Sexuality In The Canterbury Tales

Sexuality is a major topic and theme discussed in Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales. In the Canterbury Tales, female sexuality is portrayed as a command that women hold over their husbands and use as an instrument of control and manipulation. This viewpoint shows Chaucer's distorted views of marriage as he seems marriage not as a unification between two people in love but rather as a position used for control. Throughout the tales, Chaucer writes mainly about his fascination with the sexuality of individuals living within the institution of marriage. The topic of sexuality is most obvious in The Wife of Bath's Tale, The Miller's tale and The Reeve's tale. Many of Chaucer's tales discuss marriage, extramarital affairs, sexuality, and courtly love.

In The Wife of Bath's Tale, the prologue introduces the reader to a woman named Alyson. Everything about Alyson, also known as the Wife of Bath, is excessively exaggerated. She has been married five times and has an extravagantly large sexual appetite. In The Wife of Bath's Prologue, Alyson was a symbol of hypersexuality that was illustrated as a dominant and sexually insatiable character. In the prologue, the wife talks about her sexual adventures with her all of her previous five husbands. It is clear that she receives great enjoyment out of sex. In order to fully understand Chaucer's explicit stories, it's important to take the time period into consideration. In fact, "[i]n the early Middle Ages, wealth and standing was passed down, not by way of father to son, but to father to their sister's son. The thinking was that a man knew who his sister was and in turn who she'd given birth to so there was a guaranteed blood line. Your wife, on the other hand, couldn't be trusted" ("Sex Uncovered"). In "Sex Uncovered: The numbers game: Sleeping around: From Chaucer to Castro," the article also discussed the topic of having multiple sexual partners and how for men it is socially acceptable, but for women it seen as promiscuous and frowned upon. It has long been acceptable for men to have more than one sexual partner at a time. Some even view men sleeping around as an accomplishment of masculinity, whereas if a woman were to do the same, she would be seen as a slut. Marriage is an essential them that is also seen in other of Chaucer's tales.

The Merchant's Tale explores the ups and downs of a marriage. The tale debunks the image of a perfect marriage and shows the true struggles between married partners. The tale "…concerns the pleasures and pains of marriage, with both viewpoints debated throughout its unfolding" (Pugh 478). In The Merchant's Tale, a wealthy and old knight (January) decides to get married. January picks a beautiful woman named May, who is supposedly a virgin. One of knight January's attendants, named Damian, falls in love with his new wife. Then suddenly January loses his sight and becomes completely blind. Damian is persistent in his romantic feelings toward May and she soon falls in love with him too. May actually gives her new lover, Damian, a key to January's secret garden. One day when May and her husband are in the garden near a pear tree something unexpected occurs. Damian is there and as May climbed up into the pear tree to fetch a pear, "Damian Gan pullen up the smok, an in he throng" (Chaucer, "The Merchant's Tale" 1109). Essentially, Damian and May are having sex at this point. Miraculously, at this same moment January's sight returns just in time for him to see his wife and attendant "swyving" or having sex. After seeing them have sex with his own eyes, January shouts angrily, "he swyved thee, I saugh it with myne yen" (Chaucer, "The Merchant's Tale" 1134). May defends her actions by claiming January's sight is defective and that his eyesight

was not showing what truly happened. Overall, The Merchant's Tale shows a bitter viewpoint of marriage as we see January's dissatisfaction with his marriage to May after she has an affair. The Merchant's Tale is similar to The Miller's Tale in that both tales deal with an older husband marrying a much younger woman.

The Miller's Tale starts with the pilgrims praising the Knight's tale. Then the host states "Let see now who shal telle another tale" (Greenblatt 221, line 8) and the drunken Miller jumps in and insists on telling his tale. Miller's tale is a raunchy story about the life of a carpenter and his wife and how a young clerk had sex with the carpenter's wife. It's interesting that the speaker apologizes to the reader for the story's indecency but claims that as a storyteller he needs to include everything and not pick and choose which parts to include in his writings. The narrator asks for forgiveness for telling this story and even suggests that easily offended readers skip reading this dirty tale. This tale in particular feels like an entertaining story that men told after a lot of drinking. It feels like a locker room style tale about sex and the breakdown of a marriage. The story seems to possibly be told to cause laughter from the men, especially when the young student, Nicholas, thinks he can outwit John, the old carpenter. Nicholas sleeps with John's young and attractive wife, Alisoun. Another man, Absolon, wants Alisoun but it appears Alisoun loves Nicholas and the two plot a plan to allow them to spend a night together. Alisoun tells her husband, John, that Nicholas is sick and so John visits him. At this time, Nicholas tells John about a vision he had where a flood will take out all forms of life soon. As a result of the fear, John decides to attach three tubs to the roof of their barn and have everyone sleep in them so that when the flood comes they will be able to float and survive. The night of the supposed flood arrives and they climb up and lay in their tubs but as soon as John falls asleep, Alisoun and Nicholas climb back to the house and have sex. That next morning, Absolon (an admirer of Alisoun) expresses his desire for her and Absolon leans into kiss Alisoun through a window but ends up kissing "…hir naked ers" and thought something "…was amis / For wel he wiste a woman hath no beerd" (Greenblatt 235, lines 626-629). It turns out Absolon kissed her bare butt and during the kiss he felt her pubic hair. Alisoun thinks her prank is hilarious but Absolon gets his revenge when he returns and brands Nicholas's butt with a hot iron poker. The story The Miller tells is vulgar and graphic. It is a bawdy story that has no topics off limit. The prank Alisoun pulls on her admirer, Absolon, can be seen as a hilarious story that men laugh over while at a bar drinking. There is an antagonism between the teller of The Miller's Tale and the teller of The Reeve's Tale that provides the tales with a sense of humor and comedy for the readers.

In Reeve's Tale, the main character is a miller who is extremely conceited and his unethical ways of business come back to bite him. A man named Skmkyn steals corn from his customers and rips them off through his use of cheap fillers in the flour he sells townspeople. Skmkyn is described as a miller (or man that grinds corn and other grains into flour) that married the illegitimate daughter of a local cleric. The tale is very unsettling as it discusses how two male students get their revenge on Skmkyn cheating them out of corn by raping and beating his wife and daughter. The Reeve's Tale appears to be retaliation for The Miller's Tale because the Reeve (who used to be a carpenter) is personally offended by the Miller's story of a foolish carpenter. The Reeve attacks The Miller's Tale by telling a story that ridicules an arrogant miller, which is intended to offend The Miller. In the tale, Skmkyn's daughter is "used sexually" as a form of currency, with the tragic rape of her being seen as "fair payment" for the corn stolen from the two male students (Lancashire 162). This fundamental theme that having sexual relations with another man's daughter or wife is comparable to theft is unrealistic. Violence and rape seem to be far too horrific acts of punishment in this story.

Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales were risqué stories for their time. It is undeniable that lust and sexual desire plays an important role in his writings. In Chaucer’s stories, the women characters are not content to live their life conservatively within the constricted medieval standards of proper behavior. In many of his tales, women are shown as characters that are meant to be heard and seen, not pushed aside. His women characters seem to be the exception to many of the restrictive guidelines for appropriate female behavior in the fourteenth century. It seems like Chaucer proved that women in that time did not have to fit into one stereotypical category, but rather they could exist in multiple categories of proper behavior or even create their own. Regarding relationships, Chaucer demonstrates that couples need to have similitude in their relationship. Chaucer’s consistent discussion of marriage shows his interest, and possibly respect, for women’s independence as women and wives. In his stories, the women chose not to live their lives by stereotypical marriage principles. As a result, each woman then becomes an unforgettable character for their individual actions that went against the norm.

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