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PERFORMATIVE PASSIVITY AND FANTASIES OF MASCULINITY IN THE *MERCHANT'S TALE*

by Holly A. Crocker

Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* has a mixed critical record. While a few scholars over the years have made arguments for the tale's comic potential, many critics agree that the tale's narrator, a sour and disillusioned character, has an unsettling effect on the tale.¹ The narrator, often identified with the Merchant from the tale's headlink, has been variously described as "bitter" and "self-lacerating," traits that lend the tale its reputation as "brutal, bitter, and hence un-Chaucerian."² In a welcome feminist intervention, Elaine Tuttle Hansen argues that the impulse to identify the tale's cynical antifeminism with a character distinct from Chaucer is the attempt to salvage an authorial position that remains insulated from the disintegration of gender difference enacted by this story.³ Foreclosing the potential comedy of the tale, the "bitterness tradition" attempts to deny the joke that May's performative passivity makes of gender. As I shall argue, May's conduct demonstrates that the feminine passivity upon which masculine performances of agency depend is *of course* an act, and by playing out this act, May exposes the ridiculous nature of all claims to masculine authority, whether they are based on knowing rawness, ironic detachment, or blind naivete.

Scholars aligned with the "bitterness tradition" seek to do what the tale itself cannot: they set up a binary of gender, creating two masculinities distinguished by separate claims to agency. While Chaucer is empowered by the ability to resist defensive cynicism, the tale's speaker is debilitated by his retreat into frustrated attack. This scheme of masculinity is ranked by the ability to contain feminine agency, suggesting as it does that aloof detachment implies more self-control than disillusioned disappointment. The fantasy of masculine agency that the "bitterness tradition" naturalizes is a tempting gender-fiction, one to which even Hansen concedes in her acknowledgment of the tale's bitterness. Hansen pulls back from her most radical insight, that "May *is* different and has something that can-

not be fully known or seen or controlled,” claiming instead that the “narrator’s treatment of this final vision of May’s ‘pryvetee’ actually works . . . to undercut and contain the woman’s agency in a couple of ways.”⁴ Hansen’s analysis allows room for feminine agency, but then suggests that men’s manipulations and evaluations of that agency contain its disruptive potential to blur masculine categories of control. Hansen’s feminist version of the “bitterness tradition” displaces, then, the subversive potential of femininity by relying on the same categories of masculinity she seeks to revise. By so doing, Hansen, like the critical tradition that seeks to separate Chaucer from the identity of the tale’s teller, sets up a binary of masculinity, something May’s performance of femininity prevents the *Merchant’s Tale* from doing on its own.

In this essay I am interested in the “Chaucer versus teller” distinction that the “bitterness tradition” enables as it relates to the binary of masculinity the tale tries to erect. As I shall argue, the tale sets up a series of contrasts designed to distinguish between men in terms of their control of (ideas about) women. This project perpetually fails, I suggest, because May’s femininity exposes the fictionality of gender distinctions based on displays of agency or passivity. May’s conduct does not shift from passive to active; instead, her behavior demonstrates that feminine passivity always requires agency. Whether she is working to endure January’s sexual fantasy, or endeavoring to satisfy her desire for Damyan, May uses agency to maintain the appearance of passivity. When she shows that the difference between passivity and agency is only a matter of display, May takes away the ability for men to differentiate themselves from one another, or from women. Gender difference indeed disintegrates in this story, but it does so in a way that cannot be reinstated by recognizing the “feminized position of many men.”⁵ When May shows that femininity involves a process of “passing,” she also demonstrates that masculinities based on displays of agency are performances of masquerade. Such is the radical comedy of the *Merchant’s Tale*.

The tale might not be funny, but because it “evade[s] restrictions and open[s] sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible,” it is nevertheless a powerful vehicle of humor.⁶ R. Howard Bloch argues that the Old French fabliaux are not shocking due to obscenity, violence, or immorality, but rather because they reveal what he calls “the scandal of their own production,” showing and exploiting the slippages and failures in language usually meant to keep categories of identity distinct.⁷ There is a similar scandal at the heart of Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*. This tale exposes the slippages and failures that characterize the production of gender, whisking back the curtain in Oz to reveal the small binary apparatus that can only attempt to contain a multitude of behavior by classifying it as either passive or active, masculine or feminine. The tale thus

catalogs the failure of gender, exposing the crippling fallacies in its binary logic that narratives usually suppress, efface, or ignore. From the dramatic *Merchant's Prologue* contained in many manuscripts, to May's rhetorical ability to reassure January at the end of the tale, this story suggests that feminine passivity is an act that prevents men from cultivating and managing their own identities.

Competitive Fictions

The Merchant's exchange with the Clerk enacts the type of competition that is meant to establish and rank different forms of masculine agency in the tale itself. The masculinities of both men depend upon the fictionality of passive femininity: while the Clerk suggests feminine passivity is ideal, the Merchant insists that it is phony. The Clerk establishes his self-control through his ability to map a type of feminine identity that remains inaccessible except through literary representation. Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff suggests that the motivation spurring Walter to test Griselda in a repetitive cycle is the masculine belief in and fear of the essential unknowability of women.⁸ Keeping in mind Petroff's argument about Walter's attitude in that tale, I submit that the narrative of Griselda's submission offers the Clerk a way to display her performances of passivity as a marker of his own agency. While his claim that there are no more Griseldas in the world puts such feminine identity outside the boundaries of common masculine experience, he creates for himself the position of privileged masculinity empowered by its access to and control over an ideal of feminine submission, the rarity of which suggests its power.

The Merchant also stakes his claim to masculine agency on the fictional status of feminine passivity, taking up in effect the same type of cultural authority that the Wife of Bath uses to resist the tradition of clerical misogyny. While Alison claims

Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage

(III 1–3),

the Merchant asserts that his suffering in marriage gives him more authoritative access to the ideal of wifely obedience that Griselda represents.⁹ He tries to prove his agency by deflating a textually authoritative model of gender, quickly pointing out the

long and large difference
 Bitwix Grisildis grete pacience
 And of my wyf the passyng crueltee.

(IV 1223–25)

Not only does he claim to be able to separate truth from fiction, the Merchant also suggests that the myth of feminine submission fools men into believing in a false sense of self-control. Taken in by the promise of wifely obedience, the Merchant finds that the autonomy hierarchical marriage is supposed to secure for him dissolves into a chaotic struggle for marital control characterized by “Wepying and waylyng, care and oother sorwe” (IV 1213). The Merchant’s embittered appeal to his own unhappiness, “I knowe ynogh / . . . and so doon other mo / That wedded been” (IV 1214–16), suggests that feminine passivity—even as an idealized fantasy—is a threat to masculine autonomy.

The Merchant attempts to establish a position of masculine authority for himself by suggesting that the Clerk’s exemplary fable of femininity is based upon a false promise of control. His position is paradoxical, seeking as he does to establish his masculine agency by insisting that women are really not passive. To assert his superiority, the Merchant denies the Clerk’s ability to cultivate and manage a model of passive femininity. He seeks to dominate the Clerk, moreover, with his own version of feminine passivity as fiction. When he suggests that there is another femininity, one whose recalcitrant agency falsifies the Clerk’s ideal, he creates a range of masculinities differentiated by the varying ability to see through the ruses that authenticate idealized feminine passivity. Multiple masculinities imply shifting femininities, but since the Merchant treats feminine shiftiness itself like a metaphysical quality, he assumes that he knows the contours of the universal model of feminine agency his wife is meant to signify in his account. Like every male character in the tale, the Merchant assumes that his version of feminine identity actually shapes female conduct. If he says that all women are shrews, he expects women’s agency to fit itself to the intractable model that assures his authority. He thus assumes that women are passive in the face of masculine will, even when that masculine will asserts the universal unruliness of feminine agency.

The headlink’s Merchant, then, is indeed “self-lacerating,” to use Paul Strohm’s phrasing, taking himself apart by making visible the gender paradox that destroys all claims to masculine authority within the tale itself.¹⁰ The Merchant denies the equivalence between femininity and passivity except when it promotes his claim to control. He therefore seeks to use the fictionality of gender to authenticate his masculinity. To do so he must admit that women have agency, even as he tries to insist that such agency is universally shrewish (and thus is under his interpretive rule).

Much as the Merchant's attempt to dominate the Clerk suggests that men can be active or passive in relation to one another, his insistence that feminine passivity is an act suggests that men also can be active or passive in relation to women. As the *Merchant's Prologue* demonstrates, gender difference based on a binary dividing agency from passivity is a practical joke, one that cannot be defused by any amount of knowing rawness or cynicism.

Romancing The Stone

Refusing to keep concealed what we all discipline ourselves to ignore, the *Merchant's Tale* continually reveals the fabrications that must pass themselves off as truths for gender difference to have any cultural sway whatsoever. From the cynical teller, to the narcissistic January, to the chastened Pluto, this story suggests that masculine authority based on feminine passivity is a farce. No matter how much men admit they know about the independence and autonomy of individual women, their dependence upon self-gratifying fictions of feminine passivity looks laughable in this domain. In its perversion of genre, the tale reduces the romance, which often effaces or suspends heteronormative marital ties in favor of a brand of "competitive masculinity," to the domesticating social function it increasingly played in the late fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries.¹¹ As Felicity Riddy points out, "It is not surprising that romances that seem to be fantasies of freedom should turn out to endorse, again and again, the view that the supreme goal for boys and men of the propertied classes is to marry and settle down."¹² Masculinity is both fragile and vulnerable in this world, suggesting that grades of masculine empowerment depend on the different ways feminine agency passes itself off as passivity in public displays.

Tellingly, January's decision to marry after sixty years of bachelordom does not conclude a narrative cycle of heroic deeds that preclude marriage; instead, by emphasizing the bachelor's inglorious waning mortality the narrator devalues the knightly model of masculinity that perpetually avoids marriage. When January has to settle down, he does, but as the narrator's (un)ambiguous suspension of judgment suggests, "Were it for hoolynesse or for dotage / I kan nat seye" (IV 1253–54), his reasons boil down to concern about the perpetuity of his estate. January's concerns mark him as an old man, worried now about preserving the assets his position and performance in the armed class have secured for him. January's keen desire to be wed uncovers heroic masculinity's repressed dependence on a ridiculous ideal of passive femininity. Even if the exploits of Gawain, Yvain, or Erec make it clear that men achieve

heroic masculinity through their interactions with powerful women, these narratives work hard to ignore feminine agency by continually reading women as passive players who exert no decisive control in competitions that are supposed to take place only between men. The *Merchant's Tale*, by contrast, underscores the fact that active masculinity is completely dependent upon femininity for its intelligibility, stability, and perpetuity, revealing in turn the ugly motivations for investing cultural prestige in a fiction of feminine passivity.

As January himself admits, his desire to marry derives from his wish to preserve his social standing:

“Yet were me levere houndes had me eten
Than that myn heritage sholde falle
In straunge hand.”

(IV 1438–40)

Since perpetuating his estate requires a successful procreative bond with a woman, January has good reason to believe in the malleable nature of young wives. He does not want an old wife, because she might not give him children, and because she has enough experience with men to know that January's narrative of himself is a fiction. His expectations for his bride and his marriage derive from his overestimation of his worth, an attitude which derives from a romance notion of independent masculine agency. January thinks that an empowered man is able to fashion himself and his estate by means of the effortless control he exerts over women. The exemplary agent of masculinity (knight turned husband) will have a marriage that outdoes the bliss of heaven: “I shal have myn hevene in erthe heere” (IV 1647). The ideally powerful husband will also have a wife as passive and pliable as the model the encomium delineates: “‘Do this,’ seith he; ‘Al redy, sire,’ seith she” (IV 1346). Seeking to write himself into his idealized fiction of gender difference, January needs passive femininity to be real. He is therefore chained to an image of femininity, vulnerable in his desire to make himself the man he wants to be through a submissive spouse.

It is no wonder, then, that to find such a wife he looks into the mirror of his own imagination.¹³ When January claims that a man cannot sin with his wife, just as he cannot “hurte hymselfen with his owene knyf” (IV 1840), it is evident that he believes he controls the fiction of femininity he has cultivated to secure his own image, even as he looks into the unresponsive eyes of his new bride May. January models his identity on the youthful heroes of romance whose masculinity he seeks to mirror. In his dream world January seems more interested in physical appeal than virtuous quality, but physical appeal often signifies virtuous quality in romance scenarios. Troilus, for example, also makes “a mirour of his

mynde / In which he saugh al holly hir figure" (I, 365–66), but he uses such projection to consolidate his love for Criseyde:

It was to hym a right good aventure
To love swich oon, and if he dede his cure
To serven hir, yet myghte he falle in grace.

(I, 368–70)

Such imaginative fabrication, here clearly designed to validate Troilus's worth, is fairly standard among medieval discussions defining and extolling feminine virtue.

As Marbod of Rennes's *De Matrona* further illustrates, desiring "oon" (IV 1595) as nondescript as "warm wex" (IV 1430) waiting to be molded to fit masculine desire is not a unique fantasy, because, as Marbod claims of the beautiful young maiden he imagines, "Inque boni formam ceu mollis cera reflecti, / Et disciplinae subjectionis esse probatur" (She can be shaped into the pattern of goodness like soft wax, and is proved to be more submissive to discipline).¹⁴ When January constitutes May's character from the model of femininity he imagines to be ideal, he patterns his own expectations after those designated worthy for a powerful and respectable man:

He purtreyed in his herte and in his thoght
Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tendre,
Hir myddel smal, hire armes longe and sklendre,
Hir wise governaunce, hir gentillesse,
Hir wommanly berynge, and hire sadnesse.

(IV 1600–1604)

January follows clerical and popular advice when he insists upon a flexible young bride: John Chrysostom claims that youth insures chastity and marital affection, while the anonymous fourteenth-century poem *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* advises early marriage in order to stabilize the supposedly fickle feminine character that might disrupt coupled harmony.¹⁵

January's expectations for his young bride are outrageous, then, but only because his blazon uncovers what other narratives leave hidden: the connection between an image of femininity so passive that it is static and an empowered model of masculinity able to shape and manage itself in a competitive world of other men. January seeks to perform the expectations for masculinity that confer power in late medieval discourse, but his advanced years put him beyond the arc of manhood that such an

ideal of masculinity is meant to organize. By seeking to fit himself into a model of youthful knightly potency, January instead makes himself look like a narcissistic old fool. Jehan le Fèvre's disgust registers the social boundary January crosses:

Nature damne le vieillart;
Oultre pouoir par son vieil art
Plus appete qu'il ne puet faire

Nature damns the old man;
outside his capacity in his aged way
he longs to do that which he cannot.¹⁶

The problem with January's attempt to animate a fantasy of active masculinity, however, goes beyond his age. January's turn from bachelor to husband underscores the fact that knights, despite their lives of risk and chance, often must settle down and marry, and when they do, they must confront the fiction of passive femininity that sustains the fantasy of competitive masculinity outside of marriage.

When that confrontation takes place, as it does in the *Merchant's Tale*, it becomes clear that the fiction of passive femininity, especially when it is enacted, is a fantasy that does more to unsettle than enable active masculinity. The expectations for January's new bride, set forth in the encomium and endorsed by January, suggest that any woman who could fill that role would have to be "stille as stoon" (IV 1818), a statuesque beauty whose only activity is reflecting January's masculine worth. When May enters the tale, nearly halfway through the narrative, she appears to be the static image of feminine passivity January needs to animate his fiction of masculine agency. Sitting at the wedding feast—more like a carved stone figure than a real live girl—she is the passive object January "purtreyed" in his mind (IV 1600). She looks like animate feminine virtue, a beautiful statue whose blush of color, or gently panting breath, indicates her authentic, fleshly status.¹⁷ Materializing the fiction of feminine passivity is a common project of medieval culture and often determines female status, as the *Good Wife's* advice makes clear,

But be of fair bearing and of good tongue
Through thy fair bearing
Thy worship hath increasing.¹⁸

Such stasis, such distance, is therefore appropriate for a woman like May, and should secure January in his claim to masculine potency.

Animating Passivity

May's display of passivity does not secure January's agency, and not just because he is old. As May's performance at her wedding feast and on her wedding night demonstrates, when the fantasy of feminine passivity is made flesh, she stops masculine agency cold. A knight's respect for the virtue a lady's passivity signifies gives her power over him. Thus Troilus swoons, Palamon and Arcite are awestruck by Emily's wondrous beauty, and "Januarie is rayvsshed in a traunce" (IV 1750). This inertia is often a means of situating what might otherwise appear to be inappropriate masculine aggression, expressing as it does the knight's devotion to the lady he is preparing to "streyne" (IV 1753; *TC* III, 1205). As Derek Pearsall points out, January's fantasies of ravishment at the wedding feast suggest the psychic preparation for marital rape.¹⁹ January's conduct thus seems to separate him from the masculinity that he desires; similarly, when Troilus snaps out of his love-stupor, his agency threatens to overpower Criseyde's vulnerable femininity: "Right as an aspes leef she gan to quake, / Whan she hym felte hire in his armes folde" (III, 1200–1201).

Despite January's depravity, it is not his behavior towards May on their wedding night that separates him from the ranks of lovers such as Troilus. Rather, it is May's lack of response to his "pleyyng" (IV 1854), her continued passivity in the face of his attempts to perform sexually, that suggest both his disregard for her and her indifference to him. Before and after Troilus takes sexual possession of Criseyde, she is active, working to revive him from his faint, responding with affection to his sexual performance. Criseyde clearly has agency, but because her agency enables and endorses Troilus's masculinity, it passes as passivity. Freud's characterization of femininity illustrates the difference between Criseyde's and May's passive femininities: "One might consider characterizing femininity psychologically as giving preference to passive aims. This is not, of course, the same thing as passivity; to achieve a passive aim may call for a large amount of activity."²⁰ Unlike May, whose passivity makes her inscrutable, Criseyde's performance of feminine submission is meant to satisfy her lover:

Criseyde, al quyt from every drede and tene,

 Made hym swych feste it joye was to sene,
 Whan she his trouthe and clene entente wiste.

(III, 1226, 1228–29)

May's appraisal, on the contrary, remains inaccessible to all but divine insight: "But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte" (IV 1851). May seems to have an opinion about January's performance, but it

emerges as a combination of absence and negation, "She preyseth nat his pleying worth a bene" (IV 1854). May's lack of response actually gives her agency in this context, suggesting that she is unreceptive to January's sexual advances because she thinks his performance is inadequate. The extremity of May's passivity suggests that her femininity is not a product of January's identity, giving her what Hansen acknowledges is at least the possibility of a subjectivity outside the domain of masculine fabrication. May indeed has a subjectivity that escapes masculine control, but not because she remains ultimately Other, inaccessible through radical passivity. May's inert unresponsiveness is even more terrifying than the courtly lady, whom Jacques Lacan and then Slavoj Žižek characterize as traumatic in her unfeeling ability to impose demands that are completely arbitrary.²¹ It is true that the representation of May as a screen whereupon January may project a narcissistic ideal of himself is an attempt to hide her traumatic potential, but the terror she poses is her very lack of demand, her seeming lack of desire. May appears to want nothing, especially from her partner January. Her lack of want thus makes her frightening because she reflects the naked vulnerability of an empty masculinity that nonetheless seeks to animate itself through an immovable fiction of femininity.

By giving January exactly what he says he wants, May gains agency by doing exactly "*what is allowed*, that is, what the existing order explicitly allows, although it prohibits it at the level of implicit unwritten prohibitions."²² May demonstrates that codified feminine passivity does not enable masculinity; instead it exposes its false claims to agency. January's treatment of May on their wedding night and her lack of response to his erotic manipulation show that the desire to cultivate a model of feminine passivity falls short of masculine fantasies of empowerment. Because January cannot animate May's passivity, he loses credibility as a masculine agent, no matter how aggressively he dominates her body. Pointing out the parallels between January's fantasies of self-empowerment and medieval retellings of the Pygmalion myth of feminine creation, D. W. Robertson, Jr., suggests that January's desire to fashion for himself a feminine figure who reflects his empowered identity exposes his narcissism: "Pygmalion did love a 'fantosme' and 'anemis' within himself to the extent that he abandoned the counsel of reason completely and became just as blinded by his passion as . . . Chaucer's Januarie was to become at the foot of his pear tree."²³ As John Lydgate's version of the sculptor demonstrates, masculine power is bankrupt if the woman made to reflect masculine agency does not come to life:

Al be that yt was ded and colde,
Which made hym self [for] to stryve
Lyche as hyt had[d]e ben alyve.²⁴

January falls victim to the masculine fantasy of feminine passivity because he is not able to animate his stony figure of feminine beauty.

January fails to establish his masculine agency, then, but only because he believes in the myth of feminine passivity absolutely. He does not understand that in order for feminine passivity to promote masculine empowerment, a woman must have agency. His narcissistic cultivation shows, moreover, that the agency he expects to gain from his creation can come only from the woman herself. For January's empowerment to gain authority, May must approve of his agency by subjecting herself to his dominion. Although medieval renderings of the Pygmalion story foreclose this aspect, Ovid's poem shows that the project of cultivating feminine passivity as a marker of masculine agency requires that the woman be animated. As long as Pygmalion's figure remains stony, he risks being read as a representative of delusional narcissism, as Robertson's analysis makes clear. If he is to succeed in his project of masculine creative empowerment, his maiden must come to life *as subject* to his will. The model of masculine agency that Pygmalion represents in Ovid, then, depends upon feminine subjectivity, because masculine agency can be measured only by its ability to bring to life a woman whose supposedly independent will fulfills masculine desires. Making love to an ivory maiden reveals the folly of masculine pretensions to agency that employ a feminine figure of radical passivity. January, who "kisseth hire ful ofte; / With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte" (IV 1823–24), fails to arouse May's desire because he believes he needs only a *figure* of feminine passivity. His disregard for the agency that feminine passivity requires thus empties out the myth of masculine control he seeks to perform.

Limiting Agency

January does not believe that the ideal of feminine passivity is a fiction. He also fails to admit that animation of any femininity requires subjectivity, and that the mobilizing agency required even by passive subjectivity is not simply a product of his masculine will. Thus January's failure to recognize that his bride must have agency for her to remain subject to his fantasy exposes the fictionality of his feminine ideal. January fails to animate his fantasy of masculine agency, then, but his failure does not allow the teller to mobilize a model of masculine power based on the ability to see May's feminine passivity *as a fiction* disguising her agency. It is true that the narrator attempts to institute a binary of masculinity that abjects January by revealing May's agency, but as I shall suggest, that scheme falls apart precisely because of his limited articulation of May's feminine agency. The teller of the tale attempts to set up a new law to

govern May's identity, one that reads femininity as universally shrewish. In effect, the speaker assumes that his ability to unmask May's agency makes her passive in the face of his dominating authority. Because he is able to see through the ruse of feminine passivity, May's humiliation of her aging husband is designed to mark the teller's masculine power. From the beginning of the tale, in sarcastic asides and snide dismissals, the narrator undercuts the model of passive, obedient wife that the encomium outlines and January seeks. This strategy is meant to give the speaker a two-fold claim to agency, over January and over May.

When May begins her liaison with Damyan, her behavior fulfills Justinus's specific predictions of feminine insubordination. Justinus admits that women have agency, but he insists that feminine autonomy always has a shrewish character. Offering the example of his own wife, who is reputed to be meek by his neighbors (and especially by other women), Justinus claims, "But I woot best where wryngeth me my sho" (IV 1553). He therefore allows no room for a type of feminine activity that can be directed for masculine gains, or that steps outside the well-documented limits of shrewish feminine identity. Justinus is unlike Placebo, who as his name predicts, offers an uncritical endorsement of January's desires in a performance of submission much like that imagined for January's future bride:

"I woot wel that my lord kan moore than I.
With that he seith, I holde it ferme and stable;
I seye the same, or elles thyng semblable."

(IV 1498–1500)

Justinus marks his agency by refusing to validate January's fantasy; however, his warnings, as Richard Neuse points out, do not challenge January's ideal of marriage or the desirability of feminine passivity. As Neuse states, "there is no real disagreement between Placebo and Justinus, who between them define precisely January's idea of marriage as a sanctified way to self-justification and pleasure (*placere*), and as a hard-headed business deal."²⁵ The two advisors differ only in their views of the possibility of such delightful fabrication. Despite his passivity, Placebo affirms the possibility of January's masculine power. Justinus, in contrast, asserts his agency by denying that the fantasy of masculine empowerment based on feminine passivity can be materialized.

Justinus's position is defeatist in the sense that he stakes his claim to authority on the ability to deny a fiction of feminine passivity in which he is also invested. He may advise January to be cautious in his choice of bride, "Men moste enquire . . ." (IV 1532), but he also suggests that no matter how thorough January is in his investigations of his potential mate, there is nothing he can do to subject feminine agency to fulfill his own

pleasure: "Paraunter she may be youre purgatorie!" (IV 1670). Even if January's worry that he may risk heavenly salvation to marital bliss is absurd, Justinus's conclusion, "That ther nys no so greet felicitie / In mariage, ne nevere mo shal bee" (IV 1675–76), suggests that marriage is a union that leads to masculine loss of control. But instead of advising January to avoid marriage altogether, Justinus's mocking deference to the Wife of Bath's authority on the subject of marriage suggests that men inevitably must form marital unions with women, but that they must also accept the dissolution of masculine agency that such bonds entail. Justinus seeks to establish masculine authority by denying the gender binary upon which January's fantasy of masculine empowerment depends, but in so doing, he also undermines the foundation of his own power. This is the scandalous paradox at the heart of gender identity that the teller labors to keep covered in his revelation of May's autonomy.

The narrator, like Justinus in his "wisdom," seeks to assert masculine power by denying feminine passivity. This strategy can maintain a successful appearance only if the narrator establishes an exclusive claim to May's identity, allowing him to see through the guise of passive femininity so that he is invulnerable to the feminine shrewishness he exposes. As long as May is called upon to fit the codified fantasy of feminine passivity that January's desire fabricates, the narrator is able to suggest that her apparent agency is a product of his will. When May does not respond to January's performance of masculine potency, her seeming agency, in its ability to deny January's empowerment, suggests the narrator's control over May, January, and himself. When May begins her affair with Damyan, moreover, her willingness to betray January is not presented as a product of her own dissatisfaction with January's disregard for her desire. The speaker undermines May's sympathy for Damyan with his sarcastic redeployment of a familiar Chaucerian line, "Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!" (IV 1986), while he presents what in other contexts would be a noble performance of masculine lovesickness as enfeebling.

Damyan is not the romance hero who can rescue May from the pain of her mismatched marriage. Unlike Marie de France's *Yonec*, or *Guigemar*, in which young lovers conspire to cuckold old husbands, the *Merchant's Tale* does not romanticize youthful erotic desire.²⁶ Using suggestion and double entendre, the speaker reduces May's romantic love to physical longing: "threste," "harde," and "twiste" (IV 2003, 2005) foreshadow the tale's denouement, separating May from any lofty associations with amorous passion.²⁷ Similarly, focusing on the way that Damyan seeks to go "about his nede" (IV 2019) with a display of grooming and preening suggests that his passion is based on physical attraction. These moments uncover the connection between physical appeal and romanticized desire that other narratives hide, and they have a belittling impact that is

enhanced by the privy scene. When May feigns physical “need” (IV 1951) to escape from January so that she can read Damyan’s letter, the speaker casts the potential for May to develop ennobling pity into the toilet. As Derek Pearsall comments, “The narrator’s insistence on telling us exactly what May did with Damian’s love-letter (1953–4) has about it the sour disillusion of one who is determined to tell the truth about this squalid business of sex.”²⁸ This scene shows that May has agency, but as Pearsall suggests, this scene also shows that her will is a product of the speaker’s manipulation.

While Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out that this affair would be less disturbing if the hierarchy of agency were not reversed (if Damyan were more clever and dominant, like Nicholas from the *Miller’s Tale*), it is not simply the inversion of gender roles that makes May’s relationship with Damyan unsettling.²⁹ May’s agency is disturbing because it is deployed to authorize the speaker’s position. When May returns to the bedroom, it is clear that she has a will, but it is the speaker now, not God, who knows what she thinks of January’s lovemaking: “How that he wroghte, I dar nat to yow telle, / Or wheither hire thoughte it paradys or helle” (IV 1963–64). Even as the teller “underscores that May acts under compulsion” in her submission to January’s desire, it is the teller who directs her identity, in the bed and in the privy.³⁰ When January builds his walled garden, it provides the enclosed scene where the speaker may uncover the shrewish character of May’s agency, supposedly without exposing himself to its potential for harm. January, “[t]hurgh eggyng of his wyf” (IV 2135), decides to indulge in the pleasures his garden promises, while “On Damyan a signe made she, / That he sholde go biforn with his cliket” (IV 2150–51); both men are at the mercy of May’s manipulations. May, on the other hand, acts according to the misogynist literary tradition the narrator seeks to validate through her performance of shrewish agency.

Staging the Shrew

January’s entreaty to May that she remain faithful to him even after his death sets the stage for the performance of misogynist commonplaces enacted by May. She bursts into tears when she hears January’s requests, employing a weapon that medieval writers accuse women of employing to diffuse masculine anger, or to hide feminine betrayal.³¹ Since it is clear that May is not in the garden to exchange sincere vows of devotion with her dependent husband, it is hard to separate her conduct from such misogynist lore. Likewise, when she wishes harm upon herself were she

to sully her honor, it is difficult to differentiate her from the feminine figure medieval discourse associates with lying or hypocritical rhetoric.³² Jehan le Fèvre claims that women use five sorts of sophistry to cover their transgressions against masculine authority in the household.³³ Following one of Jehan's verbal formulae for wifely deception, May uses January's worries about her fidelity to manipulate him when she claims that husbands are continually mistrustful and speak nothing but harm of women. May's performance places her in company with the Wife of Bath, executing almost verbatim Alisoun's advice to other women.³⁴

When January merely hints at May's potential for (future) infidelity, May follows the model for dominating her male accuser that Proserpine outlines: "Yit shul we wommen visage it hardily, / And wepe, and swere, and chydte subtilly" (IV 2273–74). Although Proserpine promises to give her "suffisant answer" to defend her actions (IV 2266), May clearly already possesses the "face boold" needed to excuse her adulterous designs (IV 2269). The problem is that the shrewishness May assumes is presented as an indicator of the narrator's power over feminine identity. The circuit of May's performance marks her as the sort of unruly wife that Justinus warns against in his advice. Ironically, Proserpine herself demonstrates the parameters of feminine identity in which the teller seeks to circumscribe May. As Mortimer J. Donovan points out, there are many parallels between the divine couple and their earthly counterparts.³⁵ The similarities, however, are most apparent before Pluto restores January's sight.³⁶ The supernatural couple's interaction produces ironic pleasure, for as Jill Mann notes, Pluto, once a rapist, exasperatedly concedes defeat at the hands of his once innocent wife.³⁷ Emerson Brown, Jr., puts it more directly with his question, "If Proserpina can so embitter and subdue once mighty Pluto, what can mere mortal men expect of their wives?"³⁸ If the tale could stage this type of exchange between January and May, the speaker would then be able assert the superiority of his own masculinity. Such an exchange would show that January's claims to power are founded on an illusory vision of feminine identity, while it would also demonstrate that feminine passivity is a fiction designed to hide what can be only shrewish feminine agency.

The confidence with which the narrator presumes to see through phony feminine passivity to find shrewish feminine agency forecloses the possibility that a woman's activity can be managed to promote masculine empowerment. It is this insistence that feminine agency cannot be contained, which is ironically deployed to demonstrate masculine authority, that takes apart the speaker's claims to control May's identity. Because May does exactly what the speaker says, she moves beyond what he says, gaining autonomy outside the control of the masculinities that seek to define her. By taking on the identity the narrator designs for her, she

takes from him the ability to manage her agency, showing in turn the absurdity of the speaker's claim that he manages feminine agency by identifying the performativity of feminine passivity. The narrator's loss of control over his feminine creation becomes apparent in May's answer to January's outrage at seeing her "struggle" with Damyan in the tree (IV 2374–76). Her exchange with January has nothing in common with the altercation modeled by Pluto and Proserpine. As the tale works out, January is not blind but may not see, while May is not passive but is not a shrew. May is crafty, wily, and cunning, which are different strategies from those Proserpine employs. Pluto's unwilling bride forces her rapist-husband into exhausted submission by attacking the source of his folly with arguments that are better than his; she does not exploit his selfish fantasy of her beauty and innocence as a form of covert challenge.³⁹ Proserpine's answer to her husband exposes the misogynist presumption of patriarchal marriage; she does not gratify that fiction so that she can secretly corrupt it. Her reasoning is better than her husband's, and it is the honesty and frankness of her challenge that categorizes her as a shrew. If January were forced to recognize May's agency, the tale would demonstrate what Jill Mann claims it does anyway: "female shrewishness is both the inevitable response to male aggression and its proper punishment."⁴⁰ In the tale's conclusion, January accepts a romanticized version of feminine agency that separates May from the model of shrewish feminine aggression against which Justinus warns and Pluto grapples.

Because May is able to pass off her agency as socially sanctioned "medicyn" for January's blindness (IV 2380), she exceeds both the model of feminine passivity he desires and the model of feminine agency the speaker wants to expose. January might look like a fool for accepting May's explanation of her activity, but when he validates May's construction of her feminine agency as respectable passivity, he curtails the speaker's ability to master the definition of masculine empowerment in this story. Because May can present herself as active and obedient (she claims to be working to cure her husband), she makes January accept her agency and the speaker accept that such agency can be read as feminine submission.⁴¹ Gwen Griffiths notes May's skill in shaping January's sight, observing that what May actually does is turn reality into illusion for January, replacing it with a fictional reality that she creates for him.⁴² But since January always believed in a fictional reality, all May does is recast that identity so that it allows her to do as she pleases. Acting as January's Placebo, May exploits the fiction of feminine passivity so that it allows her to exercise agency as she wishes. January thus depends upon May for his conception of feminine identity, and as long she leaves his fantasy of self-empowerment undisturbed, no matter how empty his agency appears, she can exercise control over herself and her husband. May's ability to

take up passive femininity as a performative fiction, then, prevents the tale's teller from exhibiting her agency as a marker of his own power.

When May protests, "'This thank have I for I have maad yow see. / Allas,' quod she, 'that evere I was so kynde!'" (IV 2388–89), she outdoes the performance of shrewish agency the narrator designs for her.⁴³ Although medieval antifeminist literature provides for the possibility that women use meekness to cover their transgressions, as the *De coniuge non ducenda* makes clear, such modesty is constituted by outward signs that are easy to misread:

Vxor adultera dimisso gremio
 Vix potest argui de adulterio.

 Vxor adultera se multis copulat
 Et nichilominus se catam simulate.

The wayward wife, by modest dress,
 Avoids all blame for wantonness.

 She revels in unchastity
 But still pretends fidelity.⁴⁴

As T. W. Craik points out, when May excuses her actions, her "injured tone belongs wholly to herself."⁴⁵ May does not fit the shrewish model of aggressive femininity that men can use their authority to resist. Even if the Merchant, Justinus, and Pluto are no match for their shrewish partners, their ability to see feminine rebellion at least gives them the chance to challenge their wives. Since January can see feminine agency only as it promotes his fantasy of empowerment, he has no ability to resist the "excess" agency that May exercises over her marriage. And, even if the speaker is able to reveal May's subversive agency for his broader audience to see, her ability to recover herself uncovers the narrator's lack of control over his feminine creation.

Un-Chaucerian Loss

Notwithstanding May's ability to step outside masculine domination in the tale itself, the speaker's loss of control over his "mateere" (I 727, 1259) potentially contributes to the fiction of Chaucerian empowerment. Because it suggests a binary of agency that makes the speaker passive in the face of authorial control, the masculine fantasy of power this tale unmasks as illusory is potentially reinstituted between Chaucer and his

tale's teller. Chaucer takes up the position of mastery that May's performance of passivity dismantles, creating in effect a new masculine position that is seemingly able to resist the type of agency that other men cannot account for in their representations of her femininity. Perhaps. Despite the comforting possibility this reading offers, as the "bitterness tradition" of criticism illustrates, recontaining the tale's teller in an attempt to insulate Chaucer from the destabilizing effect of this tale is itself an illusory fantasy. The tale is "un-Chaucerian" in the sense that it takes apart Chaucer's self-presentation as a congenial figure who is not implicated in his own work. As Stephanie Trigg demonstrates, Chaucer's authorial presence is a fantasy that depends on his participation in idealized homosocial relationships that protect him from the disturbances his poems otherwise unleash.⁴⁶

So if we can read Chaucer's tone in a poem like *Envoy to Bukton* as good-humored, his willingness to speak of the "sorwe and wo that is in mariage" even as he dares "not writen of it no wikkednesse" (*Bukton* 6, 7), does not release him from that poem's "bitter edge," as Pearsall suggests.⁴⁷ Only if we imagine ourselves and Chaucer as part of a company of "blessed bachelors," as Kittredge put it, can we see the poem as one that encourages congenial laughter.⁴⁸ Although the *Merchant's Tale* does not encourage affable laughter, it remains humorous in its ability to fragment the fictional community of men that Kittredge imagines for *Bukton*. The joke at the heart of the *Merchant's Tale* is the binary process of managing gender difference through classifications of agency and passivity. If Chaucer has any authority over the scandal of gender difference that this tale exposes, it is of an implicated sort that can only laugh at the absurdity of a system that often works despite its flimsy claims to authority. And, because Chaucer is implicated in his own productions, he is no more able to assert masculine control over the feminine passivity May performs than is any other character associated with the *Merchant's Tale*. All we can credit Chaucer with in this tale is exposing the farcical negotiations of power that settle matters of gender in everyday life. This is not to say, finally, that January in his blindness, the speaker in his bitterness, May in her duplicity, or Chaucer in his detachment have no influence over constructions of gender identity. On the contrary, each of these performances, because they are revealed to be absurd, demonstrates the ways that men and women collaborate to make fictions of gender convincing.

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1. For a reading of the tale as mirthful, see Bertrand H. Bronson, "Afterthoughts on the *Merchant's Tale*," *Studies in Philology* 58 (1961): 583–96; and Martin Stevens, "'And Venus Laugheth': An Interpretation of the *Merchant's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 7 (1972): 118–31.

2. J. S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," *Modern Philology* 33 (1935–36): 367–81, repr. in Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, eds., *Chaucer Criticism*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, 1960), 1:175–89; Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 89; John R. Elliott, Jr., "The Two Tellers of the *Merchant's Tale*," *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 9 (1964): 11–17, at 12.

3. Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, 1992), 245–66.

4. Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 249, 264.

5. Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 266.

6. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1960), 103.

7. R. Howard Bloch claims that the multiplicity of the fabliaux makes them serious and even dangerous because "they threaten to expose the scandalous relation of language to an unlocalizable, undefinable, insubstantial point of origin" (*The Scandal of the Fabliaux* [Chicago, 1986], 128).

8. Elizabeth Avilds Petroff, *Body and Soul* (Oxford, 1994), 26.

9. All citations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

10. Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 89.

11. Thomas Hahn, "Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain," in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta Krueger (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), 218–34, at 220.

12. Felicity Riddy, "Middle English Romance: Family, Marriage, Intimacy," in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta Krueger (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), 235–52, at 239–40.

13. Angela M. Lucas, in her article "The Mirror in the Marketplace: Januarie through the Looking Glass," *Chaucer Review* 33 (1998): 123–45, analyzes the multiple significances of mirrors, both materially and figuratively, in relation to the tale. Her analysis of technological capabilities of and literary associations with mirrors in late fourteenth-century culture leads her to conclude that "a mirror might be expected to be an image of imperfect vision" (127). It is clear that January's contemplation of his possible bride is one that privileges his fantasy over the marketplace, even though his fantasy is related to mastery of his marriage-market. Furthermore, the isolation that fixation on one's beloved could cause a knight is itself a threat explored in romance, most notably in Chrétien de Troyes's *Erec et Enide*.

14. Marbod of Rennes, *De Matrona, Liber Decem Capitulorum*, in *Patrologiae cursus completus*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1844–64), 171:1701. Andreas Capellanus uses the melting wax metaphor to express the inconstancy of woman: "[Q]uia nulla mulier tanta super aliquo negotio soliditate firmatur, cuius fides modica suasionem cuiusque non efficiatur in brevi spatio alterata. Est etenim mulier tanquam cera liquescens, quae semper est formam novam parata suscipere et ad sigilli cuiuslibet impositionem mutari." (There is no woman so firmly determined on anything that her reliability cannot be soon dispelled by slight persuasion from someone. For woman is like melting wax, always ready to assume fresh shape and to be moulded to the imprint of anyone's seal) (*The Art of Courtly Love*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh [London, 1982], 317 [3.83]). The flexibility of this metaphor illustrates the continual potential for misfire that language has in this competitive format. Compare Shoshana Felman, who relates the performative theory of J. L. Austin to the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan in a discussion of the effects of "language misfire": "The act of failing thus opens up the space of referentiality—or of impossible reality—not because *something* is missing, but because *something else* is done, or because something else is said: the term 'misfire' does not refer to an absence, but to the enactment of a difference" (*The Literary Speech Act* [Ithaca, N.Y., 1983], 84; her emphasis). The narrator depends upon the possibility of misfire, always relying on the potential that January means something other than what he intends when he attempts to stabilize the fantasy of his desire.

15. John Chrysostom, *Homily IX on St. Paul's Epistle to I Timothy ii. 11–15*, *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. and trans. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1956), 436–37; Tauno Mustanoja, ed., *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter, The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage, The Thewis of Gud Women* (Helsinki, 1948), 41.
16. Jehan le Fèvre, *Les Lamentations de Matheolus et Le Livre de Leesce de Jehan le Fèvre*, ed. A. G. Van Hamel, 2 vols. (Paris, 1892; repr. 1905) 1:1125–28.
17. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 85 (X.280–94).
18. Mustanoja, ed., *Good Wife*, 34.
19. Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London, 1985), 201.
20. Sigmund Freud, “Femininity” (1933), in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1964), 22:115.
21. See Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (London, 1992), 149–51, and Slavoj Žižek, *The Metaphysics of Enjoyment* (London, 1994), 89–112.
22. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute* (London, 2000), 147 (his emphasis).
23. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1962), 102–3.
24. John Lydgate, *Reson and Sensuallyte*, ed. Ernst Sieper, EETS ES 84 (London, 1901), 112–13 (lines 4276–4280).
25. Richard Neuse, “Marriage and the Question of Allegory in the *Merchant's Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 24 (1989): 115–131, at 118.
26. Marie de France, *Guigemar and Yonec*, in *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby (London, 1986).
27. See John Bugge, “Damyant's Wanton Clyket and an Ironic New Twiste to the *Merchant's Tale*,” *Annuaire Mediaevale* 14 (1973): 53–62, for a discussion of the tale's double-entendre.
28. Pearsall, *Canterbury Tales*, 200.
29. Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 255.
30. Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 260.
31. That women use tears to their advantage is a misogynist commonplace. See Juvenal, *Satire VI, Juvenal and Perseus*, ed. and trans. G. G. Ramsay (London, 1918), 82; Jacques de Vitry, “Sermon 66,” in Alcuin Blamires, ed., with Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford, 1992), 146–47; and Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Corbaccio*, trans. Anthony K. Cassell (Urbana, Ill., 1975), 35.
32. Walter Map, *Dissuasio Valerii ad Rufinum*, in *Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves*, ed. and trans. Ralph Hanna III and Traugott Lawler (Athens, Ga., 1997), 130–33, employs Horace's “purpureus” passage (*Ars Poetica*, 14–16) in a manner that associates arts of feminine cosmetics and the insincerity of ornamental language, charging his allusion with the satirical anti-cosmetic commentary of Tertullian (*De cultu feminarum*, 2.7), and of Jerome (*Epistolae*, 54.7) when he says, “et a me non requies purpurissum oratoris aut cerussam que me nescire fateor et fleo, sed scribentis votum et pagine veritatem accepta” (and do not ask of me the purple or white cosmetics of an orator, which I confess with regret that I do not know, but be content with the writer's sincerity and truth on the page).
33. Jehan le Fèvre: “Femme dit que la touche ment / Et confute l'atouchement / Par argument et par fallace.” (*Les Lamentations*, 1:967–69). See also, Juvenal, *Satire VI*, which claims that women accuse their husbands of having lovers as a way of covering their own disloyalty (82).
34. See Traugott Lawler, *The One and the Many in The Canterbury Tales* (Hamden, Conn., 1980), 60. The Wife of Bath tells her audience that women, if they know what is good for them, can convince their husbands that their senses are faulty (III 231–34). May follows this advice precisely, but uses the fantasy of feminine virtue to hide her manipulation. Alison may likewise participate in such behavior, but the kind of bawling she reports with her fourth husband suggests, at least, that her shrewish identity is visible.
35. Mortimer J. Donovan claims that Pluto and January seek “marriage for the same reasons: (1) offspring, (2) solace” (“The Image of Pluto and Proserpine in the *Merchant's Tale*,” *Philological Quarterly* 36 [1957]: 49–60, at 51).
36. Many critics point out that the exchange between the deities has nothing about it to suggest divine elevation. See, for example, Strohm, who claims “The relationship drawn

between the celestial and earthly levels of this tale is less one of descent than of perverse ascent, with an earthly quarrel perpetuated in the realm of the gods" (*Social Chaucer*, 159). And, as John P. McCall argues, these deities "intervene, not as divinities, but as a haggling couple from the petty nobility" (*Chaucer among the Gods: The Poetics of Classical Myth* [University Park, Penn., 1976], 128).

37. Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1991), 65–66.

38. Emerson Brown, Jr., "Biblical Women in the *Merchant's Tale*: Feminism, Antifeminism, and Beyond," *Viator* 5 (1974): 387–412, at 401.

39. As Karl P. Wentersdorf observes, "Proserpine's point is well-taken: all of Solomon's heroism and wisdom did not save him in his old age from the sins of lechery and literal idolatry (I Kings/3 Kings II: 1–10)" ("Imagery, Structure, and Theme in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," in *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction*, ed. Leigh A. Arathoon [Rochester, Mich., 1986], 35–61, at 40).

40. Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 67.

41. Jacques de Vitry claims that "woman can be called a virtuoso artist, as they say; because she has one skill—that is, one way of deceiving—more than the devil" ("Sermon 66," in Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed*, 147).

42. Gwen Griffiths, "Receding Images of Initiators and Recipients—Yet Another Reflection on the *Merchant's Tale*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 25 (1989): 242–63, at 254.

43. May's reaction to January's accusation is tropologically feminine in misogynist literary representation. See, for example, Boccaccio's *Corbaccio*, whose speaker claims that women meet charges of infidelity with responses such as "It wasn't like that! You're lying in your teeth! You're seeing things! You've left your brain at the menders! Try drinking less! You don't know where you are! Are you all right in the head? Even without a fever you're raving and rambling nonsensically" (31). Jehan le Fèvre's account of the feminine ability to excuse wrong is particularly close to May's answer. When a husband catches his wife in the act of adultery she tells her husband he is imagining things; when he admits self-doubt, she makes him admit publicly that he falsely accused her (*Lamentations*, 1:850–902). May, like these other women, uses a masculine imaginary category of femininity to hide what is supposedly authentic feminine character. The difference between her and these women is her method of attack, which keeps invisible her deception and thus separates her from the character of confrontational shrew.

44. A. G. Rigg, ed. and trans., *Gawain on Marriage: The Textual Tradition of the De coniuge non ducenda* (Toronto, 1986), 82–85 (*L5*, lines 1–2; *L9*, lines 1–2).

45. T. W. Craik, *The Comic Tales of Chaucer* (London, 1958), 152.

46. Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis, 2002).

47. Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1992), 183–84.

48. George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), 34.