we find, following Eco's lead, that Chaucer links the ideas of wife and knife to create the idea of woman as ironically powerful, dangerous, potent. The apparent sense of the analogy, a woman, like a knife, can be manipulated, is expanded to include, a woman, like a knife is very dangerous".⁴⁴ Yet this danger is brought about by the very structure that allows January to view May as property to be owned and dominated.

The ambiguity surrounding May's pregnancy serves as an example of January's self-delusion regarding his valuation of May as property or tool. January assumes that one of the "functions" of his wife is to bear him an heir. What he doesn't take into consideration, however, is any identity on the part of May with regard to her participation in the sexual act which will bring about conception. Her pleasure or displeasure in the act, according to a medical belief of Chaucer's time, played an integral role in reproduction. This belief, derived from Galen and disseminated by Albertus Magnus, held that women, like men, also discharge a seed during intercourse. Furthermore, the release of this female seed, much like the male seed, coincides with orgasm.⁴⁵ January, however, fails to consider May's response--never venturing forth any speculation with regard to how she feels about the act--and he does this in the face of the

⁴⁴ Collette, "Umberto Eco, Semiotics, and the *Merchant's Tale*," 135.

⁴⁵ For more on this subject, see Hallissy's article, "Widow-To-Be: May in Chaucer's 'The Merchant's Tale'," 301-302. Everest's article, "Pears and Pregnancy in Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale'," 164, is also helpful.

warning that has been given to him by Justinus with regard to taking so young a wife: "Trusteth me,/ Ye shul nat plesen hire fully yeres thre--/ This is to seyn, to doon hire ful plesaunce" (1561-1563).

May's lack of pleasure in the sexual act coupled with the medieval belief that a man of January's age would produce sperm of a greatly decreased potency has led many critics to contend that if May is pregnant, January could not possibly be the father of the child. Because May actively seeks out a union with Damyan, the youthful and virile squire, he is more likely to be the one who impregnates her. The language surrounding the encounter in the pear tree is coarse and indelicate, more suggestive of an act in which the participants are compelled in some beastlike manner to perform rather than one from which they actually derive pleasure: "And sodeynly anon this Damyan/ Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng." (2352-2353). When May contends that she was only struggling with a man in a tree in order to restore her husband's sight, January responds, "'Strugle?' quod he, 'Ye, algate in it wente!// God yeve yow bothe on shames deth to dyen!// He swyved thee;" (2376-2378). It must be remembered, however, that this crude language is that of the Merchant's and January's. It does not take away from the fact that May orchestrated the union. Pleasure, although not alluded to by the men who are allowed to narrate the act, was most likely had by May.

If it is, in fact, the seed of Damyan which resides in the womb that January "stroketh...ful softe" (2414) at the end of the tale, why, then do allusions to May's pregnancy exist before the act in the pear tree? January, for example, desires to make out a will as soon as possible: "I yeve it yow, maketh chartres as yow leste;/ This shal be doon to-morwe er sonne reste," (2173-2174). May's craving of the unripe fruit is further testimony to the possibility of pregnancy. This desire for strange or otherwise unappetizing food was recognized in Chaucer's time as a sign of pregnancy.

Furthermore, Avicenna actually listed pears as one of the fruits that were beneficial to a woman with child.⁴⁶ One possible answer for the existence of these allusions is that May has deceived January into believing that she is pregnant. This deception falls in line with May's manipulation of the structure which binds her. She does not protest January's sexual advances and she does not leave him in favor of her young lover. She merely works within the narrow confines of the system which defines her. She plays the dutiful young wife who will carry out her function to produce an heir, but her actions are those of the deceitful and cunning woman so ubiquitous in anti-feminist literature. She at no time is able to come up with an alternative to this dualistic comprehension of women.

Carolyn Dinshaw proposes that "Chaucer's works point to a critique of patriarchal conceptions of language and literary activity--conceptions at work in recent criticism of Chaucer as well as in larger theoretical formulations about language, the self, and society--and that they suggest alternatives to such misogynistic formulations".⁴⁷ As has been pointed out earlier, Lee Patterson has indicated quite a number of examples within the text which imply a movement from the figurative to the literal. My particular examination of the tale has also brought to the forefront other instances in which the literal and figurative do battle. The Merchant, for example, calls for a literal reading of the Biblical women which runs contrary to contemporary Biblical exegesis. Proserpyna defies the figurative reading of Solomon in her attempt to question his authority. Chaucer even destabilizes the genre of fabliau by bestowing upon January and May allegorical, or figurative, names. Chaucer's insertion of the allegorical into a genre that has so little to do with allegory has historically had an unsettling effect upon critics and

⁴⁶ Everest, "Pears and Pregnancy", 166.

⁴⁷ Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, 16.

readers alike. Because the structure has been tampered with, the reader is unsure of how to go about reading. Is there, for example, a moral to this tale? Or is one to read it in the light-hearted and humorous fashion that is preconditioned by the fabliau? This blurring of genres points to the most important crux of this tale: structure determines meaning, and meaning can change when structure changes.

Within the patriarchal structure, women can only be defined in a limited number of ways. If they wish to be defined in ways which do not exist, they will have to change the framework. When Proserpyna calls into question the authority of Solomon, she is, in essence, asking for her husband to consider the story within a different framework. The fact that both stories exist--and possibly others as well--attests to the mutability of language. Unlike the medieval theologians believed, this example runs contrary to the assumption that the word refers to some higher or spiritual meaning. The idea of equally valid multiple readings refutes their attitudes regarding hermeneutics.

As an example, it may be beneficial to look at the significance that the medieval mind invested in the word. As Maureen Quilligan has pointed out, "...it was not unusual for [medieval] men to contemplate the etymology of a beast's name and that name's synonyms along with the beast's habitat, methods of movement, and reproduction (which are the significant details in modern taxonomies) as equally valid bits of information for understanding its essential being".⁴⁸ Just as it was not uncommon to investigate the etymology of a beast's name, it was also not uncommon for medieval theologians to treat Eve, the prototype of all women, in the same manner. Isidore of Seville, through word-play, justifies the degraded nature of Eve: "Eve means 'life' or 'disaster' or 'woe'--life because she was the origin of being born; disaster or woe because through transgression

⁴⁸ Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), 158.

she became the cause of dying". He also applied this hermeneutical approach to define the characteristics of the sexes: "The Latin word *vir*, he says, is related to *vis*, meaning strength, and *mulier* is related to *mollitie*, meaning softness or weakness".⁴⁹ In this way, words themselves are granted a significance which can be used to justify "innate" characteristics of the sexes.

Speaking of the difficulty existing in the critical approach to Chaucerian texts, Edward I. Condren has said, "But when we try to demonstrate Chaucer's meaning with a scientist's precision, at best we fare as Newton did, gain light and lose a rainbow...Add to his exceptionally high percentage of secondary and tertiary meanings, and all hope of a 'criterion of corrigibility' (Morton Bloomfield's phrase) vanishes. Even when Chaucer spells familiar words in unfamiliar ways, we never know with certainty whether they show variety in spelling or variety in meaning".⁵⁰ Ambiguities in a word's meaning and disruption of genre--both Chaucerian features at work in this text--serve to collapse the dominant discourse regarding meaning as something which must be sought as a higher ideal. Meaning, as Chaucer proves, can be relative. May does not have to be trapped in the dualistic construct which defines her as either dutiful, loving wife or lusty and deceitful adulterer.

As I have attempted to elucidate, the *Merchant's Tale* is structured in a way that allows it to question the apparent moral of the story: women are not to be trusted and marriage is to be avoided. Through the exploration of different views of the same issue, whether they be the character of Solomon or the morality of Esther, Chaucer forces the

⁴⁹ Lucas, *Women in the Middle Ages*, 10, 5.

⁵⁰ Edward I. Condren, "Transcendent Metaphor or Banal Reality: Three Chaucerian Dilemmas," *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* 21 (Summer 1985): 233.

reader to realize that the identity of May is one that has been constructed by both January and the Merchant. Disturbingly, however, May, unlike Proserpyna, is never able to recognize this fabrication. Believing that she has outwitted her husband, she merely remains locked into the system which has defined her as Other from the start of the tale. Both she and the reader are never allowed any insight into the real May because she never seeks self-definition. Although the tale ends on this depressing note--we are not given a heroine who has escaped "misogynistic formulations" (except, of course, Proserpyna...but she is not human)--it does call into question the framework which gives precedence to male "truths". In this way, the *Merchant's Tale* disrupts and subverts the given structures and systems of belief, rendering them less viable.

Bibliography

- Benson, Larry D., ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Brown, Jr., Emerson. "Biblical Women in the *Merchant's Tale*." *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 5 (1974): 387-412.
- Bryan, William F. and Germaine Dempster., ed. *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1941.
- Collette, Carolyn P. "Umberto Eco, Semiotics, and *The Merchant's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 24 (2) (1989): 132-138.
- Condren, Edward I. "Transcendent Metaphor or Banal Reality: Three Chaucerian Dilemmas." *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* 21 (Summer 1985): 233-257.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Madison, Wisconsin: The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989.
- Edwards, A. S. G. "*The Merchant's Tale* and Moral Chaucer." *Modern Language Quarterly* 51 (3) (1990): 409-426.
- Ellis, Deborah H. "The Merchant's Wife's Tale: Language, Sex and Commerce in Margery Kempe and Chaucer." *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 2 (1990): 595-626.
- Everest, Carol A. "Pears and Pregnancy in Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale'." in Melitta Weiss Adamson ed., *Food in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995.
- Hallissy, Margaret. "Widow-To-Be: May in Chaucer's 'The Merchant's Tale'." *Studies in Short Fiction* 26 (3) (Summer 1989): 295-304.
- Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1992.

The Holy Bible in The King James Version.

Kelly, Henry Ansgar. *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer.* Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975.

Kristeva, Julia. "Women's Time." in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl ed., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism.* New Brunswick: New Jersey: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1985.

Lucas, Angela M. *Women in the Middle Ages: Religion, Marriage and Letters.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983.

Morris, Pam. "The Construction of Gender: Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan." in *Literature and Feminism.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1977.

Ovid. *Ovid's Fasti: Roman Holidays.* Translated by Betty Rose Nagle. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1995.

Patterson, Lee. *Chaucer and the Subject of History.* Madison: The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991.

Quilligan, Maureen. *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre.* Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979.

Saint Augustine. *On Christian Doctrine.* Translated by D.W. Robertson, Jr. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1958.

Shahar, Shulamith. *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages.* Translated by Chaya Galai. London: Methuen, 1983.

Simmons-O'Neill. "Love in Hell: The Role of Pluto and Proserpine in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale.*" *Modern Language Quarterly* 51 (3) (1990): 389-407.

Stanton, Domna C. "Language and Revolution: The Franco-American Disconnection." in *The Future of Difference.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1985.

Kimberly Diane Whitley was born in Richmond, Virginia. Her undergraduate education took place at the College of William & Mary. She majored in English Literature and graduated in 1990. She studied for her Masters in English Literature at the University of Richmond, receiving this degree in 1997. Within the field of literature, she is particularly interested in twentieth-century works, feminist theory and post-structural theory.