



1997

Sexuality and the Balance of Power in the Canterbury Tales

Sarah C. Zumdahl '97

Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation

Zumdahl '97, Sarah C., "Sexuality and the Balance of Power in the Canterbury Tales" (1997). *Honors Projects*. Paper 13.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/eng_honproj/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Ames Library, the Andrew W. Mellon Center for Curricular and Faculty Development, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Commons @ IWU by the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Sarah C. Zumdahl

Sexuality and the Balance of Power
in the Canterbury Tales

Research Honors in English

Dan Terkla
Mary Ann Bushman
Pamela Muirhead
Curtis Trout

April 25, 1997

When examining ideas on the sexuality of Chaucer's characters, one cannot help but come across the work of Alfred David. In his book *The Strumpet Muse*, David studies selected Canterbury tales from the perspective of New Criticism, analyzing various sexual attitudes expressed in the separate tales. In this paper I appropriate a basic concept of David's and use it to my own feminist critical purposes, adding significantly to David's core idea. Throughout the following study of sexuality and power in the *Canterbury Tales*, I use "sexual natural" to define a certain state of human sexuality. While the term is my own, the idea is drawn from David's general argument on the "comedy of innocence" (95).

In my estimation Chaucer portrays, in terms of sexuality, two extremes in the balance of power between masculine and feminine: "The Reeve's Tale" [RvT] incorporates a woman who, in effect, pays her rapist for violating her, while the Wife of Bath tells a tale in which a knight consciously concedes all his masculine power to a woman. The "Miller's Tale" [MilT] mediates between these two extremes, but is also an example of how masculine and feminine realize equality of control in a sexual relationship. Using these three tales as my support, I will argue that in Chaucer's estimation, male/female power in a

fictional, yet non-ideal world can achieve equal balance only when sex is "natural" -- a state loosely defined by Alfred David as being neither too obsessed with physical gratification and domination, nor too fixated on some goal apart from the pleasure of sex itself(95).

Though some have argued that sex in the "Knight's Tale" is significant simply for the sake of its absence, the MilT is the first Canterbury tale that deals directly with the subject of human sexuality. Chaucer places this tale in such a prominent position for a number of reasons. The Miller himself, though a rather obnoxious fellow, embodies the very Canterbury themes of rebellion, irreverence, and joviality(Dinshaw 11). Through the Miller, Chaucer turns "up-sid-doon" the expectations and limitations associated with medieval social hierarchy. The low-born Miller over-steps his place by setting himself up against the Knight: "I kan a noble tale for the nones,/ With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale,"(3126). But what he proposes in his tale is even more subversive than the imposition itself.

In the MilT Chaucer gives his reader a hypothetical alternative to the Church's disapproving views on sexuality.¹ In the guise of peasant "harlotrye," Chaucer presents a freer, less

guilty, portrait of sexuality in the character of Alisoun of Oxenford (3145). Through her characterization Chaucer gives a portrait of the sexual natural, and only in this tale is the natural maintained by a character. Alfred David calls this attitude toward sexuality "the religion of love," because it ignores sexual restrictions imposed by the Church while at the same time creating its own moral justification by "celebrating the joy of life" (96,95). Chaucer has chosen an important role for his Miller, because though the churl challenges fundamental values that his "bette[s]" rely on to maintain social order, his heresy is allowed its play, for Chaucer asks that "men shal nat maken ernest of game" (3186). His insurrection is never considered dangerous precisely because he is a character we can laugh at.

The Miller himself is a one-man peasant rebellion; he carries a tongue-loosening bottle of wine instead of the usual pitchfork and torch, but the message he conveys is the same. He has listened patiently to the Knight's lengthy Athenian-medieval romance, but becomes fed up when Harry Bailey's class-conscience is going to banish him to the end of the tale-telling roster:

Our Hooste...

seyde, "Abyd, Robyn, my leeve brother;

Som bettre man shal telle us first another.

Abyd, and lat us werken thriftily."

"By Goddes soule," quod he, "that wol

nat I;

For I wol speke or elles go my wey." (I.3129)

He knows for a drunken fact that his tale is going to best that of the Knight.

The Miller's frustration is understandable; he simply wants to tell a tale about his kind of people, not Athenians or kings. An audience of Chaucer's day would immediately recognize the Miller's social mutiny as a comedic convention and real life occurrence. They were familiar with, and had probably witnessed, such traditions as Holy Innocents Day where choir boys, dressed up as cardinals and bishops, pretended to usurp control of the mass, singing the psalm "Deposuit potentes-- He has put down the mighty from their seats" (Owen, 105). This and similar holidays allowed the lower classes to play at revolution and mock those who oppressed them the rest of the year. Like the Miller's own drunken insurrection, these subversive festivities were allowed only because they were meant as a joke and nothing more serious.²

Not only does the Miller represent a social revolution of

the "common man," he also personifies the natural rebellion that is described in the opening lines of the "General Prologue" (David 93). The new order of spring is challenging the oppression of winter, and with this awakening comes a spirit of carefree festivity (92). In this way Chaucer aligns the Miller with Nature and a comedy unconstrained by conventional mores.

One of the most outstanding features of the *MilT* is its unabashed and guiltless revelry in the sensual. In the words of Alfred David, "Sex is frankly presented as the supreme physical pleasure, a natural satisfaction like food and drink" (95). Chaucer embodies this ideal most concretely in Alisoun of Oxenford, a young peasant girl who personifies "natural" sex in two ways. She is first of all, the paragon of earthy, vigorous, young womanhood -- a natural delight to any man who sees and wants her. "She was ful moore blisful on to see/ Than is the newe pere-jonette tree," (3247-48). But she is not merely an object of healthy sexual desire, she also has desires of her own.

Alisoun's description is very animalistic: "hir song, it was al loude and yerne/ As any swalwe... [She] koude skippe and make game,/ As any kyde or calf... Wynsynge she was, as is a joly colt" (3257-60, 3263). Yet, unlike other animalistic connections Chaucer has made, such as the Miller's "berd as any sowe or fox

was reed" or Symkyn's "skulle...piled as an ape" in the RvT, none of Alisoun's descriptions are at all negative (552,3935). She personifies the beauty and exuberance of Nature; she is "wylde and yong" (3225).

Because of this characterization, Alisoun experiences sexual pleasure as a creature of Nature, without worrying about the restrictions that marriage and the Church place on sex. In Alisoun's eyes, the desire for sex is not a human frailty or a sin before God; if anything, sex is her joyful praise. Chaucer in essence gives her God's blessing when the church bells chime and the monks sing their matins while she and her lover are engaged in "bisynesse of myrthe and of solas" (3654).

To placate his more conservative readers, Chaucer does give some rationale for Alisoun's seemingly blatant rejection of feudal and Christian morality. Both the Miller and his character John the Carpenter are very concerned that "men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee," for it was the desire for divine knowledge of good and evil that caused man to Fall in the first place (3454). In her carefree simplicity, Alisoun retains a kind of pre-lapsarian innocence by ignoring the complexities of human sin. Like an animal, concentrates strictly on her own physical needs and desires. Chaucer proposes a new, yet entirely logical

and moral philosophy through the actions of the other characters in the tale, and the resulting consequences brought upon them.

John the Carpenter starts as a prosperous craftsman, but through the course of the narrative, becomes the village idiot. Though it would appear his young wife lies at the root of all his problems, in the context of the "natural" ideology, he, and not his wife, has sinned. He, in his old age, has taken a young wife, and this, according to the "sexual natural" ideology, is a "sin against nature" (David 95). John's unnatural desire to "heeld hire narwe in cage" makes him the weak partner in their marriage (3224). While Alisoun is evenly balanced, neither too concerned with power nor with excesses of physical pleasure, John has defied the natural and in so doing, he has given Alisoun power over him.

John's tenant, the amorous clerk Nicholas, uses Alisoun's indirect control over John to convince the gullible carpenter that he must ready himself for the second Flood, in order that he may save his dear wife.

This carpenter answerde, "Allas, my wyf!

And shal she drenche? Allas, myn Alisoun!"

For sorwe of this he fil almoost adoun,

And seyed, "Is ther no remedie in this cas?"

"Why, yis, for Gode," quod hende Nicholas,...

Yet shal I saven hire and thee and me." (3522-3227)

In the end, John is ridiculed for his foolishness-- his punishment for violating the implicit rule of nature: that "wylde and yonge" does not belong with "old" (3225).

"Hende" Nicholas, a young man, is sexually and naturally more suited for Alisoun (3199). But while he wants Alisoun's body and enjoys sex for the pure physical pleasure, he is too concerned with objectives other than simple sensual enjoyment to be in line with Alisoun's "natural."

He turns his affair with Alisoun into a test of his own cleverness and wit; it becomes a matter of the educated clerk pulling one over on the ignorant laborer. His plan is much too elaborate to be practical-- "Nicholas shal shapen him a wyle/ This sely jealous housbonde to bigyle" (3403-04). Like John, Nicholas is also punished in the end for his unnatural wish to complicate sexual relations unnecessarily.

Through Absolon Chaucer portrays yet another way in which man can deviate from the sexual "natural." The parish clerk is a vital player in this tale, not just as a scorned lover and necessary plot device, but also as a medium through which Chaucer raises issues about what is considered masculine and feminine.

Absolon can by no stretch of the imagination be called manly. His physical description resembles that of the Pardoner, a personage Chaucer describes as "a geldyng or a mare" (692). Absolon is too absorbed in his own attractiveness, and would probably be too squeamish about the act itself, to really want sex with Alisoun.

Instead, Absolon seems to want the medieval courtly ideal of romance. This ideal, however, goes against the sexual "natural" because courtly love traditionally remains unconsummated. But his prissiness and vanity notwithstanding, only in relation to Alisoun does his femininity translate into a loss of power.

Alisoun, our established sexual standard, is described in phallic and militaristic terms that become more obviously significant when taken in context with her relationship to the feminine Absolon. Chaucer tells us she is "Long as a mast, and upright as a [cross-bow] bolt./ A brooch she baar upon hir lowe coler,/ as brood as is the boos of a bokeler" (3264-66). This is indeed very manly in comparison with "Absolon./ Crul was his heer, and as the gold it shoon," (3313,14). Alisoun clearly wields the power in her relationship with Absolon. As a sort of proof of her potency, she plays tricks on her scorned suitor, just as Nicholas plays them on his landlord, John.

Absolon tries to compensate for his lack of masculine power by borrowing a hot poker from the blacksmith Gerveys: "freend so deere,/ That hoote kultour in the chymenee heere,/ as lene it me;"(3776). He plans to burn Alisoun, the brand symbolizing his ownership and domination of her "colt"ish nature, as well as a punishment for her dominance and power over him (3263). Instead, Absolon's borrowed phallic poker punishes Nicholas for his trickery and scheming.

Alisoun is the only character in this story who escapes unscathed. She wants both good sex and enough wealth to gratify her desire for sensual pleasures like "silk [and] barmcloth as whit as morne milk"(3235-36). She is not so involved with intrigue that she sought out Nicholas herself and plotted ways to be with him, but neither did she do the sexually "unnatural" thing and refuse him for very long.

Her power over the men in her life is, for the most part, passive and feminine. She allows them to revolve around her, and while getting everything she desires, she remains passive and perfectly in balance. Alisoun is not moral, but neither is she immoral. Chaucer allows her to operate outside the framework of conventional morality. Her happy fate at the end of the tale is enough to convince me that, in Alisoun of Oxenford, Chaucer

creates a fiction that exemplifies the natural state of human sexuality.

The Reeve, however, does not appreciate the Miller's "joly" overturning of social hierarchy and the Church's sense of virtue. Our Reeve Osewald has gotten "fulle riche," not by speaking his mind and offending his "bettres," but by swallowing his pride for the sake of material gain(609). Chaucer tells us that the Reeve's "heer was by his erys ful round yshorn;/ His top was dokked lyk a priest biforn"(589-90). Through much of the Middle Ages and into Chaucer's time, this manner of cropping the hair was not just an indication of monastic affiliation, but a way for any man to show humble and loyal servitude. Walter Curry aptly calls it an "ostentatious display of humility"(72). The Reeve can "bette than his lord purchace," yet he remains indentured (608). His legs are "full lene/ Ylyk a staf; ther was no calf ysene"(591); and according to medieval physiognomy, small or spindly legs are the sign of a cowardly man.(Curry 77). The Reeve resents the Miller's freedom and bold irreverence, so he decides to tell a tale which pays back in full every insult that the Reeve believes he was made to endure.

In Osewald's tale, every humiliation suffered by John the carpenter is magnified to "quite" the Miller more harshly (3864).

Instead of being outsmarted by only one scholar as John is, Symkyn is duped and physically beaten by two. John and Symkyn are both cuckolded, but Symkyn suffers the additional disgrace of having his daughter deflowered right under his nose. And whereas everyone receives a sort of appropriate justice in the MILT, the clerks who abuse Symkyn and his family escape punishment.

But Symkyn is not a sympathetic character himself, and is described in less than glowing terms both physically and personally:

A millere was ther dwellynge many a day.

As any pecok he was proud and gay...

Round was his face, and camus was his nose;

As piled as an ape was his skulle...

A theef he was for sothe of corn and mele,

And that a sly, and usaunt for to stele.(3925-40)

His wife is almost equally despicable. She is mockingly referred to as "noble," the daughter of the village priest(3942). Both she and her husband wear colors above their station, and she will allow "no wight clepen hire but 'dame'"(3956).³ It is no wonder then, that the two Cambridge scholars, Aleyn and John, wish to humble the miller and his family. However, the young men use sex as their weapon, and while taking Symkyn down a notch, their

actions betray the dark, bitter frustration of their creator, the Reeve.

When Symkyn decides to swindle the two clerks, he does not realize what disaster it will bring upon him. Ironically, but not surprisingly, he is paranoid about theft and deception himself, so he plans to beat the youths at their own game, smiling at their antics while scheming on how to steal from them:

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 more wol I stele whan I take. (4049-4052)

When Aleyn and John realize their loss, they decide to make it up however they can, and conspire to humiliate and "quite" their host the miller.

The two Cambridge scholars use sex not only to avenge themselves against Symkyn, but also to prove their masculine power over his social-climbing wife and daughter. While mention of the clerks' stallion running after wild mares conjures visions of the sexual "natural," the scene that takes place that night in the Miller's bedroom is anything but natural. Aleyn and John, as they lie in bed listening to the tuneful snorting and snoring of their sexual quarries, are not motivated by a sensual desire to

have sex with either Malyne or her mother. Instead of enjoying sex innocently as Alisoun of Oxenford does, the clerks lower sex to the level of revenge and even go so far as to justify rape as fair payment for their trouble. Aleyn says to John, "ther is a lawe that says thus:/ That gif a man in a point be agreved,/ That in another he sal be releved" and calculates his fee: "als evere moot I thryve,/ If that I may, yon wenche wil I swyve"(4176-77). Aleyn makes an assumption about Malyne that critics have not questioned until recently, and even now many continue to defend.

When Aleyn sneaks into Malyne's bed, he takes for granted that there is nothing wrong with deflowering the girl simply because she is common and homely, a "thikke wenche" with "kamus nose" and "buttokes brode"(3973-75). Her virtue seems not to matter because she is neither noble and hyper-virginal, like Emyle or Custance of the Knight's and Merchant's tales respectively, nor is she a low-born living saint and martyr like Griselda of the "Clerk's Tale." Sadly enough, many Chaucerian scholars and critics agree with Aleyn, presuming Malyne is like every woman of fabliau-- loose with her sexual favors and the object around which general merriment and the hero's sexual exploits should revolve.⁴ Tamarrah Kohanski states, however, "The idea that Malyne is sexually eager, or at the very least

agreeable, seems to be based more on traditional expectation of the fabliau female than on anything the text really tells us about Malyne" (228).

Aleyn knows that Malyne needs a husband, and he uses the fact to his advantage. Malyne will not cry out if there is a naked man in her bed, because even the appearance of lost virginity will destroy her chances at the brilliant marriage she believes would be hers. Even more unfortunately, Malyne cannot, by law, cry rape. The medieval conceptualization of the offence of rape is very similar to our modern idea; canonists agreed it was a public crime, punishable by civil law, and defined as copulation through "moderate force" (Brundage, VIII.62). This "moderate force" could be either mental or physical, and even an unspoken threat such as can be inferred in the RvT would be judged as grounds for rape. But canon law of the late Middle Ages still included a stipulation dating from Rome, and the Latin crime of *raptus*: 'to take' (VIII.65). Though the notion was becoming antiquated in Chaucer's time, Medieval law still specified that in order for rape to occur, the victim must be carried off or abducted in some way. Since her "swyvyng" was taking place right under her own roof, Malyne could not even legally protest the taking of her virtue. Malyne consciously,

but unwillingly, submits to coercion: Aleyn "by the wenche crepte...Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,/ That it had been to late for to crie," (emphasis added) (4193-96). These are strong words for a genre in which "the absence of clear complicity on the part of the 'wenche' is highly unusual" (Kohanski, 231).

The next morning, though, Malyne falls victim to Aleyn once more, this time to his sweet words of love and romance:

Fare weel, Malyne, sweete wight!

The day is come; I may no lenger byde;

But everemo, wher so I go or ryde,

I is thyn awen clerk, swa have I seel!

(4236-39)

She responds by calling him "deere lemman," and telling him where he can find a cake baked from the grain that was stolen from him(4240). Because she seems loving and content in the morning, many readers assume she was a willing participant from the start. In reality, the scenario played out is a classic example of the centuries-old Western "rape myth" wherein a man sees a woman who thinks she has what every man wants, and the man decides she "needs a good screw" to humble her. He approaches her -- she is many times forbidden -- and she cannot help but succumb to his masculine power and overwhelming sexuality. In the morning she

is fawning and grateful, the perfect submissive woman who can make no demands on him because she has unequivocally lost the power struggle. The man is free to leave because he has achieved his goal, "his nedes sped"; the woman, on the other hand, has entered into a sexual relationship that ties her to the man (4205).⁵ Aleyn's crude boasting immediately after he leaves Malyne's bed makes it very clear what kind of encounter the night was for him, and proves the accuracy of the rape myth: "As I have thries in this shorte nyght/ Swyved the milleres doghter bolt upright" (4265-66).

As much as she is wronged by Aleyn, though, Malyne is not a model of the "natural" herself. She is made gullible by her own pretensions; she believes, as her parents have told her, that she is quite a catch. It does not occur to her as she steals back the grain that her father has stolen, that Aleyn has used her. Aleyn takes advantage of her delusions of grandeur to manipulate the situation in his favor, and because of this, he has even greater power over her.

Symkyn's wife is punished for her foolishness and greed-- both she and her husband fall all over themselves making the clerks welcome, once their guests flash a little gold-- by unwittingly making her husband a cuckold. Chaucer also makes it

plain that neither she nor her husband have been very interested in keeping their marriage in a sexually healthy and "natural" state. After John tricks her into his own bed and "priketh harde and depe as he were mad," she muses that she has not had such a great and vigorous swyve in years(4230-31). She and Symkyn have become too caught up in their own social aspirations to worry about the joys of physical pleasure.

It is doubtful that Symkyn wanted his wife for anything other than her "noble" blood and education, and the marriage a child of their union might secure. His greed, thievery, and disregard for the healthy sexuality of he and his wife put him at the mercy of the clerks whose one objective is revenge through sex. The RvT, though it too is a fabliau, casts a very different thematic light than the MilT. From his first lines in the "Reeve's Prologue," Osewold establishes himself as a caustic, though impotent, attacker of the sexual natural put forth in the MilT. Sex in his tale is not about mutual pleasure and physical enjoyment, but about retribution and payback. The skewed and unhealthy sexuality of the teller is reflected in the sexual values expressed in his tale.

At the opposite end of the gender-power spectrum sits the Wife of Bath, complacently awaiting her next hapless victim: "Of

fyve husbondes scoleiyng am I./ Welcome the sixte, whan that
evere he shal"(44). Chaucer never proposes that Alisoun of Bath
represents any kind of sexual natural-- more than anything else
she wants power over those around her (Owen, 146). And in this
way, she is a typical woman according to medieval misogynists:
Pope Innocent wrote of wives in The Misery of the Human
Condition, "She wants to master, and will not be mastered. She
will not be a servant, she must be in charge. She must have a
finger in everything" (Adversus Jovinium trans. Bloch 76).
Over the years, Alisoun has tried different methods of gaining
power. In her first three "goode" marriages, Alisoun exercised a
more passive, feminine power over her "riche, and olde"
husbands(196-97). She extracted wealth from them in exchange for
domestic peace, and their love for her put them at her mercy, for
she loved none of them.

They loved me so wel, by God above,
That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love!...
But sith I hadde him hoolly in myn hond,
And sith they hadde me yeven al hir lond,
What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese,
But it were for my profit and myn ese? (207-214)

Alisoun's experience has taught her to treat sex as a commodity,

and this attitude has colored every aspect of her life, making her into a shrewd businesswoman. The roles Alisoun has chosen to embrace as merchant, traveler, and sexual aggressor, are sources of traditionally masculine power. Therefore, Alisoun has given up some of her "natural" passive feminine power in favor of the less subtle and more active masculine: "An housbonde I wol have-- I wol nat lett--/ Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral" (154-155). She wants a husband she can treat like the traditional medieval wife (Hallissy, 140).

Alisoun's behavior is especially dangerous to the Church, because she is, in her own way, following its teachings while at the same time undermining its patriarchal control. The Church fathers of Chaucer's time taught that woman must emulate the superior nature of man, as man emulated the perfection of Christ. The Gospel of Mary states, "Praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us into men" (trans. Bloch 93). In order for a woman to be the equal of any man, she must disclaim her femininity. This case includes nuns and virgin saints, who renounce their sexuality in order to gain a masculine, and hence more perfect, spirituality. The Wife, however, has only given up the child-bearing aspect of her sexual/feminine nature. I would argue that this makes her even more masculine-- a sexual being

who aggressively wields active power.

The Wife also appropriates the masculine tool of textual authority, and manipulates it to her own purpose. Alisoun has determined through years of "experience" that textual "auctoritee" is masculine, and correlatively, if not causatively, questionable (1). According to Caroline Dinshaw, Alisoun of Bath is opposed to the gloss because it is written by learned men who are anti-pleasure and anti-body, so the Wife manipulates her own glosses(45). Alisoun asserts that the literal text-- her body-- can speak for itself. By doing this she gains power by bringing text into the realm of the sexual, out of the patriarchy's element. In the words of Caroline Dinshaw, "[The Wife] is impersonating a masculine discourse, dislocating it and voicing it from elsewhere" ("Quarrels, Rivals" 117). She beats the male-dominated system at its own game by preaching and glossing.

Edmund Reiss states that "through [Alisoun of Bath], Chaucer is able to reform and still to participate in patriarchal discourse; he recuperates the feminine within the solid structure of the discourse"(29). I would argue, though, that the Wyf has been, through necessity, masculinized. It is possible that she started out like Alisoun of Oxenford, simply wanting physical comfort and good sex. Her telling of this tale is Chaucer's way

of mediating between feminine and masculine. The fact that we the audience must read her character and her tale, calls into serious question the value of her sermon on experience. She is not real. She cannot be experienced, though of all the pilgrims she comes the closest. She has made it onto the pages of patriarchal textual authority because Chaucer de-feminized her enough to be recorded.

The Wife's "real" world is full of paradoxes and dichotomies, so she herself feels she must "choose between male and female roles," being either the subject or object, the oppressor or oppressed (Gottfried, 211)⁶.

In her first three marriages, the men had the wealth and power; she used sex as a bartering tool to get those things from them. She boasts, "How pitously a-nyght I make hem swynke!/ And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor./ They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor"(202-04). Her last two marriages, and especially her union with Jankyn, are examples of the other possibility; the men were young and healthy, but had no wealth or social power. She used them for sex or love, and they in turn had a measure of personal power over her: "[W]hy hydestow, with sorwe,/ The keys of thy cheste away fro me?...wenestow make an ydiot ofoure dame?" (308-09,311).

R. E. Kaske states that both man and woman want to rule in a relationship, and Alisoun's example seems to support this theory(49). However, this theory becomes paradoxical when taken in conjunction with Christian feudal dogma. Authority and Christian tradition state that man should rule over his wife sexually, and in every other way. The tradition stipulates, however, that sex must stay within the bounds of marriage. And because Christian morality frowns upon rape, the wife has control over the sex act. A man can only avoid being ruled by his wife as long as physical desire and fulfillment are not placed too high on the man's scale of values. The more important sex is to him, the more his authority over his wife decreases and the more the woman's power over her husband increases.

But within this equation lies a paradox, because the further woman's authority increases, the more contradictory the sex relation becomes. Man is supposed to be the sexual aggressor, but the loss of power to his wife emasculates him, making the one thing he has put above everything else-- physical gratification-- impossible.

The Wyf's tale, however, resolves this paradox of sexuality and power. Her hag, a magical figure in a fantasy world, has the ability to destabilize the social structure while still keeping it

in tact, and she does it through exclusively female methods. Susan Crane uses the word "queyntesse" to describe this feminine power. While "queynte" can refer to female genitalia, more often it describes the mysterious, unreachable, and alien nature of woman(153). This feminine "queyntesse" is represented most clearly in the hag's ability to shift her shape. Crane states, "[her] shape-shifting pleases the 'worldly appetit' (1218) of the knight, but again emphasizes the indeterminacy of the feminine" (155).

The hag is ultimately given absolute power over the knight who abused his masculine power through rape. However, she does not wish to overturn the order; she simply wishes to shake it a little. Her "sermon" on true nobility does not advocate the inherent moral superiority of poverty and low birth, but she openly questions shallow distinctions of character that are presumed true in a feudal society. Alisoun's fantasy is a world where women are given the power to blur the lines of gender and class power. She gives up her right to tyranny in order that the burden of power may be shared. Whereas the Church fathers "conceived of marriage as a constant struggle for mastery," the hag inhabits a world where "women wield their emotional sovereignty in ways beneficial to men and themselves" (Bloch 17;

Crane, *Gender and Romance* 117).

According to the Wyf, this is another kind of "natural" sexual relationship; the kind that Paul is talking about in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Love is not envious or boastful or rude" (New Revised Standard, 13.5). It has become apparent though, that both Paul and the hag live in worlds apart from the real one; Paul because he was celibate, and the hag because she is only the character of a character. But through her neo-masculine preaching and her tale-telling, Alisoun has created an ideal world where sex does not have to be animalistic to be "natural." The kind of relationship Alisoun describes is what she's been searching for all her married and widowed life. To ask for a man to be "meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde," is no more or less a miracle than the hag being able to shift her shape. Alisoun's tale merely comments on the ideal situation possible in a faerie world where a woman's choice is preserved in the context of marriage.

Alisoun of Bath is no longer "innocent" and sexually natural as Alisoun of Oxenford is, but I would argue that she doesn't want to be. Her experience has gotten her wealth, relative freedom, and great power, considering her gender. The Wife has broken out of the young Alisoun's "narwe cage" (3224), in other

words. Alisoun of Oxenford is trapped in her genre. Like her creator the Miller, she is not meant to be taken seriously. She is allowed promiscuity because her type is promiscuous, but if she strays too far from her empty fabliau mold, she is no longer allowed the sexual freedom her genre affords her. Alisoun of Bath does not tell a tale that is meant only to be laughed at; though she admonishes the other pilgrims not to take her too seriously, she chooses to tell a romance -- a genre which carries deeper meaning.

Over the years, the Wife has seen, and perhaps even experienced, the ugly side of sex, represented concretely in the "Reeve's Tale," but in her tale, she takes the ugliness of rape and reforms it into a perfect balance of power and marital love. I suggest that the "sexual natural" achieved by the hag in her tale is not that of young Alisoun's animalistic pre-lapsarian innocence, but a truly human and Christ-like "natural" that has been seen and experienced, and yet is perfect.

Notes

1 In James Brundage states, "Church authorities [of the fourteenth century] repeatedly disparaged sex, both marital and non-marital, as dirty, unclean, and sinful". Saint Augustine, whose writings were a basis for much Church doctrine, wrote "Christians have a moral imperative to avoid sex so far as possible." For Church fathers and canonists, the idea of sex for pleasure was, morally speaking, out of the question. ("'Alas that evere love was synne': Sex and Medieval Canon Law" II.1).

2 These Church holidays were probably taken a little more seriously than the upper estates would have liked. There are numerous records dating from around Chaucer's time condemning especially (but unspecified) "blasphemous" practices on these days (Brundage 71).

3 Sumptuary laws of Chaucer's time were becoming more strict about what dress was appropriate for which class, because the rising merchant class could now afford clothing that had previously distinguished nobility from commoners. The color "reed" was one reserved for the higher ranking members of society, and though there were ways to circumvent the laws (such as calling the color maroon instead of red) it was considered bad taste to obviously dress above one's station. Nobles were still determining the rules of etiquette after all.

4 Some examples of popular critical opinion: Ian Lancashire's "Sexual Innuendo in the Reeve's Tale," discusses how Malyne is "used sexually" as currency, her swyving being "fair payment" (162). W.A. Turner wrote an article entitled "Chaucer's 'Lusty Malyne'" in which he refers to her as sexually "eager" (239).

5 This is my own paraphrase of Ruth Herschberger's "rape fantasy" scenario (124-26).

6 In her essay "Thinking About Gender: The Diversity of Medieval Perspectives" Jacqueline Murry states, "Medieval clerical writers frequently expressed their ideas about the nature of men and women in terms of binary oppositions: "intellect/body, active/passive, reason/emotion, order/chaos" (2). James Brundage discusses the futility of female virginity in his essay "The Poetics of Virginity." He translates Tertullian: "For a virgin ceases to be a virgin from the time it becomes possible for her not to be one" (34).

Bibliography

- Barnett, Pamela F. "'And Shortly For to Seyn They Were Aton': Chaucer's Deflection of Rape in the Reeve's and Franklin's Tales." *Women's Studies* 22 (1993):145-62.
- Bloch, R. Howard. *Medieval Mysogyny*. Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1991.
- Brundage, James A. *Sex, Law, and Marriage in the Middle Ages*. Hampshire: Variorum, 1993.
- Bullough, Vern L. "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages." *Medieval Masculinities*. Ed. Clare A. Lees. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1994. 31-45.
- Carmi Parsons, John. "The Queen's Intercession in Thirteenth Century England." *Power of the Weak*. Eds. Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean. Chicago: University of Illinois P, 1995. 147-77.
- Coakley, John. "Friars, Sanctity, and Gender." *Medieval Masculinities*. Ed. Clare A. Lees. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1994. 91-110.
- Cooke, Thomas D. *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux*. Columbia: University of Missouri P, 1978.
- Crane, Susan. *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.
- "Alisoun's Incapacity and Poetic Instability in the Wife of Bath's Tale." *PMLA* 102 (1987): 20-27.
- Curry, Walter. *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*. New York: Oxford UP, 1926.
- David, Alfred. *The Strumpet Muse*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Madison: University

- of Wisconsin P, 1989.
- "Quarrels, Rivals and Rape: Gower and Chaucer." A Wyf Ther Was. Ed. Juliette Dor. Belgium: Liege UP, 1992. 112-22.
- Duby, Georges. Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages. Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1988.
- Gottfried, Barbara. "Conflict and Relationship, Sovereignty and Survival: Parables of Power in the Wife of Bath's Prologue." The Chaucer Review. 19 (1986): 202-24.
- Hallissy, Margaret. Clean Maids, True Wives, and Steadfast Widows. Westport: Greenwood P, 1993.
- Herschberger, Ruth. "Is Rape a Myth?" Masculine/Feminine. Eds. Betty Rozak and Theodore Rozak. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1969. 122-30.
- Kaske, R.E. "Chaucer's Marriage Group." Chaucer the Love Poet. Eds. Jerome Mitchell and William Provost. Athens: University of Georgia P, 1973. 45-60.
- Knapp, Peggy A. "Alisoun of Bath and the Reappropriation of Tradition." The Chaucer Review. 24 (1989): 45-52.
- Kohanski, Tamarah. "In Search of Malyne." The Chaucer Review. 27 (1993): 228-37.
- Lancashire, Ian. "Sexual Innuendo in the Reeve's Tale." The Chaucer Review. 7 (1972):159-70.
- Long, Walter C. "The Wife as Moral Revolutionary." The Chaucer Review. 20 (1986): 273-82.
- Morewedge, Rosemarie Thee, ed. The Role of Women in the Middle Ages. Albany: State University of New York P, 1975.
- Murray, Jacqueline. "Thinking About Gender: The Diversity of Medieval Perspectives." Power of the Weak. Eds. Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean. Chicago: University of

Illinois P, 1995. 1-26.

Owen, Charles A. Jr. Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the
Canterbury Tales. Norman: University of Oklahoma P, 1977.

Reiss, Edmund. "Chaucer's Parodies of Love." Chaucer the Love
Poet. Eds. Jerome Mitchell and William Provost. Athens:
University of Georgia P, 1973. 27-43.

Turner, W.A. "Chaucer's 'Lusty Malyne'" Notes and Queries.
(1954): 232-48.