

Plotted to be Upheld in Her Receding: Eliding the Woman in Her Authenticity in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a masterfully plotted set of stories that make available implicitly the cultural mores and social tensions of medieval England to readers. Matters of morality, religion, social hierarchies, fortune and free will, reality and illusion, and negotiations between a patriarchal society and its female counterparts – all form the canvas of Chaucer's *Tales*. However, to recognise the conflicts and defenses employed in the pilgrims' telling of the tales – real or imaginary – is to recognize the ambiguity over the realness of the themes meant to be conveyed through them. This ambiguity is, as I observe, purposeful. As a device, it is most explicit in the way women are treated in the *Tales*. I argue that the centrality they are bestowed in them is a pose which when observed closely, collapses, exposing in turn a lack since while the narratives on the one hand uphold the woman in her all-encompassing beauty and truthfulness, on the other she is objectified by being trapped in the definition of that idyll. When she does not fit the idyll of the accepting and docile, her silence is indicative of the obliteration of not only her will but motives: and the latter disallows her access to identity, making her authenticity ambiguous. Moreover, sometimes, despite being particularly peripheral to the plots the narrators weave for the listener, the female characters become central in terms of merely embodying means to negatively or positively affect the male others in a tale. So, her presence is also tied to her being made part of the plot which serves the motives of the characters in the narrative and also those of the narrators. The woman's interiorities are never reached, for doing so is also placing them in a position of possessing intention and thereby choice; their presence therefore has to be treated in terms of the contexts that are acceptable by the society: virtuous, passive, almost mute, for there is a danger in being otherwise, in other words, being authentic. The women are sometimes complicit in their projection of the idyll, but this too elides them of any subjectivity that remains

opposed to what they truly are.¹ Even in their presence therefore, their absence has to be made palpable. Further, at the hands of the narrator, the characters within the narration, and also perhaps at the hands of the author, she is trampled, likened to nothing but beasts without voice (even “glas”: *CT* 3974)² to be seen at an observably physical level whose characteristics are a consequence of not her definitions but those imposed by the male superior, the gods, fortune and even fiction. In the analysis to come, I examine the eliding in the upholding of the female idyll that also serves contexts and interests of others in some of Chaucer’s tales, namely the Reeve’s, Clerk’s, Merchant’s and the Miller’s. I suggest that much like the medieval English society that saw the woman in the light of sacrifice, procreation, and only in relation to the male being precedent, these tales not only introduce plots that give her no individuality, they also relegate her to a position that is further difficult to assess and access. In what appears to be a representation of the real, the woman is simultaneously fictionalized and doubly so. The woman in her authenticity is made absent, blanched.

Ironically, it is only in being “interpreted” that the female is made accessible and given voice; at the same time, their identities in their authenticity are omitted since interpretations make scope for numerous renditions. The *unrealness* of woman as category in being obliterated is achieved not only through the ambiguity over the motives that drive her actions but also in the crossfire between her being merely a character in the narrators’ tales – the tales in themselves being sometimes borrowed and refashioned by the tellers from other authors’ tales – and through them being an object of interpretation. Hence, while women continue to serve *le rôle idéal* in others’ lives, another’s fiction, and yet another’s interpretation they are never

¹ The concept of passivity as performance is one that I draw from Holly A. Crocker’s examination of the Merchant’s Tale. However, while she finds in this a rendering of the perception of the power the male feels on the face of it fantasy, I treat this performance as making the woman’s authenticity a performance instead. Through the passivity that is the performance the authentic is recognizable but never allowed to exist alone and this makes the absence of the female real and omnipresent.

² All quotations from Chaucer’s *Tales* are from Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales: A Selection*. Ed. Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor. 2nd ed. NY: Broadview Press, 2013. Print. Within parentheses I provide line numbers from the tales discussed and whenever the title of the book is used, it has been abbreviated to *CT* across the paper.

portrayed as “real,” or in their realness. Subject and subjugated, they are refused a voice to their interiorities which might reveal motives opposed to acceptable definitions of the medieval woman.

With reference to Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*, Maud Ellman discusses how Blanche, “true to her name” (100), is wiped out of the story and yet how the discourse, the text becomes her tomb embodying the Black Knight’s lamentation on her death. Drawing from Jacques Lacan’s view that the very act of speaking of love or desire is “jouissance” (100) where the absence of the object of desire, the woman, must precede the presence of the lover’s discourse, Ellman argues how Blanche’s death leads to the existence of the book. Blanche’s burial is also made possible by the structure of the book that includes a dream within a dream, and texts within a text. Further, the walls of the castle are white in colour too. Blanche is thus engulfed in the whiteness of her name. The erasure that that brings along, however, is necessary for the mourner’s discourse of loss to be communicated; in this, Ellman observes Freud’s view of how repression of a loss leads to a melancholic’s complaints of the same (104). I note that although not dead, the female characters in Chaucer’s *Tales* represent the lost object in a complex way. Their presence in the tales lends an effectiveness to the plots at hand. However, their presence is at a certain cost that erases them of a capacity to any interiority and therefore any presence at all; in fact, even in the way they themselves respond to that obliteration portrays a repression of their own lost-ness. If we turn to the *Reeve’s Tale* about the arrogant, “ape”-ish (CT 3935) miller Symkyn, the debasement that is portrayed through the description of the miller’s wife and daughter, and also in the way they are treated in the story, represent this erasure. In the one dark room where all the protagonists of the tale lie, when Symkyn’s wife returns from having gone out to “pisse” (4215) she moves towards the cradle beside which her bed was. She subsequently falls prey to a trick played by John, one of the two clerks in the room, who has moved the cradle near his own bed to be able to experience a “joly lyf” (4232). Thereafter, “... on this goode wyf he leith on soore./ So myrie a fit hadde she nat ful yore./ He priketh harde and soore as he were mad” (4229-33). Ironically, while the wife indulges in this exchange unknowingly and thus willingly, the darkness and the cradle, useful props in the drama the

author creates with aplomb to draw in the woman as victim to the nonchalance of John, the daughter accepts without complaint the violation that Aleyn brings upon her. Although this lack of protest can be symptomatic of the silent acceptance of male domination that is perhaps not surprising in the Middle ages, I interpret this silence to be Malyne's approving a means to sexual independence, since following the "pley" (4298) she even cries at the possibility of Aleyn's departure and feels no sense of annoyance at the way she has been treated. To her "deere lemman" (4240) she even returns the cake that has been made out of the flour her father had stolen from the students. One does not get to know the true reason behind what appears to be a surprising reaction on Malyne's end. However, my interpretation bears relevance in relation to the fact that it is only following this incident of sexual violation, if violation it still remains, that Malyne speaks. In the story, one also gets to hear Malyne's name for the first time through Aleyn. Till then, one only knows her as Symkyn's daughter who has been described by the Reeve in merely physical terms: "This girl is thick and well-grown was,/ With snubbed nose and eyes grey as glas,/ Buttocks broad and breasts round and high./ But truly fair was her hair, I will not lie." (3973-76). While through the abovementioned description, one gets to see her only as an inanimate object in the tale, in her responding to the touch of another, in the apparent subjugation she accepts nevertheless in Aleyn's company, one gets to see her as a human.

Situating their gaze amidst literature concerning gender, sexuality and body politics, W.W.Allman and D. Thomas Hanks Jr. argue how in the *Tales* and across literary genres in the tales, dismantling received notions of equanimity in love, Chaucer repeatedly equates lovemaking with dominant imageries of the knife where the male controls and the woman accepts. In this backdrop the authors illustrate how the Reeve's tale becomes the first where "heterosexual lovemaking [is] described in the terms used for erotic love" (42). They write of how in the Reeve's tale the unconsented sex is never defined as rape since it ends up being pleasurable for the wife and the daughter. While Allman and Hanks Jr. see the Reeve's retaliatory intentions reversed through the "voice" that Malyne derives through the "pain" (45) inflicted upon her, I find that very

voice trampled since while it does emerge and can be interpreted as independent of the stigma that being dishonoured brings, that intention cannot be *confirmed*. (The dishonour is Symkyn's to experience in the Reeve's eyes.) In the *Reeve's Tale*, ruffled by Symkyn's stealing of their corn, the students seek a redressal through sex driven by the not-so-justified law of "esement" (4179). Further, John's pursuit of the ironically described "digne" (3964) wife of Symkyn's following Aleyn's pursuit of Malyne, is simply because he does not wish to be unhappy ("Unhardy is unseely.": 4210). John describes himself to be an useless "draf" (4206) who cannot be proven a "cokenay" (4208) as opposed to Aleyn who has succeeded in "swyv[ing]" (4317) with Symkyn's daughter. He indulges in a trickery no less condemnable than Symkyn's wishing to cheat them of the grain, both ignorant of the costs. While the cause of esement is easily used as motive in the garb of a means towards a suitable justice for Symkyn, the same cannot be used as a cause for Malyne's acceptance of Aleyn's violation; she *must* be victim. Thus, while Malyne does find a voice, it is impossible to apply a signification to it given the way the plot places her in the context of the male other and also the Reeve's motive of quiting the Miller's tale. Even for the Reeve, a tale that proves millers as tricksters assumes a singularity and in such a world women become dispensable.³ Symkyn's wife and daughter are constantly perceived in relation to the cheat that Symkyn is, not in their individualities. Through this illusory nature of the women's portrayal, woman as category is fictionalized: as victim to the room full of darkness, a legitimate victimization perhaps since the unnamed wife of the miller is an illegitimate offspring of a parson, and in Malyne's case, in a "seeming" acceptance of her position as an attractive "wenche," (4194) an obedient daughter, and subsequently one who without a cry is an object of "pley" for Aleyn (4196-97) and nothing beyond that. To see her as object is safer than to portray her as someone with recognizable motives. The burial that the duchess suffers in real in *The Book of the Duchess*, becomes metaphorically real in the case of many of the women in the *Tales*: in the Reeve's tale, the death of intention despite the apparent presence of a voice leads to the silence of the female which is a must for the authentic to be shadowed. In the

³ I draw this reading from the close reading assignment that I submitted for ENG 551 this semester.

bracketing of herself in not asserting her will towards Aleyn and accepting what little independence she has received from him is also Malyne's refusal to transcend the boundary of being objectified and thus here is a repression of her capacity to be human or in other words, woman. At the same time, this capacity must be given to her by the teller which her being part of a "tale" makes possible but denied.

Alcuin Blamires views the *Reeve's Tale* in the context of the old Christian "dispensation ethic," wherein the woman's body in the *Tale* is not only reduced to "vessels in which masculine *esement* is found for an afternoon" (101), but also becomes an object to be trampled and stolen from as against the flour that the students have been robbed of. Blamires's concept of "theft for theft" (100) also exemplifies how rape and adultery are perceived in the tale as merely theft, but given the ambiguity created by the circumstances in the tale, how one cannot clearly dispute the women's acceptance of that theft. I agree with Blamires's perception of the haze that the author creates over the woman's acceptance of the sexual violation they suffer in the *Reeve's Tale*, and yet how, seeped in the compensatory nature of the plot they are nothing more than "irrational things" (100). He also brings to light how in Malyne's returning the stolen flour to Aleyn is the girl's "complement[ing] the sexual flour she has had to yield to him" (99). Blamires's espousal reduces the possibility of Malyne's access to choice to a reading that aids the upholding of the idyll: the virgin female Malyne, as expected, transfers the chastity that belonged earlier to her father to the one who plays the role of the husband, the possessor of the "sexual flour" (99). Thus, through these interpretations, the erasing of the woman stands uncontested because the woman's actions cannot be perceived outside the contexts the tellers place them in; their intentions can only be guessed at best, never understood in the real. In *Grisildis* in the *Clerk's Tale*, this misrecognition of motive and intention and through that an elision of authenticity is further acute.

For the purposes of the continuity of his lineage and also because time flows by fast and death nears all, it is crucial that the "noble markys" (*CT* 92) of Lumbarde marries soon. Convinced of his subjects' concern, Walter agrees to leave behind a life of "liberte" (145) and in a day's time chooses to wed *Grisildis*,

daughter of poor Janicula. Grisildis's description in the tale equals that of the quintessential medieval chaste woman: "faireste" (212) under the sun when it came to "vertuous bountee," (211) she is said to be always aware that she was brought up in poverty and thus does not have any "likerous lust" (214) and knows not a moment of "ydel ese" (217). The Clerk says: "... thogh this mayde tender were of age,/ Yet in the brest of hire virginitee/ Ther was enclosed rype and sad corage," (218-20). It is noteworthy here how Grisildis's description significantly differs from that of Malyne's or even her mother's in the *Reeve's Tale*. While the latter are equated to animals (magpie), devoid of any intrinsic qualities, Grisildis's portraiture is based on only her qualities as a person. With due diligence she serves her father and leads a hard life. Although Walter gives her a choice to think about the offer of marriage that must be done hastily, Grisildis is a personification of obedience. "In werk ne thocht I nyl yow disobeye" (363) she tells him, for she feels that she is "unworthy" (359) of such an offer or choice. Through the rest of the tale, Grisildis does exactly that: she never disobeys. However, despite her being "so discrete and fair of eloquence/So benigne and so digne of reverence" (410-11), Walter wishes to test her "sadnesse" (452) or constancy. Constantly reminding her of the state of poverty from which he has saved her from, Walter tests her firmness to withstand pain. Under different pretexts, he asks Grisildis to not only bear parting away from both her children, who she knows to be dead until they are returned to her after several years, but also in the end, proposes that he will marry someone else; the girl he says he will wed is his own daughter who Grisildis knows to be dead. In fact, he even asks Grisildis to decorate the room where the latter shall be received for he knows not any other "wommen suffisaunt" (961) who can do so properly. Grisildis is unwavering in her acquiescence. In the end, Walter finally begins believing in his wife's "stedfastnesse" (1056), and returns her her children and the joy he had betrayed her of; Grisildis faints only to regain the strength to hold her children close, and while "Walter hire gladeth ... hire sorwe slaketh" (1107). She is soon "strepen" (1115) of her "rude array" (1116) and attired in a "clooth of gold" (1117) and a "coroune of many a riche stoon" (1118). I argue that while the tale focuses on how she withstands the Walter's demands, the focus is never on *what* Grisildis does not

disobey or why. The *Clerk's Tale* poses a very complex lens from which the femme ideal, Grisildis, is viewed. Elaine T. Hansen explores a paradox in the female submission in the *Clerk's Tale* and argues how despite being submissive to her husband's whims, Griselda's power is in that powerlessness. She observes how Walter's aggression towards Griselda begins after she "has been acclaimed as a saintly ruler..." (191); the qualities of an able and wise ruler are possessions of able men and thus Griselda must be subdued, and therefore Walter's tyrannical actions, one that allows Walter to also find his identity. Further, Hansen interestingly observes how in being acquiescing, Griselda's possesses complete knowledge of Walter's will and that way the will is hers too to possess. Consequently, gender differences are made unstable. Griselda's subordination is equated to her being able to assert herself which Walter must interrupt and therefore Walter begins believing in his wife's steadfastness (Hansen 193). While Hansen's compelling argument finds the powerlessness necessary for power to be wielded at Grisildis's end, the question that arises however is, in relation to whom is the woman's wielding of power possible? Is the curbing of the male authority through the choice of the woman other, or is it through his own, or rather the narrator's? I contend that in the diligent obedience that Grisildis portrays towards Walter's psychologically sadistic demands, is merely the projection of the passivity that was perceived to be ideal of the medieval woman and must remain that, not to help indirectly to ascertain the man's identity and therefore her own. That her unwavering attitude towards the tribulations that Walter brings upon her is even defined to be a symbol of steadfastness is suspect given the fact that such a symbolization is made possible only when the woman is in a position of the giver, the one who sacrifices, yields and never questions or opposes. Hansen finds in this role the power. I find through it an evasion of the real. Moreover, if Grisildis is seen to be the one who chooses her husband's good in relation to the greater good of the people he rules, in acceding to the request of giving up her children to the extent of accepting them as dead, and not pursuing other possibilities of tackling the reasons that Walter brings to her, one could also read in this her unconscious or unspoken wish to be complicit in the position of power that her being constant in relation to Walter makes possible. Hansen also

somewhat brings this up – she says that in Griselda’s being a bad mother, is equally her being an ideal woman to her husband and amidst this duality Walter feels threatened. Griselda is a “mystery” to Walter (Hansen 194); and so he stops giving her any further opportunities to be beyond understanding, according to Hansen. As I see it, this mystery is *required* so that Grisildis’s intentions can be blurred. To view as authentic the possibility of Grisildis “choosing” to be without her children, is perhaps an unacceptable notion. Therefore, throughout the tale, one only gets to see Grisildis’s response to Walter, and does not get any glimpse of what she *thinks*. Her emotions are only explicitly defined in her role of the wife and mother, not as an individual, a woman. What Hansen sees as the powerfulness of the “perfectly good woman” (190) is an acceding that Grisildis must embrace in order to remain what she has defined herself to be and others accept her in: the ideal woman who is present only through her absence. Even if one were to see in her powerlessness a means to wield power, Grisildis makes any presence of a subjectivity a performance and therefore subjugates herself to the definition Walter, the male other or even the Clerk projects through her. The constancy she lives up to is consequent to Walter’s definition of her as constant, not hers to own or to be characterized by. In that Grisildis is trapped in being only “stedfaste,” and nothing else. Moreover, the plot disallows a context that renders itself a single interpretation of her identity; rather, through that ambiguity in the interpretability she does not exist at all. Hansen’s view of agency through absence is not being powerful; it is contrarily a sly obliteration of motive that Grisildis cannot be allowed to have.

Even in multifacetedness of the ending the Clerk offers this tale, I find Hansen’s observations pertinent. Sympathetic to the plight of women on the one hand, he contrarily pushes Griselda to being merely an example from a fable saying that the women of this world are not like those of the “olde tymes” (CT 1140). There is then the humorous envoy where the Clerk reduces the seriousness of the tale. Hansen also points to places where the Clerk moves away from Petrarch’s portrayal of Griselda: while Petrarch writes of Walter valuing in Grisildis “a virtue beyond her sex and age,” the Clerk changes that “hir wommanhede” (Hansen 199). She also writes how the Clerk projects a personality that is not only scared of

women but how he may also be afraid that he will be likened to Griselda; he cannot run the risk of being ridiculed by the Host again and so he takes recourse to humour even if it is at the cost of making the female figure “implausible” (204). The position of the female in the Clerk’s tale adorns a profound ambiguity for it is one where the woman belongs to not only a story by Petrarch, but it is translated by the Clerk who determines how it is to be translated for the audience who is keen on something “murie” (line 15 in *CT* 215). The tale that the Clerk presents is further one of the many pilgrims’ tales in *The Canterbury Tales*. Hence, even if one were to delete the many pictures that the Clerk presents of Grisildis, at the multiple levels of interpretation to which the character is subjected, one does lose her in her interiorities. She is a fable in a fable, in a fable (like Blanche), and also serves the fears of the Clerk who does not want to be subjugated by the Host. Grisildis is victim to several plots which accept her position in its subjugation – fictive or real, it is hard to discern. Even if were to agree with Hansen when she writes that the portrayal of the women in the tales reveals the “male speaker’s anxiety about his manliness, his status and identity” (207), I also find in the representation of the woman in the *Tales* a purposeful ambiguity that dismantles the validity of any single interpretation. Does such a deconstruction mend the powerlessness that the medieval woman stands for, since it allows for them to be positioned in any category? Contrarily, I argue that in such a fluidity is simultaneously an erasure for it is impossible to define the female in her authentic self which can be opposed to the virtuous and meek.

The Merchant compares Grisildis’s “grete pacience” (1224) with his own wife’s “crueltee” (*CT* 1225) following the Clerk’s tale. Cut short by the Host thereafter, he begins on a story of sixty-year-old Januarie, who after a life of “bodily delyt” (1249), for salvation or senility - the Merchant does not know - decides to marry but a young woman no more than twenty. Although a “hoor,” he compares himself to blossoming trees (4461-62) and sees marriageable women as “tendre veel” (1420). He chooses May, who is described to be like the “bryghte morwe of May,/Fulfilld of alle beautee and pleasaunce” (lines 1748-49). But although this “meke” (1745) May fulfills the role of being his legitimate sexual partner, one’s not aware of what she

thinks “in her herte” (1851) of Januarie who the Merchant describes as “coltish, ful of ragerye/ ... ful of jargon as a flekked pyc” (1847-48). The squire Damyan, however, falls in love with May on the wedding night. May, out of her piteous heart, is unable to remove the “remembrance for to doon hym ese” (1981); she says: “Certeyn, ... whom that this thing displese,/I rekke noght, for here I hym assure/To love hym best of any creature,” (1982-84). While Januarie becomes blind and more possessive of May, May decides to grant Damyan his desire. Finally, in Januarie’s garden, where Damyan awaits atop a pear tree, May expresses a desire to pick the pears and climbs the tree. While Damyan “Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng[s]” (2353), Pluto grants Januarie sight. However, May is able to convince Januarie that he has not seen what he thinks he has for he “han som glymsyng and no parfit sighte” (2383).

Opposed to the feminine ideals of fidelity and acceptance towards what has come as part of the marriage, May is no Grisildis. Even within the tale, this portrayal is contextualised amidst the popular notions of marriage where “womman is for mannes helpe ywrought” (1324), one who “kepeth his good and wasteth never a deel./All that her husband lust, hire liketh weel” (1343-44); therefore opposed to those notions, May’s actions can be read to be deliberate and negative, and authentic. At the same time however, May serves well the Merchant’s notion of wives. She keeps to Januarie’s fantasy of her being the dutiful wife alive. I contend that in this portrayal of the good wife (which Holly A. Crocker writes as disarming Januarie of any power that he thinks he has over her), even if there is subjectivity, it is severed of any authenticity. Rather, it is the authentic that is made unreal. The very act of juxtaposing this tale against the Clerk’s tale of Grisildis, and likening his own story of the nag of a wife he has, the Merchant paints a picture of May as negative but at the same time *unreal* since the Merchant’s tale is pushed into “Whilom” (CT 1245). While May’s inner thoughts as a woman are heard contrary to Malyne’s or Grisildis’s, the fact that it becomes part of a tale that even time-wise is difficult to trace, disallows this negativisation of the female idyll in the real. Moreover, despite the realism of the characterizations, there are elements of the fantastic and the individuals in the tale are made to fall into a situation that was meant to be and therefore are not responsible for the

actions that follow: for instance, the Merchant speaks of how “The hevене stood that tyme fortunaat/Was for to putte a bille of Venus werkes” (1970-71) in the context of May’s falling in love with Damyan. This immediately takes away agency from May for we do not know if her response to Damyan is consequent to her feeling suppressed under Januarie’s sexual prowess which is a matter of everyday or it is out of her choice to love. Even in the conversation between Pluto and Proserpyne, Pluto expresses concern over the “tresons whiche that wommen doon to man” (2239). Why are May’s feelings towards Damyan to be defined as treson? How could one be sure of her motives behind her actions? Is May’s acceptance of Damyan out of her refusal to be an object to Januarie’s sexual gratification? Or is she adulteress? Even within the tale is a dichotomy between how a wife is considered God’s gift and what Januarie’s wife turns out to be. But what makes for this difference? In Alcuin Blamires’s reading of Januarie as devaluing the concept of marriage as providing a “salvific haven” (89) in which he is never able to transcend sensual pleasure or “voluptas” (92), may be a justification in the manner May behaves. But her motives except in terms of being the source of reciprocation of Damyan’s desire, is never made clear. This lack of clarity is also inherent in the blindness that Januarie willingly adorns despite having witnessed the truth; he is blind therefore to the authentic May. At the same time, even if she is adulteress, she cannot be considered to be real since it is opposed to the female idyll of being virtuous; the plot in its fantastical qualities must reduce the tale to a mere fable that places the possibility of female agency in making choices outside of the realm of the real.

Holly A. Crocker astutely argues how the existence of male authority is made a “masquerade” (179) in the Merchant’s tale. “Whether she is working to endure January’s sexual fantasy, or endeavoring to satisfy her desire for Damyan, May uses agency to maintain the appearance of passivity,” (179) Crocker writes. May’s lack of want in response to Januarie’s masculinity is “frightening” (187) and this disintegrates any control that the male other can hope to achieve by the passivity of the woman, for the latter is a “display” (179). May’s relationship to Damyan too is deemed to be devoid of feeling. Crocker thus sees May as possessing agency. She also asserts that Januarie’s decision to marry at so advanced an age expresses a

dependence on female passivity for it allows “perpetuity” (183), thus suggesting that the existence of the male ideal necessitates female passivity. Of the role the Merchant plays in the telling of the tale, Crocker observes that he proves the Clerk’s conception of Grisildis’s submissiveness as fiction, through trying to portray May as possessing agency, one that projects her to be shrewish and in turn allows for the Merchant’s agency in empowering definitions of masculinity. However, as Crocker argues, May, by being “able to pass off her agency as socially sanctioned ‘medicyn’ for January’s blindness (IV 2380), ... exceeds both the model of feminine passivity he desires and the model of feminine agency the speaker wants to expose” (193). By being able to diffuse January’s suspicion of her adulterous behavior and in Januarie’s acceptance of her submissiveness is thus the repudiation of the Merchant’s control over the feminine identity. “Since January can see feminine agency only as it promotes his fantasy of empowerment, he has no ability to resist the ‘excess’ agency that May exercises over her marriage,” (194) Crocker writes. I agree with Crocker’s argument in which it recognises that May is authentic in the disguise of feminine passivity that only performs to deceptively empower the acceptable and expected fantasies of masculine domination. However, this authenticity is not only fictionalized and made unreal through relegating her to being part of a fictional narrative, despite being her authentic self, May is also denied access to being real for ultimately she is trapped within the confines of the fantasy she mirrors for Januarie, and perhaps also Damyan. Even if the fantasy in itself is denied veracity by Crocker because May’s passivity is a mere “display” (179), May represents it and judged as being opposed to the ideal. Also, her affinity to grant Damyan his wish is never explained in relation to Januarie’s treatment of her as simply a means to sexual satisfaction. I argue that the topography within which she may be exercising the agency through performativity is itself not traversable. So how can the subjectivity be ascertained? What Crocker sees as performance and therefore a means to limiting male authority, is viewed by me as limiting itself and therefore it is May’s subjectivity, one without a known motive, that actually becomes a performance, not the other way round. Feminine passivity requires subjectivity according to Crocker and the denial of that subjectivity makes a charade of the male agency.

However, this lack of desire that May displays in response to Januarie is also, as I see it, within a framework that is created by the Merchant. The subjectivity in May's passivity may not be shrewishness and may tear apart the Merchant's control over her agency, but May is viewed not as an individual and is instead created almost in response to Grisildis's "stedfastnesse." With regard to Damyan, the choice that she seemingly makes or fortune allows her to make, must be reduced to something foul in being caught by Januarie at the end; in that even the Gods (Pluto) are against women like May. May in her realness cannot exist and has to perform (drawing from Crocker's analogy) otherwise to live up to the ideal of Grisildis's virtue. In this there is an obliteration of the female identity in its authenticity even if it were to make a fantasy of the male agency. Through May's characterization, neither is she allowed to be authentic through the choice she makes of fulfilling her desire to be with Damyan for that is against the female ideal of being chaste, but also it is through her own choice (which is also the Merchant's) that she is complicit in reducing herself to be in the apparent position of the giver, the figure subject to Januarie's sexual appetite. Interestingly, in this dichotomous portraiture, the feminine idyll itself is emblematic of being inherently inescapable. Feminine passivity is not erased through May's subjectivity in the Merchant's tale, but in the performativity of the ideal and ambiguity over the realness of her authentic self where we do not get to know what her motives are, is both the test and erasure of her identity that cannot be authentic. This does not make gender binaries a fiction, but perpetuates the notion that the woman as individual separate from the Grisildis-ian meekness devoid of the inwardness cannot exist; even if they do, they exist in unreal lands where Gods speak and keep watch. Thus, subjectivity of the woman itself becomes a performance and fictive since desire that transgresses the masculine control to which the female must respond must be an affair surreptitious, and mute. Such a subjectivity is equal to Lacan's lost object, one that has to absent itself for the tale to be told, a tale that makes true *only* the survival of the feminine that is subject to male dominance, eliding, in turn, the authentic.

Subjectivity as performance in which the authentic is denied is also a concept that is present in the *Miller's Tale*, for while to the Miller, Alison in her authentic playfulness is recognized of her desire towards Nicholas, created to be so by the teller of the tale, this authentic playfulness is but a means for the former to position the female as only a means to satiate sexual needs. He likens Alison to objects that are worth being touched and consumed: a "joly colt" (3263), "softer than the wolfe ... of a wether" (3249) one with a mouth as sweet as "meeth" (3261) or fermented honey, or even a hoard of apples laid on a "hay or heath" (3262). It is also inclusive of her undergarment "broyden al bifoore" (3238). Within the *Tale* both Alison's and Nicholas's sense of humour serve well for themselves, the Miller's plot also serves humorously well this "game" (3117) of telling tales; within the game that the Miller participates in, she becomes simply a performer who must be part of the ironic humour that his story instills in the larger plot of the *Tales*. The *Tale* has Alison's offering her "ers" (3734) to be kissed by love-stricken and chivalrous Absolon that is avenged with Absolon inserting a blade "amydde [the] ers" (3810) of Nicholas. When Absolon is ready to kiss Alison through the window and Alison decides to offer her "naked ers" (3734), "al rough and longe yherd" (3738), Alison says to Nicholas: "Now hust, and thou shalt laughen al thy fille" (3722). As a willing participant in the plot, given the fact that she is amply available in making a fool out of John in the context of Nicholas's prediction of a "greet" flood that is going to come in which all are going to be dead, in her physical intimacy with Nicholas while the husband is absent, and also in her audacious disregard towards Absolon's longing for her, Alison is authentic. But her authenticity is not beyond the limits the Miller's gaze sets her characterization in, in which she is an object to be desired and devoured.

Even outside the tale, when the Reeve decides to quite the Miller of this "ribaudye" (3866) Symkyn's wife and daughter are both punished for being related to the evil-doer. The plight of the two women, according to me, also becomes a lesson for the freedom that Alison has projected in the Miller's tale. While the Reeve's tale quites the Miller's tale in which the Reeve shows how tricksters like the miller in his tale (like the drunk Miller part of the pilgrimage) suffer the loss of honour and stolen grain, it also quites the

Miller of his recognition of Alison's capacity to pronounce her desires and go unpunished for it. In that way, Alison can be viewed to be an extension of the Miller who is punished in and therefore through the Reeve's tale; Alison's subjectivity is powerless outside the definitions the Miller gives it and therefore the over-compensatory nature of the Reeve's revenge through subjecting Symkyn's nameless wife who is violated and denied any recourse to choice in the darkness of a room, and also the daughter who apparently accepts it without even a cry, strips Alison of a subjectivity that she may be capable of. The Reeve's avenging the Miller is also through avenging the subjectivity that Alison is representative of since to the Reeve, she is an extension of the Miller's unruliness. Alison's authenticity is thereby made inauthentic on several fronts.

In the context of how, despite the *Miller's Tale* being an apparent example of characters personifying "animality, bodiliness, and desire" (Miller 37), does not quite completely satisfy the naturalism that it is insistent on portraying, Mark Miller illustrates how in the Miller's naturalist world, John's sense of "intimacy" (69) towards his wife is considered foolishness because he does not take Alisoun to be the object of desire who he must possess. The pilgrim miller, Miller writes, is incapable of seeing John in his nature of thinking beyond himself, an intimacy that goes beyond the selfishness of desiring the other in its possessiveness (66), and therefore he must "suffer a broken arm, betrayal of his wife, and a resounding public humiliation" (67). While Miller sees in this denial the way naturalism becomes a "site of misrecognition" (46), I see this lack of understanding extending to how the Miller portrays Alisoun; just like the Miller is incapable of accepting John in his desire for Alisoun being beyond "self-interest" (66) Alisoun too does not reciprocate that sense of intimacy. Despite being aware of Nicholas's scheme, Alisoun feigns faithfulness when her husband shares with her the secret of how they are going to be saved from the flood: "'I am thy trewe, verray wedded wyf./Go, deere spouse, and help to save oure lyf!" (3609-10) Just like to the Miller, "affeccioun" (3611) is "ymaginacioun" (3612) that men die of, to Alisoun, affection is a non-existent entity. Hence, within the tale the idyll of the "trewe wedded wyf" is well-performed. This is hardly subjectivity as Crocker may have seen it, and Alison, despite being portrayed as unapologetically against the

idyll, is at the same time not allowed to be authentic since in the tale to follow this bawdiness of hers will soon be trapped in darkness. She becomes merely reflective of the Miller's philosophies, devoid of an identity that she can create individually, and also devoid of a body that she can call completely hers.

From the discussion above, it becomes clear how the very subjectivity one is trying to recognize as authentic in the female characters becomes difficult to ascertain in the *Canterbury Tales*. While at times, the quality of accepting without questioning is representative of the feminine idyll of being passive it can also be read as such given the inability to trace the actual motives of the women; they may be mute, but that can indicate either an incapacity to have a voice or agency, or a hidden purpose to embrace an intimacy to gain freedom from the expectations of womanhood or even motherhood. While being audacious in stepping outside the confines of a marriage and being able to abide by sexual pleasure from another is still being within the limits that marriage provides, it is perhaps not subjectivity or agency; for although in relation to the ideal of fidelity it becomes negative, there appears to be a compulsion to achieve the ideal through performance. The performance is however part of a plot that is fictive. There is thus a trampling of subjectivity twice over where the feminine idyll cannot be transgressed. While some critics find in a few characters an effectiveness in the powerlessness which become necessary for the male other to accept for them to feel less threatened, I find in that powerlessness an imposed erasure of motive, intention and definition. The woman's identity is seeped in ambiguity, for allowing them purpose is to repurpose their cosmetic presence into a presence that is real, and that cannot be. This ambiguity is furthered by the fact that many of the female characters are reflections of the tellers of the tales, or are fashioned out of the necessity of creating an example that may stand opposed to or in comparison to another teller's tale. Within a tale, the women perform according to the plot that is created around them, outside of it, to the motives of the tellers. However, whether outside of the tellers' plots they are subject to a certain purpose of the author too is difficult to decide.

S. H. Rigby writes: “The meaning of a medieval image, including that of a woman, can be understood only from its role in specific generic and rhetorical contexts” (161). She argues how there is a danger in reading the women in Chaucer’s texts literally and so how they should be read in the context in which they appear, the rhetorical context. Rigby also writes that the female characters in Chaucer’s tales are representative of the roles that were expected of them in society. “The scientific, religious and social philosophy of the Middle ages justified sexual inequality by portraying women’s inferiority as natural, inevitable, divinely sanctioned and socially beneficial” (163), she writes, and therefore, “it would ... be wrong to portray medieval views of women” as either misogynistic or completely opposed to it. Moreover, it is important that we understand that “misogynist texts ... exhibited the medieval love of adopting a stance for the purposes of debate....” (161). Sheila Delany too, would have been supportive of Rigby when she wrote how “ ... Chaucer both ‘is and is not’ the friend of a woman” (83). Chaucer does bestow “creative power” (91) to his female characters according to Delany (in the context of the *Wife of Bath*), but at the same time he cannot rid himself of the cultural influences that inherently saw women “contributing to labour” (83) but also excluded her from “universities, priesthood, and ... government” (84). These assertions have value. The female characters in Chaucer’s tales do represent the role they were supposed to in the Medieval times for “order and harmony” (Rigby 162) to prevail, and perhaps Chaucer was merely representing the dichotomy inherent in the role of a woman. However, I argue that the rhetorical contexts themselves render the woman no substantiveness. Even if one were to see the women being representative of the virtuous and accepting, that is so because of the absence of any intention or motive that is imposed on the characters. In that I question the validity of the obliteration of the latter in serving the purposes of the tellers. In Chaucer’s *Tales*, subjectivity in its authentic form is not allowed to exist and that is achieved by reducing the characters’ will to perform or be shaped by the idyll they cannot escape. The ambiguity that I speak of can of course be a consequence of the fictions Chaucer powerfully creates for the tellers to tell, or in creating the many speakers in the larger context of the pilgrimage can be Chaucer’s intention, as not only author but also male,

to push away the female into the rhetoric of the unreal. The distancing of himself as author from the tales itself seems to be a means to make possible separate interpretations. But the interpretations all seem to deconstruct themselves towards one image: the femme ideal in not so much her subservience, but the presence of the ideal in the expunging of clear motives and intentions which elides the woman of subjectivity and instead gives her an identity that is defined from the outside. She is reduced to it, voicing at times the intentions of the tellers, but never *is* it. It is impossible to hold Chaucer accountable for the reduction and finally elision of the authentic in the female identity, for he is ultimately author. But the tales represent a surreptitious awareness that intricately makes the female othered, pushed into an indecipherable abyss mocking individuation. Ellman writes: “The Black Knight entombs [Blanche] in his words, but ... can never talk away her silence” (110). Contrarily, the *Tales* bring that very silence to the fore in deceptive ways, instead fictionalizing identity, negating the inert, and finally the possibility of woman as *authentic*.

Works Cited

- Allman, W. W., and D. Thomas Hanks Jr. “Rough Love: Notes Toward an Erotics of the Canterbury Tales.” *The Chaucer Review* 38.1 (2003): 36-65. *ProjectMUSE*. 27 Oct. 2015.
- Blamires, Alcuin. “Sex and Lust: ‘The Merchant’s Tale’, ‘The Reeve’s Tale’, and Other *Tales*.” *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. 78-106. Print.
- Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales: A Selection*. Ed. Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor. 2nd ed. NY: Broadview Press, 2013. Print.
- Crocker, Holly A. “Performative Passivity and Fantasies of Masculinity in the Merchant’s Tale.” *The Chaucer Review* 38.2 (2003): 178-98. *ProjectMUSE*. 1 Nov. 2015.
- Delany, Sheila. “Difference and the Difference It Makes: Sex and Gender in Chaucer’s Poetry.” *Florilegium: Papers on Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* 10 (1988-1991): 83-92. *MLA*. 27 Oct. 2015.
- Ellman, Maud. “Blanche.” *Criticism and Critical Theory*. Ed. Jeremy Hawthorn. Maryland: Edward Arnold, 1984. 99-112. Print.
- Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. “The Powers of Silence: The Case of the Clerk’s Griselda.” *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. 188-207. Print.
- Miller, Mark. “Naturalism and Its Discontents in the *Miller’s Tale*.” *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the Canterbury Tales*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 36-81. Print.
- Rigby, S. H. “Misogynist versus Feminine Chaucer.” *Chaucer in Context: Society, Allegory and Gender*. Manchester, England: Manchester UP, 1996. 116-66. Print.