

CHAUCER'S HANDLING OF THE PROSERPINA MYTH IN

*THE CANTERBURY TALES*

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my indomitable mother, Amber Stubbs-Aydell, who has always fought for me. If I am ever lost, I know that, inevitably, I can always find my way home to you.

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## I. INTRODUCTION: FEMININE ANGER AND THE *CANTERBURY TALES*

O chaste goddess of the wodes grene,  
To whom bothe hevene and erthe and see is  
sene,  
Queene of the regne of Pluto derk and lowe,  
Goddess of maydens, that myn herte hast  
knowe  
Ful many a yeer, and woost what I desire,  
As keepe me fro thy vengeaunce and thyn ire,  
That Attheon aboute cruelly.  
Chaste goddess, wel wostow that I  
Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,  
Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf. (the *Knight's Tale*, III. 2297-2306).

Until this point in the *Knight's Tale*, when Emelye unveils to Diana her “desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,” the only intimate desires Chaucer makes known are those of lovesick Palamon and Arcite, whose obsessive infatuation with Emelye drives the plot forward. The first time we actually hear Emelye speak, she prays for protection in Diana’s temple, a space that suggests both psychological interiority and wish-fulfillment. As the painting of Daphne and Apollo on a wall of this temple implies, Diana often functions as a granter of wishes for devoted maidens seeking protection from rape (III. 2062-2064). In this sacred place, Emelye makes her wish known: she wants to be a life-long maiden and avoid marriage. Surrounded by images of people Diana has transformed in animals, Emelye expresses her love for hunting and walking in the wild woods, as well as her antipathy toward the prospect of motherhood and sexual intercourse: “I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye,/ A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye,/ And for to walken in the wodes wilde,/ And nought to ben a wyf and be with childe./ Nought wol I knowe the compaignye of man” (III. 2307-2311). Chaucer obscures whether or not Emelye actually asks for a physical transformation of her own, but she does let Diana



know in no uncertain terms that as an animal, or even as a tree-like Daphne,<sup>1</sup> she will still get to do the things she loves without the torments of marriage that she would have to endure as a human. Emelye's wish, of course, never comes true. At the conclusion of *The Knight's Tale*, Theseus marries her off to Palamon, and the only physical transformation on the horizon is the one she fears most. Prayer fails to protect Emelye, and Chaucer sinks her emotional interiority in the text, replacing the "bittre teeris"<sup>2</sup> that stain Emelye's cheeks in Diana's temple with public weeping in the wake of Arcite's death: "Tho cam this woful Theban Palamoun,/ With flotery berd and ruggy, asshy heeres,/ In clothes blake, ydropped al with teeres;/ And, passynge othere of wepyng, Emelye,/ The rewefulleste of al the compaignye" (IV. 2885). In the *Canterbury Tales*, a psychological divide exists between the emotionality women express in the private and public spheres; bitter and fearful, Emelye cries for herself in private, but publicly, she weeps for a man she does not love. I ask, where is the warrior-spirit of this captive Amazon, and does she seethe?

Forthright depictions of feminine anger rarely occur in the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer allows us to see the Wife of Bath seething to the point of physical reaction in her prologue, which describes her boiling anger as she listens to Jankyn continuously read from his "cursed book" of wicked wives, provoking her to tear out three pages of the book and hit his cheek so hard that he falls backwards into a fire (790-796). However, her emotional transgression does not go unpunished; Jankyn retaliates by striking her head, causing one of her ears to go deaf (668). Feminine anger manifests verbally rather than

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<sup>1</sup> If Emelye happened to turn into a tree, her leaves might fall and "walk" in the woods, carried by the wind. Her wood might be used for bows or arrows, through which she could still hunt.

<sup>2</sup> (KT III. 2326-27).

physically in the *Friar's Tale*, when a widow becomes so infuriated with a summoner that she damns him and a frying pan to hell (1622-23). These moments, along with the vengefulness of Custance's mothers-in-law in the *Man of Law's Tale*, and Proserpina's heated argument with Pluto in the *Merchant's Tale*, make up the only instances of overt feminine anger found in the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>3</sup> Beyond these rare exceptions, Chaucer's women, quiet and divinely patient, are routinely denied their righteous anger in the face of male violence. The scarcity of feminine anger in the *Tales* is mirrored in critical readings of feminine anger. While critics including John Lance Griffith and Judith Shaw have written studies on anger<sup>4</sup>, and scholars such as Jill Mann and Elaine Tuttle Hansen have focused on the emotional Stoicism<sup>5</sup> and superhuman virtue<sup>6</sup> of Chaucer's women, there are no studies specifically devoted to feminine anger. This study will locate submerged feminine anger in the *Canterbury Tales*. I will do so by analyzing Chaucer's use of the Proserpina myth, in which Pluto voyeuristically obsesses over Proserpina, abducts her, rapes her, and damns her to become his queen in the Underworld. Proserpina's enraged mother, Ceres, scours every corner of the world for her daughter, and manages to recover Proserpina from the underworld for half the year. As I argue, Chaucer uses the Proserpina myth as a metaphor for stifled female emotionality,

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<sup>3</sup> See Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*. Blamires briefly comments on the anger of Custance's mothers-in-law and the Wife of Bath, categorizing their anger as "transgressively shrill, out-of-gender behavior" (34).

<sup>4</sup> See Griffith, "Anger and Community in *The Knight's Tale*." See also Judith Shaw, "Wrath in the Canterbury Pilgrims," and "Corporeal and Spiritual Homicide, the Sin of Wrath, and the 'Parson's Tale.'"

<sup>5</sup> See Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*. In considering *The Man of Law's Tale*, she writes, "The Sultaness and Donegild are 'masculine' in their choice of action over suffering; in contrast to Constance, who suffers her fate with a Stoic dignity, they assert themselves in active opposition to whatever they do not like." Although Mann recognizes the gendered activity of these characters, she avoids addressing the emotional state which provokes that activity.

<sup>6</sup> See Tuttle Hansen, "The Powers of Silence: The Case of the Clerk's Griselda," in which she explores the paradox of Griselda's "archetypally acceptable behavior" and "superhuman" virtue (189; 191).

including anger. The Proserpina myth is about the literal submergence of a woman, and Chaucer submerges feminine anger by reenacting the Proserpina myth throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. Although Chaucer names Proserpina only once, in the *Merchant's Tale*, and refers to her title as goddess of the underworld in the *Knight's Tale*, he alludes frequently to the Proserpina myth, characterizing many of his female characters in her image. Denying these women a genuine emotional, angry response in favor of a more docile characterization, Chaucer shrouds the anger of Emelye, Hippolyta, Malyne, Malyne's mother, Griselda, and May. By using a damned woman to illustrate this suffocated anger, Chaucer reveals the bleak, limited range of expression women are given in response to male aggression: prayers, tears, and defiant silences may be socially acceptable, and they may placate aggressors for a time, but they rarely achieve results which reflect the heroine's innermost desires.

For my purposes in this study, the term “feminine anger” refers to the possession of anger by a female character. It does not refer to the perceived “femininity” or “masculinity” of anger by myself or Chaucer, although inevitably, Chaucer does gender anger. My investigation into Chaucer’s treatment of feminine anger in the *Canterbury Tales* is two-fold, hinging upon close textual analysis of my primary source, as well as my interpretation of my findings. I began by searching for moments of overt feminine anger in the text, where Chaucer plainly tells the reader that a female character expresses anger, or “ire.” From there, I examined whether or not these instances appeared gendered within the text, noting how other characters in the text respond to these moments of anger, and how the narrator characterizes that anger. As I previously mentioned, my findings regarding overt expressions of feminine anger were slim, limited to the Wife of

Bath, the widow of the *Friar's Tale*, Custance's mothers-in-law in the *Man of Law's Tale*, and Proserpina of the *Merchant's Tale*. Next, I isolated moments in the text where one would expect an angry response from a female character, either externally through speech or internally via private thought, but where, for whatever reason, Chaucer denies his readers access to feminine anger. I specifically looked for instances when female characters endure violence or abuse (physically, sexually, or mentally), since these subjects would provide ample opportunity to witness expressions of anger, bitterness, or revenge. My findings therein developed into the heart of this study. In the *Canterbury Tales*, episodes of sexual violence often beget limited access to the emotional interiority of Chaucer's female characters. Moreover, the anger of the victim's mother or maternal-figure on the behalf of her daughter rings eerily absent.

In this study, I use a feminist approach to analyze Chaucer's handling of the Proserpina myth as it relates to *Knight's* and *Reeve's* tales, and draw upon the *Man of Law's Tale*, the *Clerk's Tale*, and the *Merchant's Tale* as points of comparison. Emelye and Malynne represent buried women, dragged to figurative hell as Proserpina is dragged to a literal Underworld. I have made it my purpose here to unearth these characters, and illuminate the way their emotional interiorities have been silenced in the text. Chaucer does not plainly allocate the role of "innocent victim" to Emelye or Malynne, nor the role of "evil abductor/rapist" to their male aggressors. One could argue that despite the sinister characterizations of John and Aleyn in the *Reeve's Tale*, Chaucer at least partially exonerates some male oppressors in similar Proserpina/Pluto dynamics, such as January from the *Merchant's Tale*, an earthly manifestation of Pluto. I contend that rather than using the Proserpina myth as means for us to understand these characters as wholly good

or evil, Chaucer uses it as a pathway to explore how sexual violence disrupts our understanding of Emelye and Malyne's interiority. Chaucer returns to this subject in the *Canterbury Tales* after entertaining it through Lucrece and Philomela in the *Legend of Good Women*. O'Connell contrasts Custance's physical resistance of her attacker in the *Man of Law's Tale* with the "paralysis" and "muteness" of Philomela and Lucrece in the *Legend of Good Women*:

Philomela's paralysis is strikingly different from the reaction of Custance, who is also deeply distressed by the threat of rape, and also cries 'pitiously' (II.919), but not only maintains control of her body, but manages to successfully resist her attacker through fierce physical struggle. The reaction of Custance can be fruitfully contrasted with 'The Legend of Lucrece,' in which Chaucer also highlights the paralysis and muteness of the victim in the moments leading up to the rape (18).

Lucrece's suicide after her rape serves as a precursor to the many heroines who seem to "disappear" after an episode of sexual violence throughout the *Canterbury Tales*.

Although no physical rape occurs in the *Knight's Tale*, Theseus commands Emelye to marry Palamon, and the marriage represents the theft of her body, as I will explain in Chapter One. Her wedding concludes the tale, and she disappears from the text to make way for a new tale. The *Reeve's Tale* quickly ends after Malyne's rape, and in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the raped maiden disappears from the text *immediately*. The pervasive disappearance of the victim's emotional perspective in the text becomes another common feature concerning episodes of sexual violence in the *Canterbury Tales*. For example, May experiences physical paralysis on her wedding night in the *Merchant's Tale*, "brought abedde as stille as stoon" (1818). Although January accesses her physical body, her mental state remains impenetrable.

In this study, Chapter One addresses Emelye's role as Chaucer's Proserpina in the *Knight's Tale*. Chaucer uses romantic language to obscure Emelye's heritage, making her nearly unrecognizable as an Amazon, and more akin to the fair maidens of courtly romance. Emelye's resemblance to Proserpina, both physically and figuratively, subverts her function as a prototypical heroine of her literary stock, and asks us to read her marriage to Palamon as an abduction rather than a union of young lovers. Nevertheless, solely focusing on Chaucer's revision of the Proserpina myth itself would lead to a reductive reading of the text. Therefore, I will look at details Chaucer has purposefully excluded from Boccaccio's *Teseida* and Statius's *Thebaid*, and analyze how those omissions point to Emelye's eclipsed anger within the text. Previous scholarship has heretofore neglected to raise questions of emotional performativity within the *Knight's Tale*.<sup>7</sup> Hansen notes how after Arcite wins the tournament for Emelye's hand, he looks up at her and she casts a "freendlich ye" in his direction (222). According to Hansen, this aside from the Knight "calls into question the sincerity of Emily's devotion to Diana," and suggests her "willingness to respond to male desire" (222). Hansen does not consider that while in the presence of Theseus, Emelye must, at minimum, feign approval of Theseus's wishes, which means accepting the outcome of the battle, and treating her new betrothed with kindness. The tension between what the reader knows of Emelye's emotional interiority and her acquiescent behavior in Theseus's presence (and indeed, the acquiescent behavior of all women in the *Knight's Tale*) merits examination, as does the contradictory nature between Emelye's mythological texture as an Othered Amazon and

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<sup>7</sup> The theme of emotional performativity will also become the subject of later chapters, most prominently in my discussion of the *Reeve's* and *Clerk's* tales, which dissect the limitations of female agency under male oppressors who seek to silence not only women's voices, but their bodies as well.

her characterization within the *Knight's Tale* as a submissive love interest. Together, these intersections expose how Chaucer conceals the anger of his female characters behind pitiful, "wommanly" masks.

Chapter Two reads the *Reeve's Tale* against the *Knight's Tale*, two structurally similar tales, yet so unlike in tone that the *Reeve's Tale* reads like a grotesque caricature of the *Knight's Tale's* romantic plot. By writing the *Reeve's Tale* as a fabliau and using the acerbic Reeve as narrator, Chaucer frees his text to explore sexual violence in ways the *Knight's Tale*, a chivalric romance, cannot.<sup>8</sup> Chaucer introduces the physical act of rape (an essential element of the Proserpina myth) missing from the *Knight's Tale* through Malyne's rape in the *Reeve's Tale*. In this chapter, I discuss Malyne's response to her rape, and argue that what some scholars have labeled male fantasy<sup>9</sup> can be more accurately described as an example of emotional restraint. Without the choices that would afford them the agency needed to overcome their oppressors, Chaucer's women are limited in their emotional responses as well. By reading the *Reeve's Tale* against the *Knight's Tale*, the consequences of Emelye's original capture, and her subsequent marriage to Palamon, become apparent and harrowing.

While my first two chapters concentrate exclusively on the emotional interiority of daughters, my discussion of feminine anger in the *Canterbury Tales* would remain incomplete without addressing the hushed rage of mothers and maternal figures. For this reason, I am devoting my final chapter to Chaucer's treatment of Ceres's role in his revisions of the Proserpina myth. In order to suggest that Emelye and Malyne are, in spite

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<sup>8</sup> Morrison finds Chaucer's use of the dawn song genre in *The Reeve's Tale* "disturbing." According to her, "Malyne's speech provides a generic break, alerting us to a passage of importance and, as is inevitable in Chaucer, ambiguity" (81).

<sup>9</sup> See Barnett, (149), also Rose, (40).

of their acceptance of their fates, in their own version of a Prosperina-esque nightmare, Chaucer erases the second half of the Proserpina myth, which partially rescues the heroine. As an agricultural goddess, Ceres's vengeance reflects not only divine feminine anger, but the primal, maternal fierceness rooted in the earth itself, which implores all mothers to protect their children. Several tales in the *Canterbury Tales* include absent mothers, or mothers who fail to protect and rescue their daughters. The collective silencing of these mothers culminates in a figure I call "the lost mother" of the *Canterbury Tales*—the absent Ceres-figure— whose maternal anger partially saves her daughter. In this chapter I explore the mother-daughter dynamics found the *Man of Law's Tale*, the *Clerk's Tale*, and the *Merchant's Tale*, and I address the treatment of maternal anger in these tales. In the *Man of Law's Tale*, two perversions of feminine anger take shape in angry mothers-in-law who contribute to Custance's abuse. The presence of these women draw attention to Custance's own lack of a maternal protector, as well as her dependence on a paternal God. Similarly, the *Clerk's Tale* points to the lack of a maternal rescuer, except in this case the mother serves as the protagonist instead of the daughter-in-peril. Chaucer creates a deceptively motherless landscape, only to betray that structure by fixating the reader's attention on Griselda's role as a mother. The final tale I discuss, the *Merchant's Tale*, finally locates that maternal voice, expressed through Proserpina's resolve to protect May, her spiritual daughter trapped in an unhappy marriage.



## II. ABANDONMENT AND THE FAILURE OF PRAYER IN THE *KNIGHT'S TALE*

Chaucer reinvents Boccaccio's characterization of Emilia in the *Teseida* extensively,<sup>10</sup> erasing her playfulness, vanity, and romantic attraction to her suitors, and replacing these attributes with obliviousness, piety, and sexual disinterest. Boccaccio's Emilia displays awareness of the knights' gaze, basking in their adoration,

“[. . .] Although she was too young for mature love, she still understood what it meant. As it seemed to her that she knew that she was indeed liked, she took pleasure in it, and considered herself more beautiful, and now adorned herself the more every time she returned to the garden” (80).

Unlike Emilia, whose knowledge of the knights' watchful eyes becomes a source of pleasure that keeps her coming back to parade new adornments and inflate her self-love, Chaucer's Emelye remains oblivious to the watchful eyes of Palamon and Arcite, absorbed in her own “observance” of springtime,

Er it were day, as was hir wone to do,  
She was arisen and al reddy dight,  
For May wole have no slogardie anyght. . .  
The sesoun priketh every gentil herte,  
And maketh it out of his slep to sterte,  
And seith "Arys, and do thyn observaunce."  
This maked Emelye have remembraunce  
To doon honour to May, and for to ryse (1040-47).

Although Chaucer and Boccaccio create similar scenes—a beautiful, young maiden waking up to play in a garden—Chaucer soaks Emelye's springtime ritual in language that suggests spiritual devotion to an external entity (spring, capitalized here as May.)

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<sup>10</sup> For scholarship regarding why Chaucer never mentions Boccaccio as a source in the *Knight's Tale*, despite using the *Teseida* as his primary source, see Schwebel, “The Legend of Thebes and Literary Patricide in Chaucer, Boccaccio, and Statius.”

Whereas Boccaccio's Emilia arrives at the garden "drawn by her own nature," (78) the spiritual language found in Chaucer's passage evokes a sense of duty rather than selfishness, replacing the self-indulgent, "artless" personality found in the *Teseida* (79) with a woman who appears innocent and pious in equal measure. Neither does Emelye display any of the vanity found in Boccaccio's *Teseida*, wherein Emilia's coquettish reactions to the knights' voyeurism are "not prompted by any thought or feeling of love, but by vanity, which women have innate in their hearts in making others see their beauty" (82). By contrast, Chaucer tells us that Emelye "hadde hir pleyynge," but he does not elaborate on her thoughts or feelings while she plays in the garden besides noting "hire liste" (I. 1052). This marks a deliberate departure from Boccaccio's text, which stresses Emilia's awareness and deceit; she takes "lady-like steps," "clad in modesty, all the while contriving to give more pleasure to whoever was watching her" (82). Instead, Chaucer chooses to preserve Emelye's obliviousness and modesty, placing the reader in the same voyeuristic position as Palamon and Arcite, watching Emelye sing and string her garland from a distance. Chaucer desexualizes Emelye's personality by focusing our attention on her actions and role as sexual object rather than subject. The first three times he names Emelye in the text, he highlights her youth and beauty, first introducing her as Hippolyta's younger sister (I. 871), and later as "hir yonge suster sheene" (I. 972). Moments before Emelye appears in the garden, Chaucer generously romanticizes her beauty,

That Emelye, that fairer was to sene/  
 Than is the lylie upon his stalke  
 grene,/ And fressher than the May with floures newe—/  
 For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,  
 I noot which was the fyner of hem two (I. 1035-39).

Fragrant flowers, singing, and the season's pricking of "every gentil herte" immerses the garden scene in sensory detail, but Chaucer retreats from giving us too much access to Emelye's perspective, as if the reader were gazing at some pastoral painting, rather than engaging with its subject. In the *Knight's Tale*, Emelye's character becomes riddled with attributes which seem to contradict each other: desexualized, yet objectified; Amazon, yet lily-white; pious, yet pagan.<sup>11</sup> To understand how Chaucer arrives at these dichotomies, we must first recognize Emelye as a composite figure with a rich literary history. Chaucer combines elements from Statius's Tiresias, Manto, and Eteocles, Boccaccio's Emilia, and Ovid's Proserpina to create an Emelye of his own invention. Moreover, he deliberately conflates the mythologies of Diana and Proserpina<sup>12</sup> to stress, and give background to, Emelye's virginity and personal aversion to motherhood, in order to craft a persona that evokes the quintessential maiden, a young woman trapped between the playfulness of childhood and the often violent, heartbreaking realities of adulthood, for which marriage becomes a symbolic milestone. Through Emelye's transition from maiden into wife, Chaucer raises questions of emotional performativity, and the effectiveness of socially acceptable expressions of feminine anger, especially regarding the power of prayer. In this chapter I explore the intersection of Chaucer's gendered treatment of anger and emotional performativity in the *Knight's Tale* with his handling of the Proserpina myth. I argue that Chaucer purposefully invokes images of Proserpina in the *Knight's Tale* so that the reader might better understand Emelye's abduction and subsequent marriage as

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<sup>11</sup> Although piety and paganism are not mutually exclusive, Christianity dominated the theological paradigm during late medieval Europe.

<sup>12</sup> Simmons O'Neil discusses this conflation in "Love in Hell: The Role of Pluto and Proserpine in Chaucer's the *Merchant's Tale*." According to her, "Chaucer's choice of the various manifestations of this triple goddess as the protectress of both May in the *Merchant's Tale* and Emilye in the *Knight's Tale* (1. 2082-84) suggests a continuing concern in the *Canterbury Tales* with the issue of how women are defined by more powerful men and, on a larger scale, how individuals are defined by their culture" (394-396).

an inevitable rape rather than a harmonious union, and that the theft of her body begets the submergence of her emotional interiority.

Chaucer turns his reader into what I will call a Plutonic voyeur. I define Plutonic voyeurism as the deliberate objectification of the heroine, juxtaposed with her our distance from her emotional interiority, which invites the reader to watch her closely, just as Palamon and Arcite become obsessive voyeurs in the *Knight's Tale*, and Pluto becomes obsessive voyeur in the Rape of Proserpina.<sup>13</sup> Plutonic voyeurism allows Chaucer to ensure that his readers understand the perspectives of the lovesick knights by devoting lengthy passages describing their intimate thoughts and feelings, while keeping Emelye's private thoughts hidden, and therefore a point of curiosity in the text. When Chaucer does finally provide Emelye her own unique voice, she prays to Diana and voices an allusion to Proserpina, "Queene of the regne of Pluto derk and lowe,/ Goddess of maydens [. . .]" (III. 2299-2300). This allusion, combined with Emelye's prayer that explicitly states her desire to avoid marriage and motherhood, retroactively gives new meaning to the moment Palamon and Arcite first look upon Emelye. In hindsight, their gaze becomes destructive rather than romantic, and like Pluto's gaze of Proserpina, it ushers the heroine's inevitable fall.

Although the *Knight's Tale* ends with the seemingly harmonious marriage of Palamon and Emelye, Diana's failure to rescue Emelye constitutes a kind of fall, wherein the fallen woman is cast out her goddess's protection and subjugated to the harsh realities

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<sup>13</sup> Throughout this study, the "Rape of Proserpina" refers to the myth as an artistic subject, especially regarding Ovid and Claudian's representations of the myth.

of marriage, childbirth, and entrapment.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Eve, Emelye's fall does not occur as the result of any particular sin she has committed. Chaucer addresses his conflation of Eve and Proserpina more pointedly in the *Merchant's Tale*, but it is through the *Knight's Tale* that he introduces the theme of defiled innocence.<sup>15</sup> The site of that defilement is often a garden. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Genesis*, the *Knight's Tale*, the *Franklin's Tale*, and the *Merchant's Tale* all use magical gardens as sites of action and symbolic meaning. In some versions of the Proserpina myth, the heroine seals her fate through forbidden fruit, as Eve and May do (Eve with an unspecified fruit, and May with the pear tree). In Ovid's account of the Rape of Proserpina, the heroine unknowingly consumes fruit of the Underworld, which traps her there for half the year: "Proserpina, guileless, innocent,/ Had taken refuge in Death's formal gardens/ And, as she strolled there, plucked a dark pomegranate/ Unwrapped its yellow skin, and swallowed seven/ Of its blood-purpled seeds (*Metamorphoses*, 155).<sup>16</sup> Eve knowingly tempts fate, but Proserpina remains innocent throughout Ovid's version of her myth, as Emelye does in the *Knight's Tale*.

Rarely regarded as wholesome, the Amazons present an obstacle for Chaucer's mythmaking, and he addresses this problem by submerging the Amazonian heritage of Hippolyta and Emelye.<sup>17</sup> According to the Knight, whose version of history clearly aligns

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<sup>14</sup> Proserpina and Eve experience childbirth and motherhood after their respective falls, and the Knight implies a similar fate for Emelye.

<sup>15</sup> Meaning, this is where he initially addresses this theme within the *Canterbury Tales*, not within his entire body of work. He also touches on this theme in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Legend of Good Women*.

<sup>16</sup> Chaucer references Claudian in the *Merchant's Tale*: "And so bifel, that brighte morwe-tyde/ That in that gardyn, in the ferther syde,/ Pluto, that is kyng of Fayerye,/ And many a lady in his compaignye,/ Folwyngge his wyf, the queene Proserpyna,/ Which that he ravysshed out of [Ethna]/ Whil that she gadered floures in the mede --/ In Claudyan ye may the stories rede,/ How in his grisely carte he hire fette -- [. . .] (2225-2233). Chaucer acknowledges Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpine* as his chief source for the Proserpina myth, but, as we shall see, he owes a great debt to Ovid as well.

<sup>17</sup> See Pearman. Chaucer's obfuscates Amazonian history by "[. . .] suppressing the Amazonian past, reducing Emily's personality, and erasing Hippolyta's voice [. . .]" (36).

with Theseus's political agenda, Theseus "conquered the regne of Femenye," "weddede the queene Ypolita," and then simply "broghte hir hoom with hym in his contree/ With muchel glorie and greet solempnytee" (866-870). The Amazons, of course, would not have been celebrating this defeat, yet Chaucer does not provide us with their perspective, rendering their rage and sense of defeat silent and invisible. An Amazon would not consider Hippolyta merely "weddede" to Theseus, perhaps, but captured or betrayed (depending on which version of the myth Chaucer uses), and they would certainly not celebrate the capture of their queen with the happy Athenians. According to Pearman, mythological accounts of the Amazons with which Chaucer would have been most familiar portray the Amazons as "cultural Other [. . .] geographically distant, militant hunters and warriors, transgressors of gender roles, and simultaneously erotic and virginal" (33). She argues that their ethnicity has been far too often ignored in literary criticism of the *Knight's Tale*, and that the Amazons would have looked and acted radically different from the Athenians:

Most Amazonian myths even describe the women as physically different; by removing one breast, women were able to facilitate their ability to wield a shield or bow. Chaucer's Amazons thus enter his text with an unmistakably distinct culture: Hippolyta and Emily dress in their hunting gear and participate in a hunt (1685-87), and Emily practices Amazonian virginity (2307-11). Consequently, it is vital that scholars consider not only the sex of the Amazons, but also their ethnicity (33).

However, Chaucer strips the Amazons' heritage from the narrative, providing readers the essence of a culture that once existed, but no longer materializes in the flesh (or more aptly put, in the text.) In their place, we have illustrations of "fairness" and traditional family,

Cleer was the day, as I have toold er this,  
And Theseus with alle joye and blis,

With his Ypolita, the faire queene,  
And Emelye, clothed al in grene,  
On huntyng be they riden roially. (II. 1683-87).

The line, “With his Ypolita, the faire queene” makes it clear that “faire” Hippolyta belongs to Theseus, and the Theseus/Hippolyta/Emelye triad evokes a father/mother/daughter dynamic. The family goes hunting, an activity that Emelye later reveals she enjoys (III. 2307-8), and a hobby to be expected from a character raised in a warrior-society, as Pearman argues. But when considered in context with the other actions that Hippolyta and Emelye take in the *Knights Tale*, hunting actually represents one more way that Chaucer dilutes the Amazons’ heritage. Chaucer juxtaposes Hippolyta and Emelye’s hunting with their weeping for the wounded Palamon and Arcite, “The queene anon, for verray wommanhede,/ Gan for to wepe, and so dide Emelye,/And alle the ladyes in the compaignye” (II. 1748-50). Hippolyta and Emelye may enjoy hunting animals, but the sight of wounded men brings them to tears. This episode erases Amazonian misandry in favor of a more stereotypically feminine emotional response to the suffering of men, punctuated by the following lines,

Greet pitee was it, as it thoughte hem alle,  
That evere swich a chaunce sholde falle,  
For gentil men they were of greet estaat,  
And no thyng but for love was this debaat;  
And saugh hir bloody woundes wyde and soore,  
And alle crieden, bothe lasse and moore,  
"Have mercy, Lord, upon us wommen alle!"  
And on hir bare knees adoun they falle  
And wolde have kist his feet ther as he stood;  
Til at the laste aslaked was his mood,  
For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte. (II. 1751-61).

The women's weeping, prayer,<sup>18</sup> and visible humility suggests subservience to Theseus (shown here through the Amazons' falling on their knees, as well as the narrator's comment that they would have even kissed Theseus's feet, an especially humbling physical gesture.) They also have the power to alter Theseus's mood.<sup>19</sup> He initially responds to the wounded knights with "ire," as opposed to womanly pity (II. 1675). The dissonance between the Amazons' immediate tears and Theseus's anger illustrates how Chaucer genders emotional responses within the *Knight's Tale*. When women cry and pray for men in the *Knight's Tale*, their actions affect change, moving even the most powerful of men to compassion, "And eek his herte hadde compassioun/ Of wommen, for they wepen evere in oon [. . .]" (II. 1770-71). Because Theseus values the tears, prayers, and subservient behavior of women (implying that the Knight himself, the most pilgrim of the highest social rank in the *Canterbury Tales*, values these actions in women as well), and because Chaucer shows the power of such behavior, this passage purports pity as a feminine ideal, and masculinizes anger, its emotional opposite. However, when contrasted with what the reader knows of Amazonian misandry based on their mythological representations, the Amazons' over-the-top physical displays of humility and weeping for men raises questions of emotional performativity in the text.

To clarify, allow me to compare the passage cited above with an earlier example of womanly pity in the *Knight's Tale*, when Theseus triumphs through Athens with Hippolyta and Emelye in tow (I. 868-71), and a group of Theban widows, dressed in black, request that Theseus have mercy on them during his homecoming (I. 911-947).

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<sup>18</sup> The line "Have mercy, Lord, upon us wommen alle!" uses the language of prayer (II. 1757).

<sup>19</sup> For further reading on how feminine pity changes Theseus as a character, see Mann's chapter "The Feminized Hero" in *Feminizing Chaucer*: "He is feminized not only in his reverence for woman but also in his vulnerability and sensitivity of feeling" (129-130).



The eldest widow speaks for her group, expressing grief over Creon's inhumanity, who lets hounds feed upon the corpses of the widows' husbands instead of allowing the widows burial rights (I. 938-947). The women then "fillen gruf and criden pitously," and beg, "Have on us wrecched wommen som mercy,/ And lat oure sorwe synken in thyn herte" (I. 949-51). Although initially annoyed by the widows' disruptive wailing during his homecoming (I. 905-8), Theseus pities the widows upon hearing their story and witnessing their dejected state, "With herte pitous, whan he herde them speke./ Hym thoughte that his herte wolde breke,/ Whan he saugh hem so pitous and so maat,/ That whilom weren of so greet estaat [ . . .]" (953-56). He then comforts the widows, swearing to avenge them (I. 952-964). Note how the Amazons, like the Theban widows, fall, weep, and beg for mercy. If the passage describing the Amazons' pity for wounded Palamon and Arcite purports such behaviors as feminine ideals, then the passage describing Theseus's exchange with the Theban widows *establishes* those behaviors as feminine ideals. Although Hippolyta and Emelye remain silent throughout Theseus's encounter with the widows, they ride with him, and it stands to reason that they learn (along with us) that pity endears Theseus to the widows. The widows grieve for their husbands, and their wailing becomes immediately understandable when the reader learns of Creon's monstrous treatment of them, but the Amazons' weeping for Palamon and Arcite does not hold the same logical weight. At this point in the text, Hippolyta and Emelye do not know Palamon or Arcite. This fact, combined with their Amazonian heritage, results in a crack in the Knight's narrative technique. The contradiction between Emelye's roles as Amazon and emotionally fragile, lily-white maiden suggest that the Knight cannot

successfully force the type of tale he wishes to tell with the particular events and characters he has chosen.

Chaucer also removes the erotic Amazonian elements in their myths in favor of a virginal characterization, which compliments her resemblance to fair, blonde, white maidens of romantic medieval literature, such as Petrarch's description of Laura in the *Canzoniere*:

Not only that one hand when it is bare  
(now reclothing itself to my great loss),  
but the other, and both arms, are quick to press  
upon this simple heart in all its fear.

Love hides a thousand snares, and none in vain,  
throughout the unusual beauty she displays,  
adorning her in high and heavenly ways  
that could not be conceived by human brain:  
I mean unclouded eyes; and starry brows;  
and that mouth, like an angel's, which combines  
roses and pearls and speech as never known,

making bystanders tremble in amaze;  
her forehead; and her hair, which when it shines  
in summer, at midday, puts out the sun (Petrarch, 200. "Non pur quell'una  
bella ignuda mano").

Laura's blonde hair that shines so bright that it "puts out the sun" can be compared to Emelye's "brihte heer" (KT III. 2289). Although Chaucer never specifies Emelye's "whiteness" specifically, Chaucer only has to provide a brief description of Emelye's beauty for the reader to know exactly what she looks like:

Chaucer in fact takes only a few significant details from Boccaccio. But his brevity would not have been so successful if it were not for the ancient conventional tradition. Neither he nor Boccaccio needed to describe every aspect of the heroine. Everybody knew her. She was always the same (Brewer, 266).

Clearly Emelye's beauty does not reflect the exoticized beauty used to depict Amazons in antiquity, nor does he characterize Emelye as barbaric. Stewart suggests that the Amazons were recognizable as "Wild and unrestrained, they offered a perfect metaphor for the Persian enemy, enabling the Athenians to relegate the 'barbarian' Other to the role of moral and social Inferior without diminishing their own achievement" (571). Chaucer eschews such Amazonian representation and presents Emelye as a familiar character within western literary tradition, written for a medieval audience who would undoubtedly recognize this character. Therefore, Emelye does not, as Pearman claims, specifically practice Amazonian virginity. Instead she practices the docile virginity expected from all beautiful heroines of her literary stock. Emelye prays to Diana for divine protection over her virginity, but Chaucer refuses to characterize the threatening, militarized version of virginity the reader might expect from an Amazonian woman, or from Diana, for that matter (III. 2304-10). When Diana fails to deliver Emelye the protection she seeks, Emelye does not seek help from another goddess, or scheme to get herself out of her situation, but placidly accepts her fate: "I putte me in thy proteccioun,/ Dyane, and in thy disposicioun" (III. 2363-64). Although Chaucer strips her of most Amazonian attributes in both personality and appearance, he has already mentioned the name "Amazon," which carries a certain weight, and appears out of place when contrasted with the actual illustration Chaucer provides.

Chaucer's description of Emelye resembles Boccaccio's Emilia in fairness and youth, but Boccaccio frequently reminds the reader of her ethnicity.<sup>20</sup> Boccaccio calls

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<sup>20</sup> This exclusion marks another why in which Chaucer foregrounds Emelye's virginity. According to Warner, "Although blondness's most enduring associations are with beauty, with love and nobility, with erotic attraction, and with value and fertility, its luminosity made it also the traditional colour of virgins' hair" (367). Also, "Blondness is an index of the virgin's youth as well as innocence, for many children are

Emilia a “rose among thorns,” visually separating her from her Amazonian sisters (71). He also tells us that Emilia has blonde curls, and at one point Pentheus muses over Emilia’s “brightness,” placing value on her fairness: “then his thought turned to Emilia as he saw that Cythrea was rising, displaying her brightness before the sun, which the shining eyes and marvelous beauty of Emilia resembled” (179; 110). And yet, these “fair” images are balanced with evidence of Emilia’s Otherness, such as when Boccaccio introduces her to the reader as “Emilia the Amazon.” Later, he even acknowledges the Amazons’ capacity for cruelty when Theseus and Hippolyta encounter the Achaian widows, and Hippolyta pities the grieving women; she tells Theseus, “Dear lord, although I am an Amazon, I am not so cruel that I would not willingly offer myself to avenge these wrongs, for they are so despicable, if the sad recital of these ladies is true, but only if I thought that my bearing arms for them would please you” (61). Although submissive and merciful in tone, Hippolyta’s words reveal that she has not forgotten who she is, nor has she forgotten the formidable reputation of the Amazons. Moreover, in Boccaccio’s gloss for the word “Amazon,” he specifically mentions how Amazons amputated their right breasts, which would have previously prevented them from drawing bows: “This is why they are called Amazons, which means to say that they are without breasts” (48). Boccaccio does not define Amazons by their skill in warfare, but by their lack of breasts, symbolizing their devotion to war over motherhood, and their fearlessness in the face of physical pain. Unlike Boccaccio, who defines Amazons based on their lack of secondary sexual characteristics which mark women as visibly feminine, Chaucer classifies his Amazons under the term “the regne of Femenye” twice (I. 866, 877). In

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fair in infancy and grow darker with age” (Warner, 368). As I discuss later in this chapter, Chaucer stresses Emelye’s youth by placing her in the role of dutiful daughter to Diana’s maternal guidance.

doing so, he preserves the Amazons' status as Other while simultaneously allowing the reader to project their own perceptions of femininity unto the word "Femenye," a term which includes the Amazons, but seems to extend to all women as well.<sup>21</sup> Where Boccaccio pairs Emilia's fairness with several direct references to the Amazons, in Chaucer, Emelye's gender and youth<sup>22</sup> overwhelm her significance as an Amazon.

Emelye's prayer to Diana evokes Amazonian breastlessness and its signification by drawing our attention to her love of hunting<sup>23</sup> (which provides the mental image of bows, reminding the reader of how breasts become cumbersome in the use of bows) and her aversion to motherhood<sup>24</sup>, which would require the use of her breasts to feed the infant. The lines "And for to walken in the wodes wilde,/ And noight to ben a wyf and be with childe" juxtapose Emelye's desire to seek refuge in a place identifiably natural and beyond man-made constructs, "the woodes' greene,"<sup>25</sup> with the perversion of what medieval theologians would have considered the natural and divinely ordained function

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<sup>21</sup> Hansen points out the inclusiveness of this term in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*: "Whether or not Chaucer invented it, it seems to have been rarely enough used to be striking, and its generalizing, abstracting quality equates the Amazons with women in general and with Woman as an idea and a territory" (217).

<sup>22</sup> Phillips identifies the "two key aspects" of medieval maidenhood as youth and virginity: The medieval maiden, therefore, is a woman past childhood but not yet a fully fledged adult, and one whose identity is bound to a certain tension. That is, she is at once sexually and psychologically mature (as the legal codes recognize), but she must also hold onto the virginity required by her pre-marital state" (5). The tension Phillips describes is, of course, a tension expressed in depictions of the Rape of Proserpina.

<sup>23</sup> "I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye,/ A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye" (KT III. 2307-8).

<sup>24</sup> According to Warner, "In medieval representations, the Devil at his work of temptation sometimes mirrors Eve's own face, but he also has wrinkled female dugs— his perversion blazoned on his chest as breasts that have lost their true purpose of nursing" (47).

<sup>25</sup> Emelye's wish to escape into the woods also aligns with a common pattern among myth, folklore, and fairytale, where the woods/forest provides a route of rescue for the heroine. See Ashliman: "Enchanted forests imbued with both sinister and beneficial supernatural forces are depicted in myths, folktales, and literature from prehistoric times to the present. They can be forbidding places of darkness and gloom, as in the Myrkvior (Murky Wood) of Norse mythology, best known today as the Mirkwood of J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy romances. Or they can be fanciful and fulfilling, as in William Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1596). [. . .] The forest's mystical duality is reflected in countless fairy tales, where it can represent simultaneously both danger and salvation" (368).

of her breasts (III. 2309-2310). Chaucer's Emelye evokes breastlessness, but without concrete evidence that her body has indeed been amputated, Emelye still conforms to a medieval beauty ideal, even if her values do not align with what was expected of young women.

Eclipsing Emelye's militarized Amazonian heritage would have likely endeared a medieval audience toward her, who would find her youth, fairness, and chastity ideal in both feminine beauty and virtue, at least initially. In a folkloric context, physical "fairness" often reflects moral virtue, and according to the *Riverside Chaucer's* glossary, the word "fair," when used as an adjective, means "pleasing, attractive", and this definition includes the phrase "morally good" alongside these descriptors (page 1245). And yet, according to Brewer, a medieval audience would have understood love as a moral emotion. Brewer writes,

Since love is on the whole a moral emotion for the later medieval courtly writers, virtuous itself and encouraging virtue in the lover (the adulterous element has been overemphasized) the heroine herself has become more precious; her physical beauty often becomes a reflection of moral beauty (262).

Chaucer's Emelye lacks love, and that lack creates yet another crack in the Knight's narrative, drawing our attention to him as an imperfect narrator. Although stories of unrequited love were certainly not uncommon for medieval readers, they typically include some kind of romantic desire for the heroine, if not for the hero himself. If the heroine does not desire the hero, she at least desires someone else (for example, the Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot love triangle). Chaucer subverts the unrequited love narrative by making Emelye empty of romantic desire for either of her suitors. Chaucer makes Emelye's feelings clear in her prayer to Diana, in which she asks to avoid

marriage and childbirth, and never “knowe compaignye of man” (III. 2310-11). The absence of Emelye’s love denies her the virtue that would make her seem, in Brewer’s aforementioned words, “more precious” to Chaucer’s audience. In light of that absence, Arcite and Palamon’s “love” for Emelye appears less precious, founded on lust after an unworthy love-object, thereby potentially insincere, and ultimately destructive, rather than noble. The happiness of Emelye’s marriage comes into question, as the reader begins to see the relationship as an insincere bond formed by Arcite and Palamon’s voyeuristic lust, rather than love.

Chaucer’s description of Emelye in the garden resembles Greco-Roman mythology’s maiden, Persephone/Proserpina, the goddess of spring, and queen of the Underworld. Harley notes that the Knight describes Emelye “with the freshness of a May<sup>26</sup> morning,” which evokes the springtime imagery associated with Proserpina (24). Harley also compares Emelye’s innocent “pleynnge” in the garden, in which she gathers white and red flowers and fashions a garland, to Ovid’s depiction of Proserpina in the *Metamorphoses*, wherein Proserpina also plays in a garden, gathering lilies and violets, just before her abduction (Harley, 23). I will add that Palamon, upon seeing Emelye, does not know if he sees a woman or a goddess, which simultaneously suggests Emelye’s resemblance to Proserpina, while subtly encouraging the reader to notice the absurdity of Palamon’s hyperbolic love language (I. 1101). When Palamon and Arcite obsessively watch Emelye, they assume the role of the love-struck Death/Pluto in the Proserpina myth. At this point in the *Knight’s Tale*, Emelye has said nothing on her own, and yet

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<sup>26</sup> Chaucer makes this allusion to Proserpina more direct in the *Merchant’s Tale* by paralleling Proserpina’s relationship with Pluto with the marital relationship between May and January, the tale’s focal characters.

Chaucer encourages the reader to watch her, along with Palamon and Arcite, by emphasizing her elusiveness as an unattainable fantasy, rather than grounding her personality in something more substantial.

Emelye also resembles Proserpina in spiritual devotion. Ovid's Proserpina worships Diana and other "moonlit deities." In the *Metamorphoses*, Venus schemes against Pluto and Proserpina, and comments to Cupid, "If we allow her, Ceres' daughter will remain/ a virgin till she dies, for even now/ her models are moonlit deities" (5.375-77). When Chaucer's Emelye prays to Diana, she addresses the goddess with these titles: "chaste goddesse of the wodes grene," "Queene of the regne of Pluto derk and lowe," and "Goddesse of maydens" (III. 2297; 2298; 2299). Diana's titles deserve some critical attention. The first title, "chaste goddesse of the wodes grene," fits within Diana's generally accepted mythological meanings; stories of Diana, the virgin goddess of the hunt, often take place in the woods. However, "Queene of the regne of Pluto derk and lowe" can only be attributed to Proserpina, whose seat of power resides in the Underworld, where she reigns by Pluto's side for half of the year. Combining these titles results in a conflation of Proserpina's mythology with Diana's,<sup>27</sup> and attracts our attention to Emelye and the inevitable abduction and rape<sup>28</sup> that must occur to cement her role as Chaucer's Proserpina.

Emelye performs a mysterious, unspecified ritual in Diana's temple, but Chaucer veils the secrets of this ritual by referring the reader to Statius for answers: "Two fyres on the auter gan she beete,/ And dide hir thynges, as men may biholde/ In Stace of Thebes

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<sup>27</sup> For further analysis regarding Chaucer's conflation of Diana, Proserpina, and Lucina, see Harley, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Although the physical act of rape does not occur in the *Knight's Tale*, in the second chapter of this study I argue that Chaucer provides this moment through Malyne's rape in the *Reeve's Tale*.



and these bookes olde” (III. 2292-2294). Chaucer heavily borrows from Boccaccio’s *Teseida* to frame this moment, but the scene finds its roots in Statius’s *Thebaid*<sup>29</sup>, in which Eteocles seeks the help of Tiresias, a necromancer, and his virginal daughter/assistant, Manto. Chaucer obscures details of the necromantic ritual found in the *Thebaid*, as well as some of Emelye’s actions in the *Teseida* which closely resemble those found in Statius.<sup>30</sup> One reason that may have influenced Chaucer to omit details of the necromantic ritual found in the *Thebaid* is that he wrote the *Knight’s Tale* during a major shift regarding religious and academic perceptions of magic. Prior to the fourteenth century, theologians associated necromancy with male sorcerers, because in order to perform such serious, powerful feats of magic, one had to possess the intelligence and education necessary to do so. Believing that women lacked these essential academic tools, medieval theologians disregarded women as serious magical threats, that is, until the theological paradigm began to shift:

[. . .] insofar as the performance of harmful sorcery by witches was seen to rest wholly on submission to evil rather than on training or preparation, and on susceptibility to temptation rather than on intellectual striving, the magical operations of witchcraft could be seen as particularly suited to women. Thus in the movement of theological concern from necromancy to witchcraft in the early 1400s, certain underlying conceptions of magic became, in a way, feminized, and this made easier the subsequent acceptance by authorities of the notion that witches might be predominantly women (Bailey, 127-128).

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<sup>29</sup> According to Schwebel, “Chaucer’s reference to Statius is not the outright falsification that it would seem. Boccaccio himself derives the details of Emilia’s ritual from a corresponding scene in the *Thebaid*, in which the prophet Tiresias performs a series of rites in a forest sacred to Diana with the hope of ascertaining the outcome of the war (*Thebaid*, IV.416–73)” (156).

<sup>30</sup> See Schwebel: “In the original Italian, in addition to perfuming the temple, crowning her hair with cereal oak, and lighting two pyres, Emilia sacrifices turtle doves and lambs, draining the blood from their bodies and tossing the entrails and viscera of the dead animals into the fire. Her proceedings closely echo the process of Tiresias’s sacrifice in the *Thebaid*. Chaucer removes these more gruesome details from her rites” (44).

The ritual performed in the *Thebaid* likewise becomes feminized through Chaucer's revision of Statius's text, as he passes the ritual through the hands of Tiresias to Emelye.<sup>31</sup> What remains of Statius's text in the *Knight's Tale* appears ambiguous enough to preserve Emelye's innocence, an essential element of her character both within the context of chivalric romance and the Proserpina myth Chaucer uses to subvert that genre. What does survive of Tiresias's ritual in Chaucer's revision serves to subtly jostle the reader's perception of Emelye's maidenly activities, rather than to morally condemn her for those actions. For example, Tiresias wraps "fearsome horns" in "garlands of dark flowers" (IV. 449-450). Based on a previous passage from part one of the *Knight's Tale*, we already know that Emelye exhibits a fondness for collecting flowers and garland making; later, she and her maidens arrive at Diana's temple with horns full of mead (I. 1053-1054; III. 2279). The gathering of various flowers, plants, and various liquids only make up one aspect of what medieval readers would associate with necromancers and their theological usurpers, the archetypal witch. Without raising actual ghosts from the depths of the Underworld or participating in activities too obviously occultist, such as the gathering of animal entrails, Emelye's behavior appears mostly conventional, if faintly suspicious.

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<sup>31</sup> It bears mentioning that Tiresias undergoes a feminization of his own, further compounding the similarities of these characters. Several myths account for Tiresias's sex change, including Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with which Chaucer would have been familiar. In the *Metamorphoses*, Jupiter and Juno argue over whether or not men or women receive more pleasure during sex, and settle their dispute by seeking Tiresias for answers. After changing his sex and living as a woman for seven years, Tiresias agrees with Jupiter, which angers Juno, who punishes Tiresias by blinding him (Ovid, III: 316-338). Therefore, Tiresias and Emelye both represent feminized figures helpless against Juno's influence. In Emelye's prayer to Diana in the *Teseida*, she attributes power to the fates, and refers to matrimony as "the law of Juno," which gives the impression that women's roles as wives and mothers are divinely ordained and inescapable: "And if the fates have decreed that I be subjected to the law of Juno, you must certainly forgive me for it" (182).

Chaucer's omits various pagan elements which a medieval audience might perceive as too nefarious for an innocent character like Emelye. She does not, for example, deliver commands to the gods, as Tiresias does in the *Thebaid*:

You, in the seat  
of Tartarus-- voracious Death's harsh realm;  
o you, most savage of the brother gods,  
you whom dead shades attend, who portions out  
eternal punishments to malefactors  
there in the palace of the lower world:  
open the silent, void domains of grave  
Persephone to one who pounds the gates (474-481).

Here, Tiresias is commanding the gods (and threatening to command Hecate). In Chaucer, a woman is imploring the gods but unsuccessfully. Tiresias implores the dark gods of the Underworld to aid him, and among these forces is "grave Persephone," the title given to her for her role in carrying out punishments and curses upon the dead. Chaucer differs from Statius in that he is more interested in Proserpina's tragic descent into the Underworld rather than the seat of power she finds in that place.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, he emphasizes Emelye's powerlessness against the forces of men who hold her captive, and her emotional disposition resembles fearful Eteocles more than the resolute necromancers.

Like Eteocles, Emelye approaches Diana's temple under urgent, desperate circumstances. In the *Thebaid*, Eteocles receives a bad omen, and "Unable to endure his various terrors/ he did what those who face uncertainty/ do when afraid: he looked for answers from/ the skill and shaded wisdom of Tiresias, the ageless prophet" (IV. 407-11). He also displays the fear of a genuine novice: "Only the King of Thebes, Eteocles,/ was

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<sup>32</sup> See Harley, "[. . .] Chaucer does not draw on Proserpina's dark, dire existence as Pluto's queen. Rather, he turns to classical accounts of Proserpina's innocent play prior to her ravishment" (22-23).

overwhelmed by terror and afraid/ to hear the prophet's chanting" (Statius, IV. 491-493). Chaucer channels Eteocles's desperation and terror to color Emelye's perception in the *Knight's Tale*, evident in her reaction to the fires quenching and rekindling before her: "For which so soore agast was Emelye/ That she was wel ny mad and gan to crye,/ For she ne wiste what it signyfyed,/ But oonly for the feere thus hath she cried,/ And weep that it was pitee for to here" (III. 2341-2345). Statius reminds the reader of Eteocles's role as a grandchild rather than king when he receives answers from his deceased grandfather, Laius, and Chaucer likewise positions Emelye in the role of a trembling child rather than fearsome, enraged Amazon. She approaches her task with humility, and carries out her prayer with the language of a dutiful daughter. Diana's temple, painted in scenes of death and rebirth lifted from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, resembles a mother's womb, a point punctuated by the fact that Diana, the goddess of childbirth, calls Emelye "doghter" (III. 2348). Chaucer denies Diana her maternal powers of transformation, creating a surprisingly barren womb. Emelye, surrounded by images of fantastic transformation, emerges from the temple unchanged:

And with that word, the arwes in the caas  
 Of the goddesse clateren faste and ryng  
 And forth she wente and made a varysshyng;  
 For which this Emelye astoned was,  
 And seyde, "What amounteh this, allas? I putte me in thy proteccioun,  
 Dyane, and in thy disposcicioun."  
 And hoom she goth anon nexte weye.  
 This is th'effect; ther is namoore to seye (III. 2358-2366).

The effect Chaucer speaks of is vanishment, a literal disappearing act that Diana performs before Emelye. The line "ther is namoore to seye" stresses Emelye's abandonment by adding sense of finality to the scene, as a bewildered Emelye returns home.

Chaucer makes a distinction between Emelye's emotionality in private and her countenance in public, and these differences become ever more striking toward the tale's conclusion. Although he never explicitly doubts the sincerity of Emelye's public crying, context provides more than enough cause for suspicion. During the funeral procession for Arcite, visible weeping marks Emelye as the "rewefulleste," or most pitiful, person present.<sup>33</sup> As Chaucer makes clear elsewhere in the *Knight's Tale*, Theseus values the pity of women. Mann argues that Theseus comes to embrace the same pity within himself, thus becoming a feminized heroic ideal:

It is however the figure of Theseus in *The Knight's Tale* that represents the fullest development of an ideal of feminized masculinity. Displaced as he is from the hero's central position by the younger knights Palamon and Arcite (whose pairing debars each of them likewise from a central heroic role), it is nevertheless to Theseus that it falls to voice and to embody the values that constitute the wisest response to their experiences. And the key element in these values is the quality of womanly pity (Mann, 134).

Although Mann correctly identifies Theseus's growing capacity for empathy throughout the tale, his empathy does not extend to the personal desires of women. Theseus expects women to act pitifully, but does not consider women deserving of mercy, unless that mercy exists to remedy the suffering of men.<sup>34</sup> Theseus's exclusion of women from his mercy, evident through his conquering of "the regne of Femenye," blemishes the shining, gender-transgressive ideal Mann proposes (I. 866). Moreover, Theseus enforces feminine performance of pity when he decides that Emelye will marry Palamon, demanding of her, "Lat se now of youre wommanly pitee" (IV. 3083). Theseus's words challenge the notion

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<sup>33</sup> As an Amazonian captive, Emelye's Otherness requires an even more stringent adherence to social protocol than the local Athenians.

<sup>34</sup> Theseus's pity for women serves his own selfish desires. For example, at the beginning of the tale, he addresses the Theban widows because their wailing irritates the atmosphere of revelry during his return: "What folk been ye, that at myn hom-comyng/ Perturben so my feste with cryng?" (I. 905-906). His acts of pity also benefit other men, such as when he spares the lives of Palamon and Arcite (II. 1825).

that Chaucer considers pity an inherently feminine trait because he constructs feminine pity as an act that Theseus must extract from Emelye and make visible.

Emelye's pity drives forward the tale's conclusion, and the Knight's blessing of this occasion proposes a male-dominated view by adopting the perspective of Palamon, while considerably pushing Emelye's experience to the background, as he has for most of the tale. I will provide the full passage, so that my reader may compare the effect of the Knight's romantic language when read altogether to the tone the ending takes when one looks at the individual lines more closely:

Bitwixen hem was maad anon the bond  
That highte matrimoigne or mariage,  
By al the conseil and the baronage.  
And thus with alle blisse and melodye  
Hath Palamon ywedded Emelye.  
And God, that al this wyde world hath wrought,  
Sende hym his love that hath it deere aboght;  
For now is Palamon in alle wele,  
Lyvyng in blisse, in richesse, and in heele,  
And Emelye hym loveth so tendrely,  
And he hire serveth so gentilly,  
That nevere was ther no word hem bitwene  
Of jalousie or any oother teene.  
Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye;  
And God save al this faire compaignye! Amen. (IV. 3094-3108).

Here, we learn that Palamon has happily married Emelye, but we do not know whether Emelye reciprocates that happiness: "And thus with alle blisse and melodye Hath Palamon ywedded Emelye (IV. 3097-8). The Knight reassures us of Palamon's wellness and wealth with the line, "For now is Palamon in alle wele,/ Lyvyng in blisse, in richesse, and in heele," while Emelye's wellness remains to be seen (IV. 3101-2). The line "And Emelye hym loveth so tenderly" might be read one of two ways: either Emelye loves Palamon tenderly, or one could read this as an extension of Palamon's perspective,

which the Knight has already established as the dominant perspective, meaning that Palamon loves Emelye so tenderly. Either way, the happiness, health, riches, and melody all compose circumstances related to Palamon, not his bride. Without analyzing the meanings of the individual lines, it might feel tempting to read this passage as abrupt and finite, because from the outset it looks remarkably similar to the tidy romantic endings of fairytales. According to Bettelheim, one of the most fundamental differences between myth and fairytale is that one story ends in tragedy, while the other ends happily:

The myth is pessimistic, while the fairy story is optimistic, no matter how terrifyingly serious some features of the story may be. It is this decisive difference which sets the fairy tale apart from other stories in which equally fantastic events occur, whether the happy outcome is due to the virtues of the hero, chance, or the interference of supernatural figures (37).<sup>35</sup>

In the case of the *Knight's Tale*, both endings exist, depending on whether or not we read from the perspective of Palamon or Emelye. When read through the eyes of Palamon, the reader comes to see Saturn's divine intervention as the magical moment which reveals Palamon as the one who loves Emelye most, and therefore deserves her most,<sup>36</sup> and the ending appears bittersweet because in gaining his true love, he has lost a cousin and sworn brother. But when read from the perspective of Emelye, we see a drastically different story take shape, in which the gods turn their backs on an innocent, prayer fails as a method of escape, and the ending offers no reassurance of her well-being. I wish to suggest an alternative way of reading the tale's conclusion, one which accounts for

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<sup>35</sup> I do not completely agree with Bettelheim's rigid standards for myth and fairytale here, but see the differences he cites as a general rule which may make classification of these stories easier.

<sup>36</sup> Recall that Emelye asks of Diana, "Or if my destynnee be shapen so/ That I shal nedes have oon of hem two,/ As sende me hym that moost desireth me" (III. 2323-25). Of course, if one reads the *Knight's Tale* from Emelye's perspective, as I have in this chapter, Chaucer reveals Emelye's prayer and the goddess she prays to as useless, and therefore whether or not Palamon or Arcite loved Emelye best remains a debatable question.

Chaucer's persona as mythmaker as well as the Knight's persona as story-teller, wherein the author's views are at odds with the narrator's. Pluto's abduction and rape of Proserpina results in their marriage, the symbolic milestone which marks the maiden's painful transition from adolescent to wife, and this marriage results in Proserpina's literal submergence and entrapment. In the *Knight's Tale*, Emelye enters the text an abducted woman, stolen from Scythia, and brought to Athens by Theseus; this initial theft of Emelye's body prepares the reader for a second abduction, her marriage to Palamon, except this second theft promises a sexual conquering as well. If the tale's optimistic conclusion feels forced, that is because the Knight literally forces marriage upon Emelye, whose voice and perspective drop out of the text. What we know of Emelye's previous emotional interiority— her bitterness, desperation, and desire to avoid marriage and motherhood— seems to disappear, engulfed by Palamon's perspective. Once again, Chaucer privileges the male gaze, but unlike the tale's beginning, where we (along with Palamon and Arcite) had incomplete knowledge of Emelye's private thoughts, we now know her thoughts intimately, and as a result, Emelye's loss of self in the tale's conclusion reads like tragedy. The *Knight's Tale* exposes how women's emotional interiority often clash with the roles expected of them, how expressions of anger become emotional outlets gendered male, and most importantly, how the abduction of its heroine's body begets the submergence of her pain.



### III. “ALMOOST SHE GAN TO WEPE”: RAPE AND EMOTIONAL RESTRAINT IN THE *REEVE’S TALE*

As we have seen, Chaucer alludes to the Proserpina myth in the *Knight’s Tale*, and uses it more directly in the *Merchant’s Tale*, wherein Proserpina and Pluto become named characters. This chapter will discuss a tale that does not allude to Proserpina myth directly. Nevertheless, the events of the *Reeve’s Tale* provide significant context for the *Knight’s Tale* and Chaucer’s handling of the Proserpina myth, especially as it relates to the submerged emotional interiority of Chaucer’s female characters, and their limited avenues for emotional expression. The Reeve’s prologue and subsequent tale further illustrate how anger becomes a gendered concept within the *Canterbury Tales*, compounding the emotional dynamics found in the *Knight’s Tale*. Evidenced by the Reeve’s response to the Miller’s use of a cuckolded carpenter in his tale, the concept of anger as a predominantly male vice begins to take more direct shape in the Reeve’s incensed reaction (RP 3861-62). He responds angrily, prays that God will break the miller’s neck, and plans to “quite” the Miller (3918; 3916). In some ways, the *Reeve’s Tale* does serve as a vitriolic response to the Miller, but structurally, the *Reeve’s Tale* bears striking resemblances the *Knight’s Tale*. This chapter will examine the structural similarities between the *Reeve’s Tale* and the *Knight’s Tale*. As I argue, Chaucer genders anger male in the Reeve’s prologue through its narrator, and in the tale itself through the violent reactions of Symkyn, John, and Aleyn, compounding the emotional dynamics explored in the *Knight’s Tale*. Additionally, Chaucer recycles specific characters and

events of the *Knight's Tale*, offering the *Reeve's Tale* as a metaphorical mirror through which we can comprehend these characters from a less idyllic perspective. I further argue that the *Reeve's Tale* confronts how acts of sexual violence threaten the stability of the family unit, and silence the emotional responses of women. While the theme of sexual violence in the *Knight's Tale* remains largely subtextual, the *Reeve's Tale* provides the physical rapes that are implied in the *Knight's Tale*—and present in the Proserpina myth—but never articulated. In including these rapes, Chaucer connects Emelye to Malyne, whose defilement induces the reader to question not only the Reeve but also the Knight, and especially the value of the Knight's chivalric ideology, an ideology inherently dependent on violence and the silencing of women.

In order to assess the gendered polarization of anger within the *Reeve's Tale*, we must address the emotional state of its narrator, who begins his story angry and vengeful. Chaucer tells us that the Reeve responds to the *Miller's Tale* with “ire” in his heart: “Ne at this tale I saugh no man hym greve,/ But it were oonly Osewold the Reve./ By Cause he was of carpenter's craft,/ A litel ire in his herte ylaft” (RP 3859-62). Bitter, the Reeve begins to “grucche,” groaning over his loss of youth and comparing himself to rotting fruit, which “ever lenger the wers,/ Til it be roten in mullok or in stree” (3863; 3872-73). The Reeve's grumping amplifies the tense dichotomy Chaucer establishes between jealous old men and young, “ripe” women throughout the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>37</sup> In the

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<sup>37</sup> In the *Miller's Tale*, Chaucer compares Alison's beauty to a ripe pear tree: “She was ful moore blisful on to see/ Than is the newe pere-jonette tree” (MT 3247-48). Chaucer's descriptions of John and Alison foreshadow the events of the *Merchant's Tale*, in which a pear tree becomes the site of infidelity, as well as the meddling ground of Proserpina and Pluto on behalf of their human counterparts, May and January, whose symbolic names represent the dichotomy young, blossoming women, and old, withering men. The pear tree's position in a sacred garden relates to Emelye's playing in the garden in the *Knight's Tale*, as well as her beauty, “fressher than the May with floures newe” (KT I. 1037; 1060-61). Chaucer

prologue to his tale, the Reeve bemoans, “We olde men, I drede, so fare we: Til we be roten, kan we nat be rype” (3874-75). In likening himself to rotting fruit, the Reeve claims ownership over his anger, asserting that “avauntyng, lying, *anger*, coveitise;/ Thise foure sparkles longen unto eelde” (3884-85, emphasis mine.) We read the Reeve’s anger in his tale as well: he putrefies several events and characters we find in the *Knight’s Tale*, whose narrator is antithetical to the Reeve. The Reeve’s emotional state intensifies the gendered characterization of anger we find in the *Knight’s Tale*. The Knight begins his story “with right a myrie cheere” (GP 857), and just as the Reeve’s irate personality impacts the events of his tale, the Knight’s cheerful personality influences his own storytelling. He fills his tale with romantic ideology, even when it does not neatly fit the classical material he has chosen to adapt. For example, although Palamon and Arcite experience mutual anger<sup>38</sup> toward one another that leads them to fight “as it were bores two,” Theseus steps in to enforce order, and redirect their animalistic rage into a nobler duel for Emelye’s hand in marriage (KT II. 1699; 1845-1869). By contrast, the Reeve foregrounds animalistic rage in his tale’s conclusion, as Symkyn, John, and Aleyn become embroiled in a bloody brawl spurred by mutual hate and desire for vengeance; their impulsive emotional responses contradict those of Theseus, who feels anger, but responds with reason and compassion (KT II. 1762-1770). The cornerstone of the Knight’s ideology promises that despite the loss we experience in life, we can trust that order, marriage, and happiness will win out, symbolized by Theseus’s paternal guidance

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thematically binds these tales to the Reeve’s by casting the Reeve as one in a series of sour, old men in the *Canterbury Tales*.

<sup>38</sup> For evidence of Palamon’s anger, see lines, “This Palamoun, that thoughte that thurgh his herte/ He felte a coold swerd sodeynliche glyde,/ For ire he quook; no lenger wolde he byde” (II. 1574-76). For evidence of Arcite’s anger, see lines, “This Arcite, with ful despitous herte,/ Whan he hym knew, and hadde his tale herd,/ As fiers as leon pulled out his swerd [. . .]” (II. 1596-98).

throughout the tale, and the union of Palamon and Emelye at the tale's conclusion. The *Reeve's Tale* debases this message by throwing its subjects into violent chaos, while rejecting marriage as a realistic outcome for Malyne, a woman abandoned by her rapist at the tale's end.

Several structural similarities exist between the *Knight's Tale* and the *Reeve's Tale*, which prompt us to read the latter as a comment on the former. The sworn brothers Palamon and Arcite, a pair of Theban knights taken prisoner in Athens, are reflected in the *Reeve's Tale's* John and Aleyn, two clerks who arrive at the mill from out of town. As he does with Palamon and Arcite, Chaucer makes the two clerks virtually indistinguishable at first, fusing together their personalities and actions and using plural, instead of singular, personal pronouns to describe their actions: "Testif *they* were, and lusty for to pleye,/ Ans oonly for *hire* myrthe and revelrye,/ Upon the warden bisily *they* crye/ To yeve *hem* leve, but a litel stounde,/ To goon to mille and seen *hir* corn ygrounde" (4004-8, emphasis mine). Connected to one another not only by their professions but also by their similar temperaments (they are both "Tesif"), goals "lusty for to pleye"), actions, and finally assaults, John and Aleyn immediately draw to mind the two Theban prisoners from the *Knight's Tale*, who are likewise alike in profession, temperament, goals, and actions. The pairs are also alike regarding plot; Theseus imprisons Palamon and Arcite in Athens, and John and Aleyn likewise become trapped at the mill in Symkyn's house. Chasing after their loose horse until nightfall, John and Aleyn are at Symkyn's mercy for lodging: "For it was nyght, and forther myghte they nought;/ But for the love of God they hym bisoght/ Of herberwe and of ese, as for hir peny" (4117-9). While Palamon and Arcite feel trapped and confined in their

small, shared cell, John and Aleyn's "imprisonment" at the mill elicits feelings of claustrophobia when we learn how little room the miller actually has in his home. Symkyn reveals the smallness of his house when he underhandedly insults the clerks, "Myn hous is streit, but ye han lerned art; Ye konne by argumentes make a place/ a myle brood of twenty foot of space" (4122-24). Unlike the "grete tour, that was so thikke and strong" of the *Knight's Tale* (I. 1056), the Reeve envisions entrapment in the domestic sphere. The sense of claustrophobia found in this passage prepares the reader for Malyne's entrapment in her home at the end of tale. As a defiled, unmarriageable woman, her chances of escaping that home appear slim.

Another mirrored character is the "asseged" mother<sup>39</sup> of the *Knight's Tale*, Hippolyta, whom we can compare to Malyne's mother, another woman taken from an environment of chaste sisterhood and married off to a man. In the *Knight's Tale*, Hippolyta formerly rules over Scythia, matriarchal home of the Amazons. In the *Reeve's Tale*, Malyne's mother was raised in a nunnery, a different kind of sisterhood, but no less devoted to chastity and the sacrifice of marriage and family. Both Hippolyta and Malyne's mother lose their former homes and are commodified in marriage. Symkyn takes pride in his wife's "noble kyn," and assumes this makes their daughter, Malyne, quite the marriageable prize (3942). Symkyn hopes to secure an advantageous marriage for his daughter based on that bloodline (4272). Symkyn's perception of his wife and daughter as noble prizes might be read against the Amazons' status as war prizes for Theseus in the *Knight's Tale*, and Theseus's interest in marrying off Emelye as a prize to

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<sup>39</sup> Although not Emelye's biological mother, she represents a prominent maternal figure in her life as the figurative mother of all Amazons.

the winner of a battle for her hand can be seen in the miller's hopes for an ambitious marriage for Malyne. Theseus's conquering of "the regne of Femenye" becomes inextricably connected with his sexual conquering of Hippolyta, and the subduing of her Amazonian spirit. Similarly, the clerks' sexual conquering of Malyne and her mother becomes their conquering of Symkyn,<sup>40</sup> despite the loose horse that delays them earlier tale (4216-17). The clerks' "quiting" of Symkyn reenacts two conquests found in the *Knight's Tale*: Theseus's conquering of Scythia, "the regne of Femeneye," represented here in the sexual conquering of Malyne and her mother, and Theseus's conquering of Thebes, here represented by the mill itself, a location not too far from the clerks' college. When Symkyn swears, "But by my thrift, yet shal I blere hir ye,/ For al the sleighte in hir philosophye./ The moore queynte crekes that they make, / The moore wol I stele whan I take" (4049-52), the combative atmosphere of the tale takes hold, starting a miniature war between Symkyn and the clerks. The final evidence of John and Aleyn's conquest are the spoils of war: the clerks leave on horseback with more than they had when they arrived, taking their horse (4309), their meal (4310), and the cake Malyne bakes (4311-12). They refuse to pay the miller for their ground meal (4314), supper, and lodging (4315). More significantly, they refuse to recompense him for his daughter's fallen stock; the miller believes that his virgin daughter will fetch a noble and illustrious match, a marriage that becomes an impossibility after she has been raped. We can hypothesize that Symkyn would similarly hold his wife at lesser value after she has been violated by John (4317). The clerk's conquest of the miller's house, home, and women recalls the Knight's triumphant return home after conquering the reign of "femeneye," accompanied by two

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<sup>40</sup> See Barnett: "The daughter is described as looking like the Miller (she has the same pug nose and body type); so raping her is somehow similar to raping the Miller" (151).

women as the spoils of war. Sacking if not a city than the miller's home, the clerks become ruthless conquerors.

Yet if Chaucer elides the actual events of the Amazonomachy in the *Knight's Tale*, excusing this excision by talking of his large field to plow and the length of his material, the *Reeve's Tale* provides a lengthy backstory for Malyne and her mother. Chaucer devotes twenty-seven lines to the mother's history, a considerable amount compared to the number of lines used for Symkyn (seventeen), Malyne (sixteen), and the baby (two). In this backstory we learn that Symkyn's attitude toward women reflects standards typical of his time. Malyne's mother, the parson's illegitimate daughter, became married off to Symkyn after the parson gave him "[. . .] many a panne of bras/ For that Symkyn sholde in his blood allye" (3944). We first learn of Symkyn's wife not as a love interest, but as an economic transaction, valued for her "noble kyn," and traded along with "many a panne of bras," in exchange for the parson's allyship with Symkyn. By emphasizing marriage as a market rather than a divine union of young lovers, Chaucer makes a class distinction between the Knight's and Reeve's tales. Although Palamon acquires wealth<sup>41</sup> after marrying Emelye, his motivation for pursuing her appears spurred more from obsessive love than a desire to advance his social status or economic circumstances. Symkyn, a lowly miller, does not have the class privilege of simply choosing a beautiful bride; he must consider her market value, and decide if the marriage would improve his situation. For example, we learn that Symkyn values "wel ynorrised" women. Raised in a nunnery, Symkyn's wife received a privileged education that many working class women could not access, so her education reflects not only the

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<sup>41</sup> After the wedding, Palamon lives "in blisse, in richesse, and in heele" (KT. IV. 3102).

responsibilities of the domestic sphere, but a religious education as well. Therefore, Symkyn expresses a desire to marry beyond the limitations of his social class, even if that means marrying a “somedel smoterlich” woman (3963).<sup>42</sup> This detail creates a picture of marriage that seems less concerned with an effervescent portrait of true love (as in the *Knight's Tale*, wherein Theseus's mercantile attitude toward women contrasts with the myopic pining of Palamon and Arcite for Emelye), or even lust (as in the *Miller's Tale*, wherein John cherishes Alison's youth and beauty despite her lascivious personality), and more concerned with the pursuit of marriage for socio-economic advancement.

Nevertheless, virginity remains an integral component in bride selection. Symkyn will only marry “a mayde” (3948). He expects his daughter to abstain from sex as well, for fear that loss of her virginity will make her unmarriageable, and therefore unprofitable, a point made clear in Symkyn's response to his daughter's rape: “Who dorste be so boold to disparage/ My doghter, that is come of swich lynage?” (4271-72). Just as he values Malyne's mother for her “noble kyn,” he values the lineage of their daughter, through whom he can reap social profit. His daughter's virginity constitutes a crucial form of currency in medieval society, and its theft is compared to stolen meal. Aleyn rationalizes his rape of Malyne<sup>43</sup> as retribution for the miller's theft: “Oure corn is stoln, sothly, it is na nay,/ And we han had an il fit al this day;/ And syn I sal have neen amendment/ Agayn my los, I will have esement” (4283-6). The comparison of Malyne's

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<sup>42</sup> The illegitimacy of Symkyn's wife provides a symmetrical narrative by the tale's conclusion, when her own daughter potentially becomes impregnated by a man she has not married.

<sup>43</sup> See Morrison: “The entire tale revolves around the issue of requital, just as the First Fragment of the *Canterbury Tales* concerns 'quiting' the previous storyteller. Rape, as a property crime, makes perfect sense to the university students as a means of revenge since they were victims of a property crime” (81).



body to grain shows the extent of her dehumanization and objectification by the men in the tale, in which women's bodies are bought, sold, traded, and stolen, a subject Chaucer addresses in the *Knight's Tale*, and more extensively in *Troilus and Criseyde*. In Dinshaw's analysis of *Troilus and Criseyde*, she draws upon Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" to explain how,

Patriarchal society can be described, very simply, as men bonded together by women. It is, of course, gender asymmetrical— that is, male-dominated with respect to descent, property, and private and public authority. Women are the conduit by which power is passed on; they bear sons. They are thus the means by which man is bonded to man (57).

Thus, Malyne's body represents an opportunity to form male-bonds, and the grain metaphor emphasizes the sharing of her body, a point accentuated when Malyne offers the cake made of the clerks's stolen meal to Aleyn (4244.) The comparison of Malyne's body to grain also carries an unavoidable gustatory quality, indicating that Aleyn consumes and wastes Malyne's body, which recalls the parson's attitude toward Malyne's bloodline:

This parson of the toun, for she was feir,  
In purpos was to maken hire his heir,  
Bothe of his catel and his mesuage,  
And straunge he made it of hir marriage.  
His purpos was for to bistowe hire hye  
Into som worthy blood of auncetrye;  
For hooly chirches good moot been despended  
On hooly chirches blood, that is descended.  
Therefore he wolde his hooly blood honoure,  
Though that he hooly chirche shoulde *devoure*.  
(3977-86, emphasis mine).

Both Symkyn and the parson cherish the “holiness” of Malyne’s blood, making her defilement look as much an act of sacrilege as one of theft. Because of this, I cannot resist reading Malyne as the “hooly chirches good” in this stanza, which must be “despended” onto a worthy recipient. The stanza ends with the statement that the parson will inevitably “devoure” the holy church, which lends more gustatory imagery to the metaphor at hand. Malyne’s body, like the grain/meal at the mill, represents an item to protect, trade, and consume; its consumption directly impacts the parson, who hoards Malyne. Through raping Malyne, Aleyn “steals” from Symkyn, whom medieval society recognizes as the owner of both his daughter and the mill. Robbing Malyne’s virginity desecrates the holiness of her other essential marketable attribute, her bloodline, which robs Symkyn of any future accumulation of wealth, at least until his infant son comes of age to marry. As Rose argues,

Rape has become, in *The Reeve’s Tale*, a crime of property and class warfare— women, like corn, are property, and the limits of the genre and tone allow us neither to focus on the women nor the violence. The gaze is deflected from the suffering bodies of women to the problems of men (40).

The medieval legal term for rape, *raptus*, supports the Malyne/grain metaphor by ambiguously conflating acts of abduction with sexual force, which dehumanizes victims by focusing our attention on the female body as stolen property.<sup>44</sup>

Chaucer further objectifies Malyne by selectively describing individual “slices” of her body, as if to share this grain, or cake, with the reader. In doing so, he perverts the

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<sup>44</sup> Even if medieval law dictated that she had not been raped, a rape still occurs— after all, women have been raped for centuries without the help of laws to protect them, and one of the many ways patriarchal societies encourages the abuse of women’s bodies is through victim blaming. However, the word *raptus* imparts meaning onto the events of the *Reeve’s Tale* because of its ambiguity. As an artistic subject, the Rape of Proserpina consists of both the sexual violence the heroine endures as well as her abduction.

picturesque language used to describe Emelye of the *Knight's Tale*. Brewer lists

Chaucer's description as such:

In the *Reeve's Tale* we have clearly a pretty wench, rather than a lady; she is right fair (I (A), 3976), with eyes like the Prioress's, grey as glass, and with round high breasts (1. 3975). But her nose is 'camus' (1. 3974), which is not merely too short, but, as has been recently pointed out, betrays an amorous nature (267).

Brewer calls Malyne a "pretty wench," but I am not convinced that the effect of Chaucer's language here results in a pretty portrait. Of all the women in the first fragment of the tales, Chaucer describes Malyne in the crudest terms, even surpassing wife in the *Cook's Tale*, given that Chaucer cuts her description along with the rest of the tale, right after telling us that she works as a prostitute (CkT 4420-21). Body types for "attractive" medieval women vary somewhat, with some women described as "slender," and others with "plump arms," or "broad hips" (Brewer, 259). Nevertheless, I think Chaucer wishes to set Malyne apart from the pleasant, poetic adjectives typically attributed to medieval heroines, even heroines like Alison, who exist in fabliau rather than romance. Chaucer does not describe Hippolyta or Emelye's physical appearances in the *Knight's Tale* other than references to their fairness, and Emelye's "bryghte," blond hair, and their green hunting garb, but their counterparts in the *Reeve's Tale* become graphically visible. Malyne's mother looks "proud, and peert as is a pye," (3950) "digne as water in a dich,/ And ful of hoker and of bisemare," (3964-65) and wears a red gown (3954). Chaucer invests Malyne's image with a touch of the grotesque; "broad hips" might look attractive to the mind's eye, but "buttockes brode" conjures images of waste rather than childbearing. Chaucer also uses "wel ygrowen" (3973) to describe Malyne, indicating that she possesses a voluptuous figure, but one could just as well call a prized-pig "wel ygrowen." The *Riverside Chaucer* defines "kamus nose" as "pug nose," which already

blemishes any prettiness in the illustration. As John M. Steadman notes, the word “camus” could also serve here as a Latin pun on snub-nose, a detail that further complicates Malyne’s portrait:

As the Latin adjective for ‘camus’ (i.e. ‘flat-nosed or snub-nosed’) is *simus*, it is altogether fitting that a snub-nosed person should be called Simond. Such word play on name and physiognomy could be supported both by Pliny’s Natural History and by medieval rhetorical theory. Because of their snub-noses, Pliny declared, certain animals have sometimes received such name as Simo (“Snubby”) and Silo (“Pug”) (4).

Chaucer’s dehumanization of Symkyn and his family by relating them to animals raises questions regarding the kinds of women Chaucer will use to portray rape scenes, and the women who evade such literary treatment. Malyne’s social class and the literary genre Chaucer works in for this tale, fabliau, might influence Chaucer’s decision in that regard, since fabliau relishes in vulgarity rather than in romance. Instead of providing us with an untouchable maiden on a pedestal, somewhere between goddess and human, such as what we find in the *Knight’s Tale*, the Reeve favors earthy (one might even say bestial)<sup>45</sup> representations of women. This inclination allows a fuller spectrum of sexual humor, while preserving our interest in the heroine as a love object. We saw this as well with the object of desire in the *Miller’s Tale*, Alison, whom Chaucer illustrates as good-looking,

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<sup>45</sup> Bestial imagery pervades both the *Miller’s* and *Reeve’s* tales, as does the idea of caging/protecting/hoarding of young women. In the *Miller’s Tale*, John jealously guards his “wylde and yong” wife, holding her “narwe in cage” (MT 3225; 3224). The adjective “wild” suggests a primal nature, and her caging represents a deliberate domestication of that uncivilized nature. In the *Reeve’s Tale*, Symkyn and his family snore loudly, recalling their pug-noses: “Men myghte hir rowtyng heere two furlong;/ The wenche rowteth eek, par compaignye” (4166-67). This snoring, combined with the close proximity of parents and daughter, corrals the family like animals in a barn. The daughter’s close distance from her parents’ bed also indicates a watchful eye over her chastity. Excessive appetite for food and ale impairs the family’s judgment, as they have all drunk so much ale that they now snore loudly. From a medieval Christian point of view, the sin of gluttony debases people by reducing them to uncontrollable primal appetites. Dante explores the relationship between animals and gluttony in the *Inferno*, where Cerberus, a three-headed (and therefore three-mouthed), fearsome, large-bellied dog guards the third circle of hell, where gluttons eternally wallow in excrement (Canto VI. 10-22).

yet comically weasel-like in appearance: “Fair was this yonge wyf, and therwithal/ As any wezele hir body gent and small” (MT 3233-34). Malyne also receives polarizing attention to her fairness and animalistic qualities, except whereas Alison’s youth and beauty dominate the primal aspects of her appearance (evidenced by the fact that Chaucer introduces her age, eighteen, and her fairness *before* he describes her weasel-like figure), Malyne’s fairness is offered as an afterthought, “This wenche thikke and wel ygrowen<sup>46</sup> was, / With kamus nose and eyen greye as glas,/ With buttokes brode and brestes rounde and hye./ But right fair was hire heer; I wol nat lye” (3973-76). The conjunction “but” signals that the content before it differs from the content which follows. Essentially, the narrator tells us that despite the unflattering physical description he has just provided, Malyne still retains a modicum of fairness through her blonde hair, a coveted “maidenly” trait.<sup>47</sup>

The desecration of the maiden's innocence becomes more direct in the *Reeve's Tale* than in the *Knight's Tale*, and yet, for both tales, the pressure on young women to

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<sup>46</sup> Chaucer’s language here harkens back to his introduction of the Prioress in the *General Prologue*, a woman who possesses the same “eyen greye as glas,” as Malyne, and whose body is “nat undergrowe” (*GP*. 152;156). The latter detail suggests the presence of a voracious appetite beneath her carefully constructed veneer of modest eating habits (Chaucer painstakingly accounts for these habits in lines 128-136). However, simply attributing a “grown” body to the accumulation of excess weight ignores the more obvious ways women’s bodies grow— pregnancy (indicating that the Prioress’s sexual impenetrability also rings false), and the natural maturation of breasts and hips during puberty. Given that Chaucer invites the reader to look at the Prioress’s appearance in pieces rather than as a whole (he describes her body parts individually in lines 151-161), I’m inclined to read this passage as the deliberate sexualization of a religious figure, and an early example of the larger thematic connection Chaucer develops throughout the *Reeve's Tale* regarding the relationship between food and women’s bodies as sites of consumption. Symkyn and the parson emphasize the nobility of Malyne’s holy bloodline in the *Reeve's Tale*. And yet, just as Chaucer objectifies the Prioress of the *General Prologue*, he invites us to objectify Malyne as well, another “holy” figure of sexual mockery.

<sup>47</sup> In Chapter One of this study I discussed the importance of blondeness to the “maiden” archetype. That Chaucer presents Malyne’s blonde hair as a beautiful exception to the rest of her physical appearance suggests another link between her and Emelye. Remember that the *Reeve's Tale* sours the characters we find in the *Knight's Tale*, and Malyne’s blondeness constitutes one way we can recognize her as a perverted example of a maiden, because for any perversion to be recognizable, it must retain some of the identifiers which came before it.

marry is explicit. In my previous chapter I discussed how Chaucer alludes to Proserpina in the *Knight's Tale* through Emelye, whose antipathy toward sex<sup>48</sup> communicates the fears that many young women experience as they sexually mature. In doing so, Chaucer engraves her characterization as a model-maiden who embodies the central tension in the Proserpina myth—the heroine's painful transition from the safety and relative freedom of childhood into the sobering world of adulthood as a wife, which feels like a prison for many newly married women. Emelye's trajectory becomes one of domestication and entrapment, and her behavior prescribes a set of feminine reactions to emotional distressors: she prays, cries, silences her own feelings, restrains, performs pity, and yields to fate. It is important to note that although she represents a model maiden for the text as

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<sup>48</sup> More pointedly, the *Knight's Tale* addresses her fears of *heteronormative* sex which results in the reproduction of children. Emelye's sexual preferences are never made clear beyond desire to abstain from sex with men. Sauer comments on the problem of reading sexuality from a phallogocentric perspective that excludes lesbianism from the realm of possibility: "Constructing a definition for medieval lesbianism is fraught with difficulties. Problematically, these definitions often teeter towards a reduplication of the heterosexual matrix, casting an active 'manly' woman as pursuing a passive, 'womanly' woman, instead of outlining a general term for women who have (or want to have) sex with women (de Lauretis, 1988). That is, one of the main problems with Medieval Studies today—as well as the examined texts—is the insistence on viewing sexual intercourse from a phallogocentric point of view, and on categorizing gender roles dually as masculine and feminine, with little room outside that binary perspective" (334). In "Redefining Holy Maidenhood: Virginity and Lesbianism in Late Medieval England," Campbell explores the complex relationship that medieval female spiritual devotion and virginity share with lesbianism. According to her, "Examples of the juxtaposition of female virginity and heterosexuality are found not only in the works of medieval authors but also in the medieval legal recognition of male homosexuality and ignorance of female homosexuality. These juxtapositions allow for no other options—such as lesbianism for women. Women, it is no news to us, were defined by men according to their sexual relationships with them" (14). These viewpoints can be applied to Emelye's virginal characterization in the *Knight's Tale*. If we look closely again at Emelye's prayer, the word "compaignye" appears twice, first in association with Diana's group of devoted female followers, and later in reference to sexual relationships with men: "Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,/ Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf./ I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye./ A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye./ And for to walken in the wodes wilde,/ And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe./ Noght wol I knowe compaignye of man" (KT III. 2305-11). The double meanings of "compaignye" lends this passage to a queer-theory reading, especially when one considers Chaucer's emphasis on Emelye's maidenhood and spiritual devotion. Campbell writes, "'Holy maidenhood' provided for medieval women not only a rejection of physical heterosexuality but also a rejection of spiritual heterosexuality—in favor of women-only physical spaces and women-identified spirituality" (15). Hippolyta and Emelye come from the bonds of Amazonian sisterhood, and as I stated earlier, Emelye's mother's upbringing in a nunnery situates her in a similarly women-only space; that these two spaces are thematically connected further establishes a link between the preference for female-companionship and virginity. This link may represent another form of submerged emotionality in the text.

a whole, this role does not promise an idyllic, happy life for its bearer. To the contrary, Chaucer has already shown us how Emelye's responses sometimes fail to achieve her goals, such as when her prayer fails to rescue her. That failure provides a current of anxiety that runs through the *Knight's Tale*. The reader waits in suspense, as Emelye does, to see whom she will be forced to marry. If the source of tension in the *Knight's Tale* provokes us to ask whether or not Emelye will be forced to marry Palamon or Arcite, then the central anxiety of the *Reeve's Tale* is rooted in the question of whether or not Malyne will succeed in becoming a wife at all. Chaucer connects Malyne to Emelye through Proserpina's abduction, represented in the tales by the theft of each maiden's bodily autonomy,<sup>49</sup> but it is through *Malyne* that he explicitly addresses the impact of sexual violence on the maiden and her family.

I have already discussed how Chaucer turns the reader into Plutonic voyeur in the *Knight's Tale* by making Emelye elusive, asking us to pay attention to her idiosyncrasies. In the *Reeve's Tale*, he turns the reader into a Plutonic voyeur by setting his final act in the dark, obscuring important details, which encourages us to "watch" the episodes of sexual violence closely. The setting takes place sometime around midnight, as the family retires to bed (4148). The room is dark enough that Malyne's mother must rely on the physical texture of the cradle to assess her location, "And forth she gooth til she the cradel fond, / She gropeth alwey forther with hir hond" (4221-2). At this moment, and in spite of Chaucer's insistent animalization of the Reeve's characters, Chaucer humanizes Symkyn's family. Animals possess superior night vision compared to humans;

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<sup>49</sup> The *Knight's Tale* begins with the Amazons' abduction. Arguably, Theseus forces Emelye to marry Palamon, as this decision does not reflect her innermost wishes, and Theseus's authority over the matter immobilizes her agency. Marriage, then, becomes another kind of abduction. The *Reeve's Tale* makes the theft of Malyne's autonomy literal by having Aleyn rape her, which temporarily immobilizes her body.

without sight, Malyne's mother becomes vulnerable, and the presence of the cradle reminds the reader that for all her pride and besmirched reputation, she is still someone's mother. Chaucer reminds the reader of the room's darkness again before placing Symkyn's wife in an even more defenseless state as she sleeps: "By cause that the cradel by it stood, / And nyste wher she was, for it was derk; / But faire and wel she creep in to the clerk, / and lith ful stille, and wolde han caught a / sleep" (4224-26). The reader, possessing a sliver of the sight that she lacks, and knowing that she has made a grave mistake, watches the scene as it unfolds. Chaucer obscures his language just enough to subvert the humor and light-heartedness one expects from a fabliau, and once again, he invites the reader to pay attention to the text's idiosyncrasies.

One such idiosyncrasy surfaces during John's rape of Malyne's mother.<sup>50</sup>

Becoming an object of ridicule in one's community produces bitterness in one's heart, as Chaucer shows us through Malyne's mother, whose illegitimacy besmirches her social status, which fills her with "hoker and of bisemare" (3965). And indeed, Chaucer's initial portrayal of Malyne's mother does read as humorous, and the reader laughs at her expense. But the passage describing the rape of Malyne's mother uses the Reeve's humorous narration against the reader, forcing us to confront the hidden pain of this

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<sup>50</sup> Rose identifies this episode as a rape transformed into a "not-rape" due to the narrator's silencing of Malyne's mother: "[. . .] There is an alarming absence of harm in the narrator's recounting of the rape. We note that the women are dispatched by the narrator [. . .] Here rape is not rape again, transformed by its troping nature into fun for the men, while the women are silent (and therefore content or at least complicit?). The Reeve-narrator demonstrates indeed that rape is not the issue here; it is the revenge that counts" (40). Here, I argue that harm is not absent from this passage, but tucked between language that appears mockingly jovial. Rose's aside that the silences of Malyne and her mother somehow imply their contentment or complicity is a speculation that shows how often critical treatment of the rapes in the *Reeve's Tale*, in Rose's own words from the same essay, read "over rape," or "around rape" (25). Silence in the *Reeve's Tale* does not imply that Malyne or her mother want these rapes to happen. In fact, the text emphasizes the powerlessness of the women, and its breaks in tone create opportunities for us to doubt their complicity, rather than confirm it.



woman in a passage which would normally provoke laughter in a fabliau: “So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yoore;/ He priketh harde and depe as if he were made. / This joly lyf han thise two clerkes lad” (4230-32). The way Chaucer cuts through the Reeve’s playful narration (“myrie fit,” and “joly lyf”) with violent language suggests a ripping of sorts, redefining the object of ridicule— in this case, the fabliau “adulteress,” who inspires laughter through her sexual exploits— as a character experiencing physical pain. The *Riverside Chaucer* defines “priketh” as “stab, pierces,” and this verb pivots the reader from John’s perspective to what this rape *feels* like for Malyne’s mother. What Chaucer describes here becomes an episode of sexual violence, not sexual pleasure. John’s stabbing evokes images of a man at war, not a man in the throes of sexual passion. By depicting John as a ruthless sexual conqueror, Chaucer harkens back to the themes of war and sexual conquering present in the *Knight’s Tale*. Just as Hippolyta’s captured body represents a territory invaded and conquered by Theseus, the body of Malyne’s mother represents a territory invaded and conquered by John.

The cradle’s ominous presence at the foot of the bed functions as both plot device and a symbolic reminder of the physical consequences which could occur as a result of these rapes, which, for this particular family, would be accompanied by dire economic consequences as well. If either Symkyn’s wife or their daughter becomes pregnant from these rapes, the children that result constitute more mouths for the family to feed, mouths that will take up more space in the already crowded room. Not only would the quality of life diminish for the family, but the new children would *also* grow up illegitimate, like Malyne’s mother. Because Chaucer devotes so much time and detail regarding the wife’s backstory as an illegitimate child who grows up shamed by her community, it makes

sense that he would figure future illegitimate children as consequences for Symkyn and his family, as this particular fate has structural and poetic symmetry. (The threat of childbirth looms in the *Knight's Tale* as well. In her prayer, Emelye addresses her fear of bearing children, asking Diana “nought to ben a wyf and be with childe” [III. 2310]). For Chaucer's women, children represent a real danger to personal freedom, depriving them of dominion over their own bodies.

Chaucer emphasizes the loss of Malyne's bodily autonomy and voice with the line that introduces the rape, “That it had been to late for to crie” (4196). When we finally hear her speak, her response to the rape appears loving rather than bitter or angry, but the detail that she almost weeps reveals emotional restraint rather than emotional expression:

“Now, deere lemman,” quod she, “go, far weel!  
But er thow go, o thyng I wol thee telle:  
Whan that thou wendest homward by the melle,  
Right at the entree of the dore bihynde  
Thou shalt a cake of half a busshel fynde  
That was ymaked of thyn owene mele,  
Which that I heelp my sire for to stele.  
And, goode lemman, God thee save and kepe!”  
And with that word *almost she gan to wepe*  
(4240-4248, emphasis mine).

Scholars have attempted to make sense of Malyne's surprising response in several ways, and critical interest in this seemingly odd moment supports my argument that Chaucer's text encourages us to watch the rapes of Malyne and her mother closely, and read Malyne's speech as idiosyncratic with the experience of her physical body. Barnett reads Malyne's honeyed response to rape as an example of male power fantasy. She argues, “The daughter voices the male fantasy of complete willing submission into the male eroticization of dominance [. . .] Chaucer's female character is represented as

having ‘enjoyed it’” (149-150). Although Barnett correctly identifies the likeness of Malyne’s language with male fantasy, her conclusion that Malyne “is represented as having ‘enjoyed it’” ignores the possibility that Malyne speaks out of fear or desperation. Rose also reads Malyne’s speech as an example of male fantasy,

The Reeve-narrator demonstrates that rape is not the issue here; it is the revenge that counts [ . . . ] The narrative voice of the Reeve betrays a male-fantasy rape like that articulated in the old French lyric ‘La Clef d’Amours’: The act “pleases her greatly when someone takes her against her will, regardless of how it comes about. A maiden suddenly ravished has great joy, no matter what she says” (trans. Gravidal, 5). The victim enjoyed it and is in love with her rapist, sad for him to leave. Rape narratives do turn to romances! But, Chaucer’s tale reveals the brutality of the romance, a kind of tit-for-tat justice meted out by the students upon the miller (40).

But does Malyne’s speech actually read as romantic? On the surface, yes, but the passage also reveals an opportunity for suspicion. The *Reeve’s Tale* allows for some dissonance between poet and narrator, as Cannon argues,

The these acts are not rapes by this tale’s measure are judgments that we may fold back into the Reeve’s “ire” (I, 3862), the violence of a vengeful poetics whose aim is the “bleryng of a proud milleres ye” (I, 3865) or the “cherles termes” of fabliau (I, 3917), but we may not, I think, attach these judgments to Chaucer (268).

Malyne’s speech, like the *Knight’s Tale*’s ending, sets the concrete physical and emotional realities of sexual violence experienced by the victim at odds with the veneer of romance put forth by the tale’s narrator. Chaucer creates this dissonance by denying Malyne the full range of anger afforded to male characters, evidenced by the way Malyne’s reaction to her rape differs considerably from her father, who develops an immense rage that results in a bloody battle between himself and Aleyn (4273-78). Chaucer’s suppression of Malyne’s subjectivity in her speech intersects with his characterization of her as deceitful. By her own admission, Malyne initially deceives

John and Aleyn by helping her parents steal the corn. So then, should the reader automatically believe Malyne when she calls Aleyn her “lemman”? I do not think so. Chaucer gives us reason to doubt the sincerity of Malyne’s speech,<sup>51</sup> and as I noted earlier, Malyne's body shares a symbolic relationship with stolen grain. She offers the cake, a symbol for her body, to Aleyn, the thief of that body. The cake reminds the reader of the way women’s bodies are bought, sold, traded, stolen, and consumed by men. As Irigaray argues in *The Sex Which Is Not One*, the consumption and circulation of women’s bodies forms the cultural foundation of patriarchal societies, which view women like any other marketable object:

The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women [. . .] Socially, they are “objects” for and among men and furthermore they cannot do anything but mimic a “language” that they have not produced (170; 189).

That Malyne attempts to appear as an active participant in the exchange of her commodified body (symbolized by the cake) does not erase the fact that Aleyn has stolen her market value, entrapping the unmarried Malyne at the mill.<sup>52</sup> Without access to Malyne's internal thought process, the detail that Malyne *almost* begins to weep strikes me as particularly laden with ambiguity.<sup>53</sup> This detail directly follows Malyne’s sweet

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<sup>51</sup> Sidhu interprets Malyne’s dialogue as Chaucer’s statement regarding how the sincerity of one’s speech changes depending on the power dynamics of the given circumstance, and that Chaucer uses “women’s subjection as a metaphor for that of subordinate men” (11). Although Sidhu is right to question the sincerity of Malyne's speech, her argument that Chaucer uses Malyne's voice to represent subordinate men strikes me as overreaching because while Malyne inherits her father’s nose, Chaucer actually exaggerates Malyne’s womanly form to the point of caricature. Furthermore, the cradle’s presence in the room during the tale’s final act forces the reader to confront Malyne and her mother as distinctly female bodies, rather than poetic substitutes for subordinate male bodies.

<sup>52</sup> See Rose, “The daughter’s marketability as a virgin is transformed; the wife, by being raped, becomes an adulteress, a shared woman, albeit initially unwilling” (39).

<sup>53</sup> Morrison's argues that Malyne's speech signals a shift in genre: “We are also given access to Malyne's subjectivity in her speech in the morning (A 4240-47) and the information in the next line that she almost begins to weep. She bids her ‘lemman’ farewell and tells him where to find the cake made of his stolen grain. What is ambiguous and disturbing in this fabliau is this interruption of the dawn song genre. It is structurally at odds with the fabliau discourse. Malyne's speech provides a generic break, alerting us to a

farewell to her “goode lemman,” juxtaposing speech which looks like emotional expression with concrete evidence of Malyne’s emotional restraint. This stanza marks a clear moment in the *Reeve's Tale* where rape begets the submergence of feminine emotionality. Rape robs Malyne of her voice (she could not cry out), her bodily autonomy, and it silences the expression of her feelings. Malyne can only control her response to the rape. By depriving her of tears, Chaucer fixates our imagination on everything he refuses to tell us about Malyne's emotional interiority, and, vicariously, everything he refuses to tell us about Emelye and Hippolyta as well.

If Emelye’s marriage to Palamon represents an abstract kind of personal hell, then Malyne’s entrapment at the mill provides a more grounded, visibly domestic illustration of hell. The *Knight's Tale* relegates its theme of sexual violence to subtext, touting that the abduction and subjugation of women reflect divine ordinance, and a “natural,” seemingly melodic patriarchal order that promises happy endings for those who comply with its demands. But the *Reeve's Tale* exposes that order as fraudulent by showing us how sexual violence wounds victims and their families, spiraling their worlds into irreparable chaos. Although both tales gender anger male, the *Knight's Tale* seems to reject anger, wrath, and impulse as viable solutions to emotional distress, but the *Reeve's Tale* shows us how anger, when combined with cunning, achieves goals for Palamon and Arcite’s septic counterparts, John and Aleyn. That the tale provides an example of vengeance’s success makes the submergence of Malyne’s interiority all the more tragic.

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passage of importance and, as is inevitable in Chaucer, ambiguity. With Malyne, it is least disturbing—to the critic—to make her a willing lover, happy to have been violated, as Gardner suggests, though we could read her acting kindly and lovingly to Aleyn out of fear, in order to get rid of him and not have him attack her again” (81).

Malyne cannot angrily “quite” the clerks, and the reader leaves with the feeling that the defilement of her “hooly blood” damns her, at least to the mill indefinitely. The *Reeve’s Tale* demystifies the themes of sexual violence, abduction, personal hell, and emotional silencing hinted at in the *Knight’s Tale* by abandoning the Knight’s idyllic language and exploding these subjects in a hopeless, repugnant domestic sphere. The family home, typically thought of as a source of warmth and safety, becomes the site of confusion, sexual violence, and emotional invisibility for both Malyne and her mother. Like the meal, the cake, the money for supper, the money for lodging, and Malyne’s virginity, feminine anger represents another kind of loss in the text.

#### IV. THE LOST MOTHER

In the previous chapters, I have focused my attention primarily on Chaucer's handling of the Proserpina myth as it relates to the themes of abduction, sexual violence, and emotional smothering in the *Knight's* and *Reeve's* Tales. This final chapter will look at Chaucer's curious inattention to the second half of the Proserpina myth, which is not only a story of ravishment but also one of a mother's frantic quest for her missing daughter. As Ovid tells us in the *Metamorphoses*, after her daughter is seized, a grief-stricken Ceres refuses to nourish the earth's crops until Ceres is returned to her, and this maternal wrath—and its effects on those who suffer from it—prompts Hades to partially relent, returning Proserpina for half the year. Proserpina's return home pleases Ceres, who restores the earth's fruitfulness for half of the year, until her daughter must once again descend into the Underworld (Ovid, 153-156).

While there are mother figures in the *Canterbury Tales*, and even mothers whose daughters are taken from them or ravished—i.e. Prudence, Symkyn's wife, and Griselda—scenes of maternal anger on their daughter's behalf seem virtually nonexistent, replaced with examples of maternal sadness, silence, and ignorance. Malyne's mother displays no knowledge of her daughter's rape in the *Reeve's Tale*, despite having experienced a rape *alongside her* in a tiny room, and despite the narrator's comment that Aleyn wakes up weary, having “swonken al the longe nyght” (4234-35). Chaucer teases his reader with an opportunity for Malyne's mother to bludgeon her daughter's rapist with a staff, but he frames this moment as a misunderstanding rather than an act of vengeance. She wrongfully assumes the clerks fight each other and aims to break up the brawl, but misses her intended target and hits Symkyn instead (4296-4306). A mother's

search for her missing child becomes an important plot point in the *Prioress's Tale*, but she searches for her disappeared son, not a daughter. Her tears express maternal sorrow and anxiety, and not anger or vengeance.<sup>54</sup> More often than not, the episodes of maternal wrath we *do* find in the *Canterbury Tales* do not rescue or avenge daughters. To the contrary, the Sultaness's and Donegild's murderous wraths in the *Man of Law's Tale*, which they direct against their daughter-in-law, as well as against their own sons, symbolically inverts their roles as mothers and protectors. While not featuring murderous mothers, the *Clerk's Tale's* Griselda quite calmly resigns herself to what she believes to be the murder of her children, aligning her will to the man who supposedly took her. *The Tale of Melibee* similarly reveals a complete absence of maternal vengeance. Prudence, whose meaningful name suggests a cautious and virtuous nature, convinces her husband to offer forgiveness for their daughter's attackers, instead of instructing him to seek retribution on their wounded daughter's behalf. That Sophia's father, Melibee, experiences an immediate desire for vengeance<sup>55</sup> instead of her mother speaks volumes about the way Chaucer genders anger male within the *Canterbury Tales*.

As an agricultural goddess, Ceres's vengeance reflects not only the divine feminine anger, but also the primal, maternal fierceness rooted in the earth itself, which impels all mothers to protect their children. I call the overwhelming absence of vengeful

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<sup>54</sup> Chaucer's antisemitic characterization of the Jewish community's violence in this tale contrasts with the gentle characterization of the child's widowed mother, and therefore serves as another example of the way anger and pity become gendered throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. In keeping with the emotional responses Chaucer most often allows women, the mother cries (605) and prays (600). Tellingly, she commits no acts of violence or vengeance herself, and retribution for her son's murder is carried out by the magistrate, a male character: "With torment and shameful deeth echon/ This provost dooth these Jewes for to sterve" (628-9).

<sup>55</sup> From the *Tale of Melibee*: "And whan this folk togidre assembled weren, this Melibeus in sorweful wise shewed hem his cas./ And by the manere of his speche it semed that in herte he baar a crueel ire,/ redy to doon vengeance upon his foes, and sodeynly desired that the werre sholde bigynne" (1008-09A).



mothers in the *Canterbury Tales* the “Lost Mother” phenomenon. In the remainder of this chapter, I analyze moments where Chaucer has distorted or extinguished protective maternal rage within the context of mother-daughter relationships. I have divided my chapter into three sections. The first section deciphers how Chaucer characterizes maternal anger as unnaturally masculine in the *Man of Law’s Tale*. I also consider how Chaucer’s redacts the power of Mary’s role in rescuing Custance from rape. Section two examines Chaucer’s use of fairytale to create a deceptively motherless landscape in the *Clerk’s Tale*, and addresses how Griselda attempts to protect her children within the limited options available to her gender. Finally, the last section explores an exception to my argument, and the only example of maternal anger in the *Canterbury Tales* that resembles Ceres’ determination to redeem her captive daughter: Proserpina’s role as May’s divine rescuer in the *Merchant’s Tale*. In this tale, Proserpina not only voices the anger of May, her spiritual daughter on earth, but also the frustration of all women trapped in marriages which can sometimes feel like a personal hell.

#### “Mannysh” Anger vs. Divine Motherhood in the *Man of Law’s Tale*

The *Man of Law’s Tale* includes two powerful examples of maternal anger and vengeance, the Sultaness and Donegild, but the anger these mothers experience threatens the daughter rather than avenges her. Additionally, because Custance becomes a daughter-in-law for both of these women (instead of a daughter in the biological or symbolic sense), the mothers bear no sense of maternal duty for Custance; Chaucer does not provide any details regarding Custance’s biological mother, we only see her father, the Emperor of Rome. The Sultaness, enraged at her son’s marriage to Custance (which

requires his Islamic subjects to convert to Christianity), plans to deceive the newlywed couple into believing her conversion, whilst she secretly harbors murderous intention, “That, as I trowe, I shal the Sowdan quite./ For thogh his wyf be cristned never so white,/ She shal have nede to wasshe away the rede,/ Thogh she a font-ful water with hire lede” (354-357). Subsequently, the narrator expresses disgust for the Sultaness, whose vengeance violates the cultural boundaries of her gender:

O Sowdanesse, roote of iniquitee!  
Virago, thou Semyrame the secounde!  
O serpent under femynnytee,  
Lik to the serpent depe in helle ybounde!  
O feyned womman, al that may confounde  
Vertu and innocence, thurgh thy malice,  
Is bred in thee, as nest of every vice! (358-364).

Used here in the pejorative sense of the word, “Virago” suggests that the Sultaness violates the expectations of her gender. The *Riverside Chaucer* accompanies the definition of “Virago” with a note describing how Semiramis (Semyrame in Chaucer’s text), a lusty “militant queen of Babylon,” usurps power from her husband in the *Bibliotheca historica* of Diodorus Siculus, and usurps the throne from her son in Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*. The note reads,

If the reference is to Semiramis as usurping power, then Virago is probably to be understood not as OED defines it, citing II.358, “a bold, imudent (or wicked) woman,” but in the sense defined by Gavin Douglas, describing Juturna in his translation from the Aeneid, “a woman exersand a mannis office” (860).

The Sultaness’s decision to use political power and kill her son bears similarity to Semiramis’s usurpation of her son’s throne in Boccaccio’s text. Adding more weight to Chaucer’s characterization of the Sultaness as inappropriately male, the line “O serpent under femynnytee” appears deliberately ambiguous. The first instance of “serpent” may

refer to the Sultanness's deceptive nature. The *Riverside Chaucer* includes a note for lines 360 and 361 which reads,

According to a tradition transmitted by Petrus Comestor (*Historica scolastica libri Genesis*, chap. 21; PL 198:1072), Satan "chose a certain type of serpent (as Beyde says) having the face of a maiden" for the temptation of Eve. The snake in paradise is frequently so depicted in late medieval art (860).

While providing these meanings, the *Riverside* neglects to consider another more literal and humorous definition of the line "O serpent under femynynytee." This is an off omission, especially given that this line directly follows the narrator's accusation that the Sultanness is a virago, like Semiramis before her. Chaucer's use of the word "serpent" here may also imply that the Sultanness possesses a literal penis beneath her "female form,"<sup>56</sup> punctuating his illustration of her as profanely masculine. Chaucer characterizes the Sultanness's violent wrath as unforgivably masculine, rather than simply unforgivable, and in doing so he demonstrates how he uses anger as an emotional space available only to men, or women who bear a secret, "unnatural" masculinity.

Like the Sultanness, Donegild resents her daughter-in-law and deceives her, forcing Custance to flee. Donegild similarly repulses the narrator, who fumes,

O Donegild, I ne have noon Englissh digne  
Unto thy malice and thy tirannye!  
And therefore to the feend I thee resigne;  
Lat hym enditen of thy traitorie!  
Fy, mannysh, fy! -- o nay, by God, I lye --  
Fy, feendlych spirit, for I dar wel telle,  
Thogh thou heere walke, thy spirit is in helle! (778-84).

Chaucer's reference to the act of writing in this passage suggests a potential break from his persona as the Man of Law-as-narrator, as does his insistence that he does not have

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<sup>56</sup> The *Riverside Chaucer* defines "under femynynytee" as "in a female form" (page 92).

any English to depict her malice and tyranny, which makes the English language look noble and “superior” to a subject he considers lowly and vile. Like he does with the Sultaness, Chaucer characterizes Donegild’s retaliation as masculine and sacrilegious, with the word *mannysh* pointing to the absence of feminine virtue.<sup>57</sup> The narrator condemns Donegild to hell; in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, maternal anger represents damnation for the vengeful mother, rather than a path to salvation for the desperate daughter.

And yet, not all mothers in the *Man of Law’s Tale* bear such heated curses from its narrator. Unlike the *Knight’s Tale*, in which a divine mother abandons her daughter, the *Man of Law’s Tale* provides a moment of divine maternal intervention in the form of Mary.<sup>58</sup> As I have already noted, Emelye’s desperate prayer to Diana functions in the *Knight’s Tale* as a maiden seeking divine protection from a rape. While this intervention does not occur in the *Knight’s Tale* (perhaps because Emelye is a pagan and Chaucer is commenting on the ineffectuality of pagan gods), it does in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, in which Custance is repeatedly saved from harm. After her would-be rapist steals onto her rudderless ship with the intent to harm her, “A *theef*, that hadde reneyed oure creance,/ Cam into ship allone, and seyde he sholde/ Hir lemman<sup>59</sup> be, wher-so she wolde or

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<sup>57</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer* glosses *mannysh* in this line as “devoid of feminine virtues” (861).

<sup>58</sup> O’Connell reads Lucrece’s inability to flee from her rapist in the *Legend of Lucrece* as an example of “the inefficacy of the pagan gods,” which contrasts with Custance’s escape from rape in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, which demonstrates “the beneficence of God” (19). He states, “Indeed, when Chaucer asks, ‘To whom shal she compleyne or make mone?’ (line 1799), it does not seem unreasonable to assume that he is referring, at least in part, to the fact that Lucrece does not have access to the God who comes to the rescue of holy Christian women such as Custance” (18). One might read Diana’s failure to protect Emelye in the *Knight’s Tale* similarly, but O’Connell’s argument relies on an extremely literal reading of pagan gods/the Christian God. I have found an example in the *Canterbury Tales* which exposes a flaw in O’Connell’s argument: Proserpina and Pluto, both pagan gods in the *Merchant’s Tale*, display extreme power in determining the fates their earthly counterparts, May and January.

<sup>59</sup> The word “lemman” here briefly recalls Malyne’s response to her rapist/thief in the *Reeve’s Tale*, retrospectively providing more context for the ambiguity of her strangely pleasant language. When put into the mouth of Custance’s attacker, “lemman” loses its connotations of sweetness and romance.

molde” (915-17, emphasis mine), Mary intervenes on her behalf, resulting in a bizarre moment of brute strength:

But blisful Marie heelp hire right anon;  
For with hir struglyng wel and myghtily  
The thief fil over bord al sodeynly,  
And in the see he dreynte for vengeance;  
And thus hath Crist unwemmed kept Custance (920-924).

Whereas Custance, then, adheres to the “feminine” responses to distress we have already seen throughout the tales—she cries “pitiously” (919), Full of “wo,”—Mary inspires her to struggle mightily. Whether or not “hir struglyng wel and myghtily” refers to Custance, or Custance’s work in tandem with Mary remains ambiguous, but Chaucer does make it clear that Mary steps in as a divine protector in some capacity. Although Mary intervenes for her spiritual daughter, Chaucer conceals Mary’s emotionality from the reader, instead focusing on her action rather than the feelings which provoke it. The thief/potential rapist drowns “for vengeance,” possibly attributing the punishing act to Mary, but this becomes problematized by the line which follows it. Chaucer creates distance between spiritual mother and daughter by informing us that Christ keeps Custance “unwemmed,” which implies that Custance’s faith in Christ preserves the sanctity of her physical body, as it has throughout the entirety of the tale. The narrator asks, “How may this wayke womman han this strengthe/ Hire to defende agayn this renegat?” (932-933). That Custance defends herself places the action back on Custance, not Mary. We also learn that God sends Custance “myght and vigour,” suggesting the patriarchal God’s usurpation of Mary’s role in Custance’s protection (945). Although the *Man of Law’s Tale* presents a divine mother’s intervention on behalf of her daughter, Chaucer slowly chips away at the mother’s power, replacing it with the protection of a patriarchal God.

### Fairytale and the Deceptively Motherless Landscape of the *Clerk's Tale*

Although the *Clerk's Tale* is not a traditional fairytale, Chaucer borrows conventions from the fairytale genre to communicate the emotional silencing of Griselda, a woman whose fairytale-like promise to always to obey her husband<sup>60</sup> devastates her ability to protect her children from their father. Of all the fairytale tropes<sup>61</sup> in the *Clerk's Tale*, I find Chaucer's frequent repetition of absent mothers most pertinent to our understanding of the Griselda story. Chaucer creates a deceptively motherless landscape, only to betray that structure by fixating the reader's attention on Griselda's role as a mother, and exposing the limited avenues available for Griselda to protect her children.

The tale begins with a maternal void felt by Walter's subjects, when they ask that he choose a wife so that she might produce an heir (92-140). Griselda's mother is likewise absent; Chaucer only mentions Janicle, her father (204-210.) Chaucer's obfuscation of Griselda's mother is a fairytale convention, and prepares us to expect that this tale will, likewise, be a fairy tale. Marina Warner comments on the prominence of absent mothers in fairytales:

The absence of the mother from the tale is often declared at the start, without explanation, as if none were required; Beauty appears before us [. . .] as a daughter to her father, a sister to six elders, a biblical seventh child, the cadette, the favourite: nothing is spoken about her father's wife. Later, it will turn out that Beauty is a foundling, and was left by the fairies,

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<sup>60</sup> According to Mann, "[. . .] Griselda's unquestioning obedience to her husband is not the simple result of her marriage vow, but something that she takes upon herself with the unique promise that this is the special condition for her marriage. It is this promise, not her wifely duty, that exacts Griselda's cheerful compliance with Walter's every wish, As in the *Franklin's Tale*, a fairy-tale promise claims an absolute adherence that the practical common-sense of everyday life could not tolerate" (114-115).

<sup>61</sup> According to Utley, the tale's setting in a castle by a forest, the way that dresses figure as symbolic markers of change within the tale, and the marquis's selection of a poor, beautiful girl from the village as his bride all contribute to a fairytale atmosphere, as does Griselda's promise to always obey Walter adds another dimension of fairytale. The tale also resembles "The Patience of a Princess," a fairytale of Greek and Turkish origin (206-7).

after her fairy mother was disgraced by a union with a mortal— not the father Beauty knows, but another, higher in rank, more powerful (210).

Although written hundreds of years before the version of “Beauty and the Beast” Warner uses as an example above, the *Clerk’s Tale* follows a strikingly similar structure.

Griselda mentions being raised by her father, but shares no details regarding what happened to her mother (834). When describing Griselda’s virtuousness and beauty as Walter’s freshly adorned bride, Chaucer reveals the public’s suspicion of her humble background:

To every wight she woxen is so deere  
And worshipful that folk ther she was bore,  
And from hire birthe knewe hire yeer by yeere,  
Unnethe trowed they — but dorste han swore —  
That to Janicle, of which I spak bifore,  
She doghter were, for, as by conjecture,  
Hem thoughte she was another creature (400-6).

The word “conjecture” denotes that the folk (and the reader) have incomplete information regarding Griselda’s parentage, drawing our attention to the absent mother. After Griselda gives birth to a daughter, mother and daughter quickly become separated, resulting in another absent mother, and this pattern repeats itself later with her son (555-74; 673-86). Chaucer adds another layer to the motherless landscape when Walter banishes Griselda from the palace, and she asks for a shift to cover her womb, to which Walter concedes (876-889). Griselda hides the evidence of childbirth marked upon her body, thereby concealing her motherhood from public sight.

The birth of Griselda’s daughter changes Griselda’s role from bride to mother, marking a significant moment in the text and filling the maternal void present at the story’s start. Chaucer breaks up the emotional responses of his characters, first emphasizing Griselda’s disappointment, then Walter, and finally “the folk:”

Nat longe tyme after that this Grisild  
Was wedded, she a doghter hath ybore,  
Al had hire levere have born a knave child;  
Glad was this markys and the folk therfore,  
For though a mayde child coome al bifore,  
She may unto a knave child atteyne  
By liklihede, syn she nys nat bareyne (442- 448).

Chaucer describes the marquis and the folk as glad, but he makes certain that the reader understands that their gladness stems from Griselda's proven fertility, which provides hope that she might bear a male child soon enough. Chaucer's revision accomplishes two tasks. Firstly, it privileges Griselda's point of view by mentioning her interiority first. Secondly, close examination of Chaucer's language in this passage (and in the future passage regarding the birth of her son) reveals his intention to privilege Griselda's relationship with her daughter over her relationship with her future son.

When describing Griselda's emotional response, Chaucer uses the word "doghter," not the term "mayde child," which illustrates the emotionally distanced responses of Walter and the folk. The public's perception of the daughter as a "mayde child" reflects Griselda's previous role in the text by foreshadowing their doubling, in which the daughter assumes the mother's former role as Walter's bride-to-be. Chaucer establishes textual similarities between mother and daughter early in his text when he introduces Griselda first as a daughter, and then as a young maiden, "A doghter hadde he, fair ynogh to sighte,/ And Grisildis this yonge mayden highte" (209-10). He repeats this language again when Griselda must surrender her daughter to the malicious-looking sergeant as Griselda tells him, "Have heer agayn youre litel yonge mayde" (567). Chaucer's use of the term "yonge mayde," which strengthens the resemblance of mother and daughter, also serves as a way for Griselda to psychologically distance herself from



her daughter by assuming the vocabulary of characters outside of that maternal bond, and conceding ownership to the sergeant. This moment marks the first time that Griselda, who once filled the text's maternal void, becomes an absent mother herself.

Amplifying the tale's sense of motherlessness, Griselda's connection to her son becomes obscured in the ambiguous term "knave child." Chaucer uses this term three times, at line 444, line 447, and finally when describing the son's birth in line 612. In this passage, Griselda does not bear a son, but a "knave child," symbolically detaching Griselda from her role as mother, while emphasizing her role as child-bearer:

In this estaat ther passed been foure yeer  
Er she with childe was, but, as God wolde,  
A knave child she bar by this Walter,  
Ful gracious and fair for to biholde.  
And whan that folk it to his fader tolde,  
Nat oonly he but al his contree merye  
Was for this child, and God they thanke and herye (610-16).

When used in context of the son's birth, "knave" specifies a male child, but the aforementioned doubling of female gender roles calls our attention to the son's social grooming to one day inherit the role of his dishonest and cruel father, Walter, who fulfills another connotation of "knave."<sup>62</sup> Just as Griselda initially identifies with her daughter, Walter identifies with his son, and uses the pronoun "my" when speaking about him (626). Whether or not Walter will allow the son to live, the stakes for ownership over this child suddenly feel higher, and Griselda's appeal to Walter's pity reveals an attempt to reclaim both of her children. She reminds Walter of her role as a mother, instead of mere child-bearer, "I wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng, certayn,/ But as yow list. Naught greveth me at al,/ Though that *my* doughter and *my* sone be slayn –/ At youre comandement, this

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<sup>62</sup> See glossary in *The Riverside Chaucer*. When used in the pejorative sense, "knave" can mean "churl," or "villain" (page 1261).

is to sayn” (646-49, emphasis mine). On the surface, Chaucer’s Griselda seems disturbingly compliant, even evil, in her willingness to surrender her children to danger so easily. Walter marvels at Griselda’s ability to comply with his demands, and admits that if he did not know her love for their children, he would suspect that her calm demeanor belies unnatural malice: “Ne hadde soothly knowen therbifoore/ That parfitly hir children loved she,/ He wolde have wend that of som subtiltee,/ And of malice, or for crueel corage,/ That she hadde suffred this with sad visage” (689-93). Walter, like many modern readers of Chaucer who find Griselda’s reactions similarly disturbing, enjoys power in his society, which allows him to think that one’s actions reflects one’s will. Walter fails to consider Griselda’s relative powerlessness, and the limited ways she has already attempted to intervene on behalf of her children.

In fact, Griselda’s speech belies an important ambiguity. On the one hand, she complies with Walter’s wishes, even declaring that his demands do not “greveth me at al” (647). But on the other hand, she asserts ownership over her children, directing the blame for their demise at Walter by reminding him, “At youre comandement, this is to sayn” (649). A comparison of the birth of Griselda’s daughter and the birth of Proserpina in Claudian’s *De Raptu Proserpinae* will illuminate my point that Griselda, although a queen, has limited options available to her to protect her children. In Claudian’s version of the Proserpina myth, Ceres has no other children besides Proserpina, and Ceres becomes “unfruitful” after her exhaustive labor:

Ceres, whose temple is at Henna, had but one youthful daughter, a child long prayed for; for the goddess of birth granted no second offspring, and her womb, exhausted by that first labour, became unfruitful. Yet prouder is the mother above all mothers, and Proserpine such as to take the place of many (122).

Unlike Ceres, who beams with pride at the birth of her daughter, Griselda feels disappointment. The differences in maternal responses attest to the varying degrees of autonomy each mother has in her situation. Ceres, an agricultural goddess, has divine power in her world, and as such, she does not need to produce male offspring to secure her safety in society. Griselda, although seemingly immortal in virtue, must conform to the wishes of her husband and his subjects to survive. Although Griselda cannot intervene on her daughter's behalf like angry Ceres, she does attempt intervention, however feeble. Griselda's gilded cage forces her to operate within its rules, and although Walter's subjects bear affection for Griselda, her influence does not exceed that of her husband's, who rules not only through birthright, but through fear. Moreover, if Griselda were to lash out or otherwise embark on a tale of revenge, her actions would compromise Chaucer's characterization of her as a sacred mother. Griselda's characterization borrows from myth and Christian models of sacred motherhood, including Eve and the Virgin Mary.<sup>63</sup>

Griselda's outlets for emotional expression resemble those we have already seen in the previous tales, reinforcing the characterization of prayer, pity, and emotional performativity as feminine tools of resistance throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. She can pray, as Emelye does in the *Knight's Tale*. She can also appeal to the captor's pity, as seen before in the *Man of Law's Tale*.<sup>64</sup> Griselda uses both of these techniques when the sergeant arrives to take her daughter away. Griselda appeals to the sergeant's pity by praying to him that she may kiss her baby (550). Griselda also *performs* her role as a

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<sup>63</sup> See Newton, "The linkage of motherhood with biblical curse against Eve in Griselda's language is mitigated by persistent imagery that figures her as the Virgin" (64).

<sup>64</sup> See Mann, "Pity is the pressure brought to bear of the sufferer on the beholder; it is the invisible strength that acts as the 'champioun' Constance lacks" (108).

mother, visually reinforcing that relationship to the sergeant. After taking her baby in her lap and kissing her, she blesses the child and reminds the sergeant of her role as the infant's mother by saying "farewell, *my child!*" (555). Finally, she prays to Christ by entrusting the soul of her baby to him (558-9). Griselda repeats these actions when the sergeant takes away her son (673-83). Both instances provide examples of maternal desperation, but Griselda's bravest intervention occurs when she attempts to protect Walter's new bride, her own daughter, from Walter's sadism:

O thyng biseke I yow, and warne also,  
That ye ne prikke with no tormentynge  
This tendre mayden, as ye han doon mo;  
For she is fostred in hire norissynge  
Moore tendrely, and, to my supposynge,  
She koude nat adversitee endure  
As koude a povre fostred creature (1037-43).

Chaucer does not tell the reader whether or not she recognizes her daughter, and the tale's conclusion seems to posit that she does not know Walter's secret. Such a reading denies the possibility of emotional performativity. As previously seen in the *Knight's Tale* when the Amazons reenact the Theban widows' mournful posture, and in the *Reeve's Tale* when Malyne almost weeps, but restrains from that action, emotional performativity constitutes another "feminine" tool at Griselda's disposal to protect her children.<sup>65</sup> Given the intimacy Chaucer has created between mother and daughter, even in this passage, in which Griselda lovingly calls the new bride a "tendre mayden," the reader cannot ignore the possibility that Griselda sees herself in this maiden and recognizes her as her daughter. Griselda's admission that Walter has indeed acted cruelly puts her in great

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<sup>65</sup> Another example of maternal performance comes at the end of the tale, when Griselda tearfully embraces her returned children "Ful lyk a mooder" (1084). This act not only communicates to everyone watching (the crowd, Walter, and the reader) that Griselda acknowledges these children as hers, but it demonstrates the emotional pain Griselda has heretofore stifled, as well as her gratitude for the reunion.

peril, because she risks igniting the temper of a man who enjoys to watch her suffer.

Griselda may not travel to the ends of the earth to save her as Ceres does for Proserpina, but she does sacrifice herself for her daughter's safety.

### A Queen of Fairy: Proserpina as Mother and Enchantress in the *Merchant's Tale*

The *Merchant's Tale* provides the angry, feminine, maternal voice that the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale* lack. During a heated debate with Pluto in the *Merchant's Tale*, Proserpina rages against the hypocritical "auctoritees"<sup>66</sup> her husband uses to justify his intentions to cure January's blindness at a critical moment in the tale, when restoration of January's sight would reveal May's infidelity. Proserpina swears by her "moodres sires soule" to protect May, providing her and "alle women after" with the lies they need to evade to trouble (2265-71). In this moment, Proserpina and May function as an exceptional mother-daughter relationship within the *Canterbury Tales*, through which anger receives a feminine voice. Proserpina's declaration that, "I am a womman, nedes moot I speke,/ Or elles swelle til myn herte breke," attests to the way that stifled anger does not disappear, but "swells" within a person, just as the anger of Chaucer's female characters does not lie dormant somewhere, but seethes beneath their silences (2305-6).

Proserpina's role as May's spiritual mother begins with a process of identification, similar to the ones we have seen before with Diana/Emelye<sup>67</sup> and

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<sup>66</sup> Proserpina jabs, "What rekketh me of youre auctoritees?" (2276). Her stance here reflects another angry feminine voice in the text, the Wife of Bath, who reveals similar disdain for misogynistic auctoritees in the prologue to her tale.

<sup>67</sup> Emelye's love of hunting and desire to remain chaste connect her to Diana, virgin goddess of the hunt (KT III. 2307-2311).

Mary/Custance.<sup>68</sup> We can read January and May as belonging to a literary lineage of similar married couples found in the *senex amans* topos,<sup>69</sup> in which the feeble old man marries a beautiful, younger woman, and often seeks to limit her freedom. Although the classical figures of Pluto and Proserpina do not resemble characters within that topos, their identification<sup>70</sup> with January and May aligns them with such a lineage within the context of the *Merchant's Tale*. In this way, May becomes Proserpina's literary descendant, but their identification within this specific text alone provides enough evidence to conclude that May becomes Proserpina's spiritual daughter.

Chaucer's conflation of "Fayere," or fairyland with the garden in the *Merchant's Tale* constitutes another way he constructs Proserpina and May as a mother-daughter

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<sup>68</sup> Custance cries with her son just before Mary intervenes to save her, visually connecting Custance to the Virgin Mother's enmeshed relationship with Christ in medieval art: "Wo was this wrecched womman tho bigon;/ Hir child cride, and she cride pitously./ But blisful Marie heelp hire right anon" (MLT 918-20).

<sup>69</sup> According to the *Riverside Chaucer*, the *Merchant's Tale* "illustrates the familiar topos of the *senex amans*, or aged lover, also found in the Miller's Tale, The Reeve's Prologue, and The Wife of Bath's Prologue" (884). By extension, we might also read January and May as the latest descendants in a line of similar characters throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. I believe that January's likeness to other aged figures in the *Canterbury Tales* actually extends beyond the *senex amans* topos. The *Pardoner's Tale* includes a mysterious old man who leads three young men to their deaths at the site of an oak tree. He tells them, "'Now, sires,' quod he, 'if that yow be so leef/ To fynde Deeth, turne up this croked wey./ For in that grove I lafte hym, by my fey,/ Under a tree, and there he wole abyde'" (PT 760-3). The old man, unhappily eternal, also becomes the tale's harbinger of death— these associations already connect him to Pluto/Death/January; that a special tree becomes the site where the young men "find death" might be compared to the pear tree's location as the main site of conflict the *Merchant's Tale*, underscoring Chaucer's conflation of "faerye" with the Underworld and the physical garden within the tale.

<sup>70</sup> Simmons-O' Neill addresses January and May's identification with Pluto and Proserpina, arguing that, "[. . .] Chaucer's revisions of traditions (classical, medieval, and personal) do more than suggest the culpability of men in the structures of genre and power, or of January alone in his marital woes. While the rape of Helen by Paris is identified in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* with the male structures which belie Hector's claim not to 'selle' women (TC 4. 182)-- and the image of the Merchant's January 'ravysshed' by the thought of his wedding night, intending to 'streyn' May in his arms 'as Paris dide Eleyne' (4. 1750-54), further connects these images-- issues of self-definition and rape in the *Merchant's Tale* are part of a momentary identification of both January and May with Proserpine, who is 'ravysshed' from Ethna against her will by Pluto (4. 2230)." (395). See also Wensterdorf, "A more important function of the Pluto episode is to indicate that the marriage entered into by January is reprehensible because, in view of its very circumstances, it takes on some aspects of the rape. It is true that May, unlike Proserpina, is apparently not under any coercion to marry January, but she is just as averse as her counterpart to the thought of wedded life with an elderly, lustful, and repulsive husband" (525-6).

relationship. The word “Fayerye” harkens back to the episodes of sexual violence found in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and the Rape of Proserpina. The Wife of Bath describes a magical land “fulfild of fayerye,” where an “elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,/ Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede” (859-861). Crucially, a knight rapes an unnamed maiden in this fairyland setting, disrupting the idyllic image the Wife of Bath sets forth at the start of her tale (887-8). This rupture evokes the Rape of Proserpina, wherein Pluto’s violent interruption shatters the pastoral scene set forth by Ovid and Claudian, of an innocent goddess’s frolicking in a forest/meadow. In the *Merchant’s Tale*, Chaucer crowns Pluto and Proserpina the king and queen of “Fayerye:”

That in that gardyn, in the ferther syde,  
 Pluto, that is kyng of Fayerye,  
 And many a lady in his compaignye,  
 Folwyng his wyf, the queene Proserpyna,  
 Which that he ravysshed out of [Ethna]  
 Whil that she gadered floures in the mede (2226-31).

The reference to a “mede,” the presence of a fairy-queen, and the “compaignye” of ladies following Proserpina<sup>71</sup> resemble the structures of fairyland in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, connecting Proserpina to both the “elf-queene” and the “ravysshed” maiden within that text.<sup>72</sup> In the *Merchant’s Tale*, “Fayerye”<sup>73</sup> describes both a physical space within the text

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<sup>71</sup> The company of ladies here are fairies who dance with their fairy-queen, as Chaucer tells us when he relays the beauty of the garden that January builds: “Ne Priapus ne myghte nat suffise,/ Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle/ The beautee of the gardyn and the welle/ That stood under a laurer alwey grene./ Ful ofte tyme he Pluto and his queene,/ Proserpina, and al hire *fayerye*./ Disporten hem and maken melodye/ Aboute that welle, and *daunced*, as men tolde” (2034-41, emphasis mine). The presence of a laurel tree in the garden emphasizes the tale’s subtext that marriage can represent a type sexual violence.

<sup>72</sup> January’s role as a knight likewise connects him to the knight who rapes the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, underscoring the themes of sexual violence that the Proserpina myth raises within the tale.

<sup>73</sup> For further analysis regarding Pluto and Proserpina’s roles as king and queen of fairyland, see Wentersdorf: “The mythological implicatiolns of the presence of Pluto and Proserpina in January’s garden are in no wise belied by Chaucer’s transformation of them into the king and queen of fayerye. Both the poet and his audience were well aware of the significance of these two personages as divinities in the underworld. That Chaucer has not forgotten and does not intend that his audience should forget Pluto’s role as dread ruler of Hades and Proserpina’s as ‘quene . . . of the derke pyne’ (*House of Fame*, 1512) is

and indicates to the reader that some sort of enchantment will occur. As in the *Clerk's Tale*, a promise becomes an important plot point, but whereas Griselda's promise to always obey Walter precedes her emotional silencing, Proserpina's promise to protect May unearths May's buried frustration in marriage by providing Proserpina's angry speech with Pluto. As a physical space, "Faerye," conflates the Underworld (Pluto and Proserpina's seat of power in classical mythology) with the magical garden in the *Merchant's Tale*, itself symbolic of January's marriage to May, and packed with allusions to the garden of Eden/paradise<sup>74</sup> and the various gardens which figure as mythical settings for the Rape of Proserpina (including Emelye's garden in the *Knight's Tale*.)<sup>75</sup> But Chaucer's fairyland does not just represent the site of the maiden's rapture; he also uses the concepts purgatory and hell to characterize January's marriage to May. Justinus warns January, "Paraunter, she may be youre purgatorie" (1670). His words echo a line that the Wife of Bath states in her prologue, "By God, in erthe I was his purgatorie" (489). Marriage may represent January's bliss, but it also represents his torture.

But if May becomes January's purgatory, a testing ground for his moral character and a source of both pleasure and pain, then January certainly becomes May's personal hell, as seen in the physical paralysis she experiences on her wedding night. Chaucer uses the images of stone to relay the imprisonment of May's body, symbolized by the walls of

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apparent from the passage which forms the preface to the argument between Pluto and his spouse in January's garden" (525).

<sup>74</sup> At the beginning of the tale, January perceives marriage as an earthly paradise: "'Noon oother lyf,' seyde he, 'is worth a bene,/ For wedlok is so esy and so clene,/ That in this world it is a paradys.'/ Thus seyde this olde knyght, that was so wys" (1263-66). The merchant likewise refers to wives as man's paradise: "Heere may ye se, and heerby may ye preve,/ That wyf is mannes helpe and his confort,/ His paradys terrestre, and his disport" (1330-32). The narrator also calls May January's paradise: "And Januarie hath faste in armes take/His fresshe May, his paradys, his make" (1821-1822).

<sup>75</sup> For further analysis regarding the conflation of these gardens, see Harley, "Chaucer indeed uses the myth in both the Knight's romance and the Merchant's fabliau to underscore the marital exploitation of Emelye and May" (26).



stone January constructs around the garden, which isolate his wife from the world: “He made a gardyn, walled al with stoon;/ So fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon” (2029-30). When Chaucer describes Malynne’s wedding night, Chaucer denies us access to May’s thoughts and feelings, her stillness evoking the impenetrable stone walls constructed around the garden:<sup>76</sup> “The bryde was broght abedde as stille as stoon” (1818). When Chaucer describes another sexual encounter between January and May, he submerges her emotional interiority yet again:

Who studieth now but faire fresshe May?  
Adoun by olde Januarie she lay,  
That sleep til that the coughe hath hym awaked.  
Anon he preyde hire strepen hire al naked;  
He wolde of hire, he seyde, han som plesaunce;  
He seyde hir clothes dide hym encombraunce,  
And she obeyeth, be hire lief or looth.  
But lest that precious folk be with me wrooth,  
How that he wroghte, I dar nat to yow telle,  
Or wheither hire thoughte it paradys or helle.<sup>77</sup> (1955-64).

The use of the word “helle,” itself an eternal, torturous nightmare for lost souls, emphasizes the theme of May’s marriage as a permanent entrapment. Of course, the

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<sup>76</sup> Saunders notes how Chaucer silences May’s emotional response to the consummation of her marriage with January: “In the Merchant’s graphic depiction of the wedding night between January and May, the central image is of that of unwanted sex [. . .], In the *Canterbury Tales*, episodes of sexual violence beget the submergence of the victim’s emotionality May’s emotions are inaccessible, her silence reflected physically as she lies ‘stille as stoon,’ [. . .] the sexual act is portrayed, if not as rape, then certainly as unwanted. May does not refuse what is part of the marriage contract, but she does withhold active consent” (296). However, it should be noted that Saunders also argues, “The subtext of rape in the first part of the story is, however, misogynistically rewritten through the movement of May from victim to adultress: her cuckolding of January gleefully takes advantage of his age and blindness to usurp his *maistrye* of the *locus amoenus*, the enclosed garden, and the tale becomes a ‘satire on the garden ideal’” (296-7). I argue that Chaucer maintains the subtext of rape throughout, and the pathos he invents for January does not rob the original subtext of meaning so much as it simply builds a more nuanced portrait of marriage in which both partners act selfishly, regardless of the ways each has been victimized. Chaucer revisits this theme after initially introducing it in Alison and Nicholas’s cruel treatment of John in the *Miller’s Tale*. My reading channels Proserpina’s attempts to remind Pluto in the *Merchant’s Tale* that unlike God, men and women are imperfect: “[. . .] in sovereyn bontee/ Nis noon but God, but neither he ne she” (2289-90).

<sup>77</sup> According to Harley, “That May’s marriage to January represents a violation of May’s desires is beyond doubt. May is seen, seized, and imprisoned [. . .] January’s rape, described in a metaphor unmistakably echoing Pluto’s rape of Proserpina, is ‘helle’” (27).

Christian concept of hell does not find its mythological counterpoint in the garden where Pluto abducts Proserpina, but in the place he traps her, the Underworld. In this way, Chaucer sets up May as Proserpina's doppelgänger and spiritual daughter, creating an opportunity for Proserpina to provide May with some respite from her insufferable marriage.

Because the garden does not represent one specific location, but rather a fluid exchange of meaningful locations, it functions for Chaucer as a liminal space between reality and fantasy, not bound to the natural laws of the “real world.” Proserpina’s role as the Queen of Fairyland emphasizes the liminal structure of her mythos, which shifts her between two worlds, one representing the safety and magic of childhood (Earth), and the other representing the pain of responsibility of adulthood (the Underworld, an inevitable end for all people.) Once again, Proserpina’s role changes in this liminal space, just as it has before when she changed from maiden to wife in the *Metamorphoses* and *De Raptu Proserpinae*, except this time, she changes from wife to mother. Her intervention on May’s behalf echoes Ceres’s role in the Rape of Proserpina, wherein Ceres’ efforts cannot completely save her daughter from entrapment, but she manages to soften the curse, making Proserpina’s stay in the Underworld more bearable. For both Ceres in the *Metamorphoses* and Proserpina in the *Merchant’s Tale*, anger becomes the catalyst which effects change for the daughter:

“Dame,” quod this Pluto, “be no lenger wrooth;  
I yeve it up! But sith I swoor myn ooth  
That I wolde graunten hym his sighte ageyn,  
My word shal stonde, I warne yow certeyn.  
I am a kyng; it sit me noght to lye.”  
“And I,” quod she, “a queene of Fayerye!  
Hir answeyre shal she have, I undertake.  
Lat us namoore wordes heerof make;

For sothe, I wol no lenger yow contrarie” (2311-2319).

Proserpina provides magical assistance to May, not unlike the fairy godmothers<sup>78</sup> found in later examples of maternal characters who fulfill the role of magical “donor” in fairytales. Unlike the *Knight’s Tale*, in which Chaucer renders Diana powerless and illustrates her abandonment of Emelye, or the *Man of Law’s Tale*, in which Chaucer denies us access to Mary’s emotionality and rewrites her role in Custance’s protection, the *Merchant’s Tale* provides the angry, divinely maternal, and feminine voice missing from every other tale in the *Canterbury Tales*.

Nonetheless, Proserpina's feminine anger in the *Merchant's Tale* is still filtered through the language and anti-feminist rhetoric its male author, and therefore cannot truly reflect a feminine voice divorced from the misogyny of Chaucer's storytelling. According to Harley, “Ultimately, Chaucer’s ‘queene Proserpyna,’ the Ceres-surrogate of ‘The Merchant’s Tale,’ wields only the dubious power that the misogynists readily grant women, the power of verbal deceit” (29). And as Rose reminds us,

[. . .] When Chaucer the male poet gives female characters speeches in which they discuss gender using the masculine discourse of misogyny, he displaces language and gender in a slippery manner. Such a displacement, to Irigaray and to Shoshana Felman, poses a question of agency and subjectivity. Felman’s query, “Who is speaking here?” reminds us of Irigaray’s notion of the absence of a female-generated language, a lack that forces women to use the language of men (35).

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<sup>78</sup> Jorgensen identifies fairy godmothers as a popular “donor” in fairytales: “Donors and helpers traditionally appear in fairy tales to aid the hero and the heroine at various points in the plot [. . .] In many fairy tales, especially more literary tales of Charles Perrault and other French writers of his period, a common donor and helper is the fairy godmother” (216-7). However, “fairy godmothers are relatively rare in oral folktales” (219). Because of her dual roles as mother and donor, Proserpina in the *Merchant’s Tale* may represent a precursor to fairy godmothers.

In determining which portions of speech and emotional expressions throughout the *Canterbury Tales* reflect the sincerity of its speaker, I am reminded of the envoy to the *Clerk's Tale*, in which Chaucer, through the Clerk-narrator, implores women to behave like Echo, who “evere answereth at the countretaille” (1190). Chaucer's women do repeat the language of men, from Chaucer the poet to other male characters in the text itself. We have seen how Griselda repeats what Walter desires to hear, but subverts his language to assert ownership over her children. We have also seen the implied repetition of wedding vows throughout the tales, and when Pluto calls himself a king of fairyland, Proserpina angrily replies by calling herself its queen. In the Rape of Proserpina, Ceres only partially recovers her lost daughter. In my search for the lost angry, feminine voices of the *Canterbury Tales*, I have arrived at a similarly bittersweet conclusion: because Chaucer's women lack a language of their own, and often lack the emotional outlets that Chaucer allows his male characters, we can only partially unearth their voices and submerged emotionality.

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