

8-8-2007

# Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales: Rhetoric and Gender in Marriage

Andrea Marcotte  
*University of New Orleans*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Marcotte, Andrea, "Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales: Rhetoric and Gender in Marriage" (2007). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 591.  
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/591>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. The author is solely responsible for ensuring compliance with copyright. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: Rhetoric and Gender in Marriage

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

by

Andrea Meynard Marcotte

B.S. Louisiana State University, 2002

August, 2007

© 2007, Andrea Meynard Marcotte

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	iv
Chapter 1 .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2 .....	
<i>The Wife of Bath's Tale</i> .....	7
Chapter 3 .....	
<i>The Clerk's Tale</i> .....	18
Chapter 4 .....	
<i>The Merchant's Tale</i> .....	28
Chapter 5 .....	
Conclusion .....	37
Bibliography .....	42
Vita .....	44

## Abstract

In the Middle Ages, marriage represented a shift in the balance of power for both men and women. Struggling to define what constitutes the ideal marriage in medieval society, the marriage group of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* attempts to reconcile the ongoing battle for sovereignty between husband and wife. Existing hierarchies restricted women; therefore, marriage fittingly presented more obstacles for women. Chaucer creates the dynamic personalities of the Wife of Bath, the Clerk and the Merchant to debate marriage intelligently while citing their experiences within marriage in their prologues. The rhetorical device of ethos plays a significant role for the pilgrims. By first establishing their authority, each pilgrim sets out to provide his or her audience with a tale of marriage that is most correct. Chaucer's work as a social commentary becomes rhetorically complex with varying levels of ethos between Chaucer the author, his tale tellers and their characters.

Key Words: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, rhetoric, gender, ethos, marriage, Wife of Bath, Clerk, Merchant

## Chapter 1 Introduction

Medieval literature is full of rhetorical language that defines the controversial division between the sexes. In the Middle Ages, the theme of marriage provided one opportunity for writers and orators to demonstrate their skills with rhetorical language. Geoffrey Chaucer celebrates this rhetorical gender battle in *The Canterbury Tales*. The tales of the Wife of Bath, the Clerk and the Merchant are three of the tales that George Lyman Kittredge defined as the marriage group (147).<sup>1</sup> Through these tale tellers Chaucer creates strong personalities, portraying their opinions and personal reflections regarding the institution of marriage with respect to their social positions; however, we must not forget that Chaucer is speaking through them, making his work a social commentary on the sexes and marriage: “The tales are of marriages, but the normative array is of orders, for whose definition Chaucer found marriages exactly suitable. The first order is of empire, the second of sovereign realm, the third of family, the fourth of person, and the fifth of property—once again a descending series . . .” (Allen and Moritz 180).<sup>2</sup> To fully appreciate Chaucer’s multidimensional tale tellers’ debate regarding gender and marriage, we must first examine the world in which Chaucer lived and the system of hierarchies that dictated each pilgrim’s life.

Culturally imposed order defined every aspect of life in the Middle Ages, creating limits and restrictions that affected everyday life for men and women alike. The Great Chain of Being

---

<sup>1</sup> Kittredge defined the marriage group as the tales of the Wife, the Sumner, the Clerk, the Merchant, the Squire and the Franklin. George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1915) 147.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Duby, *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994) 1-4.

provided medieval people with the structure they desired, and it acted as their credo for stability.<sup>3</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy describes this hierarchical structure: “The world had a clear intelligible unity of structure, and not only definite shape, but what was deemed at once the simplest and most perfect shape, as had all the bodies composing it” (101). To maintain stability, everyone needed to fulfill his place in the universe, and to defy this system would cause chaos. In addition to the hierarchy of man in relation to the rest of the world, the medieval community was divided into three estates. Just as the Great Chain of Being established the ranking of humans relative to God and rocks, the Three Estates subdivide humans by social positions, those who fight (the aristocrats), those who pray (the clergy) and those who work (the agricultural laborers).<sup>4</sup> The aristocrats were associated with politics, and the clergy was broken down further into the rankings of the Church. Agricultural laborers, craftsmen and the middle class constitute the third estate. But another important hierarchy in the Middle Ages provides the rhetorical backdrop for the power struggle between men and women. The medieval family, whether aristocratic or middle class, adhered to a hierarchy based on gender: the medieval family is arranged with the father and male children at the top of the hierarchy and the mother and daughters at the bottom. Men were in control of the power and freely exercised their authority over women in domestic and religious affairs. The male is associated with the mind, reason and power, which entitles him to intellectual and spiritual superiority. The female is associated with the body and the senses, making her existence physically based and more like that of an animal.

Women were

---

<sup>3</sup> The Great Chain of Being is a static hierarchy of categories with God at the very top as the ultimate Being followed by angels, demons, humans, animals, plants and minerals. The categories are divided further into sub-hierarchies, and the hierarchy of angels was first describes by an author known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in *The Celestial Hierarchy*. The category of humans is more complicated because it contains three sub-hierarchies: politics, church and family.

<sup>4</sup> In the later Middle Ages, the category of those who work also included the middle class.

taught to obey subserviently as a result of their hierarchical inferiority.<sup>5</sup> Even male children were higher on the hierarchy than their mothers, which resulted in woman's lower status among her children to some extent.

According to Helen Jewell, the medieval attitude towards woman's inferiority was influenced by three conditions: physical anatomy, the Christian church's teaching regarding women, and Roman secular law (19-20). Also, woman's battle to gain control over her own body and fate increasingly became an issue as her power steadily diminished after the Norman Conquest of 1066. The instability of medieval society contributed to woman's struggle for power, and women were forced to use the system to their advantage when possible. One option a woman had to maintain power or to achieve status was to remain a virgin or to join a nunnery;<sup>6</sup> however, it was more common for women to be married off by their families. Marriage presented another dilemma for women in the power struggle. Even though virginity was saved for marriage and for reproduction, once that virtue was forfeited, the power and cleanness associated with virginity and the Virgin Mary was lost. This loss of purity and disassociation with the Virgin is comparable to death. Judson Boyce Allen and Theresa Anne Moritz describe marriage in the Middle Ages: "The first woe of marriage is that it is the end of virginity, second that it is the destroyer of peace, third that it is almost the pain of death, and fourth that it is not conducive to nobility" (152). As a wife and mother, a woman was supposed to serve and obey her husband dutifully and without question in accordance to her role in the social hierarchy; however, as I will address, this ideal is not always realistic or suitable. The few remaining ways

---

<sup>5</sup> Unless a woman was a queen or an aristocrat, having power as a married woman is unusual in the Middle Ages.

<sup>6</sup> Women of the religious community were literate and desexualized. Also, mystics merited authority for their spiritual visions. Women became powerful by their association with the gendered female Christ as compared to a wounded animal. Caroline Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* (Berkeley: California, 1982) 129-35.

a woman could attempt to elevate her status after marriage were either to become a widow or to embrace her role as an old crone.<sup>7</sup>

In the tales of the Wife of Bath, the Clerk and the Merchant in *The Canterbury Tales*, each tale teller presents a version of marriage distinct from the others. As the only female storyteller, the Wife of Bath rejects the commonly accepted power relationship between husband and wife. The Clerk and the Merchant both adhere to the customs governing marriage and gender in the Middle Ages to draw different conclusions for their audiences. All three tale tellers drew on life experience as a rhetorical strategy to establish their authority and credibility.

James J. Murphy addresses medieval rhetoric: “The truly medieval forms of the arts of discourse . . . fall into three major categories: *ars dictaminis*, the letter writing art; *ars praedicandi*, the art of the thematic sermon; and *ars grammatica*” (*Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts* xv). The art form of *ars grammatica* is subdivided further into *ars metrica* and *ars poetria*,<sup>8</sup> of which the authors, including Chaucer, are referred to as rhetoricians (xxi). Chaucer uses rhetoric to establish these conflicting gender issues while situating the pilgrims as rhetoricians themselves. D. S. Brewer states that “the social implications of vocabulary, especially in the ‘socialised’ language of love and marriage” are part of the pilgrims’ rhetoric (305). The Wife of Bath, the Clerk, and the Merchant manipulate language for the purposes of establishing their place in society and in marriage as man or woman, noble or commoner. H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. assesses the Wife of Bath’s character; however, his evaluation can be assimilated to the other pilgrims: “[The Wife] may . . . always be construed as having her own opinions, attitudes, and

---

<sup>7</sup> Older females in the Middle Ages are referred to as old crones and are viewed as wise and virtuous and are treated with respect, but they are also feared for their believed capability of magic. Nikki Stiller *Eve’s Orphans: Mothers and Daughters in Medieval English Literature* (Westport: Greenwood, 1980) 63-85.

<sup>8</sup> Marie Padgett Hamilton, “Notes on Chaucer and the Rhetoricians,” *PMLA* 47.2 (1932): 405.

intentions concerning what she reports and her own strategic or tactical reasons even for contradicting herself” (66-67). The pilgrims as rhetoricians carefully construct language as the narrators of the tales; and as the storytellers, the pilgrims create the language of the characters within the tales. To the extent that they understand and control the language of their characters, the Wife, the Clerk and the Merchant could be said to master the rhetorical art of persuasion.

Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* identifies three means of persuasion: ethos, pathos and logos. In *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, Murphy defines these means: “*ethos*, [that which] aris[es] from the speaker’s personal qualities; *pathos*, [that which] aris[es] from the audience’s emotions; and logical proof [also referred to as logos], depending upon argument” (4). The Wife of Bath, the Clerk and the Merchant use ethos to promote their tales’ messages regarding the subjects of marriage and gender in the Middle Ages; however, ethos also includes pathos and logos in their tales: what may be defined as pathos or logos can arguably be defined as part of their ethos as well. The emotional result each narrator invokes is based upon his or her own authority as the one telling the tale, and the logical proof at the conclusion of their tales is derived solely from their own arguments and premises for telling the tales. Because of this overlap, the meanings become ambiguous, and I will draw distinctions among ethos, pathos and logos when relevant.

The tale tellers briefly define their ethos in the prologues to the tales, but the tales and the characters they create most clearly reveal the pilgrims’ ethos, establishing authority for their views regarding the relationships between men and women in marriage. The tales and the ethos of the characters within the tales demonstrate Chaucer’s rhetorical skills as the author. The Wife of Bath, the Clerk and the Merchant include nobility in their stories, establishing a common ground for the socially divided audience of pilgrims. Similar to the disagreement between the aristocrats and the lower class regarding courtly love in Chaucer’s *The Parliament of Fowls*,

Chaucer presents three different depictions of nobility through the tales of the Wife of Bath, the Clerk and the Merchant to further demonstrate the differences in class and gender. The *Wife's Tale* presents a negative view of nobility, presenting the knight as a rapist and a felon; however, the queen is highly regarded for her dominate position over the knight. The Clerk represents nobility with Walter, the marquis. His depiction of nobility begins much fairer than the Wife's, portraying Walter courteously and reverently; however, throughout the course of the story, Walter devolves into the villain of the tale. In the *Merchant's Tale*, nobility is emulated in the old, foolish knight January, who is left deceived by his wife. Chaucer as the author establishes the ethos of the characters within the stories, creating a *mise en abyme* effect in the tales. The multidimensional layering of ethos of Chaucer as author, the tale tellers and the characters they create helps establish *The Canterbury Tales* as a rhetorical masterpiece in medieval literature. By asserting their beliefs based on their gender position into their tales, each of the pilgrims presents a different representation of marriage based upon either first-hand experience or upon an idealization of marriage.

## Chapter 2

### *The Wife of Bath's Tale*

The Wife of Bath uses her experience as the ethos of her *Prologue* and *Tale*, which can be read as a response to the *Knight's Tale*.<sup>9</sup> She is a woman of the bourgeoisie and has been married five times. She states in her prologue that she is an “expert in al min age” at marriage since she has had five husbands of high degree that she managed to manipulate to her advantage, and she boasts of successfully conquering the patriarchal culture (l. 174). In the fourteenth century, if a woman outlived her husband, she had the option of remaining single for one year after her husband's death before remarrying; she also had the right to stay single or to enter a religious life (Fell 61). With virginity no longer an option, a woman could once again have a chance at some social freedom just by outliving her husband, and by remarrying each time she is widowed, the Wife of Bath believes she retains her honor even if her strategy appears to some readers as underhanded and distasteful. Leicester analyzes the Wife's authority: “If the Wife wishes to assert the claims of experience, she finds herself doing so in a world in which the experiential immediacy of the moment of speaking appears to be always already conditioned and dominated by the past and a hostile masculine authority” (70). The Wife of Bath remarries several times, but she seems to believe that she has not lost her virtue given the manipulations of her chosen sources on which she bases her argument. By adhering to customs regarding widowhood, she is able to use the system to her advantage over again; however, other pilgrims view her behavior as distasteful.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> The *Knight's Tale* is an old-fashioned chivalric romance that depicts a love triangle and the typical rules of courtly love from an aristocratic point of view. The Wife's *Tale* in response suggests the unrealistic elevation of courtly love. Also, the Wife's tale demonstrates her ability to control her own life.

<sup>10</sup> Anglo-Saxon widows were required to mourn for one year before remarrying. Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (Indiana: Indiana UP, 1984) 61.

Citing Solomon, St. Paul and the clerkish proverbs in Janekin's "book of wikked wyves," (l. 685) the Wife of Bath describes the double standard regarding marriage between men and women; for example, if a woman has more than one husband in her lifetime, she is frowned upon, but it is acceptable for men to remarry several times: "Since it is the Wife herself who cites these voices and brings these issues up . . . it seems that she is somehow impelled or forced to situate *herself* in the world constituted by authority—the world of doctrine, official texts, and the patriarchal law" (Leicester 70).<sup>11</sup> Chaucer created a tale teller who is both seemingly aware and unaware of her circumstances based on her sources. The Wife cites authoritative documents to argue in favor of her position, but some critics argue that she does not use her sources appropriately because she fails to completely understand them.<sup>12</sup> Chaucer may have intended her ignorance as part of her ethos: "She seems to feel that her only recourse is to appropriate the techniques of scriptural gloss and the manipulation of sacred texts that are used against her, and she does so in a voice that is often nervous, hostile, and hairsplitting" (Leicester 71).<sup>13</sup> Though Leicester makes a provocative inference here, I would suggest that Chaucer portrayed the Wife as if she actually believes she is in control of the argument and not at all nervous or doubtful of her effectiveness.<sup>14</sup> Lisa Kiser is correct to say: "[The Wife] usually makes it clear . . . that her readings are her own, having absolutely no claim to authority beyond that of personal opinion" (139). The Wife solidifies her ethos as a successful and manipulative widow by attempting to

---

<sup>11</sup> Allan J. Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004) 86-89.

<sup>12</sup> H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., *The Disenchanted Self* (Berkeley: California, 1990) 71: "The Wife is consistently rendered marginal by the authorities she tries to appropriate, cut off by her 'freletee' from the rigorous perfection they hold up."

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell, *Ethics* 89: "Even though she does not fully understand everything she cites, she manipulates the data for her purposes of justifying her choices and actions as a woman."

<sup>14</sup> The medieval notion of the "uncontrollable speech" of women is attributed to the Wife's *Prologue*. Michaela Paasche Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse* (Columbia: South Carolina, 1996) 97-99.

evoke emotion from her audience regarding her amorous adventures. Paul G. Ruggiers describes her actions: “With considerable pathos, she evinces a desire to be wanted: she could not withhold her Venus-chamber from any good fellow, nor make distinctions between her lovers, so long as they cared for her (ll. 625-26)” (200). Her intention is to create for herself the ethos of naïveté and innocence in the matters of the heart.<sup>15</sup> This girlish image of the Wife is meant to create a sympathetic pathos in the audience.

The Wife of Bath succeeds in overstepping the normally accepted female role in the gender hierarchy as a widow who remarries several times. Within her marriages, she uses her sexuality to manipulate the gender hierarchy to her advantage. She references her different relationships with each husband in her prologue, illustrating how she is able to gain mastery over them by using “swich wit...yeven us in oure birthe” (l. 400):

Namely abedde hadden they meschaunce;

Ther wolde I chide and do hem no plesaunce.

I wolde no lenger in the bed abide,

If that I felte his arm over my side,

Til he hadde maad his raunceon unto me;

Thanne wolde I suffre him do his nicetee. (ll. 407-412)

Ruggiers states: “What she gives us is not so much an art of love as it is an account of the battle between herself and her husbands for the upper hand, a battle in which sex becomes a part of the whole arsenal of feminine tricks” (200-201). Her belief that women should have the power in marriage is her argument, or logos:

---

<sup>15</sup> Derek Brewer, *Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer* (London: Macmillan, 1982) 22-24.

An housbonde wol I have, I wol nat lette,  
Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thrall,  
And have his tribulacioun withal  
Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wif.  
I have the power during al my lif  
Upon his propre body, and nat he. (ll. 154-159)

The Wife of Bath claims that because she is the issuer of happiness in the home and in the bedroom, she rightfully has power over her husbands. Once the husband surrenders his authority to his wife, both he and she will remain happy; the sooner he realizes this, the sooner he will have peace and happiness. The Wife of Bath also describes how she chided her husbands until they gave in to her wishes. This worked for the first three of the five husbands:

They hadde me yeven hir land and hir tresoor;  
Me neded nat do lenger diligence  
To winne hir love, or doon hem reverence.  
They loved me so wel, by God above,  
That I ne tolde no deintee of hir love.  
A wis woman wol bisye hire evere in oon  
To get hir love, ye, theras she hath noon. (ll. 204-210)

Chiding was her tool to persuade her husbands, and she never let them know that she was content, since that would make her powerless. As a result, her kindness is more appreciated by her husbands when she chooses to show it. Her ethos is her experience and her success in achieving the power position over her husbands that she desires. This ethos is thus also presented as a successful argument, or logos.

The fourth and fifth husbands present a new challenge for the Wife of Bath. Despite the fact that she has buried three husbands already, she describes herself married to the fourth husband as “yong, and ful of ragerye, / Stibourne and strong, and joly as a pie” (ll. 455-456). Though she may no longer be physically young and fair, the Wife portrays herself still full of life and energy: “[Chaucer] knows the melancholy that is a part of her response to the passage of time and the loss of beauty and vigor” (Ruggiers 200). Her ethos is to portray herself as the victim to his inexcusable betrayal of her love. By describing herself in this manner, she emphasizes to her audience her innocence and his fault. He was unfaithful to her, behavior she claims she was not accustomed; however, instead of being bitter, she used her kindness in public settings to present herself as the victim of his wiles to “in his owene grece . . . him frye” (l. 487). Using her ethos to win over her countrymen to make her husband the disgrace, she states that “in erthe I was his purgatorye,” a phrase that the Merchant echoes in his tale (l. 489).

The fifth husband, the clerk, belittles her sex by reading every night from his “book of wikked wyves,” which chastises women and their mischievous acts recorded throughout history. The Wife of Bath’s ethos as a woman who was married to a clerk is evident in her opinion of clerks: “For trusteth wel, it is an inpossible / That any clerk wol speke good of wives, / But if it be of holy seintes lives, / Ne of noon othere womman neverthemo” (ll. 688-691). She argues that the status of woman is so low because men wrote the books:

Who peinted the leoun, tel me who?

By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,

As clerkes han withinne hir oratories,

They wolde han write of men moore wikkednesse

Than al the mark of Adam may redresse! (ll. 692-696)

Using her sex as the ethos, she once again produces an argument or logos in which she concludes that if women had written the stories instead of men, the blame would lay with the men. The power is in the hands of those who tell the stories, and the Wife of Bath exercises the same right as men in her prologue. She retaliates by ripping pages from the book, prompting him to strike her. The power is shifted by his violence against her, and he becomes subservient to her out of guilt:

And whan that I hadde geten unto me  
By maistrye al the soverainetee,  
And that he seide, “Min owene trewe wif,  
Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lif;  
Keep thin honour, and keep eek min estat,”

After that day we hadden nevere debaat. (ll. 817-822)

To achieve the desired power shift, she plays into the ethos of her sex as a helpless woman to triumph over her husband the clerk. The ethos here can also be viewed as a use of rhetorical pathos to persuade her fifth husband to submit in her prologue as well as to persuade her audience to sympathize with her. The image of her husband striking her and then lovingly cradling her afterwards suggests sympathy for the Wife and also calls to mind the husband’s love for her. Leicester is right to say: “[T]he Wife . . . sets out with the *intention* to reify herself, to turn herself into a counterexemplum in opposition to those in Janekyn’s book of wicked wives and the male misogynist tradition” (72). However, I disagree with Leicester’s assertion that she did not genuinely love her fifth husband. As we will learn later, “Love is perfectly compatible with marriage in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*” (Brewer, *Tradition* 22). Because she had to work

harder to gain sovereignty in this marriage, she may have admired and loved him more for the challenge he presented her:

It is clear . . . that for the Wife ‘maistrye’ is not really a simple mechanical reversal of male domination. In both cases once the woman has been granted sovereignty she refrains from exercising it, and this restraint suggests . . . that sovereignty is primarily a tool for achieving feminine independence *within* marriage so that more satisfactory relations between the sexes can have a chance to develop (Leicester 155).<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps she is insinuating that she would enjoy another challenge for her sixth marriage so long as the union results in mutual submission again. The Wife of Bath demonstrates her skill over men even in the most unpromising circumstances, which strengthens her authority on the matter of marriage and the power struggle between man and wife.

The theme in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* is the benefit of woman’s mastery over her husband, and it challenges the received tradition of a husband’s control over his wife: “In its original form [in Gower] the tale the Wife tells is an instrument of the dominant masculine ideology and its values, such as (male) loyalty and courtesy, that demonstrate male superiority” (Leicester 141).<sup>17</sup> In contrast, the *Wife’s Tale* as composed by Chaucer places the queen and the loathly lady as the manipulators of the knight, and they both dominate men in the court and in marriage.<sup>18</sup> The loathly lady’s speech is described as “gentillesse” speech: “a form of argument that aims at breaking down external hierarchies of power constituted by birth and possessions . . . in favor of

---

<sup>16</sup> Eugene Edward Slaughter, *Virtue According to Love—In Chaucer* (New York: Bookman, 1957) 204.

<sup>17</sup> Chaucer deviates from Gower’s “Tale of Florent” by making the knight’s “imposed task a punishment for rape” as well as having the hag transform by her own choice (Mann 899).

<sup>18</sup> Magical powers and all-knowing wisdom are attributed to old women like the loathly lady, and they are seen as wise and virtuous women who serve as examples to young women. The old crone or loathly lady is never to be desired but always honored and treated respectfully. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber ed., *Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 75.

equality before God and individual responsibility for establishing worth and achieving salvation” (Leicester 142).<sup>19</sup> However, Brewer states that the ideal of “gentillesse” creates a problem in the tale because it contradicts the loathly lady’s degree: “*Gentillesse* has become a moral ideal, a virtuous nobility of character independent of social rank. It is personally chosen, and evinced in personal behavior” (299). The queen’s language reflects the “gentillesse” speech of the loathly lady and the Wife’s personal choice concerning sovereignty in marriage. The logos of the *Wife’s Tale* is that when the husband and the wife mutually submit, both will live happily together, which answers the queen’s question of what women want most correctly.

In the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the Wife’s ethos is evident in how she negatively presents the knight to her audience:

Because the Wife’s public position in her prologue and tale is founded in the masculine-controlled and economically dominated idea of marriage that pervades the society in which she lives, she is driven by the logic of opposition to adopt a stance that competes with, and therefore reproduces, the exploitation, both economic and sexual, to which women are ordinarily subjected by the masculine world (Leicester 75).

She describes his action of raping a maiden as punishable “[by] cours of lawe”; the perpetrator “sholde han lost his heed” (l. 892).<sup>20</sup> Chaucer presents the knight, who is supposed to be representative of the court, in a more realistic and unfavorable light: “The tale puts [the knight] in a position more familiar to women, who ordinarily have to cater to male desires, and gives

---

<sup>19</sup> Brewer, *Class Distinction* 299: “Gentillesse has become a moral ideal, a virtuous nobility of character independent of external social rank.” Judson Boyce Allen and Theresa Anne Moritz, *A Distinction of Stories* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1981) 153: “Gentillesse . . . was to be equated with virtue, not with lineage, or wealth, or any other worldly asset which might well be, and often was, possessed by scoundrels.”

<sup>20</sup> Stiller 76.

power to women from the beginning” (Leicester 142). It is the queen who intervenes with a degree of mercy: “The Wife of Bath puts greater stress on the careful courtesy, a style appropriate to a chivalric setting, with which the queen works to get her way” (Leicester 145). By exercising her influence over the king, the queen is granted the power to decide his sentence:

But that the queene and othere ladies mo  
So longe preyeden the king of grace  
Til he his lif him graunted in the place,  
And yaf him to the queen, al at hir wille,  
To chese wher she wolde him save or spille. (ll. 894-898)

The king yields the power to his wife, and the Wife of Bath immediately situates the queen’s power as an extension of her ethos. The task the knight must complete to save his life is also biased towards women: “I graunte thee lif, if thow kanst tellen me / What thing is it that wommen moost desiren” (ll. 904-905). His fate lies in the control of women and their willingness to help him; however, the answer they provide him must also be universally accurate to be approved by the queen and her court. By situating the knight at the mercy of the queen, the Wife of Bath emphasizes her disregard for the normal gender power arrangement as is customary in the courtly love tradition. Also, by portraying the knight’s willingness to obey, the Wife of Bath again demonstrates the reversal of the power relationship.<sup>21</sup>

The Wife of Bath compares herself to the loathly lady, who technically should not receive the knight’s proposal; however, by upsetting the gender and age barriers, the Wife of Bath establishes her ethos as an older, unmarried woman able to control her own life without

---

<sup>21</sup> William George Dodd, *Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower* (Gloucester: Smith, 1959) 1-20. George R. Coffman, “Chaucer and Courtly Love Once More—‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale,’” *Speculum* 20.1 (1945): 43-50.

needing a man in a patriarchal culture: “The Wife of Bath uses the mask of the hag as an image of her own diminished powers and vanished ‘flour’ to try out this rhetoric, to see what the bran is worth” (Leicester 150). The knight is helpless and at the mercy of a woman “fouler wight ther may no man devise” (l. 999). The loathly lady is never desired but still wins the hand of the young knight, which evokes pathos for both parties. The audience feels sympathy for the knight in such a horrible predicament but also feels compassion for the loathly lady because she is emotionally rejected based on her age and ugliness: “The Wife asserts her vitality and her resistance to the deadening pressure of conventional proprieties in . . . the conclusion of the story . . . The Wife of Bath’s version—foul and obedient or fair and take your chances—reaffirms the sense of her own energy, independence, and impenitence” (Leicester 154). The final lesson of the tale is the knight’s answer to the loathly lady’s final question:

‘My lady and my love, and wif so deere,  
I putte me in youre wise governaunce.  
Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesaunce,  
And moost honour to yow and me also.  
I do no fors the wheither of the two,  
For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.’ (ll. 1230-1235)

He answers correctly, forfeiting all control to his wife, and he is rewarded with her transformation into a beautiful maiden.<sup>22</sup> Ruggiers is correct to state: “It should not surprise us that the conclusion of the tale has been dimly describable in the Wife’s own marriage to Jenkin (ll. 817-28)” (214). Kiser suggests that the Wife’s prologue “seems to represent a life narrative

---

<sup>22</sup> Stiller 76.

that has been fictionalized by . . . strong yearnings for the power and happiness denied medieval women in actual life, while her tale continues to express the same desires by promoting them in a thinly disguised but more succinct version of the issues raised in the ‘life’ of the prologue” (136). The knight is relieved and rejoices, and the lesson for the knight is the same for the Wife of Bath’s listeners: as part of her ethos, her logical proof or logos is that when the husband and wife mutually submit all power to each other, the marriage results in happiness.

### Chapter 3 *The Clerk's Tale*

The refinement of the Clerk is starkly contrasted with the frankness of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* for a medieval audience. Ruggiers argues: "Intact, [the tale] serves his larger purpose, which is to provide the Clerk with a response to the Wife of Bath on the nature of sovereignty in marriage" (217). In the prologue of the *Clerk's Tale*, the Host (Harry Bailly) establishes the Clerk's ethos in terms of his profession. Harry Bailly coerces the Clerk with flattery into telling his tale:

Tel us som murye thing of adventures!  
Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures...  
Heigh style, as whan that men to kinges write.  
Speketh so plein at this time, we yow preye,  
That we may understonde what ye seye. (ll. 15-20)

Harry Bailly suggests the Clerk's rhetorical abilities when he describes the Clerk's verbal ornaments of colors, figures and tropes even though he implores the Clerk leave them aside, for these rhetorical devices make up one of two types of *artes poetriae* (Murphy, *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts* xxi).<sup>23</sup> Averroes defines a trope as "the use of the thing which is 'like' together with the thing to which it has 'likeness' or in place of it" (quoted in Hardison 90). The colors the Host refers to are the figures of speech the Clerk employs to embellish his tale; his words are artfully selected so that meanings are slightly altered without the audience's awareness, and this

---

<sup>23</sup> For a complete listing of figures of speech, see O.B. Hardison, Jr., *Medieval Literary Criticism* (New York: Ungar, 1974).

justifies the Host's plea for simplicity.<sup>24</sup> According to Edward I. Condren, however, the *Clerk's Tale* is not a simple one, so it defies Harry Bailly's request (135). The complexity of the tale is revealed not only through the art of language, but also in the subtext of the tale, which I will address later.

Judging by the Host's description of the Clerk's style and lofty language, his ethos is that of a highly educated and polished individual, and a skilled rhetorician. This image is confirmed by the Clerk's own testimony as to the credibility of his tale: "I wol yow telle a tale which that I / Lerned at Padwe of a worthy clerk, / As preved by his wordes and his werk" (ll. 26-28). By his association with this "learned clerk," the Clerk attributes to himself the very qualities he assigns the clerk he introduces, and he does so while briefly mentioning his travels to Padua. His ethos as a traveled and learned authority is further solidified by the identity of this clerk, who is also the source of his tale, Francis Petrarch.<sup>25</sup> Ruggiers adds that the introduction of Petrarch is "necessary frill" on the Clerk's part (217). Because he names Petrarch to his audience, it can be suggested that the Clerk feels pressured or even obligated to perform well. Intensifying the pressure to perform, the Clerk and other pilgrims are aware that Harry Bailly has requirements of his tale tellers: "he . . . wants [the stories] to be drawn directly from life" and to have a lesson for the audience (Kiser 125). Because the Clerk's status is at stake, he must tell a tale that is morally and socially suitable while meeting the Host's expectations.

---

<sup>24</sup> See James J. Murphy, *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts* (Berkeley: California, 1971) for Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *The New Poetics* (c. 1210) 28-108. Also see Murphy's chapter on *Ars Poetriae* in *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: California, 1974).

<sup>25</sup> Francis Petrarch (1304-1374) was a prominent poet in 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy. His source for the story of Griselda was Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Jill Mann, ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Penguin, 2005) 919-20.

The tale's theme is sovereignty, and it idealizes a passive and obedient wife, but the Clerk is clear that it is not meant for wives to emulate or for husbands to enforce, as Petrarch mentions in his letter to Boccaccio regarding the translation (Miller 138). J. Allan Mitchell states that the tale is merely a model of patience and virtue that starkly contrasts with the Wife of Bath's ethos and also "prov[es] that clerks can speak well of wives" (123). The Clerk's religious background is the cornerstone of his ethos, accrediting his moral authority. He ironically places an idealized female at the center of his tale who juxtaposes the Wife, and this paradoxically introduces the potential for conflict within marriage, considering the patriarchal culture and the superiority of the male prevalent in the Middle Ages. Griselda is the ideal medieval wife, who obeys her husband with the utmost patience despite his relentless testing of her virtue, and her submission is portrayed in her answer to his proposal:

Lord, undigne and unworthy  
Am I to thilk honour that ye me bede...  
And here I swere that nevere willingly  
In werk ne thoght I nil yow disobeye,  
For to be deed, thogh me were looth to deye. (ll. 359-364)

From the beginning she has taken an oath to be obedient and submissive under Walter's command regardless of the consequences, and she remains true to her word. Jerome Mandel writes that like the *Merchant's Tale*, this tale "focuses upon the decision to marry and the tribulations that attend that decision" (31). However, the *Clerk's Tale* contains no tribulations for the husband, only for the wife. The Clerk's role in the gender hierarchy is established by his patriarchal bias towards religion and marriage, but his acquaintance with marriage is only through testimony and observation. Because of his lack of firsthand experience with marriage,

unlike the experiences of the Wife of Bath and the Merchant, inexperience can be added as another aspect of his ethos; however, as a clerk, we must not discredit his ethos through observation.

The Clerk introduces Walter as “The gentileste yborn of Lumbardye; / A fair persone, and strong, and yong of age, / And ful of honour and of curteisye” (ll. 72-74). Walter’s ethos as a noble and prominent marquis is emphasized further with the epithets with which his people address him and their exaggerated courtesy in their request for him to marry. They describe marriage virtuously: “Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok / Of soverainetee, nought of servise, / Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlok” (ll. 113-115). Walter, however, is not as deserving of their praises as we are led to believe. Like January, Walter is hesitant to be married and only accepts the sacrament when he is pressured by his subjects and their fear of being left without an heir (Condren 136).<sup>26</sup> His general outlook on marriage contradicts itself: he describes marriage as a loss of liberty (l. 171), but he proposes that Griselda be ruled by him (l. 327). Henry Ansgar Kelly states: “The liturgical marriage contract in use in Chaucer’s day obligated the wife to obey and serve her husband whether he is sound or sick, and to adhere to him while the both of them should last” (111). The marriage contract Walter presents reflects this notion of marriage:

...be ye redy with good herte

To all my lust, and that I frely may,

As me best thinketh, do yow laughe or smerte,

And nevere ye to grucche it, night ne day,

---

<sup>26</sup> See lines 134-40.

And eek whan I sey “ye”, ne sey nat “nay”,

Neither by word ne frowning contenance? (ll. 351-356)

Complete servitude is stressed in this passage, not love; therefore, the keystone of their marriage is her obedience to him as her master. This defies the Wife’s idea of wedded bliss as well as the Merchant’s complete disposition to pleasure.

The *Clerk’s Tale* evokes pathos in portraying Griselda’s constant and unwavering devotion to her husband. The pilgrims feel pity for her and sympathize with the loss of her children. Petrarch bears witness to this pathos in his account to Giovanni Boccaccio: “I gave it to one of our mutual friends . . . to read . . . When scarcely half-way through the composition, he was suddenly arrested by a burst of tears. When again . . . he made a manful attempt to continue, he was again interrupted by a sob” (Miller 139). The touching patience of Griselda imitates the patience of Christ, and the Clerk thus adds another dimension to his ethos as a religious authority. Some critics equate Walter with God: “In the *Clerk’s Tale* we have a man functioning as God, with his godlike activity clearly underlined by allusions to Job” (Allen and Moritz 180).<sup>27</sup> Condren, however, disagrees; he states that Griselda represents Christ, and Walter represents Man because God does not tempt as Walter does (125, 133-134). There is much imagery of Griselda as Christ in the tale: she is described as “hevene sent” (l. 440) and born “into a litel oxes stalle” (l. 207).<sup>28</sup> Chaucer uses the word “translated” in the text (l. 385) to “signify a change to a higher state of being,” and Griselda as the image of the coming of Christ represents both the human and the divine characteristics of Christ (Condren 128, 132). The religious imagery displays more evidence of the Clerk’s ethos of authority through his profession.

---

<sup>27</sup> Paul G. Ruggiers, *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (Milwaukee: Wisconsin, 1965) 221.

<sup>28</sup> Edward I. Condren, *Chaucer and the Energy of Creation* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1999) 128. For other references to Griselda as Christ see ll. 750-56, 862-64.

Walter is merely the tempter in the tale, constantly testing the virtue and promise of Griselda without cause. He tempts her several times, and the Clerk stresses the unnecessary torture of Walter's good wife: "what neded it / Hir for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore, / Thogh som men preise it for a subtil wil?" (ll. 457-459); "This markis caughte yet another lest / To tempte his wif yet offer, if he may. / O nedeles was she tempted in assay!" (ll. 619-621); "He of his cruel purpos nolde stente; / To tempte his wif was set al his entente" (ll. 734-735). Walter manipulates Griselda with false language creating a similarity between Walter and Satan, who is depicted in literature as a master rhetorician.<sup>29</sup> The Clerk as a rhetorician would be aware of the connection between falseness and rhetoric and would have regarded Satan as a deceitful rhetorician as the serpent who beguiled Eve in the Bible, which further establishes the Clerk's ethos as a learned scholar.

To produce the results he wishes, Walter constantly reminds Griselda of her vow and her previous condition of poverty:

'Griselde . . . that day  
That I yow took out of youre povre array,  
And putte yow in estat of heigh noblesse—  
Ye have nat that forgeten, as I gesse? (ll. 466-469)

This marquis who was once lavished with praises from his subjects has become the monster of the tale. His ethos as a gentle, strong and fair figure (ll. 72-74) has been reduced to that of a conniving and cruel tyrant. Walter is never satisfied with Griselda's devotion despite her passing of all his tests, which again likens him to Satan, and he becomes the villain of the tale. Condren

---

<sup>29</sup> The biblical account of Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden was well known in the Middle Ages as depicted in the Book of Genesis.

argues that Walter's behavior "restricts him to human levels" and that he tempts Griselda just as Man tempts his Maker (134).

Griselda also represents the Clerk through obedience: "[T]he Clerk behaves toward the Host as Griselda behaves toward her husband—like an obedient master, achieving great lordship through great servitude" (Condren 135); however, the Clerk does not obey the Host's wish exactly. The *Clerk's Tale* is not merry at all, but "a sober tale of man's callous treatment of God" (Condren 135). But the former parallel to Christ through the similarities between the Clerk and Griselda elevates the Clerk's ethos to an even higher level. Assuming the role of teacher with his fable, the Clerk and the pilgrims represent Christ and his disciples respectively. Not only does the Clerk tell a tale of obedience, but he follows his tale's message in life. Christ assumed the role of teacher and taught by example to his disciples, who then carried on His message. The Clerk ironically intends his tale to profoundly affect his audience so that they may continue to spread his message of patience and sovereignty in marriage; however, it is debatable whether or not the Clerk comprehends the tale with Chaucer's allegorical adjustments to Boccaccio's tale. Chaucer manipulated Boccaccio's and Petrarch's original message, turning Griselda into a Christ figure rather than a symbol of female servitude. Using rhetoric, the Clerk may have disguised Chaucer's manipulation of Boccaccio's message intentionally, or he may not have understood it at all.

Rejecting the logos of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the Clerk "contrasts authority and experience" as the logos of his tale (Mandel 37). The Clerk does not believe that experience equates authority. This authority is in the custody of the husband and not the wife, while the Wife of Bath would argue that having the authority in the hand of the wife is the key to wedded happiness. The Clerk fulfills his place in the hierarchy with a tale seemingly glorifying the

submission of wives and having the absolute authority of power in the husbands' possession with a spiritual subtext, and his treatment of Griselda's virtue is emphasized by Walter's character. However, Condren argues that because Griselda is representative of God, the wife has absolute authority (126). The logic or logos of the *Clerk's Tale* is threefold: the first is that if women are subservient and patient, they will be rewarded in marriage; the second is that despite women's virtue, husbands will never be satisfied; and the third is that Man should not test his Maker. The *Clerk's Tale* is an outright rejection of the Wife's reasoning: "no man on earth would marry Alisoun, if he could but think of Griselda" (Condren 135).<sup>30</sup>

Concluding the *Clerk's Tale* is the *Envoy de Chaucer*. The death of Griselda is lamented, and it is cause for the world to grieve. She is elevated to the status of a martyr, and this passage arguably reflects the world's loss at the death of Christ:

Grisilde is deed, and eek hir pacience,  
And bothe atones buried in Itaille.  
For which I crye in open audience,  
No wedded man so hardy be t'assaille  
His wives pacience, in trust to find  
Grisildis, for in certain he shal faille. (ll. 1177-1182)

Griselda's patience with Walter reflects Christ's patience with Man, and the passage implies that this kind of absolute virtue can never recur without great sacrifice. This passage is a social commentary: on the surface it seems that it is a warning for husbands not to test their good wives, but it can also be inferred that Chaucer is warning Man against testing the love of Christ

---

<sup>30</sup> See lines 1163-75.

because His love will never falter. However, Chaucer accomplishes this task in a flippant manner, suggesting that he realizes his fictional audience of pilgrims (and maybe his royal court) will not comprehend the tale's meaning beyond the surface anyway: *The Canterbury Tales* "shows a consciousness of the psychology and the politics of [the pilgrims'] listening, of the processes that generate discourse or close it off" (Grudin 178).

The envoy changes in rhyme scheme from rhyme royal in the tale to six-line stanzas (Mann 926), and this shift proposes a jesting nature on Chaucer's part. Modified from Petrarch's translation, Chaucer employs this passage lightheartedly to transition from the gravity of the *Clerk's Tale* to the playfulness of the *Merchant's Tale*:

If thow be fair, ther folk ben in presence  
Shewe thow thy visage, and thin apparaille.  
If thow be foul, be fre of thy dispence;  
To gete thee freendes ay do thy travaille.  
Be ay of cheere as light as leef on linde,  
And lat him care, and wepe, and wringe, and waille! (ll. 1207-1212)

The contrast between fair and foul maidens echoes and perhaps denigrates the Wife of Bath's conclusion in her tale, and it initiates the problematic idea of having a young and fair wife in the *Merchant's Tale*. It serves as a sarcastic guide for women that offers no real solution to the question of how to achieve happiness in marriage: Chaucer "points us to a discourse that revels in irresolution rather than resolution, in aperture rather than closure" (Grudin 178). The last stanza is a flat, meaningless model for women to follow with no honest connection to the *Clerk's Tale* and his message of Griselda, but it does leave the audience to infer what Chaucer could have meant by placing this between the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Merchant's Prologue*. Is it that

Chaucer has underestimated his audience and their ability to comprehend his jest, or is it that Chaucer intended this envoy to be another rhetorical jab at the expense of his audience?

## Chapter 4

### *The Merchant's Tale*

Pretending to have the same high rhetorical skills of the Clerk, the Merchant follows with a more detrimental and distorted depiction of marriage regarding the power relationship between the sexes. Unlike the Clerk, the Merchant has experienced marriage firsthand and has had his idealistic expectations of the perfect wife taken from him long ago. His version of marriage is as crude as the Wife of Bath's, but from a man's point of view; however, unlike the Wife of Bath, the Merchant includes infidelity by the wife in his tale. The Merchant demonstrates his ethos in his prologue by boasting of his experience with marriage and the pain and sorrow that has resulted:

I have a wif, the worst that may be;  
For thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were,  
She wolde him overmacche, I dar wel swere.  
What sholde I yow reherce in special  
Hir hye malice? She is a shrewe at al! (ll. 1218-1222)

The pain that he has experienced is greater than the sorrow of any unwedded man, and he tells his tale to warn against the inevitable woe of marriage. He establishes his ethos as an unfortunate husband who would have been better off without a wife. Describing his wife's "passing crueltee" (l. 1225) adds pathos to his argument and portrays the Merchant as the object of her meanness; however, that he would describe his wife in such a manner to an audience of mixed company reveals another quality of his ethos as a tactless companion. His ethos as a miserable husband gives him authority only on the subject of failed marriages for which he perhaps was to blame.

The Merchant establishes his role in the gender hierarchy as a subscriber to the patriarchal culture. He begins his tale by introducing the knight January as an old bachelor who wants to take a wife so that he “[m]ighte ones knowe of thilke blisful lif / That is bitwix an housbonde and his wif” (ll. 1259-1260). January displays his ethos in his descriptions of what a wife should be to her husband: “yong . . . and feir, / On which he mighte engendren him an heir,” and “[t]hat womman is for mannes help ywroght” (ll. 1271-1272, 1324). January’s version of marriage is common in the patriarchal culture of the Middle Ages; he views women as property, and his beliefs reflect an idealized philosophy in the tale. January believes women are essentially slaves valued for pleasure and reproduction, and his chauvinistic attitude presents another aspect of his ethos to his audience. Such a statement reveals January’s genuine opinion of the opposite sex: women are inconsequential and are subject to the husband’s wants and needs. Although January’s view of an ideal wife is similar to the ideal wife in the *Clerk’s Tale*, January’s wife falls short of expectations because she is unrealistic and not virtuous and unattainable for a man of sixty. The knight January is described as “A worthy knight, that born was of Pavie, / In which he livede in greet prosperitee” (ll. 1246-1247). By establishing the knight’s ethos as a wealthy and honorable knight, the Merchant suggests that he, too, was once so merry, naïve and wealthy before marriage. The source of all his misery is his marriage; therefore, it is logical that his tale includes a man in pursuit of the perfect wife who will eventually fail despite his thorough efforts.

The theme of the *Merchant’s Tale* and *Prologue* is that marriage equals unhappiness for men because of women’s nature to be chiding, cruel or adulterous. Another perspective may be that the Merchant intended the tale as a warning to old men suddenly hastening into marriage for the wrong reasons. The Merchant calls marriage a snare (l. 1227), implying that women serve

the role of warden while men are forced to suffer indefinitely for their decision to marry. His tale places a man in the position of power to select any wife he desires from the country, and the woman January chooses is depicted as voiceless and powerless in the matter of his decision since she does not have a voice for most of the tale; however, despite the power arrangement, neither the husband nor the wife profits from the union based upon January's and May's circumstances at the end of tale; January is duped by his wife, and May is forced to remain married to a man she does not love.

The Merchant portrays January ironically as a hopeful and naïve victim of the tale: "He may nat be deceived, as I gesse, / So that he werke after his wives reed" (ll. 1356-1357). This passage incorporates the Wife of Bath's ethos into his tale; her message of sovereignty in the wife's possession presents the ability for the husband to be deceived, and the Merchant signifies the susceptibility in her logic as demonstrated with May's empowerment and betrayal after January's blindness. If the husband yields all control to his wife, then he makes himself vulnerable to the mischievous predisposition of her sex, and this mistrust is an extension of the Merchant's ethos regarding his own marriage: "Clearly, Chaucer's intention has been to depict in specific detail a marriage which, given its carefully constructed characters, cannot possibly prosper" (Ruggiers 110). The Merchant admits that experience and physical beauty should not be the basis for choosing a wife, and in answer to the *Wife's Tale*, he states that power in the wife's possession can only lead to despair.<sup>31</sup> He further suggests his ethos regarding women when January provides his criterion for selecting a wife:

I wol noon old wif han in no manere.

---

<sup>31</sup> See lines 1670-73.

She shal nat passé twenty yeer, certein.  
Old fissue and yong flesshe wolde I have fein;  
Bet is', quod he, 'a pik than a pikerel,  
And bet than old boef is the tendre veel...  
And eek thise olde widwes, God it woot,  
They kenne so muchel craft on Wades boot...(ll. 1416-1424)

In the process of placing age restrictions on potential mates, the Merchant again rejects the Wife's authority by excluding widows from his selection because of their tall tales.<sup>32</sup> Because January restricts his search to young maidens, it is evident that the Merchant subscribes to the dominant ethos of his sex as the controller of the power, which suggests that men deserve such indulgences even if his partner is privately unwilling and exceeds him in physical attractiveness.<sup>33</sup>

The logos of the *Merchant's Tale*, however, is that despite all men's efforts to carefully choose the perfect wife, women will inevitably be a source of misery, and January's misfortune with May after his attempts to exclude unworthy women from his choices demonstrates this argument; however, the *Merchant's Tale* is more complex because it parallels January's misfortune with an allusion to May's unhappiness and disgust in her marriage to him:<sup>34</sup>

But God woot what that May thoghte in hir herte,  
Whan she him saw up sitting in his sherte,  
In his night-cappe, and with his nekke lene;

---

<sup>32</sup> See lines 1427-28.

<sup>33</sup> See lines 1601-04 for physical descriptions of the perfect wife according to January. These images sharply contrast his physical state as an old and gray man, which the Merchant will elaborate on humorously later.

<sup>34</sup> See lines 1961-64.

She preiseth nat his pleying worth a bene. (ll. 1851-1854)

Unlike Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*, May does not agree in voice to the wedding contract; she only speaks after her betrayal. May's anxiety over her helpless and far from ideal circumstances provides an alternative view of the marriage, which creates the opportunity for the Merchant to denigrate the restlessness of her sex while simultaneously creating pathos in the form of sympathy over her predicament, but this pathos will shift onto January after her betrayal. Because of the complexity of the *Merchant's Tale*, it is necessary to analyze this tale closely in regards to January's treatment of the female character. The Merchant's sympathy for May reveals more of his ethos by projecting his own self-hatred and humiliation from his own marriage onto January's character, but it is debatable whether or not the Merchant consciously reveals this part of his ethos: "The idea of Chaucer the pilgrim requires that . . . we first decide what Chaucer the pilgrim means by what he says and then what Chaucer the poet means by what the pilgrim says" (Leicester 385).

The theories the Merchant applies to January's task of finding a wife are elaborated upon by January's council of men. Placebo and Justinus assist January in determining how to choose the perfect wife; however, they provide January with contrasting advice. The counsel that Placebo offers is ineffective and only serves to add another dimension to the ethos of January's character: "I woot wel that my lord kan moore than I. / What that he seyth, I holde it ferme and stable; / I seye the same, or ellis thing semblable" (ll. 1498-1500). January's ethos is further exalted when Placebo places his lord's judgment above that of Solomon:

"Werk alle thing by conseil"—thus seide he—

"And thane shaltow nat repenten thee."

But thogh that Salomon spak swich a word . . .

I holde your owene conseil is the beste.” (ll. 1485-1490)

Placebo does not offer advice at all and proclaims that whatever January decides will exceed any decision that the council could possibly offer him. Justinus’ response to Placebo’s speech presents an accurate depiction of January’s position regarding marriage: “I warne yow wel, it is no childes pley / To take a wif withoute avisement” (ll. 1530-1531). This admonition from Justinus both serves as the conflict of the *Merchant’s Tale* and incorporates the Merchant’s ethos into one of his characters in the plot. Justinus’ ethos as an incarnation of the Merchant is a product of Justinus’ own experience with marriage:

For, God it woot, I have wept many a teere

Ful prively, sin I have had a wif . . .

And observances of alle blisses bare . . .

Trusteth me,

Ye shul nat plese hire fully yeres thre. (ll. 1544-1562)

These words echo the Merchant’s *Prologue* and the Merchant’s sad experience with his wife, but this allows the Merchant to employ January as the scapegoat for his tale: “January, [Justinus] avers, has nothing to worry about; a wife is if anything a purgatory rather than a paradise; she is an instrument of God, a whip, a scourge for bringing the soul to salvation” (Ruggiers 113).

Both January and May manipulate language for their own purposes, and the Merchant’s ethos is called into question by his motives. Condren suggests that January is aware that the marriage may not be consummated because of his inability to perform sexually, and January plants the idea of infidelity into May’s subconscious by his excessive praise of Damian and all the qualities January lacks (141-143):

He is a gentil squire, by my trouthe.

If that he deide, it were harm and routhe.  
He is as wis, discret and as secree  
As any man I woot of his degree,  
And therto manly and eek servisable,  
And for to be a thrifty man right able. (ll. 1907-1912)

This possibility corresponds with January's view of marriage as strictly a legal way to guarantee sexual satisfaction while following Christian thought.<sup>35</sup> However, Condren's position that January would encourage his wife to be adulterous to keep his marriage intact until he could sexually perform contradicts Christian thought and the sanctity of marriage. Another possibility is that January is an old fool and unaware that he is sending his much younger and beautiful wife straight into the arms of an equally young and handsome man. If the Merchant actually intended January to pawn his wife off sexually to Damian to keep his marriage safe, another aspect of January's ethos is revealed. January is not an old fool at all, but rather a clever realist (in his situation) using the circumstances for his own benefit as well. If the Merchant is projecting his ethos into January's character, he is no longer just a miserable husband bemoaning marriage; he becomes multidimensional and perverse.

May also uses rhetoric to her advantage with the help of Proserpine, the queen of the fairies and wife to Pluto, when January catches her being unfaithful with Damian. Pluto and Proserpine are in the garden where May and Damian have conspired to meet. Looking on, Pluto is disgusted with the "treson which that womman dooth to man" (l. 2239). His ethos echoes that

---

<sup>35</sup> Old men not of the clergy believed that they needed to be married before they died to ensure their salvation. In the Clerk's Tale, Walter is reminded by his advisor that he needs to take a wife to "prepare himself for death and to provide a successor for the kingdom" (Condren 127).

of the Merchant: women are a source of woe and fickleness: “Ten hundred thousand tales telle I kan, / Notable of youre untrouthe and brotelnesse” (ll. 2240-2241). To reveal May’s wickedness (l. 2249), Pluto schemes to restore January’s sight, and the Merchant displaces his malice toward women in Pluto’s zeal in exposing May. However, as is customary in the Merchant’s tale of husbands and wives, Proserpine usurps his plan by providing May with “suffisant answere . . . For lakke of answere noon of hem shal dien” (ll. 2266, 2271):

Up peril of my soule, I shal nat lien,  
As me was taught, to heele with youre eyen,  
Was nothing bet to make yow to se,  
Than struggle with a man upon a tree.  
God woot, I dide it in ful good entente. (ll. 2371-2375)

May’s answer provided by Proserpine establishes Proserpine’s ethos as a rhetorician as well. She is either sympathetic to May’s circumstances, or she is motivated by aggravation at her husband’s rant about women. May’s ethos as a skilled liar is solidified by January’s acceptance of her answer; however, Condren (in accordance with his claim above) argues that January chooses to believe May (even though he knows better) to save his marriage from certain dissolution (146-147). The tale can be read two ways: January is an old fool duped by his adulterous wife, doomed to live a life that is the result of lies; or, as Condren suggests, January is more complex than he seems, playing the puppet master who orchestrates an unorthodox marriage that in his eyes is successful. The possibility that the Merchant presents himself as January may be interpreted in January’s foolishness and inability to heed advice. If January has learned from his foolishness, the lesson is that he should have taken a wife more appropriate for his age; however, if Condren is correct in his assertion, January has learned nothing and is

victorious. However, I disagree with Condren's proposal. January's character is devoid of the clever manipulations that Condren assigns him. If we are to understand the Merchant's ethos and his unhappy experience with marriage, we must accept January for the old fool he is. We cannot expect the Merchant as Chaucer wrote him to tell a tale more complex than his character intellectually allows.

The Merchant's *Epilogue* is spoken by Harry Bailly, whose comments regarding the "sleightes and subtilitees" of women (l. 2421) seem to be directed at the Wife of Bath: "It sholde reported be, / . . . of somme of this meinee -- / Of whom, it nedeth nat for to declare, / Sin wommen konnen outen swich chaffare" (ll. 2435-2438). The rhetorical purpose of this epilogue is the Host's validation of the Merchant's view of women while justifying his own unhappiness in marriage to his "labbing shrew" of a wife (l. 2428): "for ay as bisy as bees / Ben they, us sely men for to deceive. / And from a sooth evere wol they weive" (ll. 2422-2424). The Host, like the Merchant, subscribes to the patriarchal culture; however, after marriage, they find that their power inevitably diminishes despite their efforts to maintain control. Are we to assume that Chaucer felt this negatively towards his wife Philippa? Or are we to assume that in the role of the Host, Chaucer is playing a part? The Host as Chaucer the pilgrim creates another dynamic in the rhetorical analysis of ethos in the tale. Kiser argues that Harry Bailly "has certain expectations about art's relationship to life, believing that the two are uncomplicatedly and closely . . . allied" (124). However, Chaucer the author and Chaucer as the character of Harry Bailly are not to be interpreted as the same person; therefore, Chaucer has created a persona of himself in the tale as the "primary artist figure" and as the "chief fictional audience" (Kiser 123). This persona applies outside of the fiction of his tale into the life of Chaucer as a poet of the court.

## Chapter 5 Conclusion

*Chaucer's poetic corpus is remarkably consistent in its approach to truth and textuality, showing that even when we think we have escaped from the world of words into the surer realm of things, we discover that this realm is itself part of a mysterious code, one whose secrets reach beyond our consciousness.*

Lisa Kiser<sup>36</sup>

The division between the sexes created by the culturally enforced hierarchies of the Middle Ages infringed upon the relationships between men and women, causing hostility between the sexes. This endless discussion is the backdrop for the theme of marriage that the Wife of Bath, the Clerk and the Merchant address in their tales; however, because of the fundamental power struggle, their social positions and their gender, each pilgrim's authority is manifested differently. Chaucer, as the rhetorician of *The Canterbury Tales*, creates four levels of rhetoric signifying the intricate social relationships present: the first rhetorical level is between Chaucer (the author) and the pilgrims; the second level is between the tale tellers and their characters; the third level is between Chaucer and the pilgrims' characters; and the fourth level is between Chaucer and his audience of the court.

Donald R. Howard's notion of "unimpersonated artistry" describes the author speaking through his characters without expecting the characters to be responsible for what they say (231). Whether or not the pilgrims are aware of what their tale's message is as intended by Chaucer is up for debate. The pilgrims have little control over their material, as demonstrated by the Clerk's and the Merchant's inability to understand their own tales (Condren 124-125).<sup>37</sup> The Wife's and

---

<sup>36</sup> Lisa Kiser, *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry* (London: UP of New England, 1991) 149.

<sup>37</sup> Condren argues that the Clerk may not have understood the changes that Chaucer applied to Petrarch's translation (124).

the Clerk's tales are modified from their original versions; however, do the Wife and the Clerk fully understand the changes Chaucer makes and what they imply? Or do they completely miss the underlying subtext altogether? Condren suggests: "[The Clerk and the Merchant] seem somewhat out of touch with their material, the Clerk slightly misunderstanding the story of Griselda and Walter, and the Merchant inadvertently following January and May in directions he should perhaps avoid" (136). The personal reflections of the pilgrims based on their social positions contribute to their ethos and the context of their tales; however, it is Chaucer who ultimately creates their ethos and the subtext of their tales.

The Wife of Bath establishes her ethos with her experience with marriage and her ability to achieve sovereignty in marriage. Based on woman's place in the hierarchies present in Chaucer's day, the Wife utilizes her circumstances to her advantage despite all the external pressures against her. Women in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries "were remarkably forthright, effective, and flexible actors within a culture that placed them in a rigid ideological category" (L. Mitchell 125). The Wife believes she is successful in overstepping her role in the gender hierarchy because of her ability to manipulate the sources defending her right to remarry as many times as she can; however, Chaucer's tendency to leave such questions unanswered leaves the reader wondering whether she truly understands her sources and how they can work against her: "Chaucer often portrays the Wife as knowing more about how to exploit the uncertain boundary between truth and fiction than she is usually credited with"(Kiser 137). Leicester notes that it is tempting "to treat perceived contradictions in the text as revelations about the Wife that she is unaware of or wishes to conceal" (66). The Wife uses her ethos of authority within marriage to explain her theory regarding her right to remarry as a widow; however, in some instances she misuses her technique: "[It] is common among critics to see such

features, especially the ‘gentilesse’ speech, as revealing things about the Wife of which she herself is unaware and to use them as a way of establishing her character—that is, her limitations” (66, 143). If she intentionally uses “gentilesse” speech, she may be sarcastically answering the Knight; however, if she in fact uses “gentilesse” inappropriately, Chaucer is revealing the Wife as a pioneer for women, vulnerable to her circumstances, but persevering nonetheless. Ruggiers argues: “Chaucer has gone beyond any mere amplification of hints laid down in the Wife’s *Prologue* and has brought into consideration a perpetually provocative dimension of her character and personality” (205). The *Wife’s Tale* represents Chaucer’s viewpoint on a transforming culture and allows him to take a position on the power struggle between men and women as a detached bystander.

The Clerk’s ethos as a religious authority reveals more than the message of his tale. As an unmarried man with no firsthand experience with marriage, the Clerk directly challenges both the patriarchal culture and the conviction of his audience with his tale of Griselda. He subscribes to the view of man and woman as equals and overall denounces the power remaining in the hands of just one party of the marriage. Condren argues that if the *Clerk’s Tale* is read “dramatically . . . we try to appreciate the Clerk’s struggle with material he finds unacceptable.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, we make the Tale succeed at the expense of Chaucer, whom we tacitly blame for these shortcomings” (125). However, if the *Clerk’s Tale* is scrutinized beyond the obvious but incorrect submission of wives, the tale exhibits Chaucer’s genius, not his shortcomings. Perhaps

---

<sup>38</sup> The Clerk agrees with one or both the social and symbolic implications of the tale (trying to explain “Griselda’s monstrous silence in the face of intolerable suffering” and justifying “God’s relentless testing of Griselda, as if she were another Job” respectively), and it is the reader who applies the religious analogy to the tale (Condren 125). A. C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Arnold, 1972) Chapter 4.

exerting his own ethos through the Clerk, Chaucer contributes to the marriage debate with religious allegory that counters both the Wife's and the Merchant's tales of mastery in marriage.

The Merchant displays his ethos through his experience with his failed marriage. His tale portrays his bitterness with woman's tendency to deceive men. Whether the Merchant's own marriage resembled January's relationship with May is debatable because Chaucer is ultimately speaking through the Merchant: "It is Chaucer who manipulates the character of the Merchant to utter the horror of his own marriage and then has the Merchant, a fiction himself, manipulate the character of the old knight until he stands debased and isolated upon the stage, an object of the reader's contempt and derision" (Ruggiers 112). January may be purely fictional and merely representative of the kind of downfall that the Merchant believes women cause men, not representative of the Merchant's own predicament; however, if January accurately represents the Merchant's marriage, why would the Merchant make himself look like a fool to his audience, unless he does not fully understand his tale as Chaucer created it?<sup>39</sup> If he in fact believes that his tale glorifies man's innocence when the victim of woman's deception, his sympathy for May is called into question; therefore, Chaucer's ethos as the author may have affected the Merchant's viewpoint, portraying the foolishness of old men taking young wives with only themselves to blame for their inevitable unhappiness.

Chaucer manipulates the language of the tales through the pilgrims' ethos and their characters' language. He presents us with an eclectic and dynamic discussion of marriage in the company of strangers with contrasting viewpoints from pilgrims of different social positions and sex: "[T]ale tellers consciously adapted their *materia* to fit their intended auditors, and . . . the

---

<sup>39</sup> Condren 124-25.

auditors in turn expected the narratives to be in some sense about themselves and interpreted them as such” (Astell 40). Although the Wife of Bath, the Clerk and the Merchant are created as extreme versions of particular stereotypes in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer operates behind the façade of his tale tellers, commenting on the existing pressures of his day: “All the portraits are ‘idealised’ in the literary sense; that is, each person is presented as the best, or the quintessential, example of his kind. Some . . . are morally idealized [as seen in the Clerk’s character]” (Brewer, *Class Distinction* 302). Chaucer seems to play both sides of the gender debate in these three tales without noticeably agreeing with one or another. None of the Wife’s, the Clerk’s or the Merchant’s tales are shown to be unanimously approved by their audience, making neither more socially acceptable: “The *Canterbury Tales* does not offer a solution to any problem which the pilgrims explore or debate” (Gittes 121-122). However, Kittredge argued that the *Franklin’s Tale* acts as the solution to the marriage group (205). As a member of the court and working under a patron, Chaucer had to carefully construct his language to avoid being associated with his subject matter because he, too, had to adapt his role in the hierarchy. The degree to which his material was understood depends on his audience; therefore, the meanings and subtexts that he was aware of may not have extended to his pilgrims or to his present audience. Keeping these questions unanswered illustrates the vast artistic ability of Chaucer’s performances and solidifies his place as a great artist and rhetorician.

## Bibliography

- Allen, Judson Boyce and Theresa Anne Moritz. *A Distinction of Stories: The Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1981.
- Astell, Ann W. *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England*. London: Cornell UP, 1999.
- Brewer, D. S. "Class Distinction in Chaucer." *Speculum* 43.2 (Apr., 1968): 290-305.
- Brewer, Derek. *Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer*. London: Macmillan, 1982.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Jesus as Mother*. Berkeley: California, 1982.
- Campbell, Thomas L., trans. *Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite: the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Washington: UP of America, 1981.
- Coffman, George R. "Chaucer and Courtly Love Once More—"The Wife of Bath's Tale." *Speculum* 20.1 (Jan., 1945): 43-50.
- Condren, Edward I. *Chaucer and the Energy of Creation: The Design and the Organization of the Canterbury Tales*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1999.
- Dodd, William George. *Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower*. Gloucester: Smith, 1959.
- Duby, Georges. *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Polity, 1994.
- Ellis, Steve, ed. *The Parliament of Birds*. Trans. E. B. Richmond. London: Hesperus, 2004.
- Fell, Christine. *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*. Indiana: Indiana UP, 1984.
- Grudin, Michaela Paasche. *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*. Columbia: South Carolina, 1996.
- Hamilton, Marie Padgett. "Notes on Chaucer and the Rhetoricians." *PMLA* 47.2 (June, 1932): 403-409.
- Hardison, O. B., Jr., Alex Preminger, Kevin Kerrane, Leon Golden, eds. *Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations*. New York: Ungar, 1974.
- Howard, Donald R. *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*. Berkeley: California, 1976.
- Jewell, Helen. *Women in Medieval England*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996.
- Kelly, Henry Ansgar. *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer*. London: Cornell UP, 1975.
- Kiser, Lisa J. *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry*. London: UP of New England, 1991.
- Kittredge, George Lyman. *Chaucer and his Poetry*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1915.
- Klapisch-Zuber, Christiane, ed. *Silences of the Middle Ages*. Vol. 2 of *A History of Women in the West*, ed. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992.
- Leicester, H. Marshall, Jr. *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales*. Berkeley: California, 1990.
- Lovejoy, Arthur O. *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. New York: Harper, 1960.
- Mandel, Jerome. *Geoffrey Chaucer: Building the Fragments of the Canterbury Tales*. London: Associated UP, 1992.
- Mann, Jill, ed. *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*. New York: Penguin, 2005.
- Mate, Mavis E. *Women in Medieval English Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Miller, Robert P., ed. *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Mitchell, J. Allan. *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2004.
- Mitchell, Linda E. *Portraits of Medieval Women: Family, Marriage, and Politics in England 1225-1350*. New York: Palgrave, 2003.

- Murphy, James J., ed. *Medieval Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Medieval Rhetoric*. Berkeley: California, 1978.
- . *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance*. Berkeley: California, 1974.
- , ed. *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*. Berkeley: California, 1971.
- Payne, John. *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio*. New York: Blue Ribbon, 1931.
- Ruggiers, Paul G. *The Art of the Canterbury Tales*. Milwaukee: Wisconsin, 1965.
- Slaughter, Eugene Edward. *Virtue According to Love—in Chaucer*. New York: Bookman, 1957.
- Spearing, A. C. *Criticism and Medieval Poetry*. Cambridge: Arnold, 1972.
- Stiller, Nikki. *Eve's Orphans: Mothers and Daughters in Medieval English Literature*. Westport: Greenwood, 1980.

## Vita

Andrea Meynard Marcotte was born in Metairie, Louisiana. She received her B.S. in Psychology with a minor in English from Louisiana State University and her M.A. in English Literature from the University of New Orleans.