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The Mask of Masculinity: *The Canterbury Tales*

The narrative framework of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, works as a metatextual analysis of gender and social constructs during the middle ages. Often within the tales, questions are raised about the limits of masculinity as a result of a hierarchical power struggle. The Knight, the Merchant, and the Miller provide the most intertextual evidence of this satirized society riddled with distorted notions of gender and class. As a result, when these tales are viewed through the lenses of gender, marriage, narrative order, and class, it becomes clear how each one exposes the fragility of masculinity while simultaneously satirizing the significance of social constructs.

Literary Review

It comes as no surprise that Chaucer's intricate text has been extensively studied by scholars who have attempted to detangle his webs of subtext and elucidate his lines that hint at the disruption of traditional masculinity. In my own research on this topic, I have compiled sources that engage intimately with the problems of gender, class, and the limits of masculine authority in *The Canterbury Tales*. I have found these sources to suggest that typical notions of masculinity are rivaled by marriage, class, and the false passivity of femininity in the tales and in the commentary from the tellers in their prologues. With this evidence, Chaucer's text exposes

how masculinity is constantly at the risk of obstruction. I will place my sources into two categories: those that discuss class and those that cover the flaws of masculinity through marriage and women.

CLASS

Medieval society adhered to a rigid social hierarchy identified as The Three Estates. In "The Three Estates Model: Represented and Satirised in Chaucer's General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales" Sadnur Doğan examines how this model replicates Chaucer's narrative order with the Knight being chosen to go first based on his status and chivalric qualities. She argues that his character is representative of traditional medieval social roles and he embodies the highly revered qualities of honor, valor, and courtesy. The recognition of social structure in *The Canterbury Tales* is crucial to the understanding of how these classes affect masculinity and how the social rank of the male characters leads to competitions of masculinity. The article, "The Two Alisouns: The Miller's Use of Costume and His Seduction of the Wife of Bath" draws upon Doğan's identification of class and uses it to compare the interactions between The Miller and the Knight. John Slefinger states that because the Knight is a representation of masculinity in the highest estate, The Miller "appropriates" the Knight's chivalric language to attract attention from the Wife of Bath. This speaks to the malleability of masculinity while also suggesting that masculinity is nothing more than an act to obtain a woman and a camouflage for insecurities amongst other men.

MARRIAGE AND WOMEN

Now that an establishment of the competitive aspects of masculinity through class structures has been established, we must look at how masculinity is portrayed in relationships.

Holly A. Crocker in *Performative Passivity and Fantasies of Masculinity in The Merchant's Tale* argues that the marriage between January and May demonstrates a version of the agency of women while poking at the holes of medieval masculinity. She suggests that the observed passivity of May's character, in particular, is an act to preserve January's masculinity. Essentially, letting January believe he has control over her allowed him to maintain his manhood even if it was fraudulent. This exposes the sheer insignificance of masculinity in marriage. Articles and essays that maintain a similar reading of Crocker's account are found throughout this essay as well. Amanda Walling also provides convincing commentary on these notions of masculinity and marriage in her essay as well. However, Walling demonstrates how the interpretation of women in these marriages exposes masculine insecurity over the argument of women having control over their lack of agency. Despite possible intertextual arguments, these sources provide a combination of evidence within men's treatment of women and marriage, highlighting the problems of medieval masculinity.

CONCLUSION

Individually, the research I have gathered works to highlight the fragility of masculinity found throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. However, while these sources account for specific instances of masculine shortcomings, I believe they can be combined to demonstrate how marriage, women, and class, conspire to satirically represent masculinity while demonstrating the effect that social hierarchy has on influencing the features that determine masculinity.

The narrative structure in *The Canterbury Tales* emulates the Three Estates Model by appearing to categorize the pilgrims speaking order by which estate they fall under. This is reinforced by Sadenur Doğan who states, “This model is used by Chaucer in his masterpiece to put forward his arguments about the social characteristics and roles of the medieval people who are expected to talk, behave, wear and live in accordance with what their social group requires.” (Doğan 50). The first instance of this appears first with the description of The Knight. The narrator says, “A knyght ther was and that a worthy man, / That fro the tyme that he first bigan / To ridden out, he loved chivalrie, / Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.”(43-46). Because the knight holds a position of high class, he is described in a way that is representative of Medieval values. As a result, these values become his character which essentially set the standard of masculinity for the men of lower estates, hence why the knight is given the first and lengthiest description. However, despite his “verray, parfit, gentil” (73) description, the tale he tells inadvertently mocks these qualities in a way that showcases the flaws in masculine values.

The Knight’s tale of an honorable chivalric romance framed by a competition of marriage demonstrates how under the guise of love, qualities of masculinity become a literal defense of masculinity itself. In *Gender and Romance in The Canterbury Tales*, Susan Crane writes, “Not only does heterosexual courtship become an important arena for self-definition, romances elaborate a range of distinctions between men's and women's social compoment, duties, and rights that gender the concept of identity so important to the early development of the genre.” (Crane 17). Essentially, Arcite and Palamon, the knights that the Knight composes, claim to possess the masculine values of valor, honor, and chivalry. However, these values literally come into competition with one another when it comes to marriage which poses the question:

Who's masculinity is better? Moreover, the Knight says, "Hath everich oh hem brought an hundred knyghtes" (2099), which implies that there were hundreds of other knights present at the tournament who were observing the feuding versions of masculinity. This literal competition of masculinity between Arcite and Palamon in the presence of other chivalric knights highlights how even in the highest-ranking estate, the values of masculinity are watched and battled over. In essence, this showcases not only the variability of masculinity but also demonstrates the extent to which men will go to defend their cloaks of masculinity.

This competition of class and masculinity transcends beyond that of the teller's tales. It is also seen within the transitions between stories. After the Knight ends his tale, the host intends to follow the order of estates. He says, "Now telleth on, Sire Monk, if that ye konne, / Somwhat to quite with the knyghtes tale" (3118-3119). In a source by Tison Pugh he writes, "By inviting the Monk to "quite" the Knight, Harry foments an inter-masculine tension within the Canterbury pilgrimage that he then attempts to regulate throughout the game." (Pugh. 47). Essentially, the host adheres to the social hierarchy but also asks the Monk to outdo the knight's chivalric tale, implying the competitive nature between the men and their stories. However, the Miller, a member of the lowest estate, interrupts before the Monk can speak. This not only strips the Monk of authority but is also a clear disregard of social structure. The Miller states his story is "noble" and can rival the Knights tale (3126). This again highlights the competitive quality of masculinity consistently at play to allow the men to prove themselves based on the insecurity of their own masculinity. John Slefinger goes further to argue that the Miller mimics the Knight to show how his values are better. He states, "The Miller appropriates the Knight's own language,

immediately putting himself and the Knight at odds.” (Slefinger 155). His claim proves evidence of both the tension between estates and the mockery of masculine values.

While the physical competition of masculinity between the character and the tellers clearly destabilizes the mask of masculine values, the fragility of such masculinity is also apparent in the treatment of marriage and women throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. The best example of this is with the Merchant and his tale of distorted marital values. It is interesting to note that the Merchant’s tale features an elder knight which reinforces the knight as a symbol of masculinity. The Merchant says “A worthy knight” (1247) which simply reiterates the teller's defense of their own versions of a “worthy” man. However, it seems that this version of masculinity features a knight overly-concerned with the control of his marriage, demonstrating the insecurities of his own masculinity.

January, the noble knight in question, expects to exert total control over his wife because his “masculine” authority takes precedence over her femininity. Amanda Walling in “Placebo Effects: Flattery and Antifeminism in Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale and the Tale of Melibee” remarks, “Just as January imagines that a young wife may be molded by her husband like wax (4.1430), the encomium presents a masculine ideal of marriage organized around a wife’s tractability.” (Walling 13). In other words, Walling implies that for a marriage to work, a wife will have to concede to her husband as to not interfere with his sense of masculinity. Essentially, in the Merchant’s Tale, January’s wish for a pliable wife is the result of the preservation of his own ego. The Merchant even states, “By his mirour, and in the same wyse / Gan Januarie inwith his thoght / devyse / Of maydens which that dwellen hym / bisyde.” (1585-1589). Here, January expects that if he holds up a mirror in the market then his future bride will appear behind his own

reflection. A wife and a marriage to January are simply mirrors of his own desires rather than a genuine desire for a woman of her own character.

However, it is evident with the character of May, that women provide the men with a false sense of sovereignty. For example, on May and January's wedding night, the Merchant goes into great detail about the pleasure January is receiving without any consideration for May. It is only when he says, "But God wot what that May thought in hir herte / Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his / sherte / In his nyghte cappe, and with this nekke lene. / She preyseth nat his pleyng worth a / bene." (1851-1855). Here, it becomes evident that May, however subservient and placid she may appear, has no affinity for January. She only acts content so she does not devastate his "masculine" authority. Walling states that "May's inscrutability embodies a form of agency that disguises itself as passivity, thereby enabling masculine fantasies of agency" (Walling 21). This is an agreed-upon point amongst Scholars. Holly Crocker concurs with Walling's point by claiming that January assumes that May is passive by nature, failing to realize his own threatened masculinity is the reason for her passivity (Crocker 181). Men's fictionalized versions of women make it clear that masculinity is so fragile, a woman's true character, opinions, and thoughts about her husband could potentially ruin their perceptions of themselves. Hence why there is a constant need for men of all estates to competitively prove their masculine ideals.

Together, class, marriage, gender, and women in *The Canterbury Tales* challenge traditional values that construct masculinity. The ambiguity of masculinity in the highest estate trickles down to the lower classes, causing constant competition between the males in the tales. Each perceives their masculinity to be greater than the others while remaining blind to the

insignificance of masculinity itself. The portrayal of women and marriage as passive in the text indicates that the projection of masculine values onto women is not a result of their undeniable authority, but rather a result of women's concedence to their husband's fragile egos. Masculinity does not appear to be courage, valor, or honor. It is instead, a silencing of any factors that could potentially unveil the delicate mask of masculinity.

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