



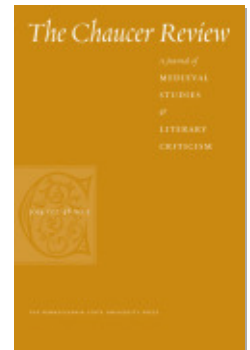
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The Chaucer Review, Volume 48, Number 3, 2014, pp. 284-306 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



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Pregnant Desire: Eyes and Appetites in the *Merchant's Tale*

SAMANTHA KATZ SEAL

ABSTRACT: This article examines the scene in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* in which May declares both that she is pregnant and that she suffers from a pregnancy-induced hunger for pears that must be satiated to preserve her life. Contextualizing Chaucer's text within medieval scientific discourses on *pica* (the medical term for often deviant pregnancy cravings), conception, and the physiological stimulation of desire, the article argues that the scene allows Chaucer to complicate more traditional narratives of human culpability and sinfulness in regards to the body's lusts.

In *Mirour de l'Omme* John Gower writes of sin:

Je te ressemble au poire douche,
Qui porte bon savour au bouche
Et est a l'estommac grevable.

I compare you to a sweet pear
That carries good flavor to the mouth
And is painful for the stomach.¹

How appropriate therefore that when Geoffrey Chaucer's youngest (if not most famous) wayward wife falls into adultery and sin, she does so by calling

1. John Gower, *Mirour de l'Omme*, in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1899–1902), 1:1–334, at 116 (lines 9961–63).

for a taste of “smale peres grene” (IV 2333). In the *Merchant's Tale*, as May stands beneath the pear tree that contains her waiting lover, she gives her husband January an explanation of her sudden appetite:²

“I telle yow wel, a womman in my plit
May han to fruyt so greet an appetit
That she may dyen but she of it have.”

(IV 2335–37)

This is the first that the reader—and perhaps January as well—has heard of this remarkably convenient pregnancy that will allow May to consummate her relationship with her lover. And yet the claim to pregnancy, along with the corollary claim to the symptoms of *pica* or *cissa* (the irrational desire of pregnant women to consume often inedible substances), cannot be entirely dismissed.³ May's supposed pregnancy adds a new complexity to the story

2. Scholars have given us contradictory interpretations of the symbolism of pears and the pear tree within the story. Carol A. Everest, “Pears and Pregnancy in Chaucer's ‘Merchant's Tale,’” in Melitta Weiss Adamson, ed., *Food in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays* (New York, 1995), 161–76, cites medieval herbals and medical texts to note that “the pear held a position of some importance for treating stomach ailments, especially the nausea due to pregnancy” (170). In contrast, Carol Falvo Heffernan, “Contraception and the Pear Tree Episode of Chaucer's ‘Merchant's Tale,’” *Journal of English and German Philology* 94 (1995): 31–41, notes that pears (or at least the pear root) were considered a contraceptive by medieval physicians. Everest also notes that pears were also sometimes specifically cited as a typical object of pregnancy cravings (165).

3. The term *pica* deserves some attention, particularly since Muscio (one of the primary Latin sources for the medieval West on this phenomenon) uses the term *cissa* instead of *pica*, which Soranus explicitly names. See Muscio, “Gynaecia,” in *Sorani Gynaeciorum Vetus Translatio Latina*, ed. Valentin Rose (New York, 1882), 15–16; and Soranus, *Gynecology*, ed. and trans. Owsei Temkin, with Nicholson J. Eastman, Ludwig Edelstein, and Alan Guttmacher (Baltimore, 1956), 50. For a comparison on the passage about *cissa* in the three different Latin primary translations of Soranus's work (of which Muscio devotes the least space), see Ann Ellis Hanson and Monica H. Green, “Soranus of Ephesus: *Methodicorum Princeps*,” in Wolfgang Haase, ed., *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ser. 2, vol. 32, pt. 2: *Wissenschaften (Medizin und Biologie)* (Berlin, 1994), 968–1075, at 1048. Monica H. Green has demonstrated, however, that the understanding of *pica* could be entirely lost in the process of translation for such texts (“Obstetrical and Gynecological Texts in Middle English,” in Monica H. Green, ed., *Women's Healthcare in the Medieval West: Texts and Contexts* [Aldershot, 2000], 53–88, at 86n82). I have utilized the more recognizable modern term for the sake of reader comprehension; in many medieval medical texts, the pathologization of such symptoms is not even given a name. In the *Trotula*, for example, the condition is described but not named: *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*, ed. and trans. Monica H. Green (Philadelphia, 2001), 94–97. In order to avoid unnecessary anachronism, however, we must note that the twentieth-century medical classification of *pica* indicates only the eating of potentially toxic materials rather than the broad category of any irrational maternal desire. Cravings for food are now distinguished from “unnatural” cravings by modern medicine. The former are indulged to an extent, while the latter are considered dangerous and problematic. Terms of medicalized concern are couched in a vocabulary of biological process and causality. See for example, Marcia Mann Cooper, *Pica* (Springfield, Ill., 1957); Lewis B. Posner, Catherine M. McCottry, and Charles A. Posner, “Pregnancy Craving and

and, by adding the possibility of a false heir, further enhances her betrayals against her cuckolded husband.

Regardless of whether May is indeed nurturing a child within her womb, she seems to tell the truth to January when she speaks of her “greet . . . appetit.” By this late point in the poem, May appears to be caught up in hunger and lust, whether the object of her desire is her husband’s young squire Damian or those sinful pears. *Pica* thus becomes a useful metaphor for May—and Chaucer—to employ in this expression of her sexual longings, precisely because of the way the cravings and desires of pregnancy were pathologized during the Middle Ages.⁴ Since the female sexual appetite was often conceptualized as a carnal manifestation of human sin, the physiological normativity of *pica* perhaps made it a less threatening system within which to verbalize shameful and transgressive desire.⁵ While it did not legitimize lust or carnal hunger, the pathology of pregnancy encompassed highly eroticized discourses of corporeal longing within a medical context, and provided thereby a hermeneutic through which feminine expressions of even the greatest sexual rapacity might be interpreted as a sickness of the body rather than a lapse of human self-control.

Desire, whether or not it stemmed from pregnancy, had a direct and identifiable biological stimulus: the dual operations of vision and imagination. Even the most susceptible of pregnant women could experience *pica* only after she had seen an object and it had taken root within her imagination.

Pica,” *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 9 (1957): 270–72; and A. J. Rainville, “Pica Practices of Pregnant Women Are Associated with Lower Maternal Hemoglobin Level at Delivery,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 98 (1998): 293–96. It is quite interesting to note that Posner et al. separate cravings and *pica* into two distinct categories (271). The most common substance that the women they surveyed consumed as the result of a craving was cornstarch (106 out of 600), while other common substances on the list included baking soda, magnesium carbonate, Vick’s salve, raw rice, and cornmeal. Unlike medieval scientists, who would have classified all of these desires as “unnatural” and thus *pica*, Posner et al. consider none of these desires to be *pica* (since these are not toxic substances) but due merely to the peculiarities of pregnancy itself. This formulation speaks to a modern reorientation of what is “natural” along the lines of corporeal harm. Interestingly enough, from a medieval context, fruit was ranked third. The most extensive recent interdisciplinary study is Sera Young, *Craving Earth: Understanding Pica—The Urge to Eat Clay, Starch, Ice, and Chalk* (New York, 2011).

4. Albertus Magnus, for example, speaks at length about the physiological expectation of pregnancy cravings in response to a question he poses: “Why [do] women who have been impregnated have an appetite so irrational that if they are lacking something from their desire they frequently miscarry?” (Albert the Great, *Questions Concerning Aristotle’s On Animals*, trans. Irvn M. Resnick and Kenneth F. Kitchell Jr. [Washington, D.C., 2008], 315). Albertus ascribes these desires to the movement of menstrual blood to the stomach, where it seems to act as something of a pollutant and prompt irrational hungers.

5. On the history of the medieval problematization of sexual desire even within marriage, see James A. Brundage, “‘Allas, that evere love was synnel’: Sex and Medieval Canon Law,” *Catholic Historical Review* 72 (1986): 1–13.

This article explores the processes by which desire and lust were believed to be conceived within the body, demonstrating how Chaucer's mechanistic structures of the progression from vision to imagination and to sexual longing belong to broader scientific and literary conversations about the nature of human appetite. To analyze May's vocalization of desire through the specifically physiological language of pregnancy and *pica*, I will examine her arousal from its genesis within the poem, showing how Chaucer plays out his dramatic discursus on the threatening, if natural, capacities of human appetite within a coherent scheme of scientific information and assertion. May's pregnancy, real or false, functions as an ideal figurative category, a nexus of the same moral ambiguity and confusion over which sins derive from biology and which from human guilt that haunts the text. It is not at May's womb that we should therefore be directing the scholarly conversation, but at the full carnal embodiment of her appetite: her eyes, her mind, her human flesh.

As the stimulative mechanism by which appetite was aroused within the mind and body, sight was understood by many medieval authors to play a unique role in the processes of sexuality and desire.⁶ The author of *Le Chemin de povreté et de richesse*, found in many manuscripts that also include a popular didactic manual for a young wife, *Le Menagier de Paris*, sketches out the progression from vision to imagination and finally to the desire that could result only in "Lasciviousness":⁷

If the skilled archer Foolish-Look tries to wound you, be wise and withdraw, hustling yourself out of range. When you are beyond their scopes, pay attention not to situate yourself in the path of Remembrance. For if he approached you and led you along, he would lead you right back within the bows' range, so that the arrow of Disquiet would quickly pierce your body, as well as that of Foolish-Pleasure, who would strive only for deceit. He would place you entirely at his beck and call and within range of Desire's

6. Norman Klassen, *Chaucer on Love, Knowledge, and Sight* (Cambridge, U.K., 1995), 39–74.

7. While likely written in fourteenth-century France, *Le Chemin de povreté et de richesse* would have been accessible to Englishmen through the dissemination mechanism of the Hundred Years' War. In the introduction to their translation, Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose note that "the most lavishly illustrated version of the poem" was produced by a Parisian workshop under the patronage of John of Lancaster, duke of Bedford; a shortened version of the poem was translated into English around 1500 and published by Wynken de Worde in 1506 (*The Good Wife's Guide: Le Menagier de Paris, a Medieval Household Book* [Ithaca, N.Y., 2009], 177–80, at 177). For the complete text of the poem, see 181–208.

crossbow. Desire would strike your heart so keenly that no physician would ever heal the wound.⁸

This passage comes as the seventh, and by far the longest, warning in a progression of admonitions from a newly married man to his new wife about the seven deadly sins. While each sin is described as attacking the young woman, it is Lasciviousness alone who pierces the body with arrows, a phallic signification that makes up in enthusiastic repetition what it lacks in subtlety. More importantly, from the point of view of this chapter, the author conceptualizes sexual sins as inseparable from vision, imagination, and desire.

Chaucer's own exposition on vision and desire—or, at least, one of his most explicit expositions—comes in the *Parson's Tale*.⁹ Chaucer locates the source of lecherous appetite within incautious human vision, as does the author of the fourteenth-century *Book of Vices and Virtues*:

And in this synne [lechery] tempteth the devel a man in five maneres,
as seynt Gregory seith. First in folily lokes. And after in foule words.
And after in foule touchynges. And after in foule kissynges. And after
cometh a man to do the dede.¹⁰

As the Parson describes the rhetorical tool of the devil's hand, "with fyve fyn-gres to cacche the peple to his vileynye" (X 852), he locates vision as the devil's fundamental tool. For example, he declaims:

The firste fynger is the fool lookynge of the fool womman and of the
fool man, that sleeth, right as the basilicok sleeth folk by the venym

8. *Le Chemin*, trans. Greco and Rose, 189.

9. It would, of course, be problematic to read *ParsT* as if it lacked that same divide of narrator and author that we assign the other tales. Indeed, in no way do I intend to represent the Parson's voice as if it were Chaucer's own or even representative of his thought. I do, however, wish to use *ParsT* to illustrate the way in which Chaucer constructed these didactic and devotional tropes in the mouth of a carefully crafted fictional narrator. Of the scholarship on *ParsT*, I have consulted, in particular: Donald R. Howard, "The Conclusion of the Marriage Group: Chaucer and the Human Condition," *Modern Philology* 57 (1960): 223–32; John Finlayson, "The Satiric Mode and *The Parson's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971): 94–116; Judson Boyce Allen, "The Old Way and the Parson's Way: An Ironic Reading of the Parson's Tale," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 3 (1973): 255–71; Siegfried Wenzel, "Chaucer and the Language of Contemporary Preaching," *Studies in Philology* 73 (1976): 138–61; and Rodney Delasanta, "Penance and Poetry in the *Canterbury Tales*," *PMLA* 93 (1978): 240–47.

10. *The Book of Vices and Virtues: A Fourteenth Century English Translation of the Somme le roi of Laurens d'Orleans, Edited From the Three Extant Manuscripts*, ed. W. Nelson Francis (London, 1942), 43.

of his sighte; for the coveitise of eyen folweth the coveitise of the herte. (X 853)

Here we see the sentence structured so that women are mentioned first, gendering not only foolish sight but also foolishness itself.

One may note the importance of cognition and contemplation in both these declamations on the dangers of vision. In her analysis of the visual metaphors utilized within medieval love poetry, Dana E. Stewart notes the important role played by such imaginative musings in stimulating individual feelings of love and sexual attraction.¹¹ For example, in the words of Giacomo da Lentini (a thirteenth-century poet):

The eyes first generate love, and the heart gives it nourishment . . .
for the eyes represent to the heart (the image) of each thing they see,
both the good and bad, the way it is formed in a natural manner;
and the heart, which receives this, contemplates the images and finds
pleasure in that desire.¹²

Here, sight and its corollary, contemplation, are given primacy as the natural instigators of love.

Thus, regardless of whether sensory perceptions are received in the heart or the mind, it is the eyes that render the body porous and open to that transmission.¹³ In *Le Chemin* sight penetrates the female body, laying it open to the ravages of Desire, while imagination offers a repetition of the visual process, recreating the optical experience endlessly and inescapably within the woman's mind. Aristotle, for example, writes on the linked nature of lust and imagination in animals:

if it has sensation, it has also imagination and appetency. For, where there is sensation, there is also pleasure and pain: and, where these are, desire also must of necessity be present.¹⁴

11. Dana E. Stewart, *The Arrow of Love: Optics, Gender, and Subjectivity in Medieval Love Poetry* (Lewisburg, Pa., 2003), 22–30, 67.

12. Qtd. in Stewart, *The Arrow of Love*, 50–51.

13. Sarah Stanbury, "The Voyeur and the Private Life in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 13 (1991): 141–58, demonstrates a complicated example of this kind of "visual transaction" in *Tr*. She writes that "Troilus's initially predatory gaze finally renders him passive victim in the gaze of the other, even though for him Criseyde's gaze (desired) is figured through his own look" (145–46). Thus, within Stanbury's scenario, the eyes function both passively and aggressively in the formation of love.

14. Aristotle, *De anima*, ed. and trans. R. D. Hicks (Amsterdam, 1965), 57.

Desire is interwoven with the cognitive functions of the brain, and therefore dependent on sight; as Aristotle continues in *De anima*, "Since sight is the principal sense, imagination has derived even its name from light, because without light one cannot see."¹⁵

The object of a person's gaze is thus significant within a visual system not merely for the time during which he or she looks directly upon it. Instead, the image's impact becomes incalculably heightened by means of the repetitive operations of the human mind, as it becomes a participant in the infinite visual loop of the imagination. Once a sight has entered through the eyes, it will find the human body endlessly fertile, the human capacity for imaginative meditation receptive and vulnerable. Blindness, caused either by the natural body or the ascetic will, remains the only defense against the penetrative infestation of potential desire. In his emphatically visual guide to love, Andreas Capellanus likewise concludes,

Blindness is a hindrance to love because a blind man has not the faculty of sight to provide his mind with objects provoking uncontrolled thought [immoderatam suscipere cogitationem] . . . but I claim only that this is true for winning love; I do not deny that love gained before a man goes blind can endure in his blindness.¹⁶

Once an image gains entry into the contemplative functions, no retroactive barricade may limit its effect.

And yet, despite the imagination's ability to stimulate love, it—and, in particular, the feminine imagination—could also be profoundly threatening to systems of masculine control. Since the progression from vision to

15. Aristotle, *De anima*, ed. Hicks, 129.

16. Andreas Capellanus, *On Love*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh (London, 1982), 40–41. Edward Wheatley reads the impact of this passage differently, concluding that "Andreas denies blind people some of the refinements that result from real love: handsomeness, nobility of character, humility, virtue, and several other positive traits that he praises in chapter 4, entitled, 'What the Effect of Love Is.' This is a different kind of sexual punishment associated with blindness, closer to Freud's association of blindness with castration" (*Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* [Ann Arbor, 2010], 137). Wheatley's assumption that medieval love is a positive attribute according to Andreas Capellanus—and that an inability to access it must be a severe punishment—ignores Capellanus's own oft-repeated assertions that "love is suffering," as well as book 3 of Capellanus's work, which credits the creation of the book with a desire to help men avoid love: "Read this little book, then, not as one seeking to take up the life of a lover, but that, invigorated by the theory and trained to excite the minds of women to love, you may, by refraining from so doing, win an eternal recompense and thereby deserve a greater reward from God" (*On Love*, 187). Capellanus has a far more complex understanding of the morality of sexual love than Wheatley allows for, and his reference to Freudian castration also disregards medieval valuations of chastity and self-control as desirable and not emasculating.

imagination to lust was entirely internal and unsupervised, women could succumb to, and indulge in, the stimulation of appetites that could potentially threaten their husbands' authority and virility. Following misogynistic discourses that claimed sexual rapacity to be a biological trait, the female imagination was also figured as unmoderated and aggressive. As Dyan Elliott notes,

Passive in heterosexual intercourse, woman was nevertheless more highly sexed and ultimately seen as supremely engaged, indeed in a certain sense "active," in imaginative exercises—particularly those of a libidinous nature. . . . The female imagination, moreover, was impinged on by both body and soul, with important consequences for female physiology and spirituality.¹⁷

The insatiable appetite of the female imagination, seizing upon whatever images to which the eyes had granted access, was highly eroticized by medieval authors and portrayed metaphorically as an insatiable and hungering organ.¹⁸ No wonder, then, that a discourse of the dangerous maternal imagination and its potential markings upon helpless fetal flesh prevailed as one of the dominant obstetric theories of the Middle Ages.

In the *Trotula* gynecological text, for example, the female imagination and its corollary, the female appetite, are presented as a direct threat to the continuance of a pregnancy:

Note that when a woman is in the beginning of her pregnancy, care ought to be taken that nothing is named in front of her which she is not able to have, because if she sets her mind on it and it is not given to her, this occasions miscarriage.¹⁹

Jacques Gelis, in his study of folklore and historical record (primarily early modern), notes stories of a pregnant woman who attacked a man to satisfy her craving for his blood, and of one who murdered her husband for the

17. Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1999), 36.

18. The female imagination not only stimulated women's sexual appetites; as an invisible function, it escaped external oversight and was therefore accused of facilitating the uncontrolled nature of women's longings. See, for example, Margo Hendricks, "The Mercurial Female Imagination," in Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters, eds., *Consuming Narratives: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Cardiff, 2002), 95–103, at 96–99.

19. *The Trotula*, ed. Green, 94–97.

same reasons. In both cases, the attendant doctors noted that if these women had not satisfied their desires, their child would have been aborted.²⁰ While *The Knowing of Women's Kind in Childing*, a Middle English gynecological text, does not specifically cite maternal cravings as a source of danger, it does speak at length of the importance of keeping pregnant women from "ouermeche sterynge of the wombe," as could be caused by "anger and wrath (or strenuous activity)."²¹

Legends also existed about the marking of a child by the stimulation of his mother's imagination via her inappropriately controlled eye. Gelis notes that

A woman's gaze was like an object lens focusing on a particular scene; what could be easier, if she ardently desired a handsome child, than to gaze fixedly, during the act of generation, at a picture of a handsome man?²²

Within this mechanism of imaginative reproduction, the female imagination and the female genitalia are understood to absorb separate external substances at the same precise moment; one sucks in extramarital visual input, while the other consumes the seminal contribution necessary for conception. Thus Soranus, the Greek author of a gynecology, recounted that "The tyrant of the Cyprians, who was misshapen, compelled his wife to look at beautiful statues during intercourse and became the father of well-shaped children."²³ Hippocrates was likewise believed to have saved the life of a woman accused of adultery when she bore a black child to a fair-skinned husband by pointing out the dark figure within a portrait in her bedroom, while Albertus Magnus notes that "an offspring often resembles what the woman imagines or what falls into her imagination at conception."²⁴ This reproductive "fact" also permeated the popular imagination. We thus find in the fifteenth-century French *Distaff Gospels* the following remark:

I tell you that God and reason forbid talking with any pregnant woman, or even any married woman of childbearing age, about any

20. Jacques Gelis, *History of Childbirth: Fertility, Pregnancy, and Birth in Early Modern Europe*, trans. Rosemary Morris (Boston, 1991), 57.

21. Alexandra Barrett, ed., *The Knowing of Women's Kind in Childing: A Middle English Version of Material Derived from the Trotula and Other Sources* (Turnhout, 2001), 59.

22. Gelis, *History of Childbirth*, 55.

23. Soranus, *Gynecology*, ed. Temkin, 38.

24. Soranus, *Gynecology*, ed. Temkin, 38; and Albert the Great, *Questions*, trans. Resnick and Kitchell, 230.

food which cannot be immediately obtained if needed, so that her baby will not have a mark on its body.²⁵

The unsatiated and indiscriminate combination of female eyes and imagination had the potential to interfere in the most important processes of masculine reproduction and patrilineal security.

The male imagination could stimulate lust, but the female imagination, active in reproduction once it had been provoked by vision, could distort the systems of resemblance so crucial to the patriarchy's project of comprehensive structural cohesion. As Maaïke van der Lugt notes, for the woman's imagination to play such a prominent role in conception was to risk the marginalization of man's seed from the conceptive process, raising the specter of female-driven parthenogenesis.²⁶ Indeed, medieval Christians might learn such a story of patriarchal disruption from the Bible itself. In the story of Laban's sheep, Jacob increases the number of spotted sheep that have been allotted to him—as opposed to the single-color sheep that Laban would keep and pass on to his sons—by placing spotted rods before the eyes of the sheep during conception: “And it came to pass that in the very heat of coition, the sheep beheld the rods, and brought forth spotted, and of divers colours, and speckled.”²⁷ Here was an affirmation of the scientific principle from Scripture itself, as well as a verbalization of the fear that a foreign man might come and, through the powers of the traitorous female eye and mind, steal both one's daughters and one's masculine patrimony.

25. *The Distaff Gospels: A First Modern English Edition of Les Évangiles des Quenouilles*, ed. and trans. Madeleine Jeay and Kathleen Garay (Peterborough, Ont., 2006), 95.

26. Maaïke van der Lugt, *Le ver, le démon et la vierge: les théories médiévales de la génération extraordinaire: une étude sur les rapports entre théologie, philosophie naturelle et médecine* (Paris, 2004), 128.

27. “Divisitque gregem Iacob et posuit virgas ante oculos arietum” (Gen. 30:39). This biblical passage is quoted frequently by scholars of historical reproduction; see, for example, Jenny Davidson, *Breeding: A Partial History of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 2009), 22. Seemingly, however, no one has noted how the following verse implies that not only is the female imagination important during coitus, but also the male: “So when the ewes went first to ram, Jacob put the rods in the troughs of water before the eyes of the rams and the sheep” (“Igitur quando primo tempore ascendebatur oves ponebat Iacob virgas in canalibus aquarum ante oculos arietum et ovium ut in earum contemplation conciperent” [Gen. 30:41]). The inclusion of “arietum” in addition to “ovium” makes it clear that both the female and male imaginations need to be triggered visually in order to influence procreative marking. While occasionally men's accumulated characteristics (for example, amputation, disfigurement, etc.) can be believed to be passed down to their children, I have seen no other reference to how masculine vision during coitus plays a role in the marking of offspring.

In her analysis of this biblical verse and its implications for historical understandings of the impact of the female imagination on reproduction, Jenny Davidson states that

The mother's imagination thus has the potential to counter the physical mechanism by which a father transmits properties to his children, leaching the value from resemblance as a test for paternal kinship and threatening to disrupt the patrilineal forms of inheritance on which many societies depend.²⁸

Yet while Davidson offers striking evidence for the ensuing problematization of accepting resemblance as proof of paternity in the early modern period, medieval authors and intellectuals seem to have progressed to a very different conclusion from the same set of beliefs about the power of the maternal imagination. Indeed, while the lack of resemblance of child and father was often taken as proof of an already-suspected cuckoldry, there seem to be no extant medieval iterations of this early modern belief that women could deliberately manipulate their imaginations to invert the process of marking. Like the other functions of the body, the medieval female imagination was a force that manipulated the woman rather than vice versa.

That is not to say that this was the only optic/perceptive formulation available to Chaucer and his medieval English contemporaries. The discussion of optics was divided between those who, like Plato and Galen, favored a theory of extramission, wherein the eye "send[s] forth its sensory power to perceive" the object, and those who, like Albertus Magnus, Alhazen, and Roger Bacon, believed instead that "rays or species issue in all directions from every point on the visible object and reach all points on the surface of the eye."²⁹ This latter theory had its roots in the work of Aristotle, who believed that "we really perceive all objects through a medium, though in touch and taste we fail to notice this."³⁰ Chaucer likely had access to both these theories, although the work of the perspectivists, following Bacon, had become increasingly part of the intellectual conversation about optics in the fourteenth century.³¹

28. Davidson, *Breeding*, 22. Her interests are in early modern England.

29. David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision: From Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago, 1976), 5–11, 71–80, 104–16, at 10, 109.

30. Aristotle, *De anima*, 101.

31. Lindberg, for example, notes the inclusion of perspectivist texts within the university curriculums, observing that John Pecham's *Perspectiva communis* was in the library of the Sorbonne by 1338, and that by 1390 it was "the basis of regular lectures at the University of Vienna" and "required for the M.A. degree at Prague" (*Theories of Vision*, 116–21, at 120–21).

Indeed, the focus of the perspectivists on visual cognition and knowledge would seem to have touched on issues of particular interest to Chaucer. As Dallas G. Denery writes,

All the medieval perspectivists believed that optics provided a comprehensive account of how we first come to know the world, beginning with the radiation of light and colour from objects through the air to the eyes and, ultimately, the brain.³²

Likewise, Norman Klassen's reading of Aquinas notes that in the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas decides that love must come before knowledge, because love must be mediated by both sight and contemplation.³³ While this article's engagement with these late medieval optic theories must be of necessity brief, it is important, I believe, to note the interest of Chaucer's contemporaries in these theories of intramission because of the way that such revisions of optical knowledge placed the internal workings of the mind firmly between the mechanisms of the eye and heart, thus expanding the scope available for the imagination. While there is not space here to dissect the intricacies of Chaucer's visual approach within the *Tales*, one may recognize that these optical paradigms provide a crucial context for January and May's respective internal musings.

The formulation of the relationship between vision, imagination, and desire demonstrated within *Le Chemin* was not limited to women. In Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* versions of this scientific progression are experienced by both the merchant January and his young wife May. In his process of choosing a wife, January creates his own concupiscent longings:

Heigh fantasye and curious bisynesse
Fro day to day gan in the soule impresse
Of Januarie aboute his mariage.
Many fair shap and many a fair visage
Ther passeth thurgh his herte, nyght by nyght,
As whoso tooke a mirour, polissed bryght,
And sette it in a commune market-place.
(IV 1577–83)

32. Dallas G. Denery II, *Seeing and Being Seen in the Later Medieval World: Optics, Theology and Religious Life* (Cambridge, U.K., 2005), 86.

33. Klassen, *Chaucer on Love*, 31–33.

The voyeuristic nature of January's behavior in this passage has been noted by A. C. Spearing.³⁴ However, there is also such a circularity of image and sight here that the reader is almost dizzied. Once January's mind has grasped the visions of these young women, he refuses to cease meditating on them; as Michelle Karnes observes, here we may witness "Januarie's unwise preference of imagination to reason," a preference that "results inevitably in his unhappy marriage."³⁵ Not only does January partake in a process of vision and imagination that will inevitably lead to lust, but he does so willfully.³⁶ The sexual desire that results from this visual and imaginative indulgence is merely the expected result of a scientific process. While the author of *Le Chemin* advises the young woman "to place a shield of Chastity before your eyes," January does precisely the opposite. Not only does he refuse to shield his eyes from images that might stir his lust, but he consciously indulges in the contemplation of the images that his eyes have taken in. As he re-sees these stimulative glimpses in his imagination, he incites an inevitable physiological process, one that can end only in a powerful, absorptive experience of lust.

May, too, experiences a similar progression from vision to imagination to appetite.³⁷ Her vision, however, is neither wandering nor intentionally deviant like January's. Instead, May's process of concupiscence is controlled and dictated by the men around her. May's culpability is thus limited in comparison to the deliberately immoral decision of her husband to engage in libidinous contemplation.³⁸ Instead, as we will see, her original visual moment in the inevitable development of lust is one crafted by her husband (albeit unknowingly) and hisquire.

34. A. C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love Narratives* (Cambridge, U.K., 1993), 170–71.

35. Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 2011), 6.

36. Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, 1992), reads this same passage as reflective of January's self-absorption, noting that "May enters the story quite explicitly as the product of the old man's warped imagination" (250).

37. Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge, U.K., 1993), speaks about a similar progression of desire formation, although she leaves out the initial visual entry point and stimulus. She refers instead to "the physiological and psychological cycle of imagination (or memory), desire, act, and pleasure" (161).

38. The passivity of the figure of May is explored at length by Holly Crocker, "Performative Passivity and Fantasies of Masculinity in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 38 (2003): 178–98, who reads her behavior as a reflection of misogynistic feminine norms, which May deliberately cultivates and to which she intentionally adheres. It may be contrasted with an example of feminine blinding as divine retribution for sexual transgression found in *Sir Launfal*, where Guinevere's lustful vision leads to her subsequent loss of sight (Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks*, 149–50). Guinevere here initiates the act of vision while May does not.

January is introduced to the reader as a character driven by lusts and *appetit*, and he continues in this situation of self-initiated carnality until, with the loss of his sight, he must depend on memory and imagination alone to stir his lusts. Notably, May is not. Indeed, her original appearance in the text is not only as a virgin bride, but as a woman almost ostentatiously lacking in desire. May acquiesces in conjugal intercourse, but she displays no indication of sexual longing or of sexual repulsion. As Chaucer tells us after just such a scene, “God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte” (IV 1851). In these early moments of her marriage, May is passive and demure, entirely submissive to her husband’s will. If anything, May seems more inclined to the marital frigidity that we see raised as a deterrent to conception in Peter Lombard’s and Raymond of Penafort’s texts.³⁹ Although the word *lust* must be read in its broadest Middle English sense and not purely as a reference to concupiscence, it is not applied to May until fairly late in the poem. By the time the text tells us that Damian “dooth al that his lady lust and lyketh” (IV 2012), a break has occurred in the depiction of May, from passive receptor of another’s lust to the originator of her own desire. To precipitate that transformation, May must experience the combination of vision and imagination that was a necessary predecessor to the *appetit* she will soon express, an *appetit* that would otherwise have been quite inconceivable.

The textual progression of May’s desire formation seems to be: May catches sight of Damian at his bedside (“alle ye go se this Damyan,” January commands [IV 1923]); she then incorporates that image into her visual imagination (“Who studieth now but faire fresshe May?” [IV 1955]); and then she finally experiences *lust* of her own. Even as January was complicit in the creation of his own libidinous desire, so too does May participate in the conception and birth of her delayed concupiscence. Indeed, we receive reinforcement of the powerful success of May’s indoctrination into these processes of lust when, a few lines later, we hear that:

this fresshe May
Hath take swich impression that day
Of pitee of this sike Damyan
That from hire herte she ne dryve kan.

(IV 1977–80)

39. Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, Bk. 4, ed. and trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto, 2010), 196–97; and Raymond of Penafort, *Summa on Marriage*, ed. and trans. Pierre Payer (Toronto, 2005), 64–68.

Her sight of Damian, that distinct visual moment, has been transformed into an optic repetition by the power of her mind.

It is within this broad theoretical understanding of the developmental progression from optic penetration to sustained sexual desire that we must situate the specific failures of January and May's conjugal bed. Although both January and May can be seen to participate in the process of lust stimulation through visual/imaginative input, within the confines of their marriage January is unable to incite or recreate that process for May. Since the directionality of vision (either active or passive) is understood in this text to operate along gender lines, January must stir lust in May by presenting her with a visual image capable of arousing her, either on first sight or through the repetitive processes of her mind. And yet, in a scene Chaucer plays for humor, he is woefully unable to do so. While as an old man January's optic functions still allow him to stimulate lust in *himself*, he cannot render his own form an erotic object for the eyes of a young woman:⁴⁰

With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte,
Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere—
For he was shave al newe in his manere—

.....
The slakke skyn aboute his nekke shaketh.

(IV 1824–26, 1849)

Here indeed we have one of the problems with a marriage between an old man and a young girl. In his consideration of marriage, January had focused only on the images of women in his head; he failed to realize that vision and imagination become reciprocal in a relationship. Even January's attempt to render himself into an erotic visual image (by shaving "al newe in his manere") only renders his situation more poignant, since it so dramatically fails to initiate the process of desire within May.

In his poetic homage to the *Merchant's Tale*, John Lydgate makes these concerns with sight's role in the stimulation of desire even more explicit. Lydgate here, in *Prohemy of a Mariage Betwixt an Olde Man and a Yonge Wife, and the Consail*, refers to Chaucer's story and creates his own analogue (the story of December and July) ostensibly as the letter of a scholar to a friend,

40. The specific visual cues of January's age are discussed by Emerson Brown Jr., "The Merchant's Tale: January's 'Unlikely Elde,'" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* (1973): 92–106.

persuading him against matrimony.⁴¹ While Lydgate's argument centers on the dangers of the female sexual appetite, he lays importance upon the role of vision in stimulating or quenching lust:

Bethenk on this, the fal of thi colour;
 Thy skyn sumtyme was ful, now is it slakke;
 For eyen and nose thee nedeth a mokadour
 Or sudary; now coorbed is thi bakke,
 Or sone shal bene, as pedeler to his pakke;
 Thi chekes hangen, thyn eyen wax read as wyne,
 And wel belyned with good read tartaryne.

 Fele wel thyself, and parceyve every dele,
 For wommans eye al this parceyveth well.⁴²

Lydgate's denunciation of his friend's physical health and appearance is meant as a necessary warning, an attempt to prevent that situation in which January finds himself through an unrealistic appraisal of his own exterior. As Lydgate notes, a woman's eye will perceive all that the man in question has managed to overlook about himself.

Vision is, of course, only one of the sensory indignities to which May is subjected within this passage, but it remains the primary sense through which the others are mediated. It provides a common linkage between January's sharp beard and his loud chatter, as well as the ultimate comment upon May's experience.

But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,
 Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte,
 In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
 She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene.

(IV 1851–54)

Chaucer ends this extended passage about male sexual inadequacy not with a reference to the pain or exhaustion suffered by May, but rather with the sight of January. For all the herbs and aphrodisiacs consumed by January so that

41. John Lydgate (?), *Prohemy of a Mariage Betwixt an Olde Man and a Yonge Wife, and the Counsail*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Ellzey and Douglas Moffatt, in Eve Salisbury, ed., *The Trials and Joys of Marriage* (Kalamazoo, 2002), 103–29.

42. Lydgate (?), *Prohemy*, ed. Ellzey and Moffatt, 105, 107 (lines 71–77, 139–40).

his body might function like that of a young man, his inability to transform his appearance prevents him from arousing a sexual response within May. It is January's external image, the visual outrage confronting May, that ultimately stands as synecdoche for the entire experience of disastrous sexual intercourse.

Other scholars have interpreted the last of these lines quite differently, reading within them a statement of preexisting sexual experience on the part of May. Alcuin Blamires, for example, writes:

As critics increasingly point out, the impression of January's experienced appetite is unexpectedly complemented in the case of our reading of May, for she too, when we are allowed behind the bland exterior that January sees, turns out to have incipient criteria of performance appraisal: 'she preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene' (IV. 1854). May's sexual appetite is imagined as evaluative, and proactive to some extent.⁴³

Blamires's argument about this line receives support from the work of Elaine Tuttle Hansen, who writes that "it reveals that she can already compare and verbalize her evaluation of male sexual performance."⁴⁴ Such a reading, however, assumes a consistent sexual appetite on the part of May. The trajectory thereby established leads from lesser to greater "control of her own sexual desires" rather than one tracing the initial stimulation and establishment of sexual desire itself.⁴⁵ In Blamires's and Hansen's formulations, sexual desire remains a static category whose variability is located in the specific exercise of individual authority over it. In contrast, theories of the visual stimulation of desire attest to the potential for humans' control over the creation of their own lusts. The crucial element here thus becomes not sexual desire, but rather the *potential* for desire, the postlapsarian physiological relationship between the eyes, the mind, and the stomach/groin. In this passage May is therefore not evaluating January's sexual performance according to the criteria of a previously established set of sexual criteria, but rather judging his inability to awaken desire in her. It is as a visual stimulus of his wife's desire that January fails, regardless of his attempts at physical penetration.

43. Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* (Oxford, 2006), 96. He notes a similar statement by Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford, 1989), 210.

44. Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 260.

45. Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*, 96.

While masculine arousal alone might still fulfill the medieval legal qualifications for marital consummation, the failure to stimulate a wife's lusts could have serious implications for procreation. According to the Galenic and Hippocratic principles of reproduction, conception occurred only when both parents experienced sufficient sexual desire to emit seed.⁴⁶ Within this theoretical model, January's impotence might thus be far more comprehensive than a matter of genital malfunction, and all the "ypocras, claree, and vernage/Of spices hoote" which he takes "t'encreeßen his corage" (IV 1807–8) will not be enough of an aphrodisiac to compensate.⁴⁷ Since, according to this school of medical thought, a woman needed to release semen just as a man did during the conceptive process, one gynecological author, Muscio, advises that the best time for a woman to conceive is when she is full of the desire for sex, while the author of one of the commentaries on the Pseudo-Albertus Magnus gynecological text *De secretis mulierum* postulates that women must have more pleasure in sex since "she has a double delight: one because she receives seed, and another because she emits it."⁴⁸

Not only did a woman need to be aroused so that she might release the feminine seed that would mix with the masculine contribution to form the child, but she also needed to have a sexual appetite so that she might maintain and nurture the seed within her womb. Indeed, Galen notes that one of the purposes of the female seed is to coat the womb and render it hospitable, since not enough male seed reaches the womb to do so.⁴⁹ Thus January's failure to awaken desire within May may render him unable to impregnate her, an extremely problematic situation for a medieval couple since procreation was one of the three goods of marriage.⁵⁰ For all his talk of engendering an

46. Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 31–35.

47. In contrast, Carol Everest, "Sight and Sexual Performance in the *Merchant's Tale*," in Peter G. Beidler, ed., *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde* (Cambridge, U.K., 1998), 91–104, argues that, from a medieval medical standpoint, January's overindulgence in sex and his use of herbal stimulants are precisely what causes him to go blind. James M. Palmer, "Your Malady Is No 'Sodeyn Hap': Ophthalmology, Benvenutus Grassus, and January's Blindness," *Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 197–205, cites Benvenutus Grassus's medical work as a source for the connection between blindness and uncontrolled sexual behavior. Tory Vandeventer Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York, 2010), 37–39, believes that the culpability for January's sexual overindulgence can be tied to May and the sexual danger that women were believed to pose to medieval men.

48. Muscio, "Gynaecia," ed. Rose, 14; and *De secretis mulierum*, in *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus's De secretis mulierum with Commentaries*, ed. and trans. Helen Rodnite Lemay (Albany, N.Y., 1992), 68.

49. Galen, *On Semen*, ed. and trans. Philip Lacy (Berlin, 1992), 175.

50. James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago, 1987), 89–98, 278–88.

heir, January will remain childless. Rather than focus upon stimulating his own reproductive system, he should have concentrated on stimulating May's. It is her "appetite of the eyes" that will determine whether or not their carnal union succeeds in creating a child. And, as we have seen, Chaucer's depiction of the marital consummation gives little hope of that result.

These facts make it all the stranger, therefore, that May explicitly claims to be pregnant. Even more intriguing, May makes this assertion *before* she sexually consummates her relationship with Damian, thus attributing the paternity of the child to January, our impotent lover. Standing beneath the pear tree in which Damian lurks, ready for their tryst, May pleads an already existing pregnancy as the reason why she must ascend the tree and take some fruit.

"Now sire," quod she, "for aught that may bityde,
I moste han of the peres that I see,
Or I moot dye, so soore longeth me
To eten of the smale peres grene.

.....
I telle yow wel, a womman in my plit
May han to fruyt so greet an appetit
That she may dyen but she of it have."

(IV 2330-33, 2335-37)

It is not only a sexual desire that May claims here, but instead a universally appetitive one, explicitly grounded in the physiological language and science of pregnancy. Is January then more virile than we had imagined? Or is this unheralded yet remarkably convenient pregnancy just another of May's quick lies?⁵¹

Our analysis of the visual and lustful dynamics would easily support either conclusion.⁵² While January himself is unable to stir or arouse May visually, once she has been stimulated so visually and effectively by Damian, perhaps January's role in her visual arousal becomes redundant. As long as January can maintain an erection and a seminal emission, then May's

51. For an argument in favor of this latter interpretation, see Milton Miller, "The Heir in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Philological Quarterly* 29 (1950): 437-40.

52. The only conclusion that this analysis would not support is the one advanced by Emerson Brown Jr., "Hortus Inconclusus: The Significance of Priapus and Pyramus and Thisbe in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 4 (1969): 31-40, namely, that Damian never completes the sexual intercourse with May but instead remains sexually frustrated. For a response to Brown, see Peter G. Beidler, "The Climax in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971): 38-43.

emission of her own feminine seed may be in response to the visual image of Damian in her imagination. In this way, May's own cyclical loop of vision and imagination may have served precisely to provide January with his heir. And yet, since May's mind was focused on Damian at the moment of conception, it becomes quite likely that the conceived child would bear some resemblance to the object of her fantasy. Even if January were indeed virile enough to sire a child upon his wife, the means necessary to inspire her fertility indicate that, in external likeness at least, his son will resemble another man.

This reading is supported by the work of Suzanne Akbari, who writes that

The mirror of Januarie's imagination is like wax in that it receives the impression of the species from that common sense. Januarie believes that May is like that mirror, ready to receive his imprint both figuratively, in the form of his authority over her, and physically, in the imprint of his sperm during conception. . . . [But] the wax turns out to be receptive to the imprint of others as well.⁵³

Once May's lusts and appetites have been stirred by her vision of Damian, it is Damian's image that may rest within her mind at the moment of conception. Thus, in this scenario, even though May's body is like "wax" in the physical and sexual sense as she receives January's seed, her imagination remains as imprinted and inaccessible as if she were indeed copulating with Damian, the object of her thoughts. There is a separation here between May's imagination and her body that I believe to be crucial to the *Merchant's Tale*. While the progression from vision to imagination to lust is as dominant as ever, it may become dislocated from the physical experiences of the body. For all January's seminal contribution, he will have failed to penetrate May where it truly counted in the Middle Ages: the visual/imaginative cycle. This is a form of cuckoldry no less powerful for its lack of direct genital contact (at least by this point in the poem): Damian would have replaced January's image with his own in the face and body of January's heir.

This conclusion, however, cannot be exclusively affirmed. For we receive, after all, no evidence in the text that January and May consummate their marriage after the remarkably uncomfortable passage documenting their wedding night. Further sexual activity seems quite likely—indeed, the implications of the garden constructed by January to hide and enjoy May within seem to

53. Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil*, 229. Chaucer utilizes the metaphor of wax for the impressionability of women when January declares to his friends, "But certeynly, a yong thyng may men gye, /Right as men may warm wex with handes plye" (IV 1429–30).

point quite directly to it—but it is not explicit.⁵⁴ Even more problematic, as noted before, the reader has received no confirmation of January's potency. We know as a certainty that he was unable to stir his wife visually (and therefore sexually). How likely, therefore, is it that he was simultaneously capable of conceiving within her womb? This alternate conclusion would accuse May of having constructed the entire pregnancy out of her already active imagination as a means to ascend the tree and copulate with Damian. Indeed, the state of sexual readiness in which she seems to find herself would most likely allow for successful and immediate conception. In contrast to her previously unknowable thoughts and desires, the language by which May now explicitly claims her "greet appetit" belongs, after all, to a vocabulary of sexual (and thereby visual/mental) arousal. The self-diagnosis of pregnancy here is thus at its heart an acknowledgement of lust, a verbal embrace of the carnal appetites that now occupy her imagination and her flesh.

May's expansive appetite, epitomized so perfectly in her longing for the "smale peres grene," resists any attempt at analytic dissection into its respective sexual and pregnant origins. Her hunger for the fruit before her eyes, for the pears and for the man in the pear tree, are fundamentally dependent on the medieval scientific principles of desire formation and reproductive physiology. While scholars have previously focused on reducing May's claim of pregnant craving into a statement on the specific state of her womb, I believe that her vocalized appetite must be understood as only one aspect of a greater discourse in the text about the embodied nature of concupiscence. The "irrational" hunger of *pica* to which she testifies is a manifestation of the dangers of the visual/imaginative system of human arousal.

In her analysis of May's reproductive body as a disabled body (in part because of its *pica* cravings), Tory Vandeventer Pearman concludes that "Whether May is truly pregnant is irrelevant."⁵⁵ As this paper demonstrates, I fully concur with Pearman's attempt to move the conversation about May's declaration beneath the pear tree away from the confines of "is she or isn't she?" in order to examine instead the broader symbolic meanings evoked by this announcement of pregnancy cravings. The tale is, I believe, a story about appetite, encompassing both the process of stimulative formation and the potential ambiguities of knowledge created by the specter of unmoderated

54. January seems to expect that they will have sex again after the original consummation, as evidenced by his saying "This wol be doon at leyser parfitly" (IV 1834) when he apologizes to May for her discomfort.

55. Pearman, *Women and Disability*, 44.

desire. It is thus far from an exclusively female story; by this model the uncontrollable appetites of pregnancy become merely an extreme iteration of the general human susceptibility to the consequences of foolish gaze and self-indulgent imagination. And yet it is also still fundamentally a story about gender, and the biological distinctions between men and women that are intuited thereof. January's appetite and lust stem from a self-indulgent narcissism, a "reasoned" desire to stimulate his lower capacities. On the contrary, May's appetite is inscribed upon her; she never makes the *choice* to desire, but instead must acquiesce to her gender's designation as the reactionary, passive half of humanity. Defined on a physiological (as well as social) level by her femininity, May is constantly the stimulated one, never the self-stimulator, her appetite always the desired and worked upon object of another's.

It is therefore only within the context of such a restrictive gendering of "biological" science that we may understand the potential transgressiveness of the *Merchant's Tale's* ending. That is not to deny that the operations of the desiring faculties bear the potential to disrupt profoundly the most basic masculine forms of medieval social structure and cohesion. January's deliberate indulgence in an inappropriate exercise of vision and imagination leads directly to his wife's adultery and his own blindness, not to mention, even more problematically, to the conception of a child that will break the bonds of patrilineality when it is born with either the blood or the face of another man. And yet we must note that the *choice* exercised by January to behave in this manner, his control over his own sexuality and appetite, belongs only to men. Such an observation does not exculpate May from her adulterous appetites, but it does act to diminish her agency, to underscore that all her self-expressions of desire occur within narrow physiological confines externally mediated by men.

Within this gendered context, the *Merchant's Tale* acts as a cautionary story of the scientific mechanisms of the body and the foolish uses to which men may put them. Forgetting the procreative requirements of mutual participation, January assumes that his lust alone will be enough to create a child. He has entirely forgotten (if he ever knew) the biological truth of which May reminds him: that, if properly stimulated by the activity of men, women may grow appetites as well. Despite the restrictions placed upon her, May too can undergo the process of desire formation. She too possesses an (albeit latent) physiological link between vision, imagination, and lust. In her declaration of pregnancy, May thus seizes on a metaphor with a double meaning. She is indeed filled with a naturally formed corporeal

longing for what she sees before her eyes. While January assumes that the female appetite about which she assures him denotes the culmination of his own successful virility and the triumph of his model of masculine-only arousal, the text seems to indicate that May's hunger is only peripherally tied to her pregnancy, a figurative marker of a much deeper and less reproductively centered insatiability that has now been stirred from dormancy.

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