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**Love, Marriage, and Happiness:  
Changing Systems of Desire in  
Fourteenth-Century England**

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## INTRODUCTION

What did “love” mean in the Middle Ages? This question is a topic of perennial interest to medievalists; the multiplicity of perspectives represented in the surviving evidence presents a formidable challenge to any scholar. Recently C. S. Jaeger has presented a perceptive and well-researched explanation for the origins of the courtly love<sup>1</sup> ideal that burst into the medieval consciousness in the twelfth century, in his book *Ennobling Love*.<sup>2</sup> Jaeger describes how passionate friendship between a king and his courtiers or between a teacher and his student was considered “a badge of refinement”<sup>3</sup> which conveyed virtue on both the lover and the person loved. He uses the sensuous love letters that were written by and to men in Europe between the eighth and twelfth century to illustrate the vitality and power of this discourse of desire.

Furthermore, he argues that the tradition of courtly love, in which men dedicate themselves in military service and (usually) chaste desire to a beautiful noblewoman, emerged as an extension and transferal of an ennobling desire which had previously only been accepted amongst men.<sup>4</sup> Some of the first expressions of this innovation can be found in the love

poetry of the troubadours in southern France, and it soon finds its way into Latin literature such as *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*.<sup>5</sup>

Jaeger's study is broad in topic, geography, and period: he examines writing produced in Western Europe between the eighth century and the fifteenth century, but focuses on the twelfth century. The material he examines is mostly written in Latin and covers many of the different situations in which the language of desire was used to highlight virtue and ennoble both its users and the objects of their desire. His broad study has defined a new way of approaching the study of love and desire in medieval Europe, one which begs for more focused studies to be done in particular regions and time periods in order to explore this approach further and gain a more thorough understanding of how the concepts he identifies function in a particular language and location. It is my intention to begin answering this call by examining in detail a variety of ways that love and desire were expressed in the secular and religious literature of fourteenth-century England, mostly in the vernacular. While the "renaissance" in twelfth-century Europe is widely acknowledged as a time of great flowering in the literature of love, the vernacular writing of fourteenth-century England is recognized by scholars as a similarly rich body of literature on the subject.<sup>6</sup> The Middle English romances, the poetry of Chaucer, the Middle English lyrics, and the writings of the

English Mystics are the sources that I will draw from to explore the nature and function of desire in England during this period.

It is my intention not only to explore the discourse of love and desire in the fourteenth century, but also to examine how the ideas have been altered from those present in the Anglo-Norman and Latin material that was written or widely read in twelfth-century England and what pressures and influences may have brought about these changes. To that end, before I can proceed to a study of love and desire in England in the fourteenth century it is important first to understand how these concepts were understood in twelfth-century England. I will look at secular tales of courtly love, and also monastic texts on brotherly love and love of God, exploring how the ideas of love and desire were expressed in several different sections of society.

One recurrent theme links all these varied forms of loving expression, and that is the definition of love as an alignment of two people's wills. This unity of will appears to be the marker of genuine love in this culture, and I will trace its appearance in our texts throughout this chapter to clarify the ways in which it is used.

I will begin with the secular writing of Marie de France. Marie wrote in Anglo-Norman French, the language of the English courts for many years after the Norman conquest. While her name seems to indicate

that she was born in France, she probably lived in England and wrote for an English audience. The extant copy of her collection of *lais*, which we will examine here, was compiled for (if not actually composed for) a Plantagenet king, probably Henry II.<sup>7</sup> Her work is mentioned by contemporary writers as being very popular in the courts, so we may assume with some confidence that the views she expressed were attractive and acceptable to the English aristocrats of the twelfth century.

Marie's *lais* are tales of passionate desire between exceptional knights and beautiful ladies. As in *Eliduc* and *Guigemar*, the love is usually adulterous and instant: one look is enough for the lovers to be "pierced" with desire for each other, after which they are "tortured" by a love which "is an invisible wound within the body."<sup>8</sup> The focus of the story is not on knightly deeds or exotic adventures, but on the intense emotions experienced by the lovers. After their initial recognition and the subsequent confession of their love, their wills are aligned in everything. Their identity is no longer found in private experience of the world, it is found only in the relationship that now completes them. The fusion of identities is so complete that they lose their will to live if they cannot be with each other. The lovers are often guided or aided by supernatural events, and this combined with their aristocratic status suggests that their love is of a kind too rare to exist within the mundane bonds of marriage.

Rather, it is something so pure, rare, and compelling that both lovers will cast aside all else to achieve its fulfillment, breaking their obligations to spouse, lord, and church. In Marie's *lais* love is ever a positive force, and no sin incurred can dull the brilliance of true love achieved.

But beautiful ladies and handsome knights did not have a monopoly on love. The twelfth century was a time of lively monastic reform, much of which seems to have been infused with fervent principles of brotherly love. Aelred of Rievaulx, a Yorkshire abbot, wrote a well-known treatise on friendship between monks titled *De Spirituali Amicitia* ("On Spiritual Friendship"). He also lifts love up to an elevated position as one of the most important sources of human happiness:

Ipsa enim omnes virtutes sua condit suavitate, vitia sua virtute confodit, adversa temperat, componit prospera; ita ut sine amico inter mortales nihil fere possit esse iucundum.<sup>9</sup>

(It [friendship] manifests all the virtues by its own charms; it assails vices by its own virtue; it tempers adversity and moderates prosperity. As a result, scarcely any happiness whatever can exist among mankind without friendship.)<sup>10</sup>

However, Aelred's love is not compatible with sin the way Marie's was. He specifically refutes the idea that sin is excusable if one sins for a friend, and furthermore prescribes a long and thorough vetting process for potential friends in order to guarantee that they are virtuous people. In addition, one's affection for one's friends must first be thoroughly

grounded in the love of God. However, once the careful preparation and selection processes are complete, a state of perfect harmony and unity ensues: “ad id ventum est, ut esset nobis cor unum et anima una, idem velle et idem nolle” (we attained that stage at which [we had] but one mind and one soul to will and not to will alike) and “et ita misceas ut unum fieri velis ex duobus . . . ut nulla sit animorum, affectionum, voluntatum, sententiarum que divisio” (you wish to become one instead of two . . . there will be no division of minds, affections, wills, or judgments).<sup>11</sup> Again the alignment of wills is presented as an essential identifier for genuine love.

Man’s love could also be directed towards God. Bernard of Clairvaux, the founder of the Cistercian order, writes on loving God. While he wrote in France rather than England, his work was distributed throughout Europe and would have certainly been known in England, which was such a lively area of Cistercian expansion. Bernard wrote about the degrees of loving God, which man may move through by religious devotion and the renunciation of sin. Bernard also wrote a series of sermons on the Song of Songs, using the descriptions of sexual interaction to capture the sheer power of human passion and direct it not towards a lover but towards God. He presents the poem as an intellectual

metaphor which must be deciphered in order to gain spiritual insight. For him a kiss is a metaphor for union with God:

Osculum, pacis indicium esse omnes novimus. Porro autem si, ut Scriptura loquitur, peccata nostra separant inter nos et Deum, tollatur de medio quod inter est, et pax est. Cum ergo satisfacimus, ut ablato quod separate peccato reconciliemur, indulgentiam quam recipimus, quid nisi quoddam osculum dixerim pacis?<sup>12</sup>

(We all know that the kiss is a sign of peace. If, as scripture says, "our sins separate us from God" (Is 59:2), peace is lost between us. When, therefore, we make satisfaction and are reconciled with the removal of sin which was separating us, the favor we receive can surely only be called a kiss.)<sup>13</sup>

If a man is able to achieve a true love of God, the resulting loss of independent identity is just as drastic as that found in the *lais*:

Te enim quodammodo perdere, tamquam qui non sis, et omnino non sentire teipsum, et a temetipso exinaniri, et paene annullari, caelestis est conversationis, non humanae affectionis.<sup>14</sup>

(To lose yourself as though you did not exist and to have no sense of yourself, to be emptied out of yourself and almost annihilated, belongs to heavenly, not to human love.)<sup>15</sup>

All three writers offer love as the highest possible ideal towards which mankind can strive; they disagree merely on the most appropriate object of that love. Each author emphasizes the unity of wills and identities created by genuine love.

Keeping this background of twelfth-century attitudes as a foundation, I can now move forward into the examination of love in

fourteenth-century Middle English literature. First I will look at two anonymous Middle English romances and several of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. These stories show a great number of changes from Marie de France's paradigm of love. They also place a strong emphasis on marriage, creating a complicated interplay and juxtaposition between the institution of marriage and the intense emotional state of love. Next I will explore secular lyrics which emphasize women's independent identities and their ability to reject love. Finally, I will examine the mystical writings of Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe, focusing on their use of sexual and marital metaphors for the relationship between humans and God. This broad range of sources will demonstrate the variety of ways love could be expressed in fourteenth-century England, and it will allow me to draw some conclusions about the nature and meaning of love and marriage at this time in the final pages of this study.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "courtly love" is rather ill-defined, and has been contested in recent scholarship. However, I have chosen to use the term as a convenient and recognizable short-hand for a paradigm of love based on intense longing and both physical and emotional suffering in service of the beloved, often found in the context of aristocratic adulterous relationships; it may or may not culminate in a physical consummation.

<sup>2</sup> Jaeger, C. Stephen. *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> Mews, Constant J. *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-century France*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Collette, Carolyn P. Private conversation, April 12, 2005.

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<sup>7</sup> Burgess, Glynn S and Keith Busby. "Introduction." *The Lais of Marie de France*. Marie de France. Trans Glynn S Burgess and Keith Busby. London : Penguin Books, 1999, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Marie de France. *The Lais of Marie de France*. Trans. Glynn S Burgess and Keith Busby. London: Penguin Books, 1999, pp. 48-9.

<sup>9</sup> Latin text from <http://web.genie.it/utenti/i/interface/AER.html> , accessed April 27, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx. *Spiritual Friendship*. Trans. Mary E Laker. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Latin text from <http://web.genie.it/utenti/i/interface/AER.html>, English translation from Laker, p. 128 and pp. 92-3, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Opera*, vol. 1. Leclerq, J; Talbot, CH; Rochais, HM; eds. Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux. *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*. Trans. GR Evans. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987, p. 225.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, Leclerq ed, vol. 3, p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, Evans trans, p. 195.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Love and Politics in the Middle English Romances

A large number of romances survive in Middle English from the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, many of them translations and adaptations of French source material. The authorship of the romances is obscure, and the concept of authorship itself is a difficult one when it comes to the romances. Many of the romances survive in more than one manuscript, and they often differ in certain particulars: for example, the Findern manuscript of *Sir Degrevant* contains thirteen stanzas in the middle of the tale (ll. 800-1008) that do not appear in the Thornton manuscript. These stanzas describe Degrevant's audience with his lady's maid and contain an important discussion between the two women about Degrevant's suitability to court the Lady Melidor. Also, in a culture much more dependent upon oral transmission than our own, it is likely that these stories were sung or performed more often than they were read silently from a manuscript. Thus it is quite possible that the romances were incrementally changed by each performer to suit his own style and the desires of a particular audience. The extant copy of a romance may

have been set down after the first translation or composition, or written from versions of the tale that had undergone many changes during their oral transmission.

The Middle English romances are quite diverse in subject matter, ranging from tales of knightly adventures, to stories of love and courtship, to penitential or quasi-hagiographical narratives. Many romances combine themes from several or all of these categories. As a whole they are less intensely emotional than the *lais*, and tend to be more concerned with social status: where the *lais* assume the high nobility of their characters, the Middle English romances often take more interest in a limited social mobility between the noble and the gentle classes.

I have selected the following romances to illustrate in greater detail some of the important differences between the treatment of love in the Anglo-Norman *lais* and the Middle English romances. *Sir Degrevant* illustrates the concern with social status and material wealth that supersedes the *lais'* obsession with erotic desire and emotional fulfillment. *King of Tars* demonstrates the form of negotiation which the romances offer as a method of bringing harmony to a seemingly incompatible marriage, which we will see again in Chaucer's *Canturbury Tales*.

*Sir Degrevant*

One of the most striking features of the Middle English Romances in general is that romantic love is firmly framed within the process of courtship and marriage, rather than being located in extramarital affairs as in the *lais* of Marie de France and the French romances. The locus of attention in the English romances is also different: in Marie's *lais* the emotional lives of the characters are the focus of each tale. The characters' longing for each other was articulated at length, while deeds of chivalry and political-economic concerns were included only when they lent some sort of necessary plot element or gave extra power to the love story. In each of the romances below we will see quite the opposite.

*Sir Degrevant* was probably composed in the late fourteenth century, and survives in two early fifteenth-century manuscripts: the Thornton Manuscript, mainly a collection of romances; and the Findern Manuscript, a household anthology containing two romances, some works by Chaucer, and some love lyrics. No French source for the tale is known, and the story is probably original to England.<sup>1</sup> At the opening of the romance the upstanding young knight, Sir Degrevant, returns from the crusade in Spain because the earl who holds the lands next to his has slaughtered his game, polluted his rivers, and murdered his foresters. Degrevant requests restitution for the damage to his property, but is rudely denied. He

resorts to war and soundly trumps the earl in the first battle. When he tries to negotiate an end to the hostilities at the castle gate, he sees the earl's daughter Melidor on the battlement, and falls in love with her. He confesses his love to his loyal squire:

Pare es no beralle so brighte, Na cristalle so clere;	<i>jewel</i>
Scho es warre and wysse, Hir rod as þe rose on ryse, Hir coloure full white it es, Pat lufly in lyre.	<i>true, wise face, stem</i>
Scho es precyous in palle, Scho es fayreste in haull, I sawe hir ons on a walle, I neghede na nere;	<i>body approached, not</i>
Me ware leuer þat scho war myn Pan alle þe golde in þe Ryn, And also in floreyne, Scho es me so dere.	<i>I would rather</i>
.....	
Scho es frely and faire, And þe Erls awn ayere (ll. 531-544, 569-70) <sup>2</sup>	<i>noble heir</i>

He compares her to a beryl or a crystal and declares he would rather have her than all the gold in Rhineland or Florence; by doing so he places her in the same category as the gold and gems. He compares her to the conventional rose as well, but the emphasis seems to be on her economic worth. Also, he is very much aware that she is the earl's sole heir, and thus able to endow social status, property, and wealth. Degrevant's love may be sincere, but the economic advantages of the match do not escape him.

He and his squire sneak into the earl's castle while he is away and meet Melidor and her maid in the orchard:

Scho come in a veluet	<i>velvet (gown)</i>
With white perle ouerfret,	<i>ornamented</i>
And faire were þay in sett	
On euer-ylke a syde;	<i>every</i>
Alle of palle-werke fine	<i>needlework</i>
Cowchide with newyne,	<i>embroidered, jewels</i>
Furrede with ermine,	
And couerde with pryde.	
To telle hir botouns were dure:	<i>durable</i>
Pay were anamelde with asure;	<i>enameled</i>
With t[o]pys and with tre[ch]oure	<i>topaz, treasure</i>
Glymerand hir gyde (ll. 641-656)	<i>gown</i>

The narrator proceeds to tell of many other rare treasures she wore. It is striking that the description of Melidor begins with her bejeweled dress, a symbol of both her status and her wealth. We find no focus on her natural beauty or on any emotion she arouses in Degrevant independent of the joy of seeing so many jewels piled onto one person. One might be inclined to assume that a more personal love is present merely because of the expectations that come with the genre, but if such an emotion is intended then the narrator finds no need to describe it. This is in stark contrast to the *lais* of Marie de France we examined earlier, which derive their main substance from the description of a powerful, undeniable spiritual link and physical attraction that binds the two lovers. Degrevant's love looks mercenary in comparison.

Melidor is afraid when the two men approach her, yet she can't help but notice that "he was so ryally arrayede/ Ðat comly knyghte" (ll. 703-4). She notices the quality of his armor, a symbol of his knightly status, before anything else. Despite his fine armor, she rebukes Degrevant for inappropriately approaching her in the orchard, and threatens to call the guard and have both of them hanged. He reiterates his undying love for her and declares himself willing to accept the consequences. Rather intimidated, she retreats to her chamber, where her maid confesses that she is quite willing to accept Degrevant's love if Melidor doesn't want it. Melidor gives the maid permission to go back to the knights. The maid serves them supper and councils Degrevant that his rank is too low to make him a plausible suitor for Melidor:

Hyr proferrys par amoure	<i>offer her love</i>
Boþ dukes and emperoure,	
Hyt were hyr disonowre	
For to taken þe (ll. 857-60)	

Degrevant is not discouraged, so the maid helps him by revealing a secret passage in and out of the castle. In return for her help he betroths her to his squire and gives her a charter granting them one hundred pounds worth of his land. Melidor is very impressed by the charter when the maid shows it to her, and apparently she is more willing to believe Degrevant's sincerity after he demonstrates a legal commitment involving

his own property. He also sends Melidor a “rede gold ryng / with a ryche ston” (ll. 991-2), and the next day he defeats one of Melidor’s suitors in single combat, giving her further evidence of his knightly prowess.

The romance is clearly split between the public world of the knight and the private world of the lover. In a theme which highlights the nobility of the characters, many of the public maneuvers of the story center upon horses. Degrevant’s battles and negotiations with the earl take place on horseback, and as W. A. Davenport points out, horses also play a key role in his public courtship of Melidor.<sup>3</sup> The warhorse is a symbol of Degrevant’s status as a skilled knight, signaling his worthiness to court an earl’s daughter. After his triumph on the first day of the tournament he registers his formal suit for Melidor’s hand by riding to her father’s castle with two of his knights, on horses lavishly decked in “bathe telerer and mantelete / ryghte of a fyne veluete” (both an ornamental head covering and a horse blanket of fine velvet, ll. 1198-9). Her other suitor challenges Degrevant to a contest of arms the next day. When Degrevant defeats the challenger Melidor signals her approval by bringing him a fresh steed herself.

Now the story shifts from the public arena of feast and tournament into the private world of the bedroom. Encouraged by Melidor’s show of favor, Degrevant sneaks into the earl’s castle via the secret entrance under

cover of darkness. Melidor welcomes him, allows herself to be kissed, and leads him to supper in her chamber, where they dine on all sorts of delicacies and rare meats, accompanied by the finest wines. Where we might expect to see a passionate consummation scene in a twelfth-century Anglo-Norman romance, we find instead an impressive feast that is a representation of the fine standard of living that Melidor commands. The description of her chamber continues the theme: The bed is encrusted with “besantes [jewels] full bryghte” (l. 1444) and “archangells of golde” (l. 1450), and painted with scenes from the bible. Images and statues of the four authors of the gospels, other famous philosophers, and noble kings stand on pillars in her room, and she has an expensive clock “with belles for to knylle” (l. 1472). Her bed is covered in sheets of silk, and the earl’s banner hangs at each corner: “Was neuer a bed rehere / Of emperours ne qwene” (ll. 1503-4). If we had forgotten that Melidor represents her father’s riches, we have been thoroughly reminded by her jeweled dresses, sumptuous feast, and spectacular chamber.

Degrevant suggests that she include him in her nocturnal plans, but she advises him sternly to put all sinful thoughts out of his mind:

‘Ceris, sir, [e]f pou were a king,	<i>Certainly, [even] if</i>
Pou solde do me no swylke thing	<i>should, such</i>
Or pou wede me with a rynge,	
And maryage full-fill. (ll. 1533-6, <i>sic</i> )	

She assures him that she loves him and wouldn't dream of having anyone else, but that they must wait "till 3e gete my fadirs wyll" (l. 1550). They sleep side by side on the bed, and she asks him to return every night, which he does for a year and a quarter in complete secrecy. In case there is any doubt in our minds about the innocence of these meetings, the narrator assures us "wete 3e wele, or þay were wed/Synned þay na mare" (mark you well, before they were wed they did not sin, ll. 1559-60). This strict chastity is the polar opposite of the passionate extramarital affairs idealized in the *lais*, and this strongly suggests that the author is catering to an audience who prefers their love stories free of sin. It also demonstrates a new kind of "unity of will" which we will see much more of in the Middle English texts: instead of an instant reciprocation of desire, unity of will means that one partner sets the rules of the relationship, and the other agrees to abide by them. Unity is a product of negotiation motivated by affection, not simply irresistible erotic desire. Melidor exemplifies a new kind of romance heroine, one who is very mindful of the social value of chastity, as well as the social and economic advantages and the increase in personal agency that can be achieved by careful negotiations with a future husband. In the next chapter we will see the heroine of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* using a similar strategy.

One midsummer night Degrevant is seen using the secret passage, and the earl's steward waits in ambush for him to return. Again demonstrating their military prowess, Degrevant and his squire are able to slay most of the men who attack them and put the others to flight. This enrages the earl, who threatens to kill Melidor. She is not intimidated and makes no secret of their love, declaring that she will never forsake Degrevant. This only makes the earl more angry, but his wife pleads with him to spare the life of their only child, reminding him that he started the quarrel by ravaging Degrevant's lands and advising him to make peace and grant Melidor to Degrevant. Melidor threatens to starve herself if he refuses, so finally he relents. He welcomes Degrevant to his house and arranges the most lavish wedding imaginable, attended by kings, bishops, empresses, and queens from all over England and France. The German emperor himself gives Melidor away at the church door, and the ground is covered in gold. Clearly Degrevant has been propelled into the social stratosphere of late medieval Europe. A year later the earl dies and the happy couple inherits all his wealth. Their thirty-six-year marriage is blessed with ten children, and after Melidor dies Degrevant rides off to the holy land and dies jousting with a heathen sultan, guaranteeing himself a place in heaven.

*Sir Degrevant* demonstrates a completely different valuation of love from the one we identified in twelfth-century literature. Instead of being motivated only by a longing for emotional and spiritual fulfillment, love is also a path to social and economic gain. Lacking the depths of passion we saw in the *lais*, it substitutes moral standards of conduct and socio-economic status as the desirable qualities of the lovers: love here is practical rather than spiritual. Melidor and Degrevant do seem to be genuinely fond of each other, but their happy ending focuses on wealth and status rather than their emotional fulfillment. The strong value placed on economic gain in romances such as *Sir Degrevant* opens the way for conflict between the economic and emotional motivations of lovers, a conflict which figures prominently in some of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that I will examine in Chapter Two.

### *King of Tars*

A striking example of negotiation within marriage may be found in the romance *King of Tars*, a story of marriage which focuses on the themes of political power and Christian religious superiority. It seems to have been a relatively popular romance, since it has survived in three separate fourteenth-century manuscripts: the Auchinleck manuscript (c. 1330-40), the Vernon manuscript (c. 1370-80), and the closely related British

Museum Additonal manuscript 22283. The romance seems to be based on the tale of an Armenian princess probably brought to England by returning crusaders and recorded in 1299 by Matthew Paris in his *Flores Historia*.<sup>4</sup>

This tale begins with a heathen sultan's demand that the Christian king of Tars give him his daughter in marriage. The king refuses, and the sultan attacks, killing thirty thousand Christians in the first battle. The princess pleads to be given to the sultan to prevent further bloodshed, and her parents reluctantly allow it. She is taken to his kingdom, dressed in heathen clothing, and he demands that she convert to Islam before she marries him or else he will return to Tars and kill her father. Up to this point he has all the power in these negotiations, so she pretends to convert but secretly remains Christian: "For when sche was by hirselve on [alone] / To Ihesu sche made hir mon [prayers]" (ll. 514-5).<sup>5</sup> When their first child is born it is a ghastly lump of flesh, lacking arms, legs, eyes, nose, blood, and bone, which "lay ded as þe ston" (l. 585). The sultan is furious and accuses her of a false conversion. Here she takes her stand: she tells him that if his gods can transform the blob-baby into a living child, she will believe in them, but if they cannot she will never accept them. He takes the blob-baby to his temple, but neither his prayers nor his desperate beating of the idols effect any change. When he returns she asks

permission to have a Christian priest attempt to transform the child, and he agrees to it. As soon as the child is baptized, it becomes healthy, whole, and fair. The sultan is thrilled that the child is healed, but she tells him that neither she nor the child belongs to him, for they are both Christian and he is a heathen. However:

“& 3if þou were a Cristen man  
Boþe were þine,” sche seyde þan,  
“Þi childe & eke þi wiue.” (ll. 823-5)

Now it is the Christian princess who holds all the power: the sultan's idols have proven powerless. Recognizing this, he agrees to convert, and when he is baptized his black skin turns white: this racist detail leaves no doubt that his conversion is a true and powerful one. She suggests that he convert his citizens and kill those who refuse to be baptized, and he enthusiastically agrees to the idea. He is clearly succeeding in aggressively converting and slaughtering his people when we come to the missing leaf in the manuscript which would have concluded the tale.

This romance begins with a violent abduction, a forced conversion, and marriage that is tantamount to spiritual and physical rape: not a promising beginning for marital harmony. Other than a few conventional terms of endearment that the couple uses when addressing each other, we are given no indication of emotional intimacy in the relationship. Their opposing religions further emphasize their disunity. However, after the

sultan's military negotiations bring them together physically, the wife's spiritual negotiations succeed in uniting them and their child in one faith. Once this alignment of wills is achieved, they seem to agree on all things and live in perfect harmony with each other. This tale demonstrates a sort of optimism about the chances that even the most dissimilar people can attain a state of harmony by negotiating with each other. It suggests that it is possible to proactively create unity and contentment even in the most unlikely situations. The characters do not attain the ecstatic emotional union that is idealized in the twelfth-century literature of love, but they create a functional social system capable of achieving great things (great, at least, according to the morals of the time), as shown by the sultan's success in converting his country.

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In the Middle English romances we find that stories emphasize the fulfillment of non-erotic desire: Degrevant's social ambition and religious expansionism in *King of Tars*. In fact the emotional love story, to the extent that it is present, functions as a device in service of these ends rather than vice versa. In the *lais* of Marie de France, the fulfillment of desire was the paramount concern, enabling her to dismiss inconvenient issues of politics, economics, and Christian morals. When the Middle English romances acknowledge that social status, wealth, and religious expansion are

equally as important as concerns of love, this opens the possibility of conflict between these different motivations. *King of Tars* proposes one solution to this dilemma by demonstrating the role of negotiation between husband and wife to create harmony in the relationship by aligning their wills to the same goal. Can this solution truly address the problems created by “romantic” relationships whose priorities are not based on emotional or erotic desire? By locating their love stories within the framework of marriage the romances attempt an awkward synthesis of the idealized desire of adulterous love and the practical political and economic concerns of medieval marriages. In the next chapter I will examine how Chaucer explores this weakness of the fourteenth-century marriage paradigm in his *Canterbury Tales*.

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<sup>1</sup> Mehl, Dieter. *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969, p. 93-4. The Thornton MS: Lincoln Cathedral Library A 5.9. The Findern MS: Cambridge University Library Ff.I.6.

<sup>2</sup> *The Romance of Sir Degrevant*. Ed. LF Casson. Early English Text Society #221. London: Oxford University Press, 1949.

<sup>3</sup> Davenport, WA. “Sir Degrevant and Composite Romance.” *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation*. Eds. Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, Morgan Dickson. Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2000, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Hibbard, Laura A. *Medæval Romance in England: A Study of the Sources and Analogues of the Non-Cyclic Metrical Romances*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1960, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> *The King of Tars*. Ed. Judith Perryman. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Univeritatsverlag, 1980.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Canterbury Tales: Desiring Love or Desiring Wealth?*

Nearly every story in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* deals with desire and marriage, but four tales known as the Marriage Group take this topic as their special focus: the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the *Clerk's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale*, and the *Franklin's Tale*. Each of these tales demonstrates how desire for things which are unrelated to love – power, wealth, knightly adventures – impacts the marriage relationship. Chaucer's characters struggle to balance their conflicting desires, and the solutions they choose show what it is they truly value.

#### *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*

At 856 lines, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* is the longest in the entire *Canterbury Tales*, longer even than some of the tales themselves. It tells us a great deal about the Wife and seems intimately related to the tale she tells. Alisoun is something of a professional wife: she has married five times, at a period in history when marriage after widowhood was a somewhat questionable practice according to clerical ideals. The first four

marriages were for money, and her repeated inheritances when her older husbands passed away have given her financial stability. She shows no shame for this mercenary past, and it has given her the freedom to make her fifth marriage “for love, and no riches” (WBT 526)<sup>1</sup>, to a clerk named Jankyn who seems to have married her for her wealth and was in the habit of beating her severely. In a confrontation over his treatment of her she convinces him of the wrong he has done her, and he promises her that she shall have “governance” and “soverayntee” over their marriage and their goods. In the end she gains not money, which she already has, but power within the relationship. This personal history of the tale’s narrator prefigures the resolution of her tale.

The *Wife of Bath’s Tale* begins with a rape, the most blatant form of uncontrolled erotic desire. The knight responsible is brought to the king, who intends to have his head for the crime, but the queen intervenes: she tells the knight that he has one year to find the answer to the question “What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren” (WBT 905), and if he succeeds his life will be spared. He has little luck in his quest until he meets an ugly old woman in the woods. She offers to tell him the answer to the question if he will promise to grant her next request if it proves true. The knight returns to the queen and uses the old woman’s answer:

Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee

As wel over hir housbond as hir love,  
 And for to been in maistrie hym above. (WBT 1038-40)

By this estimation women value power and “maistrie” more than they do emotional or sexual fulfillment. The answer is deemed correct by the queen and her ladies. When she hears this verdict the old woman springs up out of the crowd and, to his great dismay, demands that the knight wed her, “foule, and oold, and poore” (WBT 1063) though she is. Bound by his word, he marries her quickly and quietly, and tries not to touch her on their wedding night. She asks him why, and he replies,

Thou art so loothly, and so oold also,  
 And therto comen of so lough a kynde,  
 That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde.  
 (WBT 1100-1103)

The knight here shows the value he places on class by complaining that she is “of so lough a kynde.” His new wife has a ready answer and begins to instruct at length about the difference between “richesse” and “gentillesse.” She tells him that “gentillesse cometh fro God allone” (WBT 1162), and that since Christ himself chose to live his life in poverty, it can be no “vicious lyvyng” (WBT 1182). Even ugliness and old age have their advantages in her opinion:

Now ther ye seye that I am foul and old,  
 Than drede you nought to been a cokewold;  
 For filthe and eelde, also moot I thee,  
 Been grete wardeyns upon chastitee. (WBT 1213)

However, in deference to his distaste, she gives him two options: to have her be foul and old but also chaste and humble, or to have her young and fair and risk the infidelity that might result. He carefully considers his answer, and the reply he gives shows that he has finally learned the lesson he gained on his quest:

"My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,  
 I put me in youre wise governance;  
 Cheseth yourself which may be moost plesance  
 An moost honour to yow and me also.  
 I do no fors the wheither of the two *do not care*  
 For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me."  
 "Thanne have I gete of yow maistre," quod she,  
 "Syn I may chese and governe as me lest?" *wish*  
 "Ye certes, wyf," quod he, "I holde it best." *certainly*  
 "Kys me," quod she, "we be no lenger wrothe,  
 For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe -  
 This is to seyn, bothe fair and good." (WBT 1230-41)

She is indeed transformed into a beautiful young woman, and thus by learning to deny his own desire, the knight is given everything he desires: suppression is his path to fulfillment. The queen's quest and his wife's instruction have taught him a new way of relating to women that pleases both parties, the complete opposite of the initial rape: his unruly desire has been tamed and trained.

The trajectory of this story is the opposite of what we find in the Anglo-Norman *lais*, which begin with suppressed desire and work towards a passionate consummation as their resolution: rather, it begins

with uncontrolled desire and works toward moderation and obedience. The Middle English stories acknowledge that spontaneous reciprocal desire is not common, and provide a road map for achieving unity of will and desire between two rather different people and within the bonds of marriage using the tools of logical negotiation.

This tale clearly states that, from a wife's point of view, having "maistrie" over her husband is the most important aspect of their marriage, and it is not until this principle is put into practice that both partners get what they want and the marriage becomes a workable relationship. The Wife of Bath, with the experience borne of five marriages under her belt, clearly thinks that power is the most important aspect of marriage.

#### *The Clerk's Tale*

In this tale Walter, a wealthy Italian marquis, is not inclined to marry, but the concerned citizens of his realm beg him to choose a wife so that he may produce an heir to safeguard the future of the land. He agrees to this under one condition: that he may select his wife himself and the people must agree to accept whomever he chooses. To everyone's surprise, he picks Griselda, the daughter of the poorest man in a nearby village. She is both beautiful and virtuous: being raised in poverty, she

knows nothing of “likerous lust” (CIT 214) or “ydel ese” (CIT 217). He keeps his choice a secret until the wedding day, then pays a visit to Griselda’s house. He easily gains the permission of her father, but insists on speaking to her as well, to “axe if it hire wille be” (CIT 326). He asks her if she will accept his conditions of marriage:

I seye this: Be ye redy with good herte  
 To al my lust, and that I frely may  
 As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,  
 And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day? *begrudge*  
 And eek whan I sey ‘ye,’ ne sey nat ‘nay,’  
 Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?  
 Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance. (CIT 351-7)

He is asking not for her love, but for her agreement to his will in every instance. Walter, like the Wife of Bath, seems to think that having “maistrie” over his partner is the key to happiness in marriage. Griselda accepts his terms:

As ye wole youreself, right so wol I.  
 And heere I swere that nevere willyngly  
 In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye,  
 For to be deed, though me were looth to deye. *reluctant*  
(CIT 361-4)

Robert Emmet Finnegan argues that Griselda promises even more than Walter asks for. He requests her assent (Middle English *assenten*), that she “agree to” all his decisions and make no outward sign of dissent. Griselda pledges not only her assent, but her consent (Middle English *consenten*): she will “agree with” him, bringing her personal will into complete

alignment with his. Rather than merely refrain from dissent, she promises her whole-hearted agreement with all Walter's desires, and in doing so Finnegan argues that she "teeters on the edge of vowing extinction of herself as a person."<sup>2</sup> She is following the philosophical tradition which claims a married couple should be as one body with one will. It is also true that Walter is offering her the life of a rich noblewoman, and her decision to agree to his marriage conditions may also indicate that status and wealth are more important to her than retaining her own independent will.

Walter announces his new bride to the waiting crowd, and right there on the doorstep he has the women of the court remove her peasant's clothing, dress her in a fine gown, braid her hair, decorate her with jeweled brooches, and place a crown on her head. Now "she translated was in swich richesse" (CIT 385) that she is a fit bride for a marquis and he takes her home to his palace. This focus on her clothing betrays more of the tale's concern about wealth and social class: Griselda's humble origins become acceptable only once she is "translated" into richness, changed from a poor peasant to a rich noblewoman through the visual identifier of her clothing. She proves a wise and dutiful wife, stepping gracefully into the role of a noblewoman and helping Walter tend to the public good or "commune profit":

But eek, whan that the cas required it,  
 The commune profit koude she redresse.  
 Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse  
 In al that land that she ne koude apese. (CIT 430-3)

She even rules the land when Walter is away:

Though that hire housbonde absent were anon,  
 If gentil men or othere of hire contree  
 Were wrothe, she wolde bryngen hem aton;  
 So wise and rype wordes hadde she,  
 And juggementz of so greet equitee,  
 That she from hevene sent was, as men wende,  
 Peple to save and every wrong t'amende. (CIT 435-41)

Griselda takes to the role of a noblewoman like a fish to water. In addition to her skills at appeasing Walter's citizens, she performs another duty expected of a good wife when she bears him a daughter.

Walter wishes to ascertain the true loyalty and patience of his new wife, and devises a test to gauge her dedication to her vow of obedience. First he carefully reminds her of "that day / that I yow took out of youre povere array / and putte yow in estaat of heigh noblesse" (CIT 466-8). Then he tells her that his people are unsatisfied with her poor lineage and upset that she did not bear a son, and reminds her of the vow she made to follow his will in all things. She has not forgotten it:

She seyde, "Lord, al lyth in youre plesaunce.  
 My child and I, with hertely obeisaunce, *obedience*  
 Been youre al, and ye mowe save or spille *may, kill*  
 Youre owene thing; werketh after youre wille. (CIT 501-4)

She emphasizes that she and the child belong to Walter, as though when Walter dressed her in fine jewels and took her as his wife he transformed her into a piece of property, purchasing her with her own consent.

Unsatisfied with only her words, Walter sends his servant to take away her child “as though he wolde han slayn it” (CIT 536). She believes that it is going to be killed, “but nathelees she neither weep ne syked [sighed] / conformyng hire to that the markys lyked” (CIT 545-6) and asks only to kiss her child before it dies. Walter sends the child to be fostered in secret by his sister, and then goes to Griselda to determine if her actions match her words. He finds her true to her promise:

As glad, as humble, as bisy in servyse,  
And eek in love, as she was wont to be,  
Was she to hym in every maner wyse;  
Ne of hir doughter nought a word spak she. (CIT 603-6)

By not complaining or sulking she proves her ability to assent to his will and be the perfect obedient wife she vowed to become.

The concept of alignment of will appears to have been skewed into a subjugation of will, where one partner has all the power, and the other submits to his decision. Griselda’s will is passive to the point of non-existence. Yet we may also read Griselda as a trader, giving up her will only in exchange for something she values more. She claims that she does it out of love for Walter. While Walter acts like a husband rather than a

lover, demanding obedience but not offering praise or affection, Griselda does not hold back her love:

Ther may no thyng, God so my soule save,  
 Liken to yow that may displese me;  
 Ne I desire no thyng for to have,  
 Ne drede for to leese, save oonly yee. *lose*  
 This wyl is in myn herte, and ay shal be. (CIT 505-9) *always*

She desires him not out of lust but with a “wyl” that is “in myn herte.”

Since the heart is the seat of the emotions, it seems that more is at play here than merely her promise, and that she truly has grown emotionally attached to him. It makes sense that her love should be greater, since she has benefited socially and financially from the marriage while Walter reluctantly chose a wife only at his citizens’ insistence. His main criterion for a wife was obedience – perhaps so she wouldn’t get in the way of his carefree bachelor lifestyle. Griselda, on the other hand, has gained a prestigious social position as a respected noblewoman. Perhaps her expression of love for Walter also signifies her love of her new status as a noblewoman as much as it does a love of him as a person.

Four years later she bears a son, and when he is two years old Walter decides to test her again. She assures him that

I wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng, certayn,  
 But as yow list. Naught greveth me at al,  
 Though that my doughter and my sone be slayn  
 .....  
 Ye been oure lord; dooth with youre owene thyng

Right as yow list; axeth no reed at me. *ask, advice*  
 For as I lefte at hoom al my clothyng,  
 Whan I first cam to yow, right so," quod she,  
 "Lefte I my wyl and al my libertee,  
 And took youre clothyng; wherfore I yow preye,  
 Dooth youre plesaunce; I wol your lust obeye.  
 (CIT 646-648, 652-8)

When Walter took their first child she asserted that she wanted to please him, and that "this wyl is in myn herte." The second time he tests her, she says rather that she left her will and liberty in her father's house when she was "translated" into the noble class by donning the new clothes he gave her, demonstrating an increased awareness of the trade-off involved in becoming his wife. She herself describes the transaction as an exchange: she gives up her will and liberty in exchange for his riches, which are symbolized by the rich clothing he gives her.

Looking back at the *Wife of Bath's Tale* we can see some similarities: harmonious marriage involves voluntary surrender of one partner's will in both cases. Here perhaps is one of the indicators that Chaucer uses to separate love from marriage. The ideal of love was by no means synonymous with marriage in medieval Europe. Andreas Capellanus writes in his twelfth-century treatise on love:

Vehementer tamen admiror quod maritalem affectionem quidem, quam quilibet inter se coniugati adinvicem post matrimonii copulam tenentur habere, vos vultis amoris sibi vocabulum usurpare, quum liquide constet inter virum et uxorem amorem sibi locum vindicare non posse. Licet enim

nimia et immoderate affectione coniugantur, eorum tamen affectus amoris non potest vice potiri, quia nec sub amoris verae definitionis potest ratione comprehendi.

(I am mightily surprised that you consent to allow marital affection, which any couple is allowed to have after being joined in matrimony, to appropriate the name of love, for it is clearly known that love cannot claim a place between husband and wife. Although they may be united in great and boundless affection, their feelings cannot attain the status of love because they cannot be gathered under the heading of any true definition of love.)<sup>3</sup>

The subjugation of wills we have seen in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale* may represent what Chaucer sees as the difference between adulterous love and married love. In adulterous or courtly love, the participants both will to be together for no other reason than their mutual erotic desire. In marriage there is an economy of exchange at work: at least one partner must give up something (either "maistrie" over the partner or free will and liberty) in order to gain the advantages of the married state (a beautiful and faithful wife or riches and status). In this way Chaucer continues the theme of negotiation that we traced in the anonymous romances.

Taking this concept of the wife as a trader to its extreme, we can read Griselda's willing sacrifice of her children, and even her declarations of love, as mercenary. If she does not obey Walter's will she will have broken her marriage vow and will be sent home to the rags and poverty

she grew up with. Her ready acquiescence may be motivated by a fear of losing the wealth and status her marriage has given her. While the text itself does not describe such a motive, it leaves the reader wondering how Griselda could be willing to commit so many sacrifices; the focus on her translation into nobility could be one clue to her motive.

After taking her son away as if to kill him, Walter tests Griselda one last time. He has a papal bull forged that commands him to take a different wife in order to stop the supposed dissension among his people. He asks her to leave him to make way for his new wife, and rather ironically says

“And thilke dowere that ye broughten me, *dowry*  
 Taak it again; I graunte it of my grace.  
 Retourneth to youre fadres hous,” quod he. (CIT 807-9)

Since Griselda had no monetary dowry, it seems that Walter is giving her back her free will and liberty. Paradoxically, in the first instance in which she disobeys Walter’s commands she uses that free will to decide *not* to end her adherence to her contract with him:

I never heeld me lady ne mistresse,  
 But humble servant to youre worthynesse,  
 And ever shal, whil that my lyf may dure  
 .....  
 Unto my fader gladly wol I wende  
 .....  
 Til I be deed my lyf ther wol I lede,  
 A wydwe clene in body, herte, and al.  
 For sith I yaf to yow my maydenhede,

And am youre trewe wyf, it is no drede.  
(CIT 823-5, 832, 835-38)

Griselda returns to her father's house and lives humbly as a "wydwe clene," only to have Walter summon her back and ask her to make his house ready for his new bride. Betraying none of the emotional turmoil that we would expect such a task to elicit in an average woman, Griselda claims she is happy to do as he asks because of the love she still bears for him. When his supposed new bride arrives, he asks Griselda what she thinks of the girl, and she has nothing but praise for the new lady of his house. Whether she is motivated by selfless love or is calculatedly imitating the behavior Walter demanded of her in marriage in hopes of convincing him to take her back, her fortitude pays off. Her patience is finally proven to Walter's satisfaction, and he tells her that she is actually still his wife, and that the new "bride" and her brother are actually Griselda's two children, fostered secretly in Bologna all this time. The family is happily reunited, and Griselda becomes a noblewoman once again.

There is considerable debate among scholars about how the tale of Griselda was received and interpreted by its medieval audience. Charlotte Morse has argued that Griselda is intended as an exemplary figure, a model for all medieval women to emulate, citing fourteenth-

century responses to the tale which extol Griselda's virtues.<sup>4</sup> Robert Finnegan argues that it was a cautionary tale and that Griselda would have been criticized for agreeing to what she believes is the murder of her children, considering that legal and philosophical texts from the period emphasize that one should not fulfill an oath or vow if it leads to sin.<sup>5</sup> However, he does not provide any contemporary responses to the Clerk's Tale to support this reading. Chaucer himself frames the tale as an allegory, specifying that

This storie is seyde nat for that wyves sholde  
 Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee  
 For it were inportable, though they wolde,        *insupportable*  
 But for that every wight, in his degree,         *person*  
 Sholde be constant in adversitee  
 As was Grisilde . . .  
 . . . . .  
 For sith a womman was so pacient  
 Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte  
 Receyven al in gree that God us sent. (CIT 1142-7, 1149-51)

Chaucer also names her the "fleur of wyfly pacience" (CIT 919) and compares her to Job in patience and forbearance (CIT 932-8). In light of this evidence it seems unlikely that he intended the Clerk's Tale as a cautionary story of sin. Chaucer's allegorical framework suggests that perhaps one should not push too strongly on the idea of Griselda as a trader, exchanging her children's lives to maintain her comfortable lifestyle. Yet the story has been structured to place her children's lives

and her noble marriage in opposition. Chaucer could easily have written a story about a peasant marrying another peasant, vowing obedience to him, and giving up her children to him only out of love for her husband. Instead he gives her social and economic reasons to obey her husband as well.

I believe Chaucer is using this tale to explore people's motivations in marriage. He frequently emphasizes the marriage as a sort of purchase in which Walter buys his wife's patience in exchange for wealth and status. By giving up her own will Griselda eliminates conflict and enables both of them to enjoy what they have gained from the alliance: she, wealth and status, and he, a wife who never gets in the way. Within their marriage the primary form of desire is not sexual, but rather a desire for an aristocratic lifestyle on her part, and a desire for control and on his part. The *Clerk's Tale* is a prime example of how some Middle English stories devalue sexual desire in preference for more practical motivations.

### *The Merchant's Tale*

*The Merchant's Tale* is a rich and complex source for medieval attitudes about marriage. The first 500 lines of the tale consist of the so-called marriage encomium, described by Robert Jordan as "a crazy quilt of assertions and examples which do not coincide with the sentiment they

purport to advance.”<sup>6</sup> The passage, containing observations on the nature and virtue of marriage by Januarie, his two courtiers, and the narrator, is a series of contradictions and counter-contradictions.<sup>7</sup> Just when the reader is almost sure that the purpose of a passage is to praise marriage, an acid comment will make one wonder if all the foregoing material was presented in sarcasm. Donald Benson suggests that the entire tale is an “ironic anti-marriage exhortation,”<sup>8</sup> but it is also quite likely that Chaucer intended the tale to be ambiguous: while only one of the Marriage Group tales poses a formal question to the readers at its end, all the tales in this series seem to beg evaluation and further discussion by the audience. Chaucer presents valid arguments both for and against marriage, and while the tale hardly ends in marital bliss, the ending can be read more as a condemnation of the aged marrying the young than of the institution of marriage itself. His arguments on both sides serve the modern reader as a rich source for exploring the variety of attitudes about marriage that were prevalent in the fourteenth century.

One notable aspect of the discourse is the absence of discussion of love as an end in itself. Told by the Merchant, the tale is appropriately sprinkled with the commercial advantages of having a wife as “kepere of thyn housbondrye” (MerT 1380). A wife “nys nat wery hym to love and serve / though that he lye bedrede til he sterve” (MerT 1291-2): the

emphasis here is on her service to her husband as housekeeper, caretaker, and bedmate, rather than a source of emotional fulfillment. A wife is described almost as a household convenience, and to facilitate this role her will should be aligned with that of her husband:

If he be povre, she helpeth hym to swynke; *work*  
 She kepeth his good, and wasteth never a deel;  
 Al that hire housbonde lust, hire liketh weel;  
 She seith nat ones "nay," whan he seith "ye."  
 "Do this," seith he, "Al redy, sire," seith she. (MerT 1342-6)

While a wife agrees and cooperates with her husband in household matters, the passage says nothing of reciprocal admiration, affection, or desire. Indeed, as the tale moves from general observations on marriage into the knight Januarie's more specific reasons for marrying, it becomes clear that he is an old man who wants to marry solely so that he may have frequent sexual indulgence without risking the safety of his soul by the sin of fornication. When he imagines the qualities he wants in a bride, his first consideration is not that she be a hard worker, but that she "have beaute in hir face" (MerT 1589). He focuses on

Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tendre,  
 Hir myddel small, hire armes longe and sklendre,  
 Hir wise governaunce, hir gentillesse,  
 Hir wommanly berynge, and hir sadnesse. *seriousness*  
 (MerT 1601-4)

He wishes her to have an attractive body and a submissive temperament, but seems not to care what is under the skin. Indeed, one of the

fundamental problems with the marriage in this tale is that it is a matter of one-sided lust, devoid of love on both sides. Januarie claims to love his young bride May, but clearly has no interest in her as anything other than his personal bed-slave: his love is all lust and possessiveness. He spares a momentary thought for her pain on their wedding night:

But in his herte he gan hire to manace	<i>menace</i>
That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne	
Harder than evere Parys dide Eleyne.	<i>Helen</i>
But nathelees yet hadde he greet pitee	
That thilke nyght offenden hire moste he,	
And thoughte, "Allas! O tendre creature,	
Now wolde God ye myghte wel endure	
Al my corage, it is so sharp and keene!	<i>ardor</i>
I am agast ye shul it nat susteene. (MerT 1752-60)	

However, he is not concerned enough to restrain his rough use of her.

Chaucer describes the consummation in gruesome detail:

He kisseth hire ful ofte;	
With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte,	<i>bristles</i>
Lyk to the skyn of a houndfyssh, sharp as brere -	<i>houndfish</i>
For he was shave al newe in his manere -	
He rubbeth hire aboute hir tendre face,	
And seyde thus, "Allas! I moot trespace	
To yow, my spouse, an yow greetly offende	
Er tyme come that I wil doun descende." (MerT 1823-30)	

This passage makes it clear that he knows his lust is unrequited and that he will hurt her, but doesn't really care. Joseph Parry proposes that "Januarie's self-knowledge here suggests a husband who not only seeks his own pleasure solely, but one that also takes pleasure in his wife's

pain,"<sup>9</sup> and the dialogue here does seem to have a certain gloating quality to it. He does not even pretend to love her: he uses the formal "yow" to address her, rather than a lover's intimate "thee," and rather formally calls her "my spouse" instead of using a traditional endearment such as "honey" or "swete."

Like Griselda, May also gains wealth and status from her marriage. After Januarie has gone blind, and realizes he is losing his ability to control his young wife, he bribes her with property:

al my heritage, toun and tour;  
 I yeve it yow, maketh chartres as you leste;  
 This shall be doon to-morwe er sonne reste,  
 So wisly God my soule brynge in blisse.  
 I prey to you first, in covenant ye me kisse;  
 And though that I be jalous, wyte me nocht. *blame*  
 (MerT 2172-7)

However, May is already a "gentil womman" (MerT 2222) and does not value property enough to refrain from adultery. Unlike Griselda, May seems to gain no emotional fulfillment from her husband, and she responds to his callous treatment of her by taking the first offer of love that she receives despite the risk to her reputation and promised inheritance.<sup>10</sup> The squire Damyon demonstrates his love for her by his willing suffering on her behalf, and she is impressed by how he "siketh [sighs] wonder depe and soore"" (MerT 1940) for her as he lies bedridden with lovesickness. Her liaison with Damyon may appear crude, but it

offers her a relationship that promises far more respect and mutuality than her marriage does. While the narrator condemns her for modeling the universal fickleness of wives, the reader derives a certain satisfaction from her glib excuse to Januarie when he sees her being unfaithful, which represents a shift in the balance of power: poor May, whom we have seen so “offended” by Januarie, has found enough leverage to have her own way, at least temporarily.

Far from being a condemnation of the fickleness of wives, the tale rather tells a story of what is likely to happen when marriage is not an equal exchange. Januarie uses May for his own pleasure, without reference to her own wishes and desires; she is powerless to resist him and gains nothing she values from the marriage. Thus she rebels and expresses her own independent will by taking a lover, proving that she is nothing like the idealized obedient wives imagined in the opening of the tale. Had there been mutual desire and affection between her and Januarie, or if there had been some compelling advantage to the marriage from May’s point of view, this never would have taken place. We can read the Merchant’s story as a cautionary tale, warning against the risks that are quite naturally incurred by marrying without an arrangement that brings advantages and rewards to both partners.

*The Franklin's Tale*

Chaucer's Franklin claims that his tale is a Breton lay, and it does contain many of the usual themes of that genre: love of a noble lady, magic, and adultery. However, the components of the story are rearranged in an unusual way: the ideal union takes place at the beginning of the tale rather than the end, signaling that marriage is not the goal of the story but rather a pre-existing condition that will be challenged over the course of the tale.

In the first fourteen lines we meet the knight Arveragus, who does many great deeds for the high-born lady Dorigen, and wins her love.

Their marriage terms are unusual:

And for to lede the moore in blisse hir lyves,  
 Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knight  
 That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,  
 Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie  
 Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie, *show*  
 But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al,  
 As any lovere to his lady shal,  
 Save that the name of soveraynetee,  
 That wolde he have for shame of his degree *to avoid bringing*  
 (FranT 744-52) *shame on his status*

In promising to follow Dorigen's will "as any lovere to his lady shal" Arveragus shows his desire to bring the intensity of the adulterous courtly love tradition into his married life. Dorigen, in return, promises to

be his “humble trewe wyf” (FranT 758). They have come to an alignment of wills and mutual submission, and all seems well.

After a year of married life, Arveragus decides to go to England,

To seke in armes worshipe and honour –  
 For al his lust he sette in swich labour –  
 And dwelled there two yeer (FranT 811-3)

This is the first sign of trouble in their marriage. Arveragus’ “lust” is suddenly transferred from his wife to knightly adventures; as in so many of the other tales and romances, love is no longer the be-all and end-all as it was in the *lais*, but must compete with other desires and concerns.

Arveragus leaves his new wife who “moorneth, waketh, wayleth, fasteth, pleyne” (FranT 819) in her longing for him. Dorigen is suffering lovesickness for a man that should already be hers, who promised to “folwe hir wyl in al.” While the narrator does not include any discussion between the two about Arveragus’ departure, it is clear from Dorigen’s intense distress after he leaves that she did not wish him to go. No pressing military need for his trip is mentioned, simply a “lust” for “worshipe and honour.” It seems that he is already transgressing the terms of his promise to “folwe hir wyl in al.”

Dorigen’s sorrow is so intense that her friends become concerned and try to distract her from her woe. They take her for walks on the seaside cliffs, but the jagged rocks on the shore make her fear for her

seafaring husband. Trying another tack, her friends arrange feasting and dancing in a beautiful garden. At these parties a handsome young squire, Aurelius, is struck with love for Dorigen, and eventually works up the nerve to tell her so. She gently rejects him:

“By thilke God that yaf me soule and lyf, *gave*  
 Ne shal I nevere been untrewe wyf  
 In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit;  
 I wol been his to whom that I am knyht.  
 Taak this for final answeere as of me.”  
 But after that in pley thus seyde she:  
 “Aurelie,” quod she, “by heighe God above,  
 Yet wolde I graunte yow to been youre love,  
 Syn I yow se so pitously complayne.  
 Looke what day that endelong Britayne *all along Britanny*  
 Ye remoeve all the rokkes, stoon by stoon,  
 That they ne lette ship ne boot to goon - *prevent*  
 I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene  
 Of rokkes that there nys no stoon ysene,  
 Thanne wol I love yow best of any man;  
 Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I kan.” (FranT 983-98)

Aurelius understands this as the flat rejection that it is and begs her to reconsider. She refuses, saying, “well I woot [know] that it shal never bityde” (FranT 1001) that the rocks should be moved from the shore. Lamenting that the task is indeed impossible, Aurelius leaves. She has kept her promise to Arveragus and remained a “trewe wyf.” Soon her husband returns and again all seems well.

Aurelius languishes in bed for more than two years, pining for Dorigen. His brother decides that something must be done, and they visit

a clerk who is known for his command of natural magic. The clerk agrees to cast an illusion so that the rocks will appear to be gone, in exchange for a fee of one thousand pounds. The illusion is cast in due course, and Aurelius tells Dorigen that he has completed the task she set:

“My righte lady,” quod this woful man  
 .....  
 “Avyseth yow er that ye breke youre trouthe                    *consider*  
 .....  
 Madame, I speke it for the honour of yow  
 Moore than to save myn hertes lyf right now -  
 I have do so as ye comanded me;  
 And if ye vouche sauf, ye may go see                                 *grant it*  
 .....  
 But wel I woot the rokkes been aweye.”                                 *know*  
 (FranT 1311, 1320, 1331-4, 1338)

He leaves her in great distress. Aurelius has twisted her words into a trap: when she originally issued the challenge, they both understood it as a refusal: she states that she knows “that it shal never bityde” (FranT 1001), and he bewails that “this were an impossible!” (FranT 1009). When he hires the clerk to cast an illusion over the rocks, however, he reinterprets her words in a literal way that she had never intended. Dorigen “collapses under the retextualizing of the male point of view” which takes words at their face value.<sup>11</sup> Instead of evaluating her words from an emotional point of view, Aurelius understands them as one

would the terms of a business agreement. He uses the logic of the law rather than the logic of love.

She goes home and mourns that her only choices are “death or elles dishonour” (FranT 1358). To aid her in making this choice, she turns to literary precedent, and spends three days recalling the examples of women who have killed themselves rather than be “defouled” (FranT 1398) by men. This exercise only increases the male retextualization of the female role, for she is relying on male-authored texts to evaluate her options.<sup>12</sup> She seems to have settled on suicide when Arveragus returns and she tells him her trouble.

Arveragus’ evaluation of the situation emphasizes the importance of keeping her word even at the expense of emotional distress:

Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay! *vow*  
 For God so wisly have mercy upon me,  
 I hadde wel levere ystiked for to be *rather, impaled*  
 For verray love which that I to yow have,  
 But if ye sholde your trouthe kepe and save.  
 Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that a man my kepe.  
(FranT 1474-9)

However, Arveragus overlooks the fact that she also plighted her troth to *him*, promising to be his “trewe wyf.” Mary Bowman argues that the men in the tale are using a logical mode of thinking that references the letter of the law and emphasizes abstract ethics, while disregarding Dorigen’s evaluation of the situation based on personal relationships.<sup>13</sup> Arveragus

doesn't seem to consider that Dorigen's greatest wish is to stay a "trewe wyf" and that she does not want to have a tryst with Aurelius; rather, he considers only the legalistic implications of her unintended promise. In giving this answer he also reinterprets their marriage vow, in which he promised to "folwe hir wyl in al" and never to claim "maistrie" over her. By sending her to Aurelius without consulting her wishes, he both is taking "maistrie" over her and interpreting her playful vow to Aurelius as if it were a serious legal agreement.

Dorigen goes to Aurelius in great distress and tells him, "half as she were mad" (FranT 1511), that her husband commanded her to keep her word. Aurelius is moved more by her husband's "gentillesse" than he ever was for Dorigen's distress, which he witnessed without pity when he first told her the rocks were gone.<sup>14</sup> He addresses his reply to Arveragus rather than to Dorigen herself:

Madame, seyth to youre lord Arveragus  
 That sith I se his grete gentillesse  
 To yow, and eek I se wel youre distresse,  
 That him were levere han shame (and that were routhe) *pity*  
 Than ye to me sholde breke thus youre trouthe,  
 I have wel levere evere to suffre wo *had much rather*  
 Than I departe the love bitwix yow two.  
 I yow relesse, madame, into youre hond  
 Quyt every serement and every bond *pledge*  
 That ye han maad to me as heerbiforn. (FranT 1526-35)

Aurelius too uses the formal logic of contracts and abstract ethics, speaking in the official legal language of quitclaim when he releases Dorigen from her obligation.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Aurelius' reaction has the effect of removing Dorigen herself from serious consideration entirely, making her merely a commodity granted by first one man and then the other in demonstration of their *gentillesse*. The following interaction is even more telling: Aurelius begs the clerk to let him pay his debt in installments, and when the clerk hears of the generosity of Arveragus and Aurelius he matches it by forgiving Aurelius' debt entirely, to prove that "a clerk koude doon a gentil dede / as well as any of yow" (FranT 1611-2). The Franklin ends the tale with a question for the audience, "which was the most fre [noble, generous], as thynketh yow?" (FranT1622). This question blithely places Dorigen into the same category as the money Aurelius owed the clerk. She becomes no more than a commodity to be traded to prove the men's generosity, with no reference at all to her own will. Dorigen becomes the equivalent of money: just as Aurelius and the clerk trade in gold, Aurelius and Arveragus trade using the woman they both desire. Again we find economic concerns valued equally with erotic desire.

Erotic desire is valued in this tale: it is what brings the couple together and what motivates the disruptive offer of adultery. However,

this desire is re-framed in terms of contracts and obligations. In their marriage vows Arveragus and Dorigen seem to be adhering to the emotionally fulfilling and loving version of erotic desire that is used in the twelfth-century *lais*. However, by the end of the tale the characters have reinterpreted erotic desire by treating it as a commodity bound by the conventions of legally binding contracts. Dorigen is driven half mad by the drastic shifting of systems of the desire in which she must function as a wife.

\* \* \*

Each tale we have examined is filled with ambiguities and reversals, leaving it open to a wide range of interpretations. Yet all of them seem to demonstrate the presence of motivations besides love, motivations such as money, status, and knightly honor. These goals rival erotic desire and emotional fulfillment as the most important motivating factors for the characters. Chaucer's tales explore the extent to which the characters are willing to negotiate, and what they are willing to give up in order to achieve their desires. While Marie de France problematized marriage for the sake of achieving a deeper, more intense union of erotic desire between her adulterous lovers, Chaucer seems to problematize it for the sake of exploring the weakest points in the institution, poking holes in it at every opportunity and revealing its shortcomings to his audience. The

fact that his work was so popular seems to indicate that his observations were close to the mark. Marriage was problematic in the fourteenth century, and it seems that many of the problems come from the juncture where the ideals of erotic desire and emotional fulfillment collide with the more mercenary motivations of power, status, and wealth. Chaucer also addresses the essential marital fiction that marriage turns two individuals into a single unit that acts as one person with one will. The conflict in the tales arises when this does not work and husband and wife disagree, while the resolution comes when one spouse relents and the couple is once again in agreement. Yet in the case of the *Merchant's Tale* the differences of desire and will are never resolved, and the skeptical reader may question the durability of the resolutions of the other Marriage Group tales as well. In the next chapter I will explore some of the ways in which medieval authors reacted against these problems and found alternative outlets for their erotic desire.

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<sup>1</sup> Benson, Larry D, gen. ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. All Chaucer text is from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Finnegan, Robert Emmett. "She Should Have Said No to Walter: Griselda's Promise in the Clerk's Tale." *English Studies* 4 (1994): 300.

<sup>3</sup> McCarthy, Conor. "Love, Marriage, and Law: Three Canterbury Tales." *English Studies* 6 (2002): 512.

<sup>4</sup> Morse, Charlotte C. "The Exemplary Griselda." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 7 (1985): 51-86.

<sup>5</sup> Finnegan, pp. 303-21.

<sup>6</sup> Jordan, Robert M. *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> Benson, Donald R. "The Marriage 'Encomium' in the *Merchant's Tale*: a Chaucerian Crux." *The Chaucer Review* 14.1 (1979): 48-60.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 58.

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<sup>9</sup> Parry, Joseph D. "Interpreting Female Agency and Responsibility in *The Miller's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale*." *Philological Quarterly* 80.2 (2001): 154.

<sup>10</sup> On May's impetuous gambling of her widow's inheritance, see Hallissy, Margaret. "Widow-to-be: May in Chaucer's 'The Merchant's Tale.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 26(6), 1989, p. 304.

<sup>11</sup> McEntire, Sandra J. "Illusions and Interpretation in the Franklin's Tale." *The Chaucer Review* 31.2 (1996): 153.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Bowman, Mary R. "Half as She were Mad": Dorigen in the Male World of the *Franklin's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 27.3 (1993): 239-51.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>15</sup> Jacobs, Karen. "The Marriage Contract of the Franklin's Tale: The Remaking of Society." *The Chaucer Review* 20.2 (1985): 132-43.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Refusing Suitors and Desiring God in the Middle English Lyrics**

The emerging focus on status, power, and wealth that we have traced in the Middle English romances and tales demonstrates a shift away from the high, pure, aristocratic ideal of courtly love, a system of relations based on emotional connection and erotic desire. These Middle English stories show a strong practical emphasis on marriage, an institution which facilitates the transfer of property and status to a new spouse, whereas courtly love is most often located in adulterous affairs. While adulterous themes are not absent in the tales I have examined so far, the extramarital relations of May and Dorigen are not the site of the primary interest in their tales, but rather subplots to the main stories about the dynamics of marriage and the commodities it bestows.

However, Middle English lyric poetry does not usually follow the same patterns we have observed in tale and romance. These lyrics do not focus on marriage at all and thus hint at a tradition of love based on emotional and erotic desire, like that found in the *lais* of Marie de France. A number of the secular lyrics follow the conventions of this tradition

quite closely: the speaker is wounded by his lady's beauty, catalogues her virtues in adoring hyperbole, and begs her to have pity on him lest he die of unrequited love. The men in these poems suffer intensely for their love – the speaker of *So longe Ich have, lady*<sup>1</sup> even stands so long outside his lady's gate in winter that his foot freezes to the gatepost – yet these lyric heroes do not question the superlative value of love. In these courtly love poems, the poets seem to be imitating their *troubadour* and *trouvere* predecessors in France. In contrast, the more startling work of the English poets rejects courtly love, and the rejection is almost always made by the woman. Take for example this lady's pert reply to a clerk who has made advances to her:

[She] bad me fond ferther  
 a fol for to fet;  
 'Wher gossellëth  
 al thy speche?  
 Thou findëst hir noght here  
 the sot that thou seche.'  
 (*As I stod on a day*, ll. 19-21)<sup>2</sup>

(She told me to travel further to find a fool; 'What is the message of all your speech? You will not find the idiot that you seek here.')

This lady rejects her would-be lover and derides women who accept such offers as fools and idiots. Why does the lady refuse her lover so rudely? Other lyrics explore this theme in more detail, especially two from the British Library manuscript Harley 2253. Probably produced between 1314

and 1325,<sup>3</sup> this manuscript pre-dates Chaucer's writing by about fifty years. It contains an anthology of religious writing, secular verse, and miscellaneous material such as recipes and treatises on the properties of herbs. The contents are written in French, English, and Latin, and one poem, *Dum ludis floribus*, actually combines all three languages. It seems likely that a literary culture simultaneously fluent in these three languages would be an opportune site for cross-fertilization across genres and traditions, and this may explain the blending of old verse forms and new ideas in some of the lyrics of this period.

In the first Harley verse I will examine, *A Meeting in the Wood*, the so-called hero promises a reluctant lady that he will free her from care and clothe her in beautiful garments if she grants him her love, but she will have none of it:

Cloþes y haue on forte caste,  
 Such as y may weore wiþ wyne;  
 betere is were þunne boute laste  
 þen syde robes ant synke into synne.  
 Haue 3e or wyl, 3e waxeþ vnwraſte;  
 afterward or þonk be þynne. (ll. 13-8)<sup>4</sup>

(I have clothes to put on which I may wear with joy; it is better to wear thin [robes] without taint than [wear] ample robes and sink into sin. If you have your will you will grow restless, and afterward your thanks will be slight.)

This maiden expresses no interest in a premarital love affair which will soon end and leave her with a damaged reputation. She is cynical about

the inclination of any man to stay faithful outside of a marriage bond. This attitude is expressed in several other lyrics, including *As I me rode this endre dai*<sup>5</sup> and the Harley lyric *De Clerico et Puella*.<sup>6</sup> Some of the maidens who express such views yield to their lover by the end of the lyric, while others stand their ground; neither outcome undermines the fact that these women are taking a new responsibility to look out for themselves. They have a strong sense of independent identity and are motivated to protect their personal interests. It is well that they should, for they live in a culture that attaches great sin and shame to a woman who engages in premarital intercourse. If they believe the promises of every wily young squire their future will be bleak; thus it falls to the female characters to reject love, for they have the most to lose.

Indeed, the speaker of *Advice to Women*, a lyric found only four folios past the *A Meeting in the Wood* in the Harley manuscript, exhorts women not to believe all the men who would deceive them. The poet laments that women are too hasty to take a lover, because many men do not keep their pledges:

Wymmon, war þe wiþ þe swyke  
 þat feir ant freoly ys to fyke;  
     ys fare is o to founde;  
 so wyde in world ys huere won  
 in vch a toune vntrewe is on,  
     from Leycestre to Lounde.  
 Of treuþe nis þe trichour noht,

bote he habbe is wille ywroht  
 at steuenyng vmbe stounde;  
 ah, feyre leuedis, be on war,  
 to late comeþ þe 3eynchar  
 when loue ou haþ ybounde. (ll. 25-36)<sup>7</sup>

(Women, guard yourselves against the dissembler that is fair and flatters freely, his conduct is always to be tested. So wide in the world is their dwelling, in each town there is an untrue one, from Leicester to Lound. A pledge of truth is nothing to the traitor other than having his will done at a tryst from time to time. Ah, fair ladies, beware, too late comes the turning back when love has you bound.)

Here we have a clear description of men who take advantage of the conventions of courtly love, and the speaker claims that such behavior is quite common. The pert maidens in these lyrics are jaded by the corruption of the men around them; by rejecting their suitors they are also rejecting the ideal of courtly love. Fully aware of the dangers of a tryst, they protect themselves and their interests by holding themselves apart. The passionate fulfillment and completion of identity experienced by the characters in Marie de France's *lais* is not enticement enough for these women who do not believe that the men around them can be trusted to be faithful. Perhaps they also realize that marriage is the only route to the wealth and power that the romances indicate is increasing in value for their culture.

The lyric heroines I have examined do not appear to be incomplete without a lover, but rather are firmly grounded in their own independent

identity. This is a significant change from the heroines of the *lais*. This strong theme of female identity is also found in Chaucer's historical romance *Troilus and Criseyde*, written around fifty years later. Criseyde is dismayed when her uncle Pandarus urges her to love Troilus, and only after much manipulative persuasion does she agree to love Troilus "as his suster" (2 Tr 1224)<sup>8</sup> on the condition that nothing more will be demanded of her. Criseyde is intensely aware of herself as an independent person who has a choice about whether or not to love Troilus. After learning that he loves her, she sits in her room and thinks

For man may love, of possibilite,  
 A womman so, his herte may tobrete, *burst*  
 And she naught love ayein, but if hire leste. *in return, wish*  
(2 Tr 607-9)

Knowing she has the choice not to love him, she engages in a long inner dialogue debating the pros and cons of the options before her. She values her own freedom:

I am myn owene womman, well at ese -  
 I thank it God - as after myn estat,  
 Right yong, and stonde unteyd in lusty leese,  
 Withouten jalousie or swich debat:  
 Shal noon housbonde seyn to me 'Chek mat!' (2 Tr 750-4)

Furthermore, love seems to her a trap:

Allas! Syn I am free,  
 Sholde I now love, and put in jupartie  
 My sikernesse, and thrallen libertee? *peace of mind, enslave*  
 Allas, how dorst I thenken that folie?

May I naught well in other folk asprie  
 Hire dredfull joye, hire constreinte, and hire peyne?  
 Ther loveth noon, that she nath why to pleyne. *never lacks reason*  
 (2 Tr 771-7) *to complain*

The chess terms she uses show that she views her situation as a game of strategy in which she must protect her own assets. To love would be to put herself in “jupartie,” a French chess term indicating a risky move, and expose herself to “chek-mat.”<sup>9</sup> Love seems to her a dreary fate:

For love is yet the mooste stormy lyf,  
 Right of hymself, that evere was bigonne;  
 For evere som mistrust or nice strif  
 Ther is in love, som cloude is over that sonne.  
 Therto we wrecched wommen nothing konne, *can do*  
 Whan us is wo, but wepe and sitte and thinke;  
 Our wrecche is this, oure owen wo to drynke *wretchedness*  
 .....  
 How ofte tyme hath it yknowen be  
 The tresoun that to wommen hath ben do! (2 Tr 778-84, 792-3)

She is softened by her niece’s song about the bliss and honor of love, and eventually succumbs to the love affair, which brings her both great joy and great sorrow. However, the fact that she initially questions love’s value is indicative of the fourteenth-century attitudes that do not embrace love as unreservedly as in the past. For the heroines in Marie’s *lais* one glance is enough to know if they are in love. For Criseyde, even after she is impressed by Troilus’ appearance and flattered by his suffering for her, she must carefully debate whether the risks and sacrifices of love will be worth the gains. As an independent person who must protect herself and

her assets, she conducts a careful analysis of the emotional costs and profits of a love affair.

The theme of female wariness of love, which we have traced in the early fourteenth-century lyrics and the late fourteenth-century *Troilus*, also appears in France in the early fifteenth century. Christine de Pizan, writing circa 1405, has her Dame de la Tour in *Le livre du duc des vrais amans* advise the young heroine to have no dealings with foolish lovers, because even innocent interactions may bring gossip and blame which will ruin her reputation and honor. The Dame de la Tour does not place value on the emotional fulfillment of a love affair, but on the good reputation which will preserve the heroine's social status and eligibility for marriage. The Dame's basic premise is that the heroine must preserve a strong awareness of herself as an independent person who must safeguard her assets.

Here we have two major authors on either side of the Channel, as well as any number of anonymous lyric poets, all very interested in the problems that the courtly love paradigm creates for women. The exuberance and euphoria present in the writing from the first centuries of the courtly love tradition appear to have worn off, exposing the social problems and emotional turmoil that the paradigm creates when it is applied in daily life. The authors of the lyrics in which love is rejected

seem to prioritize the admonition of women against the folly of courtly love, and Chaucer and Christine find a need to include these themes in their tales of adulterous love, perhaps to create a more realistic impression of such affairs.

Is it a coincidence that this growing cynicism about premarital and adulterous love in the fourteenth century coincides with another trend, the transfer of the courtly complaint mode to devotional poetry? Could the impracticality of adulterous love have increased the receptivity for a new outlet for the passionate desire for union? Religious and secular life were strongly intertwined in medieval England, so such a shift may have seemed plausible and logical in the fourteenth century. I will examine several devotional lyrics below to test this hypothesis.

Fourteenth-century Middle English devotional lyrics have survived in relatively large quantities, and many of these lyrics use the language of lovesickness to express the speaker's love of Christ. One example occurs in the opening stanzas of *Jhesu, swete is the love of thee*:

Jhesú, swete is the love of thee,  
 Noon other thing so swete may be;  
 No thing than men may heere and see  
 Hath no swetness ayeyns thee. *compared to*

Jhesú, no song may be swettér,  
 No thing in hertë blisfullér,  
 Nought may be feelëd lightsomér,  
 Than thou, so swete a lovyér (ll.1-8)<sup>10</sup> *more joyous*

These stanzas sound very much like a knight praising the charms of his lady, but instead they have harnessed the power of the language of a lover's complaint and channeled it into the expression of religious devotion. This transfer removes all the moral problems involved with mortal love affairs: the love is eternally reciprocated, the loved one will be eternally faithful, and loving constitutes religious virtue rather than sin, allowing the poet to rejoice that "I wol thee love *and that is right*" (l. 34, my italics). Thus the amorous language adds power to the religious theme, and the religious theme provides a new, less problematic outlet for human passion. This poem is found in the Harley manuscript side-by-side with the lyrics of secular love, which suggests that the transfer of the written mode of the love lyric from a secular to a religious subject was not an uncomfortable one for the fourteenth-century reader.

Lest man be reluctant to grant his devotion to so intangible a recipient, many coaxing lyrics were written in the voice of Jesus, lamenting his unrequited love of man's soul. In *Alas! Alas! Wel evel I sped!* the poet uses the trope, common in romances, of a lover begging his lady to undo her door and let him in:

At my dore he stant alone  
 And calleth 'Undo!' with rewful mone,  
 On this manere:

'Undo, my leef, my dowvë dere!  
 Undo! Why stond I steken out here?  
     Ich am thi make!  
 Lo, mi lokkes and ek myn heved  
 Are al wyth bloody dropes bywevëd  
     For thinë sake.' (ll. 4-12)<sup>11</sup>

(At my door he stands alone and calls 'Undo!' with pitiful lament, in this manner: 'Undo [the door], my beloved, my dear dove! Undo! Why do I stand shut out here? I am your spouse! See, my locks and also my head are all covered with bloody drops for your sake.')

Here the reader, rather than identifying with a mortal speaker, finds himself entreated to love by Jesus himself, who should be his "spouse" in spiritual love. A similar theme appears in *In the vaile of restles mynd*, in which Jesus lists his suffering for man and ends each stanza with the lament "*Quia amore languo*" (because I languish for love), and begs his "owne dere wyf" (l. 121),<sup>12</sup> man's soul, to renew her faithfulness to him.

As in *In the vaile of restles mynd*, Jesus speaks in *Love me broughte* to explain that love was the driving force behind all his actions:

Love me broughte,  
 And love me wroughtë,  
     Man, to be thi ferë;  
 Love me fedde,  
 And Love me ledde,  
     And love me lettëd herë.

Love me slow,  
 And love me drow,  
     And love me leyde on berë;  
 Love is my pes,

For love I ches,  
 Man to byen derë (ll. 1-12)<sup>13</sup>

(Love brought me, and love created me, Man, to be your companion; Love fed me, and love led me, and love kept me here. Love slew me, and love drew me, and love laid me on a bier; Love is my peace, because of love I chose, to buy [i.e. redeem] man dearly.)

In this poem Jesus actually fulfills the oft-pledged lover's oath to die for his lady. Thomas Duncan observes that it also teaches the relatively new reading of Christ's sacrifice that emerges in the 11<sup>th</sup> century: that Jesus redeemed man by the power of his love. Anglo-Saxon texts such as *The Dream of the Rood* portray Christ as a young warrior king winning his people back from the devil by virtue of his personal might:

Salvation was a cosmic struggle between God and the Devil with man as a passive pawn and Christ a rather impersonal hero.... [However, St. Anselm] presented a new account of salvation. Man by his sin had incurred the penalty of death. Christ, out of love for man, became a man, and by suffering death paid for man that penalty which man alone could not pay. A cosmic view thus changed to a personal vision - a vision of Christ as a man, suffering for his fellow man out of love.<sup>14</sup>

The appearance of this philosophy in the vernacular lyrics attests to the widespread adoption of this new reading, and also to its durability. At a time when the ideal of secular erotic love as the highest pursuit had peaked and was now being questioned and problematized by

contemporary literature, the concept of salvation by the love of Christ was still vigorous.

The tenet of the courtly love tradition which identified woman as the appropriate recipient of intense love probably created the conditions necessary for an entirely new form of Christian devotion to emerge: the cult of the Virgin. Mary was also the subject of many devotional lyrics, which praised her for her chastity and virtue, thanked her for bringing Jesus into the world, pitied her for the sorrow of losing her son, and entreated her to bring prayers to her son's attention. In this last role she was seen as man's merciful and receptive advocate. Another popular form of Marian worship saw her as the Queen of Heaven. As the spotless queen of the highest court she was in a parallel category to those earthly queens and noble ladies who were the culturally accepted recipients of courtly love and knightly service. In *Edi bi thou, hevne queen*, one of many lyrics composed in honor of Mary, the poet plays with the themes of love and fealty:

Nis non maide of thinë hewë,  
 So fair, so shene, so rudy, so bright;  
 Swetë Lady of me thou rewë  
 And have merci of thin knight  
 .....  
 Maidë dreye and wel y-taught,  
 Ich am in thine lovë-bendë,  
 And to thee is al my draught.  
 Thou me shild, ye, from the fendë,

As thou art fre and wilt and maught. (ll.13-6, 34-38)<sup>15</sup>

(There is no maid of your complexion, so fair, so beautiful, so rosy, so bright; sweet lady, have pity on me and have mercy on your knight....Patient and well-taught maiden, I am in your love-bond, and all my inclination is towards you. [May] you shield me, indeed, from the Fiend, since you are generous and willing and able.)

The speaker flatters Mary's appearance and begs for her mercy as if she were the lady in a courtly romance, but soon tells us that what he desires is not earthly love, but rather heavenly salvation. Again, as with the devotional lyrics to Christ, we find quasi-erotic love channeled to a religious goal, where it may be expressed without fear of sin or reprimand.

The number of extant lyrics in this vein suggests the power of this new approach to love and religion to capture the medieval imagination. I believe that the growing cynicism about secular premarital and adulterous love and the increased use of the language of desire in religious writing are intimately connected. Another piece of supporting evidence is the proliferation of anchorites and hermits who dedicated their lives to meditation on God's love during this period. In the next chapter I will examine the rise of mysticism in England, and explore how some of the mystics incorporated metaphors of love and marriage into their writing.

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<sup>1</sup> Duncan, Thomas G. *Medieval English Lyrics, 1200-1400*. London: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 17. This poem is from MS Tübingen, University Library Deposit: Berlin, Preussische Staatsbibliothek, Lat. Theol. Fol. 249.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29. From MS London, College of Arms 27.

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<sup>3</sup> Brook, GL, ed. *The Harley Lyrics: the Middle English Lyrics of MS Harley 2253*. London: Manchester University Press, 1956, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39. From MS London, B.L., Harley 2253.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan, p. 24. From MS London, Lincoln's Inn, Hale 135.

<sup>6</sup> Brook, p. 62. From MS London, B.L., Harley 2253.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45. From MS London, B.L., Harley 2253.

<sup>8</sup> Benson, Larry D, gen. ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Professor Carolyn Collette, my thesis advisor, for sharing with me these insights on chess language that are a part of her own research.

<sup>10</sup> Duncan, p. 95. Several extant copies. Text based on MS Glasgow, Hunterian Museum, V.8.15. Also found in MS London, B.L., Harley 2253; MS Oxford, Bodl., Vernon MS, English poet.a.I; and MS Chicago, Newberry Library, Ry 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99-100. Text from MS London, Lambeth Palace Library, 557; a slightly altered text is found in MS Edinburgh, N.L.S., Advocates 18.7.21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 100. Text from MS Cambridge, Univ. Lib, Hh.4.12; also found in MS London, Lambeth Palace Library, 853.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99. Found in MS Edinburgh, N.L.S., Advocates 18.7.21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. xxix.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 107. Found in MS Oxford, Corpus Christi Coll., 59, with music.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **“Luf copuls god & manne”: The Mysticism of Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe**

The last genre of literature dealing with love and desire that I will examine is English mysticism, a literature which, alongside the devotional lyrics, begins to incorporate the language of desire into its expressive tradition in new and intensified ways during the fourteenth century. This period was a fruitful time for Christian mysticism in England, producing a cluster of well-known authors: Richard Rolle; the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*; Walter Hilton; Julian of Norwich; and in the early fifteenth century, Margery Kempe. All of these authors take the love of God as a primary part of their message, which is by no means a new theme. The striking physicality of that love in the writings of Richard Rolle and the frequent use of metaphors of marriage in *The Book of Margery Kempe* set them apart from their predecessors and give us a tantalizing insight into another way that religious devotion made use of ideas about love in the fourteenth century.

First it is necessary to demonstrate that this intent focus on physical eroticism and marital metaphors is indeed a new development. In the introduction to this study I presented two twelfth-century monastic authors, and it will be useful to revisit them now to establish a basis for comparison. First I introduced Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the Song of Songs. In his sermons he uses the vividly sexual language of the Song of Songs as a metaphor for the nature of love between man and Christ, carefully explaining the symbolism of every phrase and idea. For Bernard, the Song of Songs is a powerful intellectual code that helps the enlightened reader understand his relationship to the divine; there is nothing literal about it. The other twelfth-century author, Aelred of Rievaulx, wrote about spiritual friendships between monks. His focus is on the benefits of practical, everyday human relationships and how to make them spiritually enriching.

Both Bernard and Aelred were writing from within monastic communities, but the twelfth century also saw a resurgence of interest in the solitary path of the hermit, anchorite, or anchoress, which continued to grow in the following centuries. The continuing popularity of the eremitic life in England is attested to by the *Ancren Wisse*, a set of guidelines written for three anchoresses in the early thirteenth century. The author, perhaps Bishop Poore of Salisbury, writes:

Efter þe measse cos hwen þe preost sacred. þer for 3eoted al  
þe world. þer beoð al ut of bodi þer i sperclinde luue  
biclupped ower leofmon þe in to ow er breostes bur is iliht of  
heouene. [&] haldeð him heteueste aþet he habbe iþettet ow  
al þ[et] 3e eauer easkið.<sup>1</sup>

(After the kiss of peace in the mass, when the priest  
consecrates, forget there all the world, and there be entirely  
out of the body; there in glowing love embrace your beloved  
Saviour who is come down from heaven into your breast's  
bower, and hold him fast until he shall have granted  
whatever you wish for.)<sup>2</sup>

This passage goes a step farther than Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons,  
making the metaphor of Christ as a lover very immediate and personal.  
However, the author still specifies that this divine embrace takes place "al  
ut of bodi" and not on the physical plane. In the fourteenth century,  
Richard Rolle takes the concept a step further.

### *Richard Rolle*

Richard Rolle (1290?-1349) was an enthusiastic hermit and a very  
prolific writer, completing many texts in Latin and Middle English, both  
prose and verse. His ideas and his style were popular and influential in  
his own time; in fact, he was probably the most widely read author in  
England, judging from the extant manuscripts: for every one or two  
extant copies of *The Canterbury Tales* we have ten or twelve copies of  
*Incendium Amoris*.<sup>3</sup> Not only was Rolle a prolific writer, but Sister Mary

Arthur Knowlton argues that his style strongly influenced much of the vernacular verse that was produced in England after him.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps partially for this reason and partially to lend authority to the work of obscure writers, many texts have been attributed to Richard Rolle which he did not actually write. The work of Hope Emily Allen has been decisive in establishing a reliable catalog of Rolle's authentic writings, so now we know with some certainty which texts are authentically his.

Rolle's most popular work, *Incendium Amoris* (or *The Fire of Love*), was written in Latin some time around 1343, later translated into Middle English, and was very widely distributed throughout England and also in Europe; more than forty manuscripts of this book still exist today.<sup>5</sup> In it he describes how the contemplative life is to be spent in the enthusiastic love of God, and begins with a very physical description of the sensation of God's love:

Admirabar magis quam enucio quando siquidem sentiui cor meum primitus incalescere, et uere non imaginarie, quasi sensibile igne estuare. Eram equidem attonitus quemadmodum eruperat ardor in animo, et de insolito solacio propter inexperientiam huius abundancie: sepius pectus meum si forte esset feruor ex aliqua exteriori causa palpitauit. Cumque cognouissem quod ex interiori solummodo efferbuisset, et non esset a carne illud incendium amoris, et concupiscencia, in qua continui, quod donum esset Conditoris, letabundus liquefactus sum in affectum amplioris dileccionis . . . nam ita inflammat animam meam ac si ignis elementaris ibi arderet.<sup>6</sup>

(I cannot tell you how surprised I was the first time I felt my heart begin to warm. It was real warmth too, not imaginary, and it felt as if it were actually on fire. I was astonished at the way the heat surged up, and how this new sensation brought great and unexpected comfort. I had to keep feeling my breast to make sure there was no physical reason for it! But once I realized that it came entirely from within, that this fire of love had no cause, material or sinful, but was the gift of my Maker, I was absolutely delighted, and wanted my love to be even greater . . . it set my soul aglow as if a real fire was burning there.)<sup>7</sup>

Rolle's description of a tangible sensation of love from God is unique among the fourteenth-century English mystics (except where it appears in *The Book of Margery Kempe* in what appears to be direct imitation). In other aspects of his doctrine Rolle is consistent both with past religious thinkers and with his contemporaries. He is entirely traditional when he declares that "Omnis enim amor qui in Deum non intendit, iniquitas est, et iniquos reddit suos possessores"<sup>8</sup> (All love which is not God-directed is bad love, and makes its possessors bad too)<sup>9</sup> and that such love is also doomed to disappointment:

Non autem tristantur in amando nisi ingratum dilexerint, uel si hoc quod diligendo quesierant se adipisci posse desperant. Ista in amore Dei nunquam sunt, sed in amore sepe contingent mundi et mulierum.<sup>10</sup>

(People are not made sad by the fact of loving, unless the loved one is ungrateful or they despair of obtaining the object of their love. Such disappointments are never found in loving God, though they are met with often enough when it is a matter of loving the world – or women!)<sup>11</sup>

Like the lyric heroines in the last chapter, Rolle rejects worldly love as disappointing and unfulfilling. To draw a further distinction between worldly love and the life of contemplation he is advocating, he emphasizes the need for sincere devotion and years of solitary contemplation to obtain a true experience of God. Like the lyric devotional poets, he writes love poems to God, yet he goes a step further by adding a vividly sexual tone to the traditional complaint of courtly love:

O mellifluus ardor omnibus deliciis dulcior, cunctis operibus delectabilior! O Deus meus, O amor meus: illabere mihi, tua caritate perforato, tua pulchritudine uulnerato; illabere, inquam, et languentem consolare: medicina, tu, misero ostende te amanti. Ecce in te est omne desiderium meum, omne quod querit cor meum. Ad te suspirat anima mea; tibi sitit caro mea . . . . Ueni in me, dilecta mea!<sup>12</sup>

(O honeyed flame, sweeter than all sweet, delightful beyond all creation!

My God, my Love, surge over me, pierce me by your love, wound me with your beauty.

Surge over me, I say, who am longing for your comfort.

Reveal your healing medicine to your poor lover.

See, my one desire is for you; it is you my heart is seeking.

My soul pants for you; my whole being is athirst for you . . .

Come into me, Beloved!)<sup>13</sup>

As Brad Peters suggests, by writing in the first person Rolle creates an “I” that refers both to himself and to his reader who is reading or speaking the same words.<sup>14</sup> By drawing the reader into his work in this way, Rolle “seeks to help his male and female readers alike to channel their erotic

sensibilities toward a deeper and more fully human experience of Christ.”<sup>15</sup> His prose treatment of the subject is no less suggestive:

*Amator itaque estuans in ipsos incorporeos amplexus, et oculo intellectuali amatum suum intueri . . . anhelans: habet utique clamorem ad Conditorem suum, ex intimis medullis amoris affectuosi excitatum et erumpentem.*<sup>16</sup>

(The lover, ablaze through these same spiritual caresses, strains with all his might to gaze upon his Beloved. And his shout, excited and bursting out from the core of his longing love, goes up, of course, to his Maker.)<sup>17</sup>

*Cuius cor, in igne amoris conuersum, supernum sensibilter sentit calorem, ut magnitudinem tam ardentis amoris uix sufficiat sustinere, ne dissoluatur.*<sup>18</sup>

(His heart, transformed by the fire of love, actually feels the heavenly warmth, so that he finds it difficult to sustain the immensity of love so ardent: he fears he may melt away!)<sup>19</sup>

Rolle’s insistence on the physicality of his experience of the burning warmth of God’s love, in addition to his remarkably immediate and direct use of sexual suggestion to describe the ecstasy of the experience, have the effect of taking the imagery of erotic desire we saw in the devotional lyrics to its logical – but formerly unthinkable – conclusion: he channels man’s sexual energy (albeit a refined variety purged of earthly lust) towards union with God.

The technique proved a powerful one. Rolle skillfully balanced old and new ideas, and the response was positive. Rolle was “the most widely read of all the English masters up to the time of the

Reformation,"<sup>20</sup> and this indicates that his work was both conventional enough to be accepted and innovative enough to capture the interest and imagination of his medieval audience. His work presents one sort of solution to the problems that plagued love and marriage by suggesting that one could both direct one's love to an everlasting God and receive a sort of ecstatic physical fulfillment comparable to that associated with earthly relations.

Some of his contemporaries were more cautious. The later work of both the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Walter Hilton advised solitaries to beware of any manifestations of physical sensations, claiming that such experiences could be sent by either good beings or deceptive evil forces.<sup>21</sup> Hilton speaks of the soul's ravishing and burning love, as well as the divine music that Rolle cherished, but he is very careful to caution against false experiences of these phenomena caused by addled wits or evil angels:

[A man] ouertravailis be ymagynacion[s] hys wyttes, and be undiscrete travelynge turnes þe braynes in hys heued & forbrekes þe my3tes & þe wittes of þe saule & of þe body: & þan for febelnes of þe brayn hym thynke þat he heris wondyrfull sownes & sanges; and þat is na thyng ellis bot a fantasye caused of trobelyng of þe brayn - as a man þat is in a fransy, him thynke þat he heris & sees þat nan oþir man does, and al is bot vanite & fantasy of þe heued. Or ellis it is be wyrkyng of þe ennemy þat feynes swylke sownes in hys heringe.<sup>22</sup>

(A man overworks his wits by imagination, and by indiscrete laboring turns the brains in his head, and breaks the power and wits of his soul and of his body: and then due to feebleness of the brain he thinks that he hears wonderful sounds and songs; and it is nothing else but a fantasy caused by a troubling of the brain – like a man that is in a frenzy, he thinks that he hears and sees that which no other man does, and all of it is nothing but vanity and fantasy of the head. Or else it is the workings of the enemy that feigns such sounds in his hearing.)

Clearly there is an anxiety about the risk of self-deception and false sensations, and an uncertainty about how to determine what is a true mystical experience and what is merely the “wyrkyng of þe enemy.” The senses could not always be trusted, since in the medieval theories of sensory reception and information processing, experiences could be influenced by the will and thereby create a false “phantasy.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, whether out of personal experience, belief in others’ teaching, or an unwillingness to be outdone by Rolle, he admits that “he þat veraly heris aungels sange, h[e] ys made soe wyse þat he sal neuyr erre be fantasye ne be indiscrecion, ne be no sleyhte of þe wyrkyng of þe deuel”<sup>24</sup> (he who truly hears angel’s song, he is made so wise that he shall never err by fantasy or indiscretion, nor by any slight of the working of the devil). So, while other writers urged caution, none of the surviving mystic texts of the major fourteenth-century authors openly denounces Rolle’s ideas.

*Margery Kempe*

Margery Kempe, dictating her biography in the early fifteenth century, also claims to have heard the divine music of God and felt his burning love, but she dwells far more on her frequent visionary conversations with Jesus. Margery is unique among the English mystics of this period in that she was married, and a good portion of her autobiography deals with the tension between her marriage to her husband and her love of God. In her second mystical experience she hears the sweet melody of heaven and immediately loses all desire for sexual interaction, telling her husband, "I may not deny yow my body, but the lofe of myn hert and myn affeccyon is drawyn fro alle erdly creaturys and sett only in God"<sup>25</sup> (I may not deny you my body, but all the love and affection of my heart is withdrawn from all earthly creatures and set on God alone).<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, Margery writes that Christ schemes to get her husband to take a vow of chastity by asking her to fast on Fridays, a habit she later gives up in exchange for her husband's agreement to "makyth my body fre to God"<sup>27</sup> (make my body free to God)<sup>28</sup> and allow her to live in chastity. Jesus also "ravysched hir spyryt"<sup>29</sup> (ravished her spirit)<sup>30</sup> while she was weeping in church, and tells her, "I bydde the and comawnd the, boldly clepe me Jhesus, thi love, for I am thi love and schal be thi love

wythowtyn ende"<sup>31</sup> (I command you, boldly call me Jesus, your love, for I am your love and shall be your love without end).<sup>32</sup> These instances clearly delineate a conflict between Margery's duties in marriage and her love of God: Jesus plays the part of a new lover, seducing her away from her husband. Indeed, some of his speeches to her sound like the pleadings of a courtly lover:

Derworthy dowtyr, lofe thow me wyth al thin hert, for I love the wyth al myn hert and wyth al the myght of my Godhed . . . . I schal lovyn the wythowtyn ende . . . .me wer levar to suffyr as mech peyn as evyr I dede [on the cross] for thi sowle alon rathyr than thow schuldyst partyn fro me.<sup>33</sup>

(Beloved daughter, love me with all your heart, for I love you with all my heart and with all the might of my Godhead . . . . I shall love you without end . . . . I would rather suffer as much pain as I ever did [on the cross] for your soul alone rather than that you should be separated from me.)<sup>34</sup>

After she has achieved a chaste life, Jesus refers to her as his wife:

Whan thow sorwyst for thow art so long fro the blysse of hevyn, than art thu a very spowse and a wyfe, for it longyth to the wyfe to be wyth hir husbond and no very joy to han tyl sche come to hys presens.<sup>35</sup>

(When you sorrow because you are kept so long from the bliss of heaven, then you are as a true spouse and wife, for it is the wife's part to be with her husband and to have no true joy until she has his company.)<sup>36</sup>

While Richard Rolle emphasizes God as a lover who can reciprocate his love with physical sensation, Margery puts God into the role of a husband.

The idea of religious women as brides of Christ was already common, but Margery gives this metaphor more power by setting up Christ in a very real and immediate opposition with her earthly husband. In this way she demonstrates yet again the power of God as an alternative object of desire for the medieval heart and will. Margery bends all her will upon living her life in a way that pleases Christ, bringing their wills into alignment, and he tells her that this brings them into such unity that they are almost interchangeable: “Thei that worshep the thei worshep me; thei that despysen the thei despysen me, and I schal chastysen hem therfor. I am in the and thow in me”<sup>37</sup> (They that honour your honour me; they that despise you despise me, and I shall chastise them for it. I am in you, and you in me).<sup>38</sup> If the medieval definition of love is unity, two people can hardly be more united than Margery and her divine husband.

It is not only the contrast between God and her mortal husband that makes Margery’s testimony exemplify the blending of earthly and divine love, but also the very language she uses to refer to her relationship with God. Like Rolle, she channels her sexuality into her mysticism. Caroline Bynum postulates that Margery’s desire for asceticism was born of the need to control her own body, which had been subject to “legal rape” by her husband for years after she ceased to desire intercourse<sup>39</sup>:

Aftyr this tyme sche had nevyr desyr to komown fleschly wyth hyre husbonde, for the dette of matrimony was so abhominabyll to hir that sche had levar, hir thowt, etyn or drynkyn to wose, the mukke in the chanel, than to consentyn to any fleschly comownyng saf only for obedyens.<sup>40</sup>

(After this time she never had any desire to have sexual intercourse with her husband, for paying the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that she would rather, she thought, have eaten and drunk the ooze and muck in the gutter than consent to intercourse, except out of obedience.)<sup>41</sup>

Her body had also been controlled by the process of bearing fourteen children, which was a traumatic experience for her: she tells us that after bearing her first child she was in a state of madness for more than eight weeks. Tellingly, this period of madness ended with her first vision of Jesus, supporting Bynum's theory that her religious ascetic inclinations were brought on by bodily trauma. This lack of control over her own body and sexuality was one of the reasons Margery sought union in the divine realms rather than the physical.

Margery does not give up marriage or desire, but rather removes them from the earthly realm. In one of her visions this marriage to God is enacted in formal ceremony:

Also the Fadyr seyde to this creatur, "Dowtyr, I wil han the weddyd to my Godhede, for I schal schewyn the my prevyneys and my counselys, for thu schalt wonyn with me wythowtyn ende . . . . And than the Fadyr toke hir be the hand in hir sowle befor the Sone and the Holy Gost and the Modyr of Jhesu and alle the twelve apostelys and Seynt

Kateryn and Seynt Margarete and many other seyntys and holy virgynes with gret multitude of awngelys, seying to hir sowle, "I take the, Margery, for my weddyd wyfe, for fayrar, for fowelar, for richar, for powerar, so that thu be buxom and bonyr to do what I byd the do. For dowtyr, ther was nevyr childe so buxom to the modyr as I schal be to the bothe in wel and in wo, to help the and comfort the. And therto I make the suyrté."<sup>42</sup>

(The father also said to this creature, 'Daughter, I will have you wedded to my Godhead, because I shall show you my secrets and my counsels, for you shall live with me without end' . . . . And then the Father took her by the hand [spiritually] in her soul, before the Son and the Holy Ghost, and the Mother of Jesus, and all the twelve apostles, and St Katherine and St Margaret and many other saints and holy virgins, with a great multitude of angels, saying to her soul, 'I take you, Margery, for my wedded wife, for fairer, for fouler, for richer, for poorer, provided that you are humble and meek in doing what I command you to do. For, daughter, there was never a child so kind to its mother as I shall be to you, both in joy and sorrow, to help you and comfort you. And that I pledge to you. [sic]<sup>43</sup>

Thus by legally binding language she is wedded to God the Father. Yet during most of her visions Jesus is the one who speaks to her, and he is a husband to her as well. He tells her:

Most I nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed wyth the. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi weddyd husbond, as thy derworthy derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde. And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the arms of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt.<sup>44</sup>

(Therefore I must be intimate with you, and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you greatly desire to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your dear darling, and as your sweet son, for I want to be loved as a son should be loved by the mother, and I want you to love me, daughter, as a good wife ought to love her husband. Therefore you can boldly take me in the arms of your soul and kiss my mouth, my head, and my feet as sweetly as you want.)<sup>45</sup>

Jesus gives her permission to love him not only as a husband, but also as a son. In this way he assumes yet another household role, the recipient of a mother's love. He also calls her *dowtyr*, implying that he also acts as her father. Margery's God is no abstract and unknowable creature, but a father, husband, and son that she can relate to in familiar household terms.

Jesus fills the roles of family members, but he also serves as an object for her sexual desire. Lisa Manter argues that her visions are avenues of both holiness and desire, and analyzes her rich visual descriptions using the concepts of modern film theory:

In her visions and meditations, the male body of Christ becomes the object of desire, in a manner similar to Laura Mulvey's descriptions of the pleasures of male gaze in the cinema . . . . In her visualizations of the Passion, Margery likewise retains gender delineations that point to Christ as the object of desire. His body is displayed for visual consumption; it is subject to the controlling and curious look of the crowd.<sup>46</sup>

Even her very first vision of Christ emphasizes his beauty:

Jhesu . . . aperyd to hys creatur, whych had forsakyn hym, in lyknesse of a man, most semly, most bewtyuows, and most

amyable that evyr myght be seen wyth mannys eye, clad in a mantyl of purpyl sylke, syttyng upon hir beddys syde, lokyng upon hir wyth so blyssyd a chere that sche was strengthyd in alle hir spyritys."<sup>47</sup>

(Jesus . . . appeared to this creature who had forsaken him, in the likeness of a man, the most seemly, most beauteous, and most amiable that ever might be seen with man's eye, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her beside, looking upon her with so blessed a countenance that she was strengthened in all her spirits.)<sup>48</sup>

Liliana Sikorska argues that "Margery desires eternal bliss, eternal spiritual orgasm, a metaphysical union with God."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps driven to the spiritual realm by the harsh realities of childbirth and marriage, Margery fuses the sexual, the domestic, and the divine into her own world of imagination and vision, and dedicates herself to it as thoroughly as the most faithful of wives.

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Our examination of Chaucer's work has shown that in the fourteenth-century marriage was often plagued with many difficulties. The pert heroines of some Middle English lyrics remind us that extramarital love and sexuality was also problematic, on both the practical and the spiritual level. The mystics demonstrate a third outlet for love by modeling a way of life dedicated solely to the love of God. For them, satisfaction comes not from earthly friendships, as it did for Aelred, but from the experience of God's love expressed in divine song, physical

sensation, and visions. This experience, once attained, was morally sound and relatively problem-free. However, the amount of time and dedication required to attain such a state, which even then was granted only by God's grace, seems to have kept this otherwise attractive alternative out of reach for many.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ancrene Wisse: Edited from MS Corpus Christi College Cambridge 402*, Early English Text Society no. 249. Ed. JRR Tolkien. London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *The Nun's Rule*. Trans. James Morton. London: Chatto & Windus, 1926, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Chambers, RW. "On the Continuity of English Prose." *Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*. Nicholas Harpsfield. Ed. RW Chambers. Early English Texts Society no. 186. London: Oxford University Press, 1932, p. ci.

<sup>4</sup> Knowlton, Sister Mary Arthur. *The Influence of Richard Rolle and of Julian of Norwich on the Middle English Lyrics*. Paris: Mouton, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Wolters, Clifton. "Introduction." *The Fire of Love*. Trans. Clifton Wolters. London: Penguin Books, 1972, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Rolle, Richard. *The Incendium Amoris of Richard Rolle of Hampole*. Ed. Margaret Deansley. London: Manchester University Press, 1915, p. 145

<sup>7</sup> Rolle, Richard. *The Fire of Love*. Trans. Clifton Wolters. London: Penguin Books, 1972, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Deansley, p. 148.

<sup>9</sup> Wolters, pp. 48-9.

<sup>10</sup> Deansley, p. 195.

<sup>11</sup> Wolters, p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> Deansley, p. 152.

<sup>13</sup> Wolters, pp. 52-3.

<sup>14</sup> Peters, Brad. "Rolle's Eroticized Language in *The Fire of Love*." *Mystics Quarterly* 21.2 (1995): 53-4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Deansley, p. 243.

<sup>17</sup> Wolters, p. 152.

<sup>18</sup> Deansley, p. 208.

<sup>19</sup> Wolters, p. 114.

<sup>20</sup> Wolters, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Coleman, TW. *English Mystics of the Fourteenth Century*. London: Epworth Press, 1938, p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> Hilton, Walter. "The Song of Angels." *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole and His Followers*, vol. 1. Ed. C Horstman. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1895, pp. 179-80.

<sup>23</sup> Collette, Carolyn P. *Species, Phantasms, and Images: Vision and Medieval Psychology in The Canterbury Tales*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001, p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> Hilton, p. 180.

<sup>25</sup> Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Ed. Staley, Lynn. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996, p. 26.

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- <sup>26</sup> Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Trans. BA Windeatt. London: Penguin Books, 1985, p.46.
- <sup>27</sup> Staley edition, p. 38.
- <sup>28</sup> Windeatt translation, p. 60.
- <sup>29</sup> Staley edition, p. 30.
- <sup>30</sup> Windeatt translation, p. 51.
- <sup>31</sup> Staley edition, p. 31.
- <sup>32</sup> Windeatt translation, p. 51.
- <sup>33</sup> Staley edition, pp. 42-3.
- <sup>34</sup> Windeatt translation, pp. 65-6.
- <sup>35</sup> Staley edition, p. 44.
- <sup>36</sup> Windeatt translation, p. 67.
- <sup>37</sup> Staley edition, p. 36.
- <sup>38</sup> Windeatt translation, p. 57.
- <sup>39</sup> Bynum, Caroline. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, p. 213.
- <sup>40</sup> Staley editon, p. 26.
- <sup>41</sup> Windeatt translation, p. 46.
- <sup>42</sup> Staley edition, p. 91-2.
- <sup>43</sup> Windeatt translation, pp. 122-3.
- <sup>44</sup> Staley edition, pp. 94-5.
- <sup>45</sup> Windeatt translation, pp. 126-7.
- <sup>46</sup> Manter, Lisa. "The Savior of Her Desire: Margery Kempe's Passionate Gaze." *Exemplaria* 13.1 (2001): 43-46.
- <sup>47</sup> Staley edition, p. 23.
- <sup>48</sup> Windeatt translation, p. 42.
- <sup>49</sup> Sikorska, Liliana. "Mapping Problems of Sexual Desire in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Studia Anglica Posaniensia: International Review of English Studies* (1996): p. 5 (in the online version found at <http://web4/infotrac.galegroup.com/>, accessed Apr 1, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

I believe that one of the keys to grasping love as it was understood in fourteenth-century England is to understand the differentiation between terms that the modern reader might take to be synonymous: love, marriage, and happiness. These terms have not always been so closely associated, or Andreas Capellanus would not tell his twelfth-century audience that “liquide constat inter virum et uxorem amorem sibi locum vindicare non posse” (it is clearly known that love cannot claim a place between husband and wife).<sup>1</sup> In his time romantic love was clearly located outside of marriage, in the realm of adulterous passion, but in fourteenth-century England this ideal was beginning to change. Most of the texts I have examined in this study show the people of fourteenth-century England engaged in a complicated struggle to incorporate the ideal of passion into the framework of marriage. Aware of the social and moral dilemmas that adulterous love causes in society, they nonetheless seem unable to renounce the allure of erotic passion. While romances such as *Sir Degrevant* manage to combine the two paradigms, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* engages in a critical look at the problems with marriage,

and the *Franklin's Tale* explores the particular pitfalls of the combination of desire and marriage.

Yet at a time when love seems to be floundering in the secular arena, we find a sudden flowering of intensely passionate religious literature. The Middle English lyrics show some of their heroines rejecting passionate affairs altogether in an effort to protect their reputations and their souls from the consequences of premarital sex. This same poetic form allows devotional lyrics to harness the power of the courtly love complaint, and mystics such as Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe write about a path to God which involves both physical sensations of the passionate love of Christ, and an intense yearning for a beloved who is always just out of reach, with whom they cannot achieve complete union until they die. In many ways this passionate love of God is a remarkably appropriate solution to the dilemma of where to direct one's passionate emotion.

As Denis de Rougemont articulates in his *Love in the Western World*, the heart of the tradition of courtly love is a yearning for that which cannot be possessed.<sup>2</sup> In the *lais* of Marie de France, as in the *Tristan and Iseult* which Rougemont examines, a fundamental principle of the lover's yearning is the essential unavailability of the love object. In only a few of the *lais* do the lovers attain a permanent and unthreatened union with

their beloved. It is telling that in the *Eliduc*, where this does occur, the happily wedded couple join separate monasteries and dedicate their lives to God not long after their joyful marriage. Once the beloved is possessed he or she loses the very quality of unattainability which produced the passion of the relationship, and the couple in *Eliduc* responds to this dilemma by redirecting their love to God, who is eternally present but also just out of reach and thus can sustain a lover's yearning for as long as he or she is alive. This solution which Marie devised in the twelfth century demonstrates the ease with which the medieval mind could transfer desire and passion between human and divine objects of desire. Utilizing this same principle, Rolle and his followers identify Christ as a supremely suitable object for this sort of passionate longing. The success of their approach is demonstrated by the widespread popularity of mystical writings and the devotional lyrics.

Our understanding of the nature of love in the Middle Ages is confused by our modern expectation that love is the foundation of marriage. We must not mistake medieval stories about marriage, such as the *King of Tars*, the *Clerk's Tale*, and the *Merchant's Tale*, for stories about love. Marriage was a political, social, economic, and religious institution. It would ideally be one blessed by affection, pleasure, and an amicable alignment of wills, but not necessarily with love. Love was an emotional

state based on a passionate yearning for a beloved that one could never truly possess. The widespread acknowledgement of this condition is attested to by the seriousness with which both romances and medical writings treated the illness known as lovesickness, whose symptoms included sunken eyes, jaundiced color, insomnia, anorexia, depressed thoughts, and melancholy.<sup>3</sup> Chaucer's Aurelius in the *Franklin's Tale* is bedridden with this condition for two years because Dorigen will not love him. His predicament demonstrates another characteristic of medieval (and modern) love: the love object does not have to reciprocate for love to be experienced. The euphoric union of wills enjoyed by most of the lovers in Marie's *lais* is an ideal outcome, but love persists whether or not the loved one responds; it is an internally sustained emotional state. Once one possesses the beloved securely, as when Arveragus marries Dorigen in the opening of the *Franklin's Tale*, that person loses the allure of the unattainable and ceases to be a viable object of one's love: you cannot yearn for that which you already possess.

In the introduction of this study I asked, "What did love mean in the Middle Ages?" My answer to that question is this: Love signified a yearning for the not-quite-attainable. The beloved was close enough to keep hope alive, but when she (or he) was securely possessed she ceased to produce the intense emotion of passionate yearning which attracted the

lover. Love was an elusive thing, a state which one tried to capture, but which was destroyed by the very possession one sought to achieve. Thus when fourteenth-century Middle English literature sought to combine love and marriage, the results were problematic; but when writers directed love towards the eternally just-out-of-reach God, their success was remarkable, as the influence of writings such as Richard Rolle's *Incendium Amoris* in England and throughout Western Europe demonstrates. While *Incendium Amoris* was originally intended for a contemplative and clerical audience, Margery Kempe's autobiography shows that this passionate dedication to God was imitated by lay people as well. These writings of passionate mysticism later fell into obscurity (*Incendium Amoris* was not copied or printed between the early fifteenth century and the late nineteenth century), but in the fourteenth century they seem to have filled a need by providing a suitable object for the passionate yearning of medieval love.

Yet this answer is still incomplete: if marriage failed so miserably as a vehicle for medieval love, why is it the goal and denouement of nearly every Middle English romance? If it is such a hopeless case, why does Chaucer take the time to critique it? What was the goal of marriage? I propose that the goal of marriage was not love, but happiness. *Sir Degrevant*, for example, is not really about passionate love; if it were,

Degrevant would not be satisfied to visit Melidor's chamber every night for a year simply to lie beside her. Instead he and Melidor work out a relationship in which they prudently follow the steps which will lead to their future happiness by patiently waiting until they have her family's consent before marrying and consummating the relationship. The one-stanza summary of their married life at the end of the romance makes no mention of their passion, but dwells on their prosperity and contentment: "þrytty wyntur and mare / þei lyuede to-gyður with-out care" (ll. 1905-6).

Similarly, *King of Tars* is certainly not about passionate love. The sultan captures the princess in a fit of lust, but does not really consider her as a person. He orders her to dress as he wishes and convert to his faith without reference to her own happiness. It is not until she takes a stand on the matter of his valuable heir that he discovers the power of listening to his wife and taking her will into consideration. In many ways his dramatic baptism is not only his initiation into Christianity, but also his initiation into seeing his wife as a person rather than a tool of his pleasure, and a symbol of his new dedication to considering her will as well as his own. Once their wills are aligned, their child becomes healthy and their marriage becomes a productive relationship for both of them.

While Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, *Merchant's Tale*, and *Franklin's Tale* illustrate the breakdown of marriage, his *Wife of Bath's Tale* presents a

constructive model which is rather similar in form to *King of Tars*. The tale opens with a knight who demonstrates that his lust is out of control by raping a maiden. While his quest to discover what women most desire teaches him that they long for sovereignty over a man, the resolution of the story presents a solution that does not exactly fit that model. When his wife gives him the choice that she will either be ugly and faithful or beautiful and fickle, he gives the choice to her. By doing so he is not giving her sovereignty over him, but sovereignty over herself. This frees her to be both beautiful and faithful, and in return for his acknowledgement of her free will she promises that “I to yow be also good and trewe / as evere was wyf, syn that the world was newe” (WBT 1243-4). When she becomes beautiful to him, one can suppose that it is not the beauty born of desperate yearning passion, but the beauty of the security provided by their agreement to share their lives in a way that works towards the happiness of both and the development of both as whole people. Whereas the passionate love of the *lais* creates an emptiness inside the lover that he or she must constantly yearn to fill, the sensible marriages of *Sir Degrevant*, *King of Tars*, and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* create a constructive sense of reliability and faithfulness that create the circumstances for productive and happy lives. The focus on prosperity that we have traced in the tales of marriage is an important part of this

arrangement, since the creation of a happy household is facilitated by the availability of adequate resources.

Much of fourteenth-century love literature, especially the work of Chaucer, is the product of a struggle between two ideals, Rougemont's "passion" and "marriage." The authors identify two solutions: the direction of passionate yearning towards the divine, an ideally suited object for that form of love; and a negotiated and sensible marriage that may begin with a passionate attraction but is transformed into a vehicle for creating contentment when the partners are able to work out an agreement which aligns their wills towards the common goal of mutual happiness.

Chaucer's tales of troubled marriages illustrate the consequences of marriages that fail to achieve this agreement. The *Clerk's Tale* warns against bringing unnecessary strife into a marriage by condemning Walter's repeated testing of his wife and warning the reader that no woman today could accept what Griselda endured. The *Merchant's Tale* warns against a marriage which does not take one partner's happiness into account. The *Franklin's Tale* is the most complex and difficult of the Marriage Group tales. I believe that its message is a warning against the human weakness that causes us to mis-apply our best intentions. Arveragus promises never to disobey Dorigen's will, and yet he does it

twice: first when he leaves her to seek “worship and honour” (FranT 811) across the channel, and a second time when he commands her to fulfill her “vow” to Aurelius. He says he does it for her own good – “for verray love which that I to yow have” (FranT 1477) – and against his own happiness – “as I may best, I wol my wo endure” (FranT 1484) – but in fact he does not consider her own happiness, because he does not give her sovereignty over herself, but rather forces her to follow *his* will because he thinks he knows what is best for her. Arveragus works for Dorigen’s happiness by imposing his own will, but this drives her half-mad. Luckily Aurelius releases her from her obligation, allowing her to remain the “trewe wyf” she wishes to be.

Chaucer uses these three tales to instruct by negative example, while his *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and the romances offer a constructive model of how to build a life of happiness in marriage. Thus the secular literature of fourteenth century offers a solution to the tangles of love for those medieval people engaged in the *vita activa*, just as the mystics describe a path to passionate union with God through the *vita contemplativa*.

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Cappellanus, quoted in Conor McCarthy. “Love, Marriage, and Law: Three Canterbury Tales.” *English Studies* 6 (2002): 512.

<sup>2</sup> De Rougemont, Denis. *Love in the Western World*. Trans. Montgomery Belgion. New York: Doubleday, 1957, pp. 294-5.

<sup>3</sup> Wack, Mary Frances. *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and its Commentaries*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990, p. 40.

## APPENDIX: Tips for reading Middle English

Middle English is fairly intelligible to modern readers, especially when one realizes that spelling was yet not standardized. It is sometimes helpful to read the lines aloud, since the words usually sound like modern speech even when the spelling is eccentric. There are a few differences in orthography worth knowing:

Middle English uses three letters not found in modern English:

þ (the letter "thorn") is pronounced like our modern "th"

ð (the letter "eth") also means "th"

ȝ (the letter "yogh") is translated as a "g" or a "y," depending on context

Also, the letters "u" and "v" are used interchangeably. "Y" may

sometimes be switched with "g" or "i," and "i" with "j" as well.

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