

Thynges Smale and Queyntes: The Language of Gender in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

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Thynges Smale and Queyntes:

The Language of Gender in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

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Abstract

This thesis will examine how Geoffrey Chaucer uses the language of gender in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale in the Canterbury Tales. I will examine the gendered, or gender-neutral diction the Wife of Bath uses, specifically when describing the gender roles and norms of English Medieval society. To support my claims, I will reference other stories in the Canterbury tales, specifically the Miller's Tale, which uses highly gendered diction to distinguish men from women in terms of their physicality. I will also include sources that speak about commonly used Middle English diction and syntax in order to distinguish between Chaucer's own creation and characterization, and the linguistic norms of the time.

Dedication

I eagerly dedicate this thesis to any and all Medieval enthusiasts who, just as I do, feel unsettled by inaccurate, heteronormative representations of Medieval literature, culture, and society.

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I would like to thank: my supportive parents and twin sister who supported me throughout my years at John Cabot University; Shokoufa who, throughout this process, calmed my anxieties with loving words and hot meals; my dear friends; and, finally, my wonderful readers who offered encouragement and wonderful resources and guidance during this process.

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1. Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales* is often described as not only an ideal of a strong woman but also a proto-feminist and proto-queer character. This is to say, if we define "feminism" as the advocacy (be it through words, ideas, or actions) for equal rights among the sexes, then "proto-feminism" would be the advocacy of the equality of the sexes before the idea of modern feminism existed (Botting and Houser 265). Additionally, if we accept that "queer" is defined as anything not heterosexual or cisgender (meaning, fitting into the binary ideal of male and female), then "proto-queer" can be used to define "individuals with queer feelings [and behaviors] yet lacking language to name them – are left with personal desires that have no social context to give them meaning." (Linné). Evidence to support these claims can be found within the Wife of Bath's Prologue, where she is speaking of herself and her personal experiences with sex and womanhood and her opinions of marriage and sex in Medieval society. Therefore, I would like to clarify that although the Wife of Bath's Tale could also be described as a proto-feminist story, this thesis will argue the proto-feminist and proto-queer qualities of the Wife of Bath as a character created by Chaucer in order to experiment with the idea of feminist discourse and the female voice before the acknowledgment of its existence.

The two main points I will use to argue this are Chaucer's use of the language of gender and the Wife of Bath's defiance of Medieval gender expectations. As aforesaid, the Wife of Bath is not only a strong woman and proto feminist, but Chaucer has written her voice in a different lexical range, which is to say he made her speech in her Prologue different from the other characters, all of whom are male, as well as and the more "stereotypically feminine" characters. However, when she tells her tale she reins herself in, but in her Prologue, we see her spontaneous self (which is linguistically distinct). In order to show this, I will reference other stories in *The*

Canterbury Tales, specifically the Miller's Tale, which uses highly gendered diction to distinguish men from women in terms of their physicality. The terms Chaucer employs through the character of the Wife of Bath do not directly reveal the gender of those in the relationships she describes and although the Wife of Bath separates herself from men because of her presumed role in society, she argues that the differences between the sexes are few and of little significance. In other words, she glosses over the identities of her lovers and of people in general by veering away from identifying terms, such as penis to identify a man, or vagina to identify a woman. It should be noted that identifying these terms, both of the medical and vernacular or even explicit kind, existed and were used during the Medieval period, as is exemplified in the other Tales. Therefore, it becomes clear that the character of the Wife of Bath does this intentionally.

The other point to be made is her defiance of Medieval gender expectations, as it is shown not through *how* she speaks of her experiences, but of *what* she speaks of and, ultimately, the existence of her voice at all. In Medieval society women were defined by their husbands, as they were the ones who represented their name and household to the world since the woman was confined to the domestic sphere. However, the very existence of the Wife of Bath's prologue and tale defies this expectation, as she takes on the male role of story-telling quite literally right beside her male counterparts (the other travelers). Moreover, since she has had five husbands, it can be argued that she represents them since she is the common denominator between them all; it is she who accompanied them until their respective deaths. She also speaks highly about the Bible and its representations of marriage and women, which women were not permitted to do during this era.

The way she is physically presented also clashes with the way other female characters in *The Canterbury Tales* (the Prioress and the Nun) are described. While the other two are said to be soft, sweet and kind (words which, arguably, have “feminine” connotations), the Wife of Bath is described with more “masculine” adjectives. Therefore, she is preemptively set apart from the rest of the characters right from the beginning, before the readers have even had a chance to hear her speak.

This thesis is most certainly a modern interpretation of this character, and Chaucer would most likely be oblivious to such claims about his work. However, in the General Prologue, the narrator lays the groundwork for a multiple, prolific, open interpretation of the text, stating:

But natheles, whil I have tyme and space,
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,
Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
To telle yow al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne;
And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne. (Chaucer 34-42)

This could be therefore be interpreted as Chaucer making known his concern that his text will be analyzed by a wide audience, with different opinions, views and “condicioun[s]” (Chaucer 37), the likes of which are represented within the characters who he is about to introduce us (Cox 2). Therefore, we can feel at ease in our modern interpretation of this text, as our varied circumstances, which will lead to varied explications, which were foreseen by the author himself.

2. Gendered Expectations

When we are first introduced to the Wife of Bath in the General Prologue, the narrator describes her physically as:

Gat-tothed was she, soothly for to seye.
Upon an amblere esily she sat,
Ywympled wel, and on hir heed an hat
As brood as is a bokeler or a targe;
A foot-mantel aboute hir hipes large,
And on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe.
In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe.
Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce.

For she koude of that art the olde daunce. (Chaucer I. 468-476)

He described her teeth as “Gat toothed” (Chaucer I. 468), or gap-toothed, and his quick following of “soothly for to seye” (Chaucer I. 468), or sorry to say, demonstrates to the readers that this is a truth which may not paint the Wife of Bath in the most elegant light. He goes on to say that she is quite a large woman, with generous hips. Of course, this could be another indicator of her age, as it may suggest she is past menopause, which has caused her to gain weight, seeing as the average age cited for menopause in the 13th and 14th century was fifty (Amundsen and Diers 610). On the other hand, her heftiness could also suggest her finances, which would make sense given her five deceased husbands, and the fact that she had no children (or at least none are mentioned).

Another indicator of her wealth is the “spores sharpe” (Chaucer I. 472), which suggest they are new. The host mentions the fineness of her attire when he says:

Hir coverchiefs ful fyne weren of ground

I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound

That on a Sondag weren upon hir heed.

Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,

Ful streite yteyd, and shoes ful moyste and newe.

Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe. (Chaucer I. 453-458)

The Wife of Bath is wearing very expensive fabrics and the narrator says that she is wearing many layers, to express to the readers that she spared little expense when it comes to treating herself to finer linens. This demonstrates that she values herself and the way she is presented to the world and has the finances to ensure her dresses are of the finest quality. Moreover, her stockings are dyed red which, historically, was a very expensive and laborious color to achieve and thus reserved for wealthier classes (Stamberg). He goes on to say her shoes are new and made of fine, soft leather. Then, describes her face as, “reed of hewe” (Chaucer I. 458). Since she does not mention her own work, it is not unjust to assume this money comes from her previous marriages. However, since her husbands are now all deceased, she is an independent and, it seems, relatively wealthy woman. Moreover, the redness in her cheeks could be a sign of her health, both mental and physical. It may also mean to indicate her sexual health, meaning that although she is older, she still experiences sexual urges.

These descriptions are starkly different from how the other female characters are described in the General Prologue. For instance, the Prioress is characterized as:

Entuned in hir nose ful semely;

And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,

After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,

For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe.
At mete wel ytaught was she with alle;
She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,
Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;
Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe
That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.
In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.
Hir over-lippe wyped she so clene
That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene (Chaucer I. 123-134)

Here, it is evident that the Prioress is a well-educated and well-mannered lady, whom the narrator seems to be, not only quite impressed by, but also enamored with. He speaks of her education and perfect French for only a few lines, but almost the entirety of her section in the General Prologue is dedicated to the narrator's description of how delicately she eats. From this, it becomes quite clear that the narrator has been lustfully watching the Prioress' every movement, yet addresses the subject rather coyly, as if he is aware of how these observations could be interpreted. When he says, "Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe;" (Chaucer I. 129), the suggested play on words is evident. Yes, the Prioress is a tidy eater, but she also does not engage in other activities, namely activities of a sexual nature, that might also dampen her fingers. His hinting at her not participating in these sorts of activities (which is a fair statement given her nunhood), this also suggests that he had his own thoughts about her in that scenario. He goes on to mention how crumbs do not fall against her breast while she eats, and how she wipes her lip clean after she is finished. Given the scenario, eating could be easily likened to the act of sex, as he is watching her consume various foods and drink elegantly. Yet, her character,

unlike the Wife of Bath's, is completely asexual. From this, may it be presumed that it is, at least in part, her feminine constitution that immediately places her, unwilfully, beneath the male gaze in a desirable way by the host, whereas nothing about the Wife of Bath, save her several husbands and lovers, points to the appeal of her sexuality.

Needless to say, the Prioress's highly sexualized physical description is quite plain, and although it is clear she is a woman, her womanhood and femininity is not overtly studied by our narrator. In fact, she is portrayed as rather masculine and is not prescribed "feminine" adjectives, such as sweet or kind, but rather thought to be a little cold-hearted. While the Prioress is, "so charitable and so pitous / She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous" (Chaucer I. 143-144), the Wife of Bath is pictured as:

In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon
That to the offrynge bifore hire sholde goon;
And if ther dide, certeyn so wrooth was she
That she was out of alle charitee. (Chaucer I. 449-452)

She is not sensitive, nor overly emotional and kind-hearted. She is a woman who knows precisely what she wants, is willing to do what she must to have it. And she will turn her nose up to those who get to it before she does.

From the descriptions, it is also clear that the Prioress is "conventionally attractive," as she has gray eyes and a small red mouth (Brewer 12). The Wife of Bath, on the other hand, is described to have broad hips, which is a feature one can notice in the character of the old woman in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Brewer 269):

a mensk lady on molde mon may hir calle
for gode

hir body watz schort and þik

hir buttokez bay and brode (Gawain Poet I. 964-967)

From this, the Wife of Bath's "hipes large" (Chaucer I. 472) are plainly not meant to serve as a compliment.

A Wifely Occupation

Although every traveler in the Canterbury Tales is named by their profession only (e.g. the Miller, the Pardoner, the Knight, etc.), the Wife of Bath's name is particularly unusual. Instead of being named the "Wife of" followed by the name of her last husband, she is named "The Wife of" a place, specifically, Bath. This could suggest that she has married so many men within the city of Bath that she has essentially married the city as a whole, for everyone within it knows someone who has married her or else, has done so himself.

On the other hand, and perhaps more probably, her name could be meant to suggest that she defines herself in this way, even though she has a proper name, Alysoun, which she states during her prologue. However, it should be noted that in the Medieval period, people often identified themselves by *byname*s, or names that identified a person based on their characteristics, location, social status, or occupation (Evans). The use of occupational bynames is a phenomenon seen throughout the Canterbury tales, and only a few characters within the traveler's stories are given real names. For example, Alison, which is long for Alice. Moreover, it should be noted that Alice was the most common name for baby girls during the Medieval era in England (*William, Agnes, among the most common names in medieval England*), making it

likely that the travelers using it within their tales are trying to stereotype the characters named “commonly,” or are simply just using the first name that comes to mind.

All this considered, the Wife of Bath may not use her proper name to avoid being seen as “common” and fitting into medieval stereotypes given to that name. Still, her *byname* says much more. If we consider hers to be occupational, as is the case for the rest of the travelers, then her job is to be a wife. Moreover, her *byname* is also locative, as she is the Wife of *Bath*. Since she has met the other travelers in a hostel, none of whom she has met before, as evidenced by:

At nyght was come into that hostelrye

Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye

Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle

In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle, (Chaucer I. 23-26)

Given the circumstances, it is safe to assume they all used their occupational *byname*s to introduce themselves, and the Wife of Bath used this opportunity to free herself of other names, perhaps those of her former husbands, that follow her. With this name she gives herself complete autonomy and, it could be argued, that since she is the protagonist of her own story, she defines her husbands instead. Of course, she is a wife and this is her role, but she has been a wife five times to five different men. She is the common denominator between them: the one thing they all have in common, so she defines them. Furthermore, if one considers a traditional heteronormative marriage where the husband is dominant and the wife is submissive, the husband is considered the leader of the family, and the wife an extension of him. From the Wife of Bath’s prologue, it is clear that this was not the case in her marriages:

In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument

As frely as my Makere hath it sent.

If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwe!

Myn housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe,

Whan that hym list come forth and paye his dette.

An housbonde I wol have -- I wol nat lette --

Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,

And have his tribulacion withal

Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wyf.

I have the power durynge al my lyf

Upon his propre body, and noght he.

Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me,

And badoure housbondes for to love us weel.

All this sentence me liketh every deel" -- (Chaucer III. 149-162)

The Wife of Bath is extremely clear that in marriage, she is the dominant spouse, both sexually and dynamically. Whenever she desires sex, he will provide her with it, and she will not be denied. Particular interesting is her view of them as debtors and slaves, as though they owe her for her wifehood, and also for sex. Moreover, she also demands God have pity on her, should she be parsimonious to her husband. This could be meant to imply that God has no other choice but to have pity on her soul since he was the one who made her this way. The "Makere" (Chaucer III. 150) has made all genitals, all sexual acts and given humans the libido to desire them

therefore, according to the Wife of Bath, she is fulfilling God's duty by engaging in it. Should her current husband not wish to partake, she has entered another piece of Biblical wisdom to convince him it is his duty, for the Apostles told men to love their wives well. Clearly, "love" in this context is of a physical nature. Finally, if she was not plain enough, she simply says, "I have the power duryng al my lyf" (Chaucer III. 158). She has the power, for she says that she does. She asserts her dominance, therefore she is dominant. Even the mode in which she argues her point of view leaves little room for interjection. Still, although the narrator describes her as more physically masculine, these assertions come from a feminine voice.

3. A Varied Voice:

How the Wife of Bath's Voice Changes in Prologue versus her Tale

How the Wife of Bath speaks when she is telling her life's story versus how she speaks when she is telling her tale is the perfect demonstration of how her voice and linguistic nuances are so particular to her character. In fact, the way that she begins her tale is very standard in the sense that it follows the "Once Upon a Time" rubric, as though she is retelling it in the exact way it was first told to her. She begins:

In th' olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.

This was the olde opinion, as I rede; (Chaucer III. 857-862)

In the first line she gives away the origin of the text as it is revealed to us that this is an Arthurian Romance, which is most often characterized by the presence of knights and the storyline swinging between the forest and court (Sanders). She also says that this story and its details are constructed according to stories she has read, therefore revealing that this is indeed not meant to be an entirely original story, or so she says. This can be seen as the story begins with a maiden, or virgin, walking outside:

And so bifel that this kyng Arthour
Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelor,

That on a day cam ridyng fro ryver,
And happed that, allone as he was born,
He saugh a mayde walkyng hym biforn,
Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,
By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed; (Chaucer III. 882-888)

As is typified within Arthurian Romances, the knight, often based on Gawain who was King Arthur's head knight, is the protagonist (Sanders). However, this tale differs from others, because he is not the hero, in fact *he* is the one committing the awful crime said to be so devious and violent it had to be brought to the King:

For which oppressioun was swich clamour
And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour
That dampned was this knyght for to be deed,
By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed -- (Chaucer III. 889-892)

Although this characterization is not typical, it can be found in pre-Chaucerian texts, such as Breton Lais. This genre is typified by supernatural characters committing crimes, or mortal characters having to pay for their crimes with atypical punishments (Sanders). Other aspects of the story, such as rape committed by knights or women forcing the accused to make an unusual decision have also been recorded in other texts, yet none of them involved the knight deciding between "a wife foul and faithful or fair and faithless" (Sanders). The dichotomy is between this

choice of having a beautiful wife but also the possibility of being cuckolded, or having an unattractive and old, but faithful, wife.

Throughout the tale it is the women who are making these decisions, or forcing the knight to make them, as the Queen is the one who decides to send him on the quest to discover women's true desire, and the old woman is the one who gives him the ultimatum of choosing between beautiful and unfaithful, or visually repulsive and loyal. The pressure of making these decisions himself almost doubles the consequence of them, as he cannot truly call the outcome his punishment, for he was forced to choose, but not forced to make a particular choice. If he had decided to have an unattractive wife, it would be his doing, not the old woman's, and *he* would have to be the one who had to live with the decision for the rest of their marriage, not her, as she seemed rather unphased by whatever choice he would make. Still, even when he is made to choose, he ultimately ends up saying:

"My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,

I put me in youre wise governance;

Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance

And moost honour to yow and me also.

I do no fors the wheither of the two,

For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me."

"Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie," quod she,

"Syn I may chese and governe as me lest?"

"Ye, certes, wyf," quod he, "I holde it best." (Chaucer III. 1230-1238)

In the end, it seems as though he is so overwhelmed with his decision making, that he is forced to surrender and let his new wife make the decision for him. In a certain sense, he gives up, his own autonomy as it is no longer his decision with whom (or rather, the physical appearance of who) he will have sex . This echoes the beginning of the story when he rapes the young maiden and takes away her own bodily autonomy. He may not see himself as equal to the old woman, yet the premise is the same. Both the maiden and knight have no say in who they have sex with. The maiden's corporal autonomy is taken from her through force by the knight (the rape), and even within the text of the story, she has no voice and does not speak. Moreover, in terms of her rapist's punishment, she has no say in the matter; her whole character revolves around her being a victim to her sex in a society where men rule. On the other hand, part of the knight's punishment from the old woman is to give up his own bodily autonomy. He unwillingly marries her in exchange for her revealing what women want most, power over their husbands. Even when he has the chance to turn her into a beautiful young woman, which would allow him the power to choose with whom he has sex, he gives this up for he knows the decision is not truly his. Therefore, in truth, he has no say who he will have sex with: it is the old woman who will make the decision for him. This is a close parallel to how he rapes the young maiden, as he takes away her ability to make the same position. Therefore, his punishment is very similar to his crime for which he is being punished.

This whole tale is echoed in the Wife of Bath's prologue when she speaks of her last and most abusive husband, Jankyn, and how she tamed him after he hit her so hard she went deaf in one ear. At first, it appears that he has knocked her dead, but seeing as the Wife of Bath is still alive to tell this story and how she recounts the very moment, she survived the blow, yet was

knocked half-unconscious. Once she came to her senses, chose her words carefully to ensure her survival:

And whan he saugh how stille that I lay,

He was agast and wolde han fled his way,

Til atte laste out of my swogh I breyde.

`O! hastow slayn me, false thief?' I seyde,

`And for my land thus hastow mordred me?

Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee.' (Chaucer III. 797-802)

When Jankyn hits her she declares that, even though he has hit her so hard she may die, she still loves him and uses her seemingly undying affection to manipulate him into giving up his abusive habits. For although she cannot physically overpower him, and he is well aware of this, she can use her sweet tongue to convince him to not kill her or leave her for dead after hitting her to the ground. From the way she recounts the events she appears to want to seem in control at all times, for she was the one who prompted him to hit her by tearing out pages from a misogynistic book that he would ritually read aloud each night. However, from another point of view, one could very well question her credibility given how clear it is that she is viewed by others as a forceful and unmoving woman. It could be that he was simply abusive and that she retells the story to put herself in the position of power in the end:

And seyde, `Deere suster Alisoun,

As help me God, I shal thee nevere smyte!

That I have doon, it is thyself to wyte.

Foryeve it me, and that I thee biseke!

And yet eftsoones I hitte hym on the cheke,

And seyde, `Theef, thus muchel am I wreke;

Now wol I dye, I may no lenger speke.'

But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,

We fille acorded by us selven two. (Chaucer III. 804-812)

She ends up convincing him, out of his well-deserved guilt, to hand over all the money and land so that she is in control of the finances. One must bear in mind that he would have inherited all that she had inherited from her previous five husbands, some of which she says were wealthy. Moreover, she convinces him to also give her control of his words and actions. Of course, this could be out of self-protection, for then he would no longer hit her or speak ill to or of her, or women, in general. She also makes him burn his book, which would have been a valuable, both personally and monetarily, asset in the Medieval era. From how often he read it, it was clearly something he held dear, so by forcing him to burn it she makes him choose between knowledge (which he clearly treasured), and her.

Not only does she manipulate her husband, she also manipulates the text as her prologue and tale are similar in that in the end the abusive man ends up giving control to his wife. Both the old woman and the Wife of Bath tame their husbands, not by outright force or violence, but by persuading them that their masculine, authoritative ways will be eventually exhausted. Both Jankyn and the knight have, presumably, spent their lives gaining what they wanted through raw

physical power, rather than words. For both of these characters, this physical strength only carries them so far, yet it is the woman's words and mind that ultimately perseveres.

Therefore, what the Wife of Bath is suggesting is that, in the end, women win the battles they face with their wit and sly tongue. ““And for my land thus hastow mordred me? / Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee.”” (Chaucer III. 801-802). She acknowledges the corporal differences between men and women, and that in that particular sense, men may be stronger, yet it is women who make the final decisions.

This idea of a femme fatale is also enhanced by the fact that the Wife of Bath outlives all of her husbands, regardless of their vigor. She may be suggesting that the way women go on about life, in a more coy and softer manner, allows them to live longer. It also proves her overall idea that women “win” in the end, for although men may beat them and treat them unjustly, women have the capacity to completely turn the tables and take everything away from men—including their bodily autonomy. Even if this isn't the case, women will ultimately outlive their husbands, and gain possession of their earthly belongings. This also shows that women have the capacity to rule, just as men do, yet have other antics of doing so. They have discovered other ways of handling the situation that will not eventually exhaust themselves.

The text also conveys the use of the feminine language as a survival tool, as it was her use of carefully chosen words that allowed her to outlive that marriage. Although Jankyn was brutish and physically strong, she was the one who survived him because of her tongue, not her fists. This puts women in the position of power within this story, and elevates the importance of the text, or the words. It was the words she spoke that granted her survival, and by speaking them again she is granting other women the knowledge they may need to survive their abusive

marriages. Of course, as aforesaid, the text's use is somewhat manipulative. However, given her dangerous and, quite literally, life-threatening situation, she was forced to manipulate her husband in order to convince him not to kill her.

4. The Harsh Masculine and Soft Feminine of Words:

Gendered Language

What is meant by is the “language of gender”? Of course, this term can be defined a multitude of ways, but for the purpose of this thesis, it will be defined as language that defines the gender of either the subject or the speaker, be it through the expression of thoughts that are socially closely correlated to a specific gender, or through the description of one’s physical being in a way that reveals their supposed gender. The theory of genderlect, or gender dialect follows the theory language of gender closely behind. Genderlect is defined by sociolinguistics as “a speech variety or communication style particularly associated with one sex (a kind of dialect). Such styles are shaped by cultural factors” (*Genderlect*). With these two terms considered, one can analyze not only the Wife of Bath’s diction, but also the way in which she speaks in comparison to her male counterparts.

In the beginning of the Wife of Bath’s prologue, she offers her own disclaimer:

Experience, though noon auctoritee

Were in this world, is right ynogh for me

To speke of wo that is in mariage;

For, lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age, (Chaucer III. 1-4)

In these few opening lines she asserts her position in society. Chaucer has already dictated her gender to us through her name and description (it is known she is a middle-aged female), but when she first speaks it becomes clear that she was first married at the age of twelve. Moreover, she attempts to validate her own narration by using her experiences by using her experiences to assert her opinion. With this, she attempts to briefly silence the other travelers so they may listen

to her perceptions on marriage, sex, and the feminine. Therefore, from the beginning, one can observe markers of genderlect in her speech. Genderlect characterizes the female dialect as one that values “connection and intimacy” as opposed to the male dialect’s appraisal of “status and independence” (*Genderlect*). With this in mind, the Wife of Bath’s intentions are clear: to state her unique position to those around her so that they can, hopefully, sympathize with her experiences and the opinions that follow them.

This is juxtaposed with the Miller’s prologue and his pronouncement at the beginning of his tale as he sways on his horse:

And swore, "By (Christ's) arms, and by blood and bones,
I kan a noble tale for the nones,
With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale."

Oure Hooste saugh that he was dronke of ale, (Chaucer I. 3125-3128)

Here, the Miller proclaims his dominance, and through it, his superior masculinity over the other travelers. Of course, it should be noted that is he also very drunk and that his arrogance could simply be a result of the “ale of Southwerk” (Chaucer I. 3140). However, considering how he is drunk throughout the entirety of the book, this can be considered one of his inherent and defining characteristics. He forces the audience to listen to his story not because it is his turn, but rather because of his self-assured personality, which undoubtedly adds to his masculine appearance. Both of the Wife of Bath and the Miller discuss the politics of marriage and act of sex, but it is the Wife of Bath’s way of expressing her opinion that truly distinguishes her as proto-feminist and proto-queer, not just in her ideas but also through her diction.

Throughout her prologue, the Wife of Bath discusses in detail her ideas about the creation of human genitals and their uses, using the Bible to support her claims. She recognizes that,

according to the Bible, the physiology of male and female bodies were created by a higher power to serve a higher purpose (procreation) but, at the same time, she backhandedly defies other ideals within the book of Genesis that make other distinctions between man and woman that surpass physical biology:

And Adam called by their names all living things, and all volatiles [of (the) heaven(s)], and all unreasonable beasts of [the] earth. Forsooth to Adam was not found an helper like him. Therefore the Lord God sent sleep into Adam, and when he slept, God took one of his ribs, and filled flesh for it. And the Lord God builded the rib which he had taken from Adam into a woman, and brought her to Adam. And Adam said, This is now a bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; this shall be called virago, for she is taken (out) of man. And the Lord God builded the rib which he had taken from Adam into a woman, and brought her to Adam. (*Wycliffe Bible*, Gen. 2. 20-24)

This passage from the Bible recounts how God created Eve from Adam's removed rib, therefore saying that women come from men. This implies that as far as human knowledge is concerned, man holds all of it, and women only hold a part of it. Men are first and women are second, therefore men are superior, or at the very least, different. Adam named all things in the world, and Eve used those names, therefore women are forced, by way of linguistics, to view the world through men's eyes. This is to say, we think through language, even in our own consciousness, and when words, which hold ideas, are provided to us and defined for us, it takes away our autonomy to see the world through our own perspective. However, it should be noted that all of these distinctions primarily originate from God's desire to create humankind, only a man and a woman can propagate, but still, the suggested intellectual hierarchy is evident.

To counteract this masculine dominion over language, the Wife of Bath discusses the practical uses of genitals, as they were made by the creator. She argues that genitals have two purposes: urination and procreation. By failing to mention other biological differences between the male and female natures she, therefore, suggests that one's genitals do not infer anything else about the person in terms of their mental or intellectual capacities based on their gender. She states:

Telle me also, to what conclusion
Were membres maad of generacion,
And of so parfit wys a [wright] ywroght?
Trusteth right wel, they were nat maad for noght.
Glose whoso wole, and seye bothe up and doun
That they were maked for purgacioun
Of uryne, and oure bothe thynges smale
Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,
And for noon oother cause -- say ye no?

The experience woot wel it is noght so. (Chaucer III. 115-124)

She recognizes that men and women have different bodies, and that these bodies do serve a practical purpose, but that men's and women's differentiation ends there. In the line "Glose whoso wole, and seye bothe up and doun" (Chaucer III. 119), the Wife of Bath is very clearly glossing over the subject, for even the word "gloss" is used. In other words, she is intentionally being vague about the fact that these different genitals also serve another more pleasurable purpose: cunnilingus (Cox 20). One could argue that this could be linked to genderlect, as she is being more "polite" about the subject of oral sex, instead of just stating it quite plainly, as the

Miller does in his tale. Instead, she glosses over it and hints at the other obvious uses. This is not to say she is prudent when it comes to the topic of sex, but quite the opposite. Instead, she is euphemistic when referring to it: making the one phrase serve two purposes at the same time.

She also refers to genitals as “thynges smale” (Chaucer III. 132) and “myn instrument” (Chaucer III. 149). “Thynges smale” (Chaucer III. 132) could not only imply the physical smallness of the genitals themselves (a light joke to amuse her audience), but also their insignificance, meaning that in terms of pleasure and urination, both male and female genitals serve the same purpose. Moreover, she uses the same words to describe both genitals which “thus evinces an awareness of the critical distinction between sex and gender - humans have bodies and bodies have sex, but gender is subjectively constructed and situationally occupies, subject to both the dictates of cultura ‘auctoritee’ and the parameters of personal ‘experiences’” (Cox 19-20). In other words, the Wife of Bath is not defining men or women by their genitals, for both are of little importance; she is more interested in their presumed roles in society.

At the same time, she recognizes that these “instruments” are used for pleasure. Therefore, she is also not defining the act of sex as one that is purely heterosexual. We all have “thynges smale” (Chaucer III. 132) and we all have sex, but who we have sex with and how we have sex is not defined by our genitals. This suggests her awareness of homosexual pleasure, and perhaps also her taking part in it. In the General Prologue, the host describes the Wife of Bath as, “Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve, / Withouten oother compaignye in youthe -- ” (Chaucer I. 460-461). “Compaignye”, or company, is not a gendered term, and could suggest that these lovers were either male or female. This possible bisexuality could explain her refusal to use specific terms that would reveal one’s biological sex, such as penis or vagina.

This is a serious departure from the Miller's tale which demonstrates that differentiation between the sexes was indeed linguistically possible through the use of Middle English. He separates male from female entirely both in their dramatic presence as well as their physical one. This is perhaps best represented when Alison attempts to pacify Absolon's desire for a kiss in the dark of dawn:

Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole,

And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,

And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,

But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers

Abak he stirte, and thoughte it was amys,

For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.

And seyde, "Fy! allas! what have I do?"

"Tehee!" quod she, and clapte the wyndow to, (Chaucer I. 3731-3740)

Here, it is the physical distinction between women and men that gives away Alison's ploy. From the beginning of the story she is highly sexualized, not just as a sexually appealing being who captures the attention of many men, but as a woman. Absolon says to her "I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete" (Chaucer I. 3704), making it abundantly clear he longs after her femininity and womanhood, not simply just after her instrument, as the Wife of Bath puts it. When she sticks her "hole" out the window we are also aware that it is her buttocks, not her crotch, since the Miller uses the word "queynte" (Chaucer I. 3276) earlier in the story to describe this part of

her. Moreover, Absolon acknowledges that “womman hath no berd” (Chaucer I. 3738), but of course the witticism here is that they do, just in a different place. However, there is a clear recognition that women are biologically different from men and serve a different status socially. Both Absolon and Nicholas do not see these distinctions as “thynges smale” (Chaucer III. 132) but rather as significant variances among men and women that make men the ones to seek desire, and make women the desires to be sought after. More poignantly, the Miller, who is described as masculine and burly, sees these divisions, and pokes fun at them while also supporting them through his crude description of them.

The Wife of Bath’s prologue is not the first instance of glossing over characters’ sex and gender in Medieval literature. *Tristan und Isolde* by Gottfried von Straßburg (who died in 1210), presents a similar way of belittling the sexes of the characters in question. All the characters could be described as heterosexual, for they only desire others of the opposite sex, but within this fictional world is it impossible to discern between the bodies of males and the bodies of females (Schultz et al. 91). Furthermore, the same language is used to describe their equal levels of beauty, as opposed to gendered terms such as “handsome” for men or “pretty” for women (Schultz et al. 91).

There is also something to be said of the sound of the words the Wife of Bath and the Miller use to describe the genitals. In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante Alighieri speaks of feminine versus masculine languages, comparing two vernaculars found in the Romagna region of Italy. One, he says “is so womanish, because of the softness of its vocabulary and pronunciation, that a man who speaks it, even if in a suitably virile manner, still ends up being mistaken for a woman” (Dante and Botterill 33), the other is “so hirsute and shaggy in its vocabulary and accent that, because of its brutal harshness, it not only destroys the femininity any woman who speaks

it, but, reader, would make you think her a man” (Dante and Botterill 35). The difference between these two vernaculars that categorizes them as so is the sound of the words. The feminine one uses words “soft” such as “*deusci*” (Dante and Botterill 33) while the masculine one, “shaggy” words like “*bontè*” (Dante and Botterill 35). The difference between these two is clear: one uses mostly soft vowels and the other harsh consonants, it is about the sound of the words, not the meaning. Moreover, it is widely accepted that Chaucer was well-versed in Dante’s work, as he directly references several of Dante’s texts in his own poetry, such as in *Troilus’ Song* and *Legend of Good Women* (Tatlock 1-2).

With this in mind, another comparison can be made between the Wife of Bath’s “thynges smale” (Chaucer III. 132) and the Miller’s “queynte” (Chaucer I. 3276). The Wife of Bath’s diction sounds delicate and soft to the ear for it does not contain the multitude of harsh consonants that the Miller’s does. With this, comes a varied perception of these words spoken, as Dante states when he criticizes these “shaggy” words as “the height of barbarism” (Dante and Botterill 35), with “barbarism” here being closely intertwined with masculinity. Therefore, the Wife of Bath’s language is not only euphemistic in its nature, but also feminine as Chaucer uses her to play with his own masculine ideas of what would become feminine discourse (Cox 19).

5. Conclusion

The Wife of Bath's prologue and tale not only tell of her life and an Arthurian legend, but of the struggles that followed womanhood during the Medieval era, and, unfortunately, are still relevant today. Her position as a sexually confident woman who does not fear being shunned for speaking her mind and doing what, she feels, she must do to survive is undoubtedly a proto-feminist one. She speaks of sex frankly and directly, sans the typical feminine shyness and demure-ness that other female characters within *The Canterbury Tales* exhibit, such as the elegant prioress, or Alison from the Miller's Tale, who is willing to partake in an affair with the Nicholas, though she was not the one initiate.

The Wife of Bath, on the other hand, speaks freely of her willingness to commence this act of passion, rather than waiting for her husband to do so. In addition to this, she also tells of how her husbands could not always "meet" her every-lasting enthusiasm and expresses these thoughts without shame. She not only recognizes the power of her own libido but is assertive and confident about it.

Moreover, she does not let the Church shame her into feeling that ever present "Christian guilt." In fact, she takes a completely alternative approach to the matter, by deconstructing the text herself, and therefore stripping away the Bible's power with her use of words and wit. This same use of words is always what allows her to survive her marriage with Jankyn as she demonstrates to her audience, and to the female listeners and readers in particular, that although women's physical strength does not match that of men, their intellect certainly does. She argues feminine force, and although it could be seen as manipulation (a tactic women have been accused of for millennia), it is starkly different as it is used to ensure survival, rather than achieve gains.

Furthermore, in terms of her presence as a proto-queer character, she manages to, write discreetly, redefine sex by not specifying the gender of those involved in the act. This, of course, is tightly intertwined with proto-feminism, as she seeks to diminish the perceived intellectual differences between men and women by way of belittling the biological variances. However, it also leaves room for interpretation of who her various lovers could have been, for their gender is not specified either. The Wife of Bath's idea of sex as something that creates pleasure, rather than simply an act of reproduction, validates queer relationships, in which sex can create nothing but pleasure. This too is feminist, as this notion of pleasure in sex recognizes not only the female libido but also the existence of the female orgasm, and recognizes it as a legitimate reason for sex.

It is impossible to know Chaucer's true intentions behind the character of the Wife of Bath, and it is indeed very possible that Chaucer created her purely as a satirical figure. However, every character within *The Canterbury Tales* is, to a certain degree, a satire of a societal archetype from the time, yet each is given space to tell their story, and within each story there is a certain degree of truth that is told. The Wife of Bath is no exception. Although her tale is littered with euphemisms and sexual plays on words, she speaks to a deeper truth about the power of the feminine and the power of words. She survives to tell her tale and diminishes the nay-sayers' texts with her words. Through these powerful and carefully chosen syllables she also manages to redefine act of sex and gender norms by glossing over them both up and down, quite thoroughly - which is truly an act of queer-feminism.

6. Introduction to the Creative Section

I made the decision to accompany the critical section of this thesis with two experimental creative pieces, as it seemed like the only prudent option. Chaucer, himself, was playing with the English language while he wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, since the language had not been standardized during the time of the book's creation.

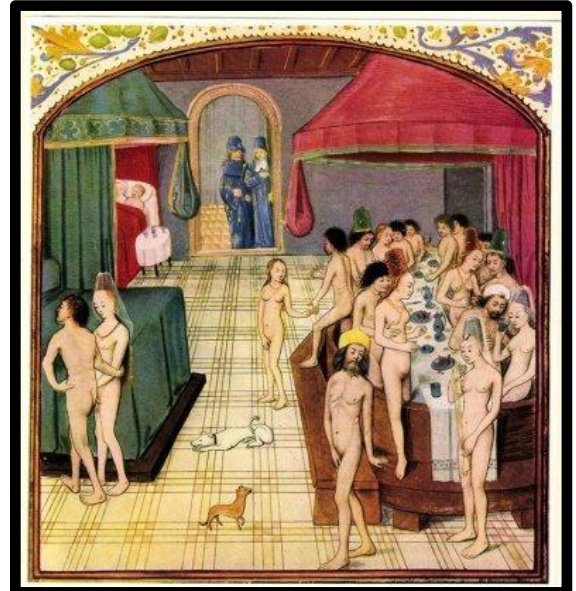
Therefore, I took this opportunity to play with the English language myself, and I decided to produce two pieces: *Reflections of a Girl: Of Peacocks and Lambs* in rhyming couplets (to mimic the signature rhyme scheme that composes *The Canterbury Tales*) and *The Diary of a Nun* in Middle English (to the best of my ability). It should be noted that *The Diary of a Nun* is not a perfect representation or reproduction of how Middle English would have been written during the fourteenth century. Needless to say, I am not fluent in this, now, archaic language. This considered, *The Diary of a Nun* proved to be an exciting and interesting piece to write. I used interlinear translations of various Medieval texts to find Middle English translations of words, as well as dictionaries that included the etymology of certain terms. In cases where a translation could not be found for a particular word or phrase, I resorted to using Latin, which, as a nun, the narrator would have been familiar with.

In both of these texts I also wanted to include queer themes, in order to carry on my idea of The Wife of Bath as a proto-queer character, as well as to argue for the existence of queer individuals who would have lived during this time and seek to give them a voice through my own fictitious text. While I have always been fascinated with Medieval literature and various aspects of Medieval culture, as I continued my studies and worked my way through 21st century Medieval fiction, I gradually became weary of the same heteronormative tropes and characters

consistently depicted within each book. Today we recognize that not everyone is heterosexual, and it seems like a gross oversimplification and dehumanization of the people who lived during this era to assume that they were.

Both of these notably female characters were intentionally left unnamed so that they could serve to show a general variety in the Medieval mindset. This said, I am not claiming that everything within these two pieces is historically accurate, they are, after all, works of fiction. Yet, if you can suspend your disbelief during those countless novels and films portraying wildly inaccurate displays of Medieval lifestyles, garments, and on the not-so-rare occasion, dragons, I hope you can manage to believe the stories of two queer Medieval young women, as well.

You Striketh Myn Herte: Ladies Left Unwhole



7. Reflections of a Girl: Of Peacocks and Lambs

When Winter brings ice and snow all hilly
Like of a young maiden's pure white lily
Crumpled beneath man's steadfast conquest
To plant a seed, grow a twig, then a nest
Consider your delicate position:
Wed as a woman or as a Christian?
So allow me please to state very clear
I've a choice to make as Winter comes near
My sister once was proud, tall, and pleasing
My mother was too, in the beginning
But manhood stripped them of these qualities
And I do not see the necessity



I have a friend near my own age
We are not children but we do play
Not Blind Man's Buff, though in the dark
How do I say this sweetly? Come, hark!
Now, on our days of fast we eat but fish

Trough, Tench and Bream are on the list
But I have a longing for oysters fresh
I discover beneath waves of her dress
This oyster is quite odd, that you must see
It has a pearl that shows just for me
Needn't a knife to crack open its shell
If you're pleasing and soft it will reveal
Pastel pink siren flesh, supple and new
My dear! Imagine how it sings for you!
And though Winter hurries from mountains white
The siren drowns you in warm delight

Forgive my wanderings, decisions ... yes!
Forget, I say to myself, that temptress
There is a lad, with the mind of a lamb
Wishing to suckle a wife to be damned
To mothering not only his children
But his mother's as well, a built-in
Nipple for the whole family to dwell
A slave to nurse her piglets well
Squealing for milk from the pits of hell
I spoke to my mother about these thoughts
They were things I had not been taught

And who feeds the mother pig? I must implore
That women shan't be swung like a door
Unseen but used carelessly each day
Her knobs twisted and turned till they crumble away
“But they are just lambs!” argue some might
And tell me can't any animal cause plight?
A little mosquito living its days
Does not *wish* to harm, though it does anyway
It sucks your blood and goes on to make
Hundreds of babies who also will take
Your lifeline inside and offend the air
And that's how disease spreads, the hellish pair
Yet, the mosquito is innocent, just like the lamb
It's their nature, I'm not saying I am
Without my own faults I know I possess
Still it's everyone's right to protect their justice
“But lambs provide shelter and food!”
Who do you think prepares it to be chewed?
Raw turnips are useful only if stewed
Will the lamb light the fire to feed his brood?
No! He will bleat while he carelessly sips
While the wife scurries 'round - babes upon hips
When he has had his share he'll wallow to bed

Or, frankly, wherever he will be lead
And squirm about his wife to plant more
Babes for her to look after
And this squirming is just but that
You have many a tool, use it!
But if she demands he use other limbs
They move carelessly, just like him
Still, why even complain?
The affair is so brief, and absent of pain
Lay on your back and let the poor beast
Be the lion that he desperately thinks
He is in that pathetic, pitiful mind
Where every one of his thoughts are ill-timed
What happens within that poor head?
A silly child playing dead?
Or is there more that he is hiding?
Is all this just artful lying?
Perhaps a cunning captor
Who has discovered how capture
A maiden in need of husbandry
So she will labor, rather than he
I wish I could catch one of my own
And interrogate those thoughts he calls his home

Loosen him with ale and see the truth
Threaten to pull teeth, if I have to
It cannot be men are so dull
They *must* be hiding something within that skull
Perhaps they meet in secret late at night
And complot new fashions to spread their plight
Though I fear if I did what I speak of now
It's be as useful as conversing with a cow
Weak stupid moo's damping my face
Muddy eyes vapid of any weight
Let the lamb be - How would he survive?
Sans women caring for him till the day he foolishly dies



But these poor creatures with wool for brains
Are not the only beasts we blindly let reign
We place peacocks on the stones of the dead
To light a path for them to be lead
To a glorious heaven, painted in its tail
But in reality, this idea proves to be frail
I've met a peacock, and chances you have too
Boasting 'bout with their feathery crew

Making roost at taverns, like Kings
Ruling with iron fists, among other things
That's why, you see, these taverns' tables
Are all bent and worn from every angle
They're peck-peck-pecking at all
And everything they might, no lull
To stop and wonder what purpose
It may serve, like children at a circus
Waving about, grabbing what they please
Misbehaving to every degree
With the same foolish, foolish belief
That they never need, for a moment, grieve
The destruction they have caused upon the way
And this is *before* they have married
A poor girl who was charmed, half drunk
Into spending her days in terrible luck
These men walk 'round boasting their codpiece
So large, yet there is scarcely anything beneath
Giggle you might, but for only a second
He'll hit you deaf, then you'll surely regret it
Awful, dangerous brutes who speak with their hands
Though they think more than lambs
They won't reflect twice about beating a wife

Over burnt bread for the rest of their life
Speak you may try in the sweetest of manner
You still risk your skin being sent to the tanner
And should you have sons of his emission
You'll be bearing more men to cause harm to more women
Try though you might to change their ways
They'll adore their father, and set the world ablaze
“And what if they're daughters?” A few might ask
Then bundle them up and flee to Halifax!
Now you may look at your dear John
With the eyes of spring bloom, but brawn
Looms within him, it may be best to leave
Satan too was in disguise when he first tempted Eve
Of course there are men who exist
Without the tendency to persist
Brutal force among ladies kind
But I have to say, they are hard to find
My father was sweet, until drunkenness came
And rid that poor mind of any blame
He died one night when he fell
Into a dry, three-man deep well
And should I marry who can say
That I would not meet this very fate

Before the hopeful, blessed dawn
When I find my own man dead and gone
Would I, like so many, who I know
Go to church and pray for a wicked blow
To knock my husband beneath a stream's current
Or bitten by a sly, wicked serpent
Let us be clear, I do not wish all men harm
But in my own life I must fight arm in arm
Even if it be on my own, as it often must be
I will protect my home, body, and sanity
And we have not even discussed
The disease men spread through lust
Lues or disease of Cupid they call it
Once you are touched you must submit
To a life in pain and boils red
Rub you may with quicksilver but you'll quickly be dead
And these beasts bring it home to their loyal wives
You have had but one man their entire lives
They find it in whorehouses and sans thought
Put the whole town in a frenzy fraught
With men's little worms falling right off!
Burrowing into the ground to soil the crops
Then they point their putrid fingers straight to us

And blame our monthly rag-time bloods
But women have had these for centuries
And, it is very clear to see
From the elders and the elders that they speak of
That mankind has not yet been cursed from above
Until those worms went burrowing about
Places wrought with a sinful clout
The past five years we've lived off salt-cod
For food had been scarce within this quod
But go 'head! Blame the dames!
We are used to being shamed
Lock us up until we bear sons
So they may keep us hidden 'till they run
To make more and more of their own
Within the bellies of women sown
But enough of this subject grim
I much prefer to sing a varied hymn



My friend, I spoke of, if you recall
Is fair and lovely, not very tall
We sleep beside one another, on those chance nights

When we've outspoken the sun's natural lights
My mother is pleased that we share a bed
(She knows little of what happens over her head)
The giggles she hears, "are but girls jesting"
Though I am no fool while undressing
Yes, as I've said, there is bodily pleasure
Though I wish to speak in good measure
About desires of the heart, allow my please
To explain how only women have this expertise
Men can boast about their fruity roll
But my friend understands when little has been told
There is a knot between us, I cannot undo
Confidently, I say, neither of us wish to
What is love? Tell me - I beg!
Is it found in a Church or the married bed?
No! It is found in solace with two dames
It is absent of a peacock's games
It is absent of children, who are not desired
It is absent of wifhood, grown weary and tired
Then what is it? They wonder, babes on their hips
It is found on my sweet Millicent's lips
There! I have revealed her honeyed name
And to it I am drawn like a moth to a flame

Call you what it might, but truth should
Be held above deceitful wifehood
Now that I speak plainly, I've another
Confession to make to the Holy Mother
I dream of both Millicent and I
Taking our vows at the nunnery
When we are married to Christ, just as
Women are married to those burdensome paths
I wish that we, in the secrecy of our thoughts
Marry each other, as I believe we ought
To spend every day in at the Eglise
With one another, till we lay in peace
Our two lives echoed in the rings of the bell
For the day she dies, I will die as well
To even think breathing without my love
Makes me wish to be struck from above
Dear Lord! Please spare me a life without her
I cannot bear to live a day sans mon cœur
There is a man, Will, who wishes to wed
My gentle girl, and I can understand
How could *he* see her the way that I do?
How could he love her in a manner so true?
He cannot! No! No! I will not let *it*

Steal these moments benevolent
In the Church we would never speak to man again
I would shelter her from those deceiving grins
From a charming smile that surely hides
Sharpened pebbles hidden within soft tides
There! A decision has been made on my part!
But persuading my love is surely an art
Though if I conspire a detailed plan
Am I just as evil as I say is man?
They too smile at her just as I
In truth, it is not my place to pry,
Be selfish in my ways to keep
A woman who may wish to sleep
With a husband and child, warm in bed
Without being held back by our sinful thread
That has wrapped me so tightly I cannot
Scarcely move without the thought
Of her jovial smirk replaying
Again and again - never decaying
To me her life's years passing
Will never be amassing
On her lovely face or soul
And should she be gone, I would die unwhole.

8. The Diary of a Nun Unnamed



Foure houres of stichting for nas! I were labouryin on an embroidery of the Hooly Mooder when the Abbys stood over me shoulder and heested me to teer it fro the clothe. She looketh as a hore she seyde in the amydde our hooly covent. Toniht she feeste, on a day of fast, on beofor, while the reste of us wearily ete salted cod, of which remainyn sith yeres below the covent, and pease of whiche I doon na care. Whil I stripped the canevas, I almost cride. Sister Benedetta consoled me with her helpe and seyde to me how the Abbys was punyshed by the preest for her loftee spendyn. From whate I had seyen toniht she has nat lerned her lessoun.

I doon na liste to seye that I stal this journal fro the libraria, but this is the varray sooth, whiche I moste telle. I hadde space to take it under my robes and did so waytyn my sisters whil they spak to each other. It wol nat be missed.

My blood stirted this morwening but I doon nat have tyme to collecte mos so it has flowed doun my legges the hool day. Sowre luck but I used somme herbes swoote to hyde the smell. I shal rest now, tomorwe we wake at day-gleam.



Help me God, he woot that I am a good Cristen womman, but dayes as this leave me firee as a cocketh come lente. A monk-- yes! a man of God smoot me ers as I leaveth the Church for morwe prayeres. What wikkedness strifes binithan that bald head I doon nat woot, nor nat it rekketh me, for as longe as he kepe his hondes fat fer away from me sete, I vowe to kepe myn pees.

In matters oother, this morwe during myn prayers I fonde to fyne God for the firste tyme in whil. I shette myn yens and thynked of Jesus lookynge downe on me. Bethynkyng as I fyned I hadde smale victoree. Many nuns feele this waye, so they telle me. But I kan nat seyn that I felte diversely when I firste cam to the convente. Yeven myn situacion, the convente semed the best route for me, and so I tooketh myn voves and chose to lyve myne age amonge womman. I doon nat mynde it much, womman kynde are softe and pleesyng- nat alle, of course. Yet the fewe that are, are lyke a sweete breath, which is needed grately in such a houshold heted by rownes slye.

Myn bloode hurtes so I now trowe the storee of Adame and Eve- I trowe trulee that I be punysshed.



← Biholde! The monke's likenyss



I hade a dreame nyghte laste aboute a mayden I wight when I was yong.
For the firste tyme in a longe tyme I missed another nat lyvyng in the convent. For so longe I
have lyved in pees here withoute a dreame of the outside. She heelde myn honde. She looked in
myn yen. Her warmth remembreth me. He love misseth me.

It is tyme for prayeres. She wol folwe me to the Church. She wol rekketh myn mynde.



The Abyss seyed I use muchel papere. What sholde I do? I clene... I
washe... I doon alle myn gentillesse wel and in faire tyme. Let me - I axe - have this one ese. I
have taketh the vowe of poverté and of God. I use ynk sparse and papere litl. And I have seyed er
how she ete lyke a noble kyng.

Now, it is myn tourne to clean her chambere. But the Lord woot what I wol fynde.



I saugh today a prioress crie mid the halle at dawe. I wolled to axe her what troublen her but as I approched her from bihynde I stunted in myn pathe. I bigan to go toward her but somewhat ypulled me bakward agayn. I wondered what she myghte crie aboute- and I thynked that, paraventure, she cried for resons like myn owene. Paraventure, she eek thynke of a mayde from dayes olde. From dayes free. I doon nat meene to saye that I am nat free... but the dayes whan I walked with wynde in myn hair- I used to have criske heer, nat smothered by clothe greye and blak. So, I lefte her allone. I walked thenne on myn wye, and I did nat looke bak.

I wondere if I shoulde axe God for foryeveness... yet it semes so nyce. He is occupyed, I thynke to myself. He shoulde nat be bothered by thynges so plane.



This even I was etynge with oother prioresses in the halle and I swear they juste lette whoso join the convente. One prioress spak of how, wel, the dede in grate quantitee is nat a sin for it bers more maydens pure. One tyme it takes to ber childe! One!

Of course this is nat the cas for every mariage. I knowe this wel.

The woman who spak of these thynges was olde, to mak thynges wors. Gat-tothed was she, and I reckon it bicams her wel - she annexed the convente wel into hir age, after many wexing experience I am sure.

It sooth, it doon nat matter - in suretee she wol be deed in a yeer or so. For now she spaks of storees strange until anoother prioress is forceed to carry hir to hir bed. In the privecee of her owene chamberes who knowes what she gooth on aboute.

As a prioress, I wish hir a blyve and peesful passynge. But as a womman, I devye to heere ech tale. She muste have many to telle.

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