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CHAPTER FIVE

Men in Love and Competition:
the *Miller's Tale* and the *Merchant's Tale*

Chaucer's depictions of love, particularly courtly love, have sparked considerable debate throughout the twentieth century. Some readers have ascribed allegorical reading to the material, finding in the love relationships between men and women a suggestion of the soul's movement toward or away from God. Some have focused on Chaucer's parody of courtly love ideals, and still others have assumed that Chaucer was, himself, a Love Poet. Once again, the ambiguity of his texts – their open-endedness and irony – make room for readers to find their own agendas reflected there. Whatever the potential readings, the male narrators on the pilgrimage to Canterbury most often represent men in love as irrational victims of their own desires, as men who have lost control of themselves. Both narrative commentary and plot design encourage us to see them this way. Whether they provoke our laughter or our outrage, male lovers are situated at a distance from us. Narrative strategies sometimes encourage us to identify with, or feel empathy toward, the narrators of the tales or the characters who are victims of circumstance, such as Custance or St Cecile, but we are always placed in an overtly critical relationship to the man in love. Chaucer accomplishes this by undercutting any consistently sympathetic response we might have toward these characters. Through the techniques of hyperbole, satire, and burlesque, as well as by revealing the baser motives lying within a character's desire for women, Chaucer pokes fun at men in love.

Women, the focus of men's amorous desire, are presented as goals to be attained or as sexual territories to be conquered or resisted. It is common for them to be jealously possessed and/or protected by men, not adored. Women usually become the site of a struggle between men so that at the heart of Chaucer's depiction of men in love (within the *Canterbury Tales*) is homosocial competition, rather than a courtly code praising the devotion of men to women.¹

No radiant Beatrice emerges in these tales, and no Gawain practices the high arts of courtesy. The text refuses an uncritical reinscription of the maiden on the pedestal and the ever-yearning lover-knight. It is a pattern which begins early. In the *Knight's Tale*, as we have already seen, Palamon and Arcite are made into clowns. Their excessive and ridiculous passion for Emelye makes them the butt of anti-courtly love humor, and it leads them into violent conflict with each other. The intersection of competition and sexual desire is reinforced in many tales throughout the text: in the *Merchant's Tale*, for example, we have Damian and January; in the *Franklin's Tale*, Aurelius and Arveragus; in the *Miller's Tale*, old John, Nicholas, and Absolon; and in the *Reeve's Tale*, the miller and the two young clerks. More ominous is the *Manciple's Tale*, where Phebus kills his wife because she has another lover; and, in a variation on this narrative pattern, the *Physician's Tale* gives us Virginius who slays his own daughter to 'protect' her from Apis.

Regardless of the genre, many narratives in the *Canterbury Tales* depict men in love in a way more consistent with heroic or theological discourse than with courtly love. Frequently, men in love are men in danger. Addressing knights in his *Vox Clamantis*, John Gower writes:

A knight does not rightly have to fear a bodily wound, since he should receive the world's praises for it. But he should fear the wounds of the spirit, which blind, incurable lust inflicts with fiery darts. Bodily wounds are to be healed, but not even Galen will make a man well who is sick with love. If the knight holds with womanish behavior, his honor dies, bereft of his noble lineage. When a wise knight falls, his fame forsakes him, as though he were fatuous and foolish. When carnal love holds the mind ensnared, an intelligent man's reason becomes irrational. When the brightness of human intelligence is clouded over by the shadow of the flesh, and the spirit of reason withdraws into the flesh, man's reason stands utterly scorned. It is a slave to the flesh, and scarcely retains the post of handmaiden.²

The sentiment is interwoven throughout many narratives of the *Canterbury Tales*. Whether the tone of a tale is comedic or serious, its plot usually suggests that a price is paid when men fall in love with women. Men may lose exclusive claim to their wife's sexual body and be cuckolded; they may be discovered and humiliated or chastised in some way for loving women; and/or they may be in danger of losing control over themselves. Rather than ennobling men, as love does in courtly love discourse, it is usually represented, or perceived by male narrators, as demeaning. The very language they use describes 'falling' in love in negative terms. 'Falling' in love is a descent: it is illness, drunkenness, pain, blindness, foolishness, madness, loss, and sometimes even a death.³ Such a

¹ See Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). The *Man of Law's Tale* offers a variation on the male-to-male competition. In that tale, evil mothers-in-law jealously guard their own power so that competition erupts between the mothers and their sons and between the mothers and Custance; yet, at the heart of the tale rages a competitive relationship between God and Satan, the divine forces which

struggle for mastery over human events and souls. Male-to-male competition is still inscribed in the tale as God and Satan struggle to win the allegiance and 'love' of the human characters.

² John Gower, *Vox Clamantis*, V, 4, in Stockton, 201.

³ Again, John Gower's *Vox Clamantis* provides a catalogue of dangers which love holds for men (here, particularly, knights): 'Love is not of one hue, but is conflicting within itself; it tempers its vicissitudes intemperately. Love conceals and reveals, disunites and reunites, and often drives

representation of love encourages us to distance ourselves from it. As listeners or as readers, we are not liable to embrace this kind of love, since it leads to such pain and exposure. In the *Merchant's Tale*, Damyan 'was so ravysshed on his lady May / That for the verray peyne he was ny wood' (IV, 1774-75), and in the *Franklin's Tale*, the 'sike' Aurelius 'langwissheth as a furye dooth in helle' (V, 950).

Within the long tradition of heroic discourse, love frequently begets chaos: it begins the Trojan war, and it spells the doom for Camelot. Love, in heroic or chivalric narrative material, frequently pulls men away from their public and social responsibilities, away from their loyalties to other men. Commenting on this frequent feature of twelfth-century French romances, Joan Ferrante notes that even though these texts arise in the culture at the same time as courtly love literature, 'they present love almost exclusively as an obstacle to social responsibility and knightly glory.'⁴ She cites many medieval romances which do just this, including *Le Roman de Troie*, where men's love for women is condemned because it makes them lose 'belief and faith, father and lord, lands and territories' (ll. 18455-59).⁵ Such views of human love are surely consistent with Chaucer's presentation in *Troilus and Criseyde*; and, tempered by humor, it is evident in the story of Palamon and Arcite.⁶ Love, interpreted this way, poses a threat to the bond between men, to the loyalty of son to father, vassal to lord, and individual to community; it promotes conflict and divisiveness. Outraged at such competitiveness, the Merchant-narrator, for example, cries:

O perilous fyr, that in the bedstraw bredeth!
O famulier foo, that his servyce bedeth!
O servant traytour, false hoonly hewe,
Lyk to the naddre in bosom sly untrewre,

happy hearts mad with grief. Love is an unjust judge; marrying opposites, it makes the very natures of things deteriorate. In love, discord is harmonious, learning is ignorant, anger makes jest, honor is base, a poor man has plenty, joys grieve, praise reproves, despair hopes, hope is afraid, harms are helpful, assets are harmful. In love, anguish is tasteful, bitterness becomes sweet, winter is springlike, chills perspire, sickness is strengthening. So take greater heed, knight, of the dangers you see. Read what forms love's sickness takes.

Love is sickly health, troubled rest, pious sin, warlike peace, a pleasant wound, a delightful calamity, anxious happiness, a devious path, dark light, gentle harshness, a light lump of lead, both a flowery winter and a withered, flowerless spring, a thorny rose, a capricious law without justice, weeping laughter, laughing lamentation, intemperate temperance, a hostile ally and a gracious enemy, fickle constancy, . . . bitter honey, delicious gall, a prison offering pleasures, irrational reason, foolish discretion, an untrustworthy judge, an ignorant person reflecting on everything, food never digestible and drink ever thirsty, an insatiable mental hunger, a living death, a dying life, harmonious discord, a garrulous mind, mute speech, a secret fever, poor prosperity, prosperous poverty, a slavish prince, a subject queen and a destitute king, drunken sobriety, demented clemency, the port of Scylla, a pestilential cure, a way of health; love is a delightful serpent.' V, 2, in Stockton, 197-98.

⁴ Joan M. Ferrante, 'The Conflict of Lyric Convention and Romance Form,' in *In Pursuit of Perfection: Courtly Love in Medieval Literature*, ed. Joan Ferrante and George Economou, et al (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat, 1975), 137.

⁵ Cited in Ferrante, 'Conflict,' 137.

⁶ See Arlyn Diamond, 'Troilus and Criseyde: The Politics of Love,' in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 93-103.

God shilde us alle from youre aqueyntaunce!
O Januarie, drunken in plesaunce
In mariage, se how thy Damyan,
Thyn owene squier and thy borne man,
Entendeth for to do thee vileynye.
God graunte thee thyn hoonly fo t'espye!
For in this world nys worse pestilence
Than hoonly foo al day in thy presence. (IV, 1783-94)

Such a reading of love and desire, which places women between competing men, can be found throughout the *Tales*, particularly in the context of most fabliaux. It assumes (by implication) that men's relationships to men are paramount.⁷ The women who are desired by men are usually seen, therefore, as a disruption of the male-to-male relationship, a disruption of an assumed order. As such, these tales record a 'masculine' plot - one which reinscribes a psychological scenario familiar to any modern reader acquainted with Freud's account of the son's relationship to the father. An interesting parallel to the Freudian Oedipal narrative emerges in many of Chaucer's tales of love: women are often married to, or controlled by, older more powerful men; and they are sought by younger, less powerful and unmarried men. This is true for Emelye, Alisoun, Maleyne, Dame Simkin, May, and Phebus's wife. The young men who desire the wife are thus challenging or breaking *into* the marriage relationship, into the territory of the older men. They are also frequently seen disrupting the law of marriage and violating the culture's institutionally-prescribed boundaries around sexuality.

Granted, there are men whose love for their wives is represented with more detachment and less passion; notably, however, none of these men's marriages are threatened by younger men's sexual desires. Walter's pursuit of Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale* is more contractual than passionate. Theseus's marriage to Ypolita, in the *Knight's Tale*, originates in military victory and territorial appropriation, not love. And in the *Tale of Melibeus*, Chaucer foregrounds Melibee's intellectual relationship with Prudence. But in tales where men's relationships to women are ones of desire and passion, infidelity and betrayal become what Douglas Kelly has termed a 'nightmare theme.'⁸ The difference between passionate love and a more detached love is underscored in the word choices and plot structures of the *Man of Law's Tale*. The Sultan, who falls in love with Custance's bodily image early in the tale, comes down with a bad case of amorous fever: 'Al his lust and al his bisy cure / Was for to love hire' (II, 188-89). His part in the plot concludes when his own mother murders him at his wedding banquet ('he for love sholde han his deeth'). Custance's second husband, King Alla, is not, however, moved by sexual desire to marry but rather by his 'gentil herte . . . fulfild of pitee' (660); notably, the narrative treats him much differently. Instead of being motivated by passion, King Alla is 'made' to

⁷ Cf. Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 1-15; 21-66. See also Kaja Silverman's discussion of the placement of women between men's eroticism in Fassbinder's films, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁸ Douglas R. Kelly, *Medieval Imagination: Rhetoric and the Poetry of Courtly Love* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 197.

wed Custance 'ful solemprely' according to divine plan. God's design, rather than human desire, unites Custance with her second husband: 'And thus hath Crist ymaad Custance a queene' (693). Of course, King Alla's marriage is threatened by betrayal when his own mother, Donegild, plots to exile Custance and her child, but the plot allows him a final reward. Whereas the Sultan was killed by his mother, King Alla kills his mother, eventually making a pilgrimage to Rome for forgiveness where he is reunited with his wife and his son. (His son even eventually becomes Pope.) The narrative treatment of King Alla differs drastically from the treatment of the Sultan, and the difference is emphasized by parallel plot structures. In addition to the anti-Islamic bias of the tale which partially explains the Sultan's demise, King Alla triumphs in love because his love for Custance is inspired by God; it is not defined as sexual.

The Canterbury narratives most often represent courtly love discourse as an absurdity, and what Chaucer and his narrators appear to find most humorous and ridiculous in the courtly love tradition is men's loss of self control. More than anything women *do* or *are*, men's own desires are emasculating. To the extent that this is true, the *Tales* echo those medieval texts on masculinity advocating control, particularly over one's own heart. Although Chaucer's work challenges and refuses courtly love discourse, it conforms to the value the culture places on control in the construction of late medieval and early modern masculinity. Furthermore, the tales of 'courtly love' are told primarily, but not exclusively, from a male point of view and hence represent men's experience of love in more detail than women's. The Wife of Bath, discussed in chapter nine, will, of course, address this very issue in her Prologue and Tale. In the tales told by the male pilgrim-narrators, men in love are frequently perceived as foolish victims. Nowhere in the *Canterbury Tales* do we get a story depicting sexual passion as unambiguously ennobling. Ascetic and ecstatic religious love that denies the body (such as St Cecilia's in the *Second Nun's Tale*) is said to ennoble others, but sexual love is not represented as a stepping stone to a platonic experience. Sexuality, is, in fact, frequently described in economic terms. The most blatant equation can be found in the *Shipman's Tale* where, as Thomas Hahn has remarked, 'success on the Wall Street of the fourteenth century produces renewed sexual vigor.'⁹ The Wife of Bath's Prologue also characterizes sexuality as a commodity of economic exchange, when Dame Alyson claims that this world is one where 'al is for to selle,' particularly the female body (III, 414, 202, 212).¹⁰

This view of human sexuality interfaces with late medieval theological interpretations of human love. In doctrinal discourse, human love is cast in a role similar to the one it has within heroic discourse: men's desire for women threatens to separate them from the divine Father, as Adam was tempted away from God. The Parson, representing the standard theological view of human love, says, 'God woot, a man may sleen hymself with his owene knyf, and make hymselfe dronken of his owene tonne. / Certes, be it wyf, be it child, or any

⁹ Thomas Hahn, 'Money, Sexuality, Wordplay, and Context in the *Shipman's Tale*,' in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Wasserman and Blanch, 235.

¹⁰ Alfred David thinks the Wife of Bath 'regards "love" like any other commodity to be bought and sold in the World's market place,' *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 146.

worldly thyng that he loveth biforn God, it is his mawmet, and he is an ydolastre' (X, 858-59). Speaking against adultery he argues:

Now lat us speke thanne of thilke stynkyng synne of Lecherie that men clepe avowtrie of wedded folk, that is to seyn, if that oon of hem be wedded, or elles bothe. / Seint John seith that avowtiers shullen been in helle, in a stank brennyng of fyr and of brymston; in fyr, for hire lecherie; in brymston, for the stynk of hire ordure. / . . . 'whoso seeth a womman to coveitise of his lust, he hath doon lecherie with hire in his herte.' (839-40, 844)

Sex in marriage is 'chaste' if husband and wife 'assemble' to pay the debt owed to their spouses, but if they 'assemble' 'oonly' to satisfy desire, they are sinful: 'if they assemble oonly for amorous love . . . to accomplice thilke brennyng delit . . . it is deedly synne' (942). The Parson, in his sermon, follows theological precepts which emphasized procreation as the only truly legitimate purpose of sexual union and downplayed mutual affection and pleasure between spouses; pleasure and mutual desire become, in this discourse, 'fornication' (938-42). The only sexual behavior the Parson endorses is a reluctant submission to sexuality for both men and women, but especially for a wife: 'she hath merite of chastitee that yeldeth to her housbounde the dette of hir body, ye, though it be agayn hir likyng and the lust of hire herte' (940). He advises husbands: 'Man sholde loven hys wyf by discrecioun, patiently and atemprely; and thanne is she as though it were his suster' (860). This idea is reiterated by Justinus in the *Merchant's Tale*:

I hope to God, hereafter shul ye knowe
That ther nys no so greet felicitee
In mariage, ne nevere mo shal bee,
That yow shal lette of youre savacion,
So that ye use, as skile is and reson,
The lustes of youre wyf atemprely,
And that ye plese hire nat to amorously,
And that ye kepe yow eek from oother synne. (IV, 1674-81)

As David Aers comments, the theological 'teaching and its language manifest the complete degradation of the erotic, the total separation of love from sexuality, of sexuality from one's full and true humanity.'¹¹

Whether Chaucer himself accepted such a perspective or not is an unanswerable question. Still, his depictions of men in love with women are rarely admirable. They are usually comic, at moments tragic, and occasionally some wonderfully ambiguous combination of both. Whether or not his representations of men in love reveal an antipathy toward the love of women, whether they represent only a parody of a literary tradition, or whether they merely reflect the fashionable fourteenth-century stance of an old narrator looking back at the foolishness of youthful love (as in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*), are questions we cannot really ever answer. However, much evidence

¹¹ David Aers, *Chaucer* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 67.

suggests that Chaucer's stance is consistent with late fourteenth-century literary tastes. Courtly love literature had, even at the end of the twelfth century, undergone a crisis. Douglas Kelly notes that in the *Queste del saint graal* and in Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*, as well as in numerous Launcelot-Grail cycles, courtly love was seen as a corruption: 'The knights of the Round Table are blind to their own error in the *Queste*; like Amant in Jean's *Rose*, they sink into clumsy foolishness and sensuality, murder and rape.'¹² The Wife of Bath's rapist knight accords with just such a portrait, although her tale argues for the power of women, the ancient feminine, to effect a transformation of this kind of male violence and immorality. Despite the presence of ideal romance and courtly worlds in late medieval literature, by and large, Kelly argues, the fourteenth-century audience turned away from these lofty and fantastic romance worlds 'to poems about the end of love, and especially the death of a loved one.' Chaucer's time was, according to Kelly, beginning to prefer literary art which recreated a world closer to actual lived experience, with all its ambiguity, variation, and mortality: '[Fourteenth-century] poems [of love] are 'realistic' in the sense that they are set in a given time and place and show forth limitation and finality. The prevailing mood is one of resignation, even despair.'¹³ He notes the tendency of fourteenth-century poets to emphasize old age, death, and the passing of time: 'Chaucer's tendency to emphasize the decline of *fyn lovyng* into a worse state is symptomatic of his generation's questioning of the reality or possibility of courtly love as an ideal.'¹⁴

If Kelly is correct about the fourteenth century's challenge to idyllic love, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reflect their historical context and its growing rejection of courtly love ideals. However, much of Chaucer's challenge to the mythology of love occurs in fabliaux tales which do not emphasize 'sorrow' or 'death' but which, rather, humorously expose the raw physicality lying beneath courteous euphemisms. One purpose of the fabliau as a genre is to overthrow repressive authority, and so Chaucer's text makes exquisite use of bawdy tales to demonstrate the disparity between the culture's myths about love and baser realities (though the fabliaux themselves are not 'realistic' depictions either).¹⁵ The 'decline of *fyn lovyng*' can be seen quite clearly in the *Miller's Tale*, where a competition between men seems much more the point than love. Judson Allen and Theresa Moritz have noted that in the *Miller's Tale*, as in the other tales of the first Fragment, 'Chaucer was interested in . . . rules and intrusions against them. His focus is therefore on the intrusive male and his supposedly sovereign adversary.'¹⁶ Although the Miller-narrator frequently borrows language from courtly love discourse, the desire of Absolon and Nicholas to possess Alisoun nearly in front of her husband underscores the competitive nature of male

relationships in this tale.¹⁷ Rivalry between the two clerks also erupts when Nicholas insists on sticking his arse out the window to get the best of Absolon. It is not enough that Alisoun has made a fool of Absolon; Nicholas must do it too. In this tale, love becomes, in fact, a battle ground for a contest fought by body parts through a window frame. Mouths, eyes, rear ends, and the phallic coulter come together in quite a row. For the Miller-narrator, the clothing of eloquence and courtly love ritual simply obscure the naked truth of human desire and physicality. Although the tone is comic (consistent with its fabliau genre), the plot of the *Miller's Tale* implies a judgment on this kind of behavior, for the lovers who 'quite' one another pay a price for their competitiveness just as they do in the *Knight's Tale*. John winds up cuckolded. He has a broken arm and a whole town that thinks he's crazy. Nicholas, although he gets the girl momentarily, winds up with a burned bum. And Absolon unwittingly kisses Alisoun's 'nether eye' and is 'almost yblent' by Nicholas's fart. Competition hurts, but, of course, it is also funny.¹⁸

The *Miller's Tale* goes beyond poking fun at and judging the love-contest, however; men's blindnesses, their fantasies about themselves and their fantasies about women, are also exposed by the tale. Each of the three male characters assumes he's superior to the others for some reason. Old John is the working man, the laborer; Nicholas plays the intellectual; and Absolon fashions himself into the courtly lover. Each assumes his own form of masculinity is somehow better than the others. Old John believes money, younger women, and hard manual labor are ennobling. Thinking and pursuing knowledge are activities he considers even potentially dangerous, and he ridicules the studious and intellectual clerk:

Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee.
Ye, blessed be alwey a lewd man
That noght but oonly his bileve kan!
So ferde another clerk with astromye;
He walked in the feeldes, for to pry
Upon the sterres, what ther sholde bifalle,
Til he was in a marle-pit yfalle;
He saugh nat that. (I, 3454-61)

Apparently, he assumes clerks are so preoccupied with their minds that they are unaware of their bodies, and even though he is afraid he will be cuckolded, John expresses no concern about leaving Alisoun home alone with the clerk who rents their spare room. This blind assumption as well as John's prideful ignorance provide Nicholas with just the tools he needs to take advantage of his host. John may mock learning, but we see his own blind ignorance push him into a 'marle-pit' as he is so easily set up by the educated Nicholas. The superstitious

¹² D. R. Kelly, *Medieval Imagination*, 177.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁵ Laura Kendrick notes, 'To a far greater extent than most writers of French fabliaux, Chaucer builds the authority to be dethroned into the text of his *Canterbury Tales*,' *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 100.

¹⁶ Judson Allen and Theresa Moritz, *A Distinction of Stories: The Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury* (Columbus: University of Ohio Press, 1981), 77, n. 4.

¹⁷ The *Miller's Tale* is also, quite clearly, in competition with the *Knight's Tale*, so that the fabliau genre competes with and defeats the chivalric romance genre, at least from the churls' perspective. See Kendrick's *Chaucerian Play*, 5-10.

¹⁸ Cf. Lee Patterson, ' "No man his reson herde": Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the *Canterbury Tales*,' *SAQ* 86 (1987); Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 223-36.

carpenter unquestioningly accepts Nicholas's prophecy that the Flood will reoccur imminently, so he sets about constructing his ridiculous life boats and hangs them from the ceiling of his house. Commenting on John's gullibility and his delusion, the Miller says:

Lo, which a greet thyng is affeccioun!
Men may dyen of ymaginacioun,
So depe may impressioun be take. (3611-13)

But John is not the only man deceived by his own assumptions; so is Absolon.¹⁹ This young clerk plays at idealized or courtly love in a highly self-conscious manner, imagining himself a gallant:

This pariss clerk, this joly Absolon,
Hath in his herte swich a love-longynge
That of no wyf took he noon offrynge;
For curteisie, he seyde, he wolde noon. (3348-51)

'For paramours' he dresses himself just so, and wanders around in the middle of the night singing underneath Alisoun's window. He falls madly in love with Alisoun, worshiping her as he imagines courtly lovers do. He sends her sweet wine, spiced ale, hot cakes, and money, and 'Sometyme, to shewe his lightnesse and maistrye, / He pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye' (3383-84). But all of this high drama is for naught; Alisoun repeatedly refuses his advances. Stubbornly, the foppish Absolon interprets her repeated rebukes as insincere, assuming she is also playing his game of courtly love, and so he persists despite them. His subjectivity blinds him to the possibility that Alisoun could have her own desires and wishes beyond, or in contradiction to, his own. He absolutely refuses to grant her any autonomy; she is merely an extension of his own fantasy. The text ridicules this kind of narcissism as Absolon's persistence leads him to kiss Alisoun's 'nether eye.' At first, he cannot even comprehend the truth. Edward Schweitzer has commented that 'Absolon is so comically deluded, so much a victim of his expectations, his judgment so overpowered by his imagination, that he cannot fully comprehend the trick played on him.'²⁰ If the narrative makes a statement about the courtly love tradition, it may be implying that the courtly man's fantasies ignore women's autonomy. As such, the Absolon material may be remarking on the refusal of men to acknowledge women's desires. But the tale may also illustrate ways that men's adherence to the courtly love ideal and their 'excessive love' for women can weaken them and make them vulnerable to abuse not only from women but from men as well, for both Alisoun and Nicholas play the bum-baring trick on the adoring Absolon. Here the 'servant of love' topos from the courtly love tradition receives a thorough-going fart in the face. As Laura Kendrick remarks, 'a kiss bestowed on

¹⁹ For an article that examines the self-delusion in Absolon's character, see especially Edward Schweitzer's 'The Misdirected Kiss and the Lover's Malady in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*,' in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, 223-33.

²⁰ Schweitzer, 'Misdirected Kiss,' 226.

the lower orifice, instead of on the mouth, puts woman "on top" in a grotesque parody of the ceremony of vassalage.'²¹

Nicholas and Alisoun are not the only ones who ridicule Absolon, however. There is yet another character who plays rather roughly with him: namely, the Miller-narrator. He apparently sees men who worship women, who posture themselves after the courtly love tradition, as effeminate. In fact, the Miller-narrator first describes Absolon using a rhetorical *effectio* modelled after those commonly reserved to describe feminine beauty.²² The beautiful woman was traditionally described in a descending catalogue from head to toe. She had blond hair and grey eyes, rosy lips and cheeks, small round breasts and a tiny waist.²³ The Miller describes Absolon from head to toe, as having golden hair like a 'fanne,' grey eyes and blushed complexion; 'Yclad he was ful smal and proprely' (see ll. 3320f). As has been noted by numerous scholars, Absolon's namesake, King David's son, had a beautiful and generous head of hair that cost him his life.²⁴ In biblical exegesis, Absolon's hair was often seen as an emblem of the effeminacy of sin. As further signs of Absolon's effeminacy, he is 'somdeel squaymous of fartyng' (3337-38), and he sings in quivering voice that is 'gentil and smal' like a nightingale's (3360). He coughs 'softe . . . with a semy soun' (3697) before he begins his performance beneath Alisoun's window, and he 'moorne[s] as dooth a lamb after the tete' (3704). Although the presence of 'feminine' features in a male body challenges gender stereotypes to some degree, the message the Miller intends to communicate here is fully masculinist: things womanly or child-like are weak and unbecoming when they exist in a man. Absolon is the only man in this tale who is described as feminine, and he is the man most maligned by the crude events in the tale. Apparently the Miller-narrator believes that the working man who creates with his hands and the intellectual who designs with his mind are more masculine than the courtly lover whose goal is to love women and revel in desire.

Absolon does not remain lost in his love-sickness for very long, however. He is rudely awakened to a 'naked' truth about Alisoun, for no lady would bare her bottom to her lover in such a manner. And so, as Robert Miller observes, 'In Absolon's misplaced kiss, the Miller subjects the code of courteous love (as he sees it) to the indecent exposure he feels it deserves.'²⁵ Absolon's response to 'truth' is revenge. He bites his lip in anger and 'to hymself he seyde, "I shal thee quyte"' (3745-46). He gets a hot iron and intends to regain his dignity by luring Alisoun to the window and burning her bottom. He regains his sense of manhood and control by retaliating physically. The hot coulter may well be more than a

²¹ Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play*, 188, n. 10.

²² See E. Talbot Donaldson, 'Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's Tale,' in *Speaking of Chaucer* (Durham, 1970; Labyrinth Press, 1983), 20-22; Robert P. Miller, 'The Miller's Tale as Complaint,' *ChauR* 5 (1970): 147-60. See also *The Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute, 1967), 36-38.

²³ For a discussion of the catalogue device as it is applied to women see Kevin Kiernan, 'The Art of the Descending Catalogue, and a Fresh Look at Alisoun,' *ChauR* 10 (1975): 1-16.

²⁴ See Paul Beichner 'Absolon's Hair' *Mediaeval Studies* 12 (1950): 222-33 and his 'Characterization in the Miller's Tale,' in *Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), 117-29. See also D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer*, 385.

²⁵ R. P. Miller, 'The Miller's Tale as Complaint,' 153.

weapon, as Charles Owen noted some time ago; it may suggest an ironic symbol of Absolon's sexual inadequacy: a phallus.²⁶ To be healed of his effeminacy, Absolon must become aggressive. If he was love-sick before, he is cured 'at the end':

His hoote love was coold and al yqueynt;
For fro that tyme that he hadde kist hir ers,
Of paramours he sette nat a kers;
For he was heeled of his maladie. (3754-57)

The Miller-narrator represents Absolon's love of women as an illusion which is 'sick' and unmanly.²⁷ Losing that illusion, 'cooling' the heart, and regaining control over one's emotions, are seen as 'healing' and positive. To be healed of his effeminacy, Absolon becomes aggressive. Instead of yearning for the 'tete' as a babe, he asserts himself with the coulter-phallus as a weapon. The development of Absolon's character traces a movement from oral desire to phallic retribution, a development the Miller-narrator apparently sees as a remedy for Absolon's unmanliness. Notably, the agent for Absolon's 'cure' is Alisoun's nakedness. In this way, the tale establishes sexuality as a field of knowledge and power, albeit humorously. Here, the woman's body is represented much as it appears in a modern pornographic film: her body becomes the knowledge to be 'seen' and possessed by men. As Yann Lardeau has commented, 'the naked woman has always been, in our society, the allegorical representation of Truth.'²⁸

If Absolon is a man who has been molded by a cultural discourse to such a degree that he becomes a fool, Nicholas represents yet another kind of distorted perception. V. A. Kolve has suggested that Nicholas is a 'shaper of fictions.'²⁹ He uses his intelligence to compete with other men, to seduce women, and to exert some control over his world. Not surprisingly, he 'Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasye / Was turned for to lerne astrologye'(3191-2). Although this educated man gets the best of the uneducated Carpenter, and although the

²⁶ Charles Owen, 'Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: Aesthetic Design in Stories of the First Day,' *English Studies* 35 (1954): 53.

²⁷ E. T. Hansen, in her analysis of the tale, stresses the homoerotic and homophobic elements in the Nicholas-Absolon exchange. *Chaucer and the Fictions*, 223-236. On pages 230-31, she writes of Absolon's retaliation against Nicholas: 'this reaction identifies what is most disturbing: the actual and feared lack of distinction between men and women, which in turn suggests the related possibilities of castration and homosexuality. A relation between (the fear of) castration, homosexual behavior, and the rape or mutilation of the female (who is presented in this tale as definitely asking for it) is equally . . . brought out in the revenge Absolon hastens to enact.'

²⁸ Yann Lardeau, 'Le sexe froid du porno au dela,' *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 289 (June, 1978): 49, translated by and cited in Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 26. De Lauretis, incorporating Lardeau's work on pornographic film, writes, 'The pornographic film is said relentlessly to repropose sexuality as the field of knowledge and power, power in the uncovering of truth . . . the close-up is its operation of truth, the camera constantly closing in on the woman's sex, exhibiting it as object of desire and definitive place of *jouissance* only in order to ward off castration . . . The porno film is constructed on the disavowal of castration, and its operation of truth is a fetishistic operation.'

²⁹ V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 166.

Miller-narrator obviously enjoys telling his audience about Nicholas's ruse, Nicholas hardly represents an admirable masculine model. He is 'subtile,' 'sleigh and ful privee,' and he knows and practices 'deerne love' well. Edmund Reiss has established that Chaucer and many of his contemporaries used this term 'deerne love' to indicate a 'more artificial than natural' love, and that the word 'deerne' carries with it connotations of sinfulness.³⁰ Reiss claims, 'The evidence would seem to indicate strikingly that *deerne love* is not noble, not an expression of *fin amour*, but, rather, a low love, one illicit and sinful.'³¹

Nicholas sees Alisoun as an object to be won in a game.³² He does not carry on an affair with her when John goes on business trips (which happens twice). Instead, his thrill lies in staging a ruse, deceiving John, and having Alisoun as a result of his fiction-making. V. A. Kolve has suggested that 'Nicholas's ultimate intent' may be 'as much the witty exploration of an old man's gullibility as the 'swyvyng' of the wife.'³³ But even though Nicholas succeeds at gulling John and 'swyvyng' Alisoun, he is punished. His desire to compete with men gets the best of him when he decides to bare his bum to Absolon. In his eagerness, he falls for Absolon's ruse and suffers the scarring consequences. Absolon applies the red-hot poker, and

Of gooth the skyn an hande-brede aboute,
The hoote kultour brende so his toute,
And for the smert he wende for to dye.
As he were wood, for wo he gan to crye,
'Help! water! water! help, for Goddes herte!' (3811-15)

So a pattern emerges from the representations of men in the *Miller's Tale*. We have here men who seek to control their worlds by fantasy, cultural code, or cunning design and yet who remain vulnerable to the designs of others. Their vulnerability arises out of their erroneous assumptions about other men and about women. John falls for Nicholas's ruses; Absolon falls for Alisoun's; and Nicholas falls for Absolon's. Edmund Reiss suggests that in this tale all secrets and all things concealed are finally exposed. Nicholas reveals his 'deerne love' to Alisoun who has been kept 'caged,' or concealed, by her jealous husband. Alisoun quite easily escapes from her 'cage,' at least for a night, to play with Nicholas. Nicholas reveals his secret prophecy to John. Alisoun exposes her 'privetee' to Absolon whose pretenses and misperceptions are discovered. Absolon's secret plan burns Nicholas's private parts which are exposed awaiting a kiss, and John falls from the ceiling into a realization that he's been duped. 'At

³⁰ Edmund Reiss, 'Chaucer's *deerne love* and the Medieval View of Secrecy in Love,' in *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner, C.S.C.*, ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 165. See also E. Talbot Donaldson, 'Idiom of Popular Poetry in the *Miller's Tale*,' in *Speaking of Chaucer*, 19-20. The *MED* II, 1006 defines the word, 'deerne' as 'stealthy, insidious, crafty, dishonest, deceptive, immoral, and evil.'

³¹ Reiss, 'Chaucer's *deerne love*,' 171.

³² For an article that examines the *Miller's Tale* as a game, see Gerard Joseph, 'Chaucerian "Game" - "Ernest" and the "Argument of Herbergage,"' in the *Canterbury Tales*, *ChauR* 5 (1970): 88-89.

³³ Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 189.

the end of the tale,' says Reiss, 'all that had been *deerne* is made public with great commotion and outcry.'³⁴ The tale opens out into the entire community as the town learns of all the private matters in the lives of the main characters. The tale, he says, serves 'to show the inadequacy of that which is illicit and hidden,'³⁵ and, ~~it~~ might add, that which is fantasy and affectation.

In this tale, only the men, apparently, have fantasies, affectations, and hidden motives which need to be exposed; Alisoun does not. She may have fantasies; she may parody a courtly lady and thoroughly relish her seduction, but her primary purpose in the tale is the same as Emelye's in the *Knight's Tale*: the female-as-body, the object to be possessed. She is in the tale to reveal something about the male characters. Her experience, her thoughts, her desires, though mentioned briefly, are not the focus. Paul Olson, in his article, 'Poetic Justice in the *Miller's Tale*,' writes:

In the *Miller's Tale*, Alysoun becomes what each of her lovers wants her to be: to the lecher [Nicholas], she is mere animal satisfaction, and she springs as a colt for him; for the proud Absolon, she is elevated to celestial regions as the Bride of the Canticum; for the greedy John, she is what he hopes to save from the flood. Pierre Bersuire remarks that a man may have three 'wives': carnality, avarice, and pomposity. Alysoun serves for all three.³⁶

If we explore the implications of Olson's analysis, then, men's misperceptions of women are punished in the *Miller's Tale*. Each of the three men fashion their actions around the delectable prize: Alisoun – her name means 'of delight' – and yet none of them can see her as anything but an object. They may 'know' her (sexually) and yet not know her. Their inability to acknowledge her subjectivity as well as their own fantasies about her lead them into errors of judgment and into trouble. The men are, then, similar to medieval versions of Adam who, because he was so fond of Eve, loses his judgment and suffers punishment. But we cannot assume too close a correspondence between the tale and gender issues in Genesis, for Absolon and Nicholas are the subjects who initiate the action; Alisoun is the object; the only innovative thing she does in the story is to stick her rear end out the window in a rather conventional fabliau move. Like Emelye, she plays a predominantly, though not exclusively, passive role.

That subjectivity revolves around the male characters and objectivity around Alisoun is also apparent in the way the narrative describes the two genders.³⁷ The description of Alisoun emphasizes her body and her sexuality. She is, as David Aers has described her, 'an assortment of desirable bits.'³⁸ The descriptions of the men do, of course, emphasize their bodies and their sexual appetites in so far as we are in the genre of the fabliau, but we learn much more about them than that. Nicholas may be lecherous, but much of his

description establishes him (humorously) as a student with textbooks, an astrolabe, augrym stones, and a harp which he plays well. He also sings beautifully and can act a part superbly.³⁹ Absolon is also lecherous, and yet we learn that he is a barber of sorts, that he can 'maken a chartre of lond or acquaintance,' and that he knows many fashionable dance steps. He can play a fiddle, 'wel kan' play and sing with the guitar, and can even participate in the town's amateur play productions. And what of John? Although John's gullibility is hilarious and his superstitiousness ridiculous, we do see him engage in business activities, and we witness his skill in carpentry. But Alisoun? She, like Emelye, is first introduced as a body in a description linking her with the natural world. Granted, Nicholas's breath is described as sweeter than the root of licorice, and Absolon is compared to a cat, a nightingale, a goose, and a blossom, but Alisoun's description is overwhelmingly sprinkled with references to Nature:

Fair was this yonge wyf, and therewithal
As any wezele hir body gent and smal. (3233–34)

She has 'a likerous eye' and is compared to a budding peach tree, 'wolle of a wether,' swallows, colts, kids and calves, honey, apples, primroses, and 'a piggesnye.' She is a 'popelete' or doll. She is the prize 'for any lord to leggen in his bedde / Or yet for any good yeman to wedde' (3269–70). But what of her work? Her accomplishments? Very little. The point here is that the woman is described not in terms of her achievements or aspirations, not in terms of her mind, but in terms of her physicality and sexuality, her body alone. She is the object of the male gaze, to borrow terminology from contemporary film criticism, and her body is fragmented by the Miller-narrator's representation and made into pieces of a body apparently desired by men – mouth, eye, eyebrow, waist, breasts, genitals, and a naked rear-end. The subject of Chaucer's tale is the male gaze and its consequences, not Alisoun. 'Alisoun,' Judson Allen and Theresa Moritz argue, 'functions more as occasion than person, as do the other 'awardable' women in the first fragment.'⁴⁰ Whereas Emelye is taken prisoner and becomes a war prize after the conflict between the Amazons and Theseus, Alisoun is held 'narwe in a cage' by her husband and is seen as a colt to be tamed by Nicholas. The ending of the tale is telling:

[The Carpenter] was holde wood in al the toun.

Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
For al his keypyng and his jalousye;
And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye;
And Nicholas is scalded in the towte. (3846; 3850–53)

³⁴ Reiss, 'Chaucer's *deerne* love,' 174.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁶ Paul Olson, 'Poetic Justice in the *Miller's Tale*,' *MLQ* 24 (1963): 233.

³⁷ Cf. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 158–90; and Thomas B. Hanson, 'Physiognomy and Characterization in the *Miller's Tale*,' *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971): 477–82.

³⁸ Aers, *Chaucer*, 84.

³⁹ J. Burke Severs discusses the nature of Nicholas' pursuits and their relationship to the gulling of John in 'Chaucer's Clerks,' in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974; Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1974), 140–52; especially 140–43.

⁴⁰ Allen and Moritz, *A Distinction of Stories*, 77, n. 4. Robert P. Miller has also argued that the *Miller's Tale* is an 'offensive thrust at women' where wives are 'simply sexual instruments,' 'The *Miller's Tale* as Complaint,' 158.

It is Alisoun who is copulated *with*, not Nicholas. She is the sexual object, not he. Johan Huizinga argued quite some time ago that 'all the conventions of love are the work of men: even when it dons an idealistic guise, erotic culture is altogether saturated with male egotism.'⁴¹ Such egotism reveals itself in the *Miller's Tale*, but not without ironic exposure.

If blindness, particularly men's blindness about women, is figuratively an epistemological condition of the men in the *Miller's Tale*, it becomes literally represented in the Merchant's story about old January. The male gaze is, once again, the object of Chaucer's satire, but the *Merchant's Tale* offers a more complex satiric comment on courtly love, and that complexity stems, partially, from the more active and ingenious role given to May, January's young wife.⁴² At the beginning of the tale, however, May is obscured, and the focus is on January. Despite the counsel of his friends, despite the wisdom one might expect from his age, and despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, the old knight persists in his belief that marriage is bliss. He believes in his own fantasies and the fictions of cultural ideals. Marriage, he thinks, will give him an heir, 'a lyf blisful and ordinaat,' an obedient wife who will mother him whenever he is in need, and some measure of economic security. A wife, he fantasizes, will be his helpmate just as the sermons prescribe; she will provide him with emotional stability and will never abandon him. He imagines that women are 'Goddess yifte' to men, a kind of property far better than 'londes, rentes, pasture, . . . commune, / Or moebles' (IV, 1311, 1313-14). Each ideal he holds is ironically answered by the events in the tale. Except that his marriage to May is blessed by a priest and may well produce an heir, the marriage (and May, particularly) exists to reveal the old knight's inadequate knowing. Contrary to any courtly depiction of love, January's devotion to an ideal of conjugal bliss is not laudable within the tale; it literally blinds him to truth.

Juxtaposed in ironic fashion against the 'factual experience' of the Merchant-narrator's own wedded life, January's beliefs become ridiculous right from the beginning of the tale, for the Merchant predicates his tale on the assumption that marriage is pain. In the Prologue to his tale, he reveals his own 'cursed' condition as a henpecked husband:

I have a wyf, the worste that may be;
For thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were,
She wolde hym overmacche, I dar wel swere.
What sholde I yow reherce in special
Hir hye malice? She is a shrewe at al.

I wolde nevere eft comen in the snare.
We wedded men lyven in sorwe and care.

(IV, 1218-22; 1227-28)

⁴¹ Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, 138.

⁴² Cf. Hansen's reading of the *Merchant's Tale* sees it as a far more sinister tale than I do here. Her argument establishes ways the tale reinscribes sexual-gender anxieties around sexual differentiation, rape, coercion, and the power of the sex-gender system. *Chaucer and the Fictions*, 245-66.

Strategically prefacing the tale with such statements, Chaucer situates competing interpretations of women and marriage at the center of his story. This guarantees that we will question the idyllic and formulaic disquisition on love and marriage which January delivers early in the narrative. Furthermore, within the tale, itself, January's perceptions of marriage are challenged by Justinus's skepticism and by the antifeminist authoritative voices of Seneca, Theophrastus, and others, again guaranteeing that the audience will not accept the old knight's interpretations.

The correlation between epistemology and the knowledge of women is emphasized early in the tale by two images drawn quite obviously from the platonic tradition. January imagines that knowing or possessing a wife will accord him far more comfort than any of the 'yiftes of Fortune, / That passen as a shadwe upon a wal' (1314-15). Even though January believes he will find some kind of 'truth' in marriage, the Merchant-narrator interprets January's desire for a wife as if it were only a desire for artificial appearances, for shadows, for reflected images:

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,
Thanne sholde he se ful many a figure pace
By his mirour; and in the same wyse
Gan Januarie inwith his thoght devyse
Of maydens whiche that dwelten hym bisyde. (1577-87)

Rather than depict the male lover's devotion to courtly love, the Merchant depicts January as a practitioner of mercantile courtesy.

The narcissism of this fantasy comes to life in the action of the tale as January takes May to bed to (consume)mate his marriage, and it is a narcissism tainted with overtones of violent conquest. January, Venus's 'knyght / . . . wolde bothe assayen his corage / In libertee and eek in mariage' (1724-26). He begins to imagine his power and dominance over the young maiden:

. . . in his herte he gan hire to manace
That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne
Harder than evere Parys dide Eleyne.
But natheless yet hadde he greet pitee
That thilke nyght offenden hire moste he,
And thoughte, 'Allas! O tendre creature,
Now wolde God ye myghte wel endure
Al my corage, it is so sharp and keene!
I am agast ye shul it nat susteene.
But God forbode that I dide al my myght! (1752-61)

The passage recreates January's thoughts, and they are thoughts of physical domination, not adoration, as the word choices so obviously indicate ('assayen,' 'manace,' 'armes,' 'knyght,' 'corage,' 'streyn harder,' 'offenden,' 'sharp,' 'keene,' 'myght'). The reference to Paris and Helen (with its inevitably military connotation) as well as January's fantasy that May, a little creature, might not 'susteene' his powerful sexual advances, help create a subtext of a sexual assault as a dominant feature of his sexual imaginings. Even more explicitly violent is the knight's metaphorical reference to his penis as 'a knyf': 'A man may do no synne with his wyf, / Ne hurte hymselfen with his owene knyf' (1839-40). But January's fantasies are ludicrous; outside the fantasy we see an old man who needs aphrodisiacs and fictions to bolster his courage in his own sexual performance. Damyan, his servant and meat-carver, will serve better than he, albeit in bizarre circumstances. For both men, May is the delectable prize, the feast for their sexual appetites.

In this supremely anti-courtly tale where 'love' is simply lust with violent overtones and where the 'lover' is a lecherous old man, Chaucer emphasizes January's egocentrism and the chasm which, consequently, separates him from May. This is accentuated by constructing the narrative so that it initially reveals January's subjectivity and obscures May's. We know Venus enjoys arousing January's sexuality (1723-29), but what she thinks of May is not recorded. We know how January found subtle ways to get his guests to leave the wedding banquet (1765-71); we know what he thought (1750-64), what he drank (1805-12), and what he said (1814-15). Consistent with this male-oriented passage, we know of Damyan's sexual arousal (1772-82) and the Merchant's reaction (1783-94); we know how masculine time (the sun) 'Parfourned hath . . . his ark diurne' so that masculine 'night with his mantel, that is derk and rude, / Gan oversprede the hemysperie aboute' (1795; 1798-99), but the feminine representative - May? 'The bryde was broght abedde as stille as stoon' (1818). However obscured May is during these lines, after January consummates his desire, the Merchant says:

But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,
Whan she hym saugh sittynge in his sherte,
In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene,
She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene. (1851-54)

Despite her earlier obscurity, or perhaps precisely because of it, this momentary stop at the doorstep of May's subjectivity is powerful, for her perception of January is, presumably, correct. Like us, she can see what he cannot. Even though only five lines of the 156 lines describing the wedding festivities indicate May's experience and perceptions, her five lines of precise and accurate observation point to the excessive fantasies of the male characters.⁴³

⁴³ The lengthy discussion on marriage at the beginning of the tale, which takes up almost half the narrative, is a discussion involving only men. The inclusion of the exclusively male discussion of women within a tale which satirizes men's objectification of women may well comment on the exclusion of women from the debate. For a discussion of the aesthetics of the tale, see Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation: The Aesthetic Possibilities of Inorganic Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).

As the narrative progresses, May's character and her perceptions gradually become clearer and clearer, accompanied by January's greater and greater blindness. While the men in the tale are blinded or consumed by jealousy and lust, May takes control. She acts. Feigning roles and concocting plots, she takes on an active role in the tale similar to Nicholas's role in the *Miller's Tale*: 'For craft is al, whoso that do it kan' (2016). Here is no distant paragon of courtly love virtue, no passive recipient of male action; here is a determined and resourceful artisan of fictions and affairs. Although the men - Damyan and January - first fall in love with May, May herself chooses to pursue an affair with Damyan despite his poverty ('he namoore hadde than his sherte' [1985]). She chooses to defy and her husband's possessiveness and to satisfy her own desires, ingeniously finding ways to skirt his fierce jealousy; and she is the one who cleverly destroys Damyan's billet-doux by throwing it down the privy. She is the one who writes Damyan:

And sotilly this lettre doun she threste
Under his pilwe, rede it if hym leste.
She taketh hym by the hand, and harde hym twiste
So secrely that no wight of it wiste. (2003-06)

In Chaucer's spoof on the courtly love tradition, his Merchant says:

Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!
Heere may ye se how excellent franchise
In wommen is, whan they hem narwe avyse.
Som tyrant is, as ther be many oon,
That hath an herte as hard as any stoon,
Which wolde han lat hym sterven in the place
Wel rather than han graunted hym hire grace;
And hem rejoysen in hire crueel pryde,
And rekke nat to been an homycide. (1986-94)

At least twice the Merchant-narrator tells us that Damyan goes along with May's plans because he 'knew al hire entente' (2120, 2212); and her 'entente,' or will, governs once January loses his eyesight. She is the one who devises the plan to duplicate the garden gate key from a wax imprint (2117-18), and she is the stage director in the garden scene: 'For in a lettre she hadde toold [Damyan] al / Of this matere, how he werchen shal' (2215-16). Carefully orchestrating her 'play,' she gestures:

On Damyan a signe made she,
That he sholde go biforn with his cliket.
This Damyan thanne hath opened the wyket,
And in he stirte, and that in swich manere
That no wight myghte it se neither yheere,
And stille he sit under a bussh anon. (2150-55)

Then leading blind old January 'down the garden path,' May deceitfully sings and gives testimony to her fidelity. She feigns pregnancy and a sudden craving

for fruit; stepping on her blind husband's back in a bitter representation of the courtly lover's vassalage to women, May hoists herself into a pear tree to frolic with Damyan. At just this moment, the Merchant-narrator interrupts the action with a digression reminiscent of the courtly past-time of competitive debating.

Imagining Pluto and Proserpina as divine witnesses to the human scene, the Merchant freezes the action to allow for a discussion. Pluto, outraged that May should cuckold her husband, decides to restore old January's eyesight. He condemns May, and all women, citing Solomon's words: 'Thus preiseth he yet the bountee of man: / "Amonges a thousand men yet foond I oon, / But of wommen alle foond I noon,"' (2246-48). But lest we, as listeners or readers, should accept such a categorical evaluation of women, Proserpina launches into a defense of women (2264-2310), and forces a reconsideration. From Proserpina's perspective, young women forced into marriage with older, lecherous men are to be pitied. And Proserpina, unlike Pluto, can see that even if one woman is adulterous, it is not logical to conclude that all women are adulterous. Pluto, like January, is far more illogical and absolute. Women, he thinks, are, without exception, lustful and 'untrouthe.' But that is not, apparently, what Chaucer wants us to think, otherwise Proserpina's commentary would not stand in counterpoint to Pluto's. At this moment in the narrative, the complexity of textual interpretation becomes explicit: are we going to side with Pluto or with Proserpina? Their interpretations of the January-May relationship offer us two possibilities.

If we agree with Pluto, we fall into the kind of misperception January exhibits at the beginning of the tale: an insistence on absolute judgments, on either/or thinking. If we side with Proserpina, we are left with what may seem like an uncomfortable decision to sanction adultery: an approval of deceit and duplicity. This dilemma is, apparently, the one Chaucer wants for us, otherwise the narrative would never have been so abruptly interrupted by questions of interpretation. In the dilemma, made even more problematic by the Merchant's Prologue, the only conclusion we can draw for sure is that the way one answers the question depends upon one's experience. Pluto, the 'old king of the underworld, king of darkness, feels outrage when he sees old, blind January being cuckolded by his wife. Proserpina, the young goddess of Spring, abducted, ravished, and made wife of Pluto, understandably feels for May. The scales may well tip in Proserpina's favor, since most of us would find an alliance with life (rebirth, youth, Proserpina) more amenable than an alliance with death (the underworld, old age, Pluto). It may also be tempting for the feminist reader to revel in May's rebellion, in her clever response to January, for as Joan Ferrante notes: 'With limited opportunities to exercise real power over their own or others' lives, women in medieval literature and sometimes in real life find subtle or hidden ways to exercise such power, to manipulate people and situations, and to spin out fictions which suit them better than their reality, fictions by which they can, or hope to, control reality.'⁴⁴ But to revel in May's clever response, to side with Proserpina, is not completely comfortable, for

⁴⁴ Joan Ferrante, 'Public Postures and Private Maneuvers: Roles Medieval Women Play,' in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 213.

Proserpina's gift of duplicity to May also has the effect of making her consistent with the representations of women which the antifeminist tradition maintains. That is quite clearly the way Harry Bailly reads the tale: he remarks, 'Lo, whiche sleighes and subtilitees / In wommen been!' (2421-22).

Consistent with his absolutist mode of thinking, Pluto, even after listening to Proserpina's defense of women, still vows to restore January's eyesight so that he will know the truth of his wife's adultery. Proserpina, consistent with her compassion toward May, vows that if Pluto does restore January's eyesight, she will provide May with 'suffisant answere, / And alle wommen after, for hir sake' (2266-67). Their plans proceed exactly. January opens his eyes and accuses his wife. She maintains coolly:

. . . 'Sire, what eyeth yow?
Have pacience and resoun in youre mynde!
I have yow holpe on bothe youre eyen blynde.
Up peril of my soule, I shal nat lyen,
As me was taught, to heele with youre eyen,
Was no thyng bet, to make yow to see,
Than struggle with a man upon a tree.' (2368-74)

Still, January persists, outraged by what he has witnessed: ' "Strugle!" quod he, "ye algate in it wente! / . . . He swyved thee, I saugh it with myne yen" ' (2376, 2378). Once again, May, using the cleverness of language and argument, simply denies him his seen reality:

'But sire, a man that waketh out of his sleep,
He may nat sodeynly wel taken keep
Upon a thyng, ne seen it parfitly,
Til that he be adawed verrailly.
Right so a man that longe hath blynd ybe,
Ne may nat sodeynly so wel yse,
First whan his sighte is newe come ageyn,
As he that hath a day of two yseyn.
Til that youre sighte ysatled be a while
Ther may ful many a sighte yow bigile.
Beth war, I prey yow; for, by hevene kyng,
Ful many a man weneth to seen a thyng,
And it is al another than it semeth.
He that mysconceyvethe, he mysdemeth.'⁴⁵ (2397-2410)

Here is, perhaps a serious Chaucerian appraisal of the man in love, and it is a warning: beware of your own misperceptions. The power of January's desire for

⁴⁵ Cf. Hugh of Folietto, *De nuptiis libri duo* (PL 176, col. 1212): 'What a woman does without a witness, she forgets as if it never happened. If, however, there was a witness, she forces him to believe by her artful use of language (*artificio linguae*) that he had not seen what he actually saw.' This passage is translated by and cited in Katharina M. Wilson and Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Wykked Wyves and the Woes of Marriage: Misogamous Literature from Juvenal to Chaucer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 90.

the ideal negates his sensory experience, so that he kisses May and leads her home, apparently content to deny reality and believe fiction.

In the *Miller's Tale*, Absolon's kiss forces his recognition of truth, his recognition of his own ridiculous delusions, but here, in the *Merchant's Tale*, January is even more ridiculous because he never does fully recognize the truth of his own illusions (or the truth of real experience, for that matter). As a comment on the culture's discourse surrounding women, characterized by the January-Justinus debate which begins the tale, the *Merchant's Tale* laughs at men's very human tendency to swallow ideology without thinking, to believe in the myths without hesitation, to imagine that signifier and signified are synonymous, that marriage and 'paradys' are necessarily the same because some authority says so, or that women are always manipulative because some other authority says so. Where the *Miller's Tale* parodies the courtly love discourse, the *Merchant's Tale* takes the challenge even further by daring the audience to formulate a judgment; and since, according to the tale, we can only 'glympse' at truth, it comments as much on us as on January. It suggests that we often give credence to particular definitions of 'men' and 'women' (and to particular interpretations of reality) because those interpretations happen to complement our own fantasies.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hansen writes, 'Characters and narrator alike are at once constituted and deconstructed by the misogynistic discourses that they use, and so again the *Merchant's Tale* reminds us that the fused problems of identity and writing cannot be divorced from the fundamental problems of gender difference and gender relations. No one escapes into the position of asexuality and nonrepresentability, here – except, more visibly than ever, perhaps, the Chaucer that modern criticism has nervously attempted to discern,' *Chaucer and the Fictions*, 266.