

Christian, Courtly, and Ideal Love in Chaucer's Marriage Group

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

This discussion of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is limited to those four grouped together that discuss the institution of marriage-- "The Wife of Bath's Tale," "The Clerk's Tale," "The Merchant's Tale," and "The Franklin's Tale." Along with brief overviews of each tale, Christianity and Courtly Love (as represented in each tale) are presented. The paper concludes with a brief investigation into the ingredients of an ideal marriage.

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Introduction

When faced with my senior thesis project, I explored several possibilities. I considered either a project dealing with my major, business administration, or a creative writing paper. However, I decided I should write a paper dealing with an aspect of literature because of two things: 1) My favorite experience here at Ball State has been the humanities sequence, and 2) I am a writer at heart. Now begins my attempt at a possible future avocation.

Chaucer is, without a doubt, my favorite Middle English author. He is a writing genius; many attitudes and opinions he evidently held were ahead of his time. Chaucer is a true storyteller in the sense that he can evoke several different feelings in a person while telling a story; included in these are laughter, deep thought, and pain. I constantly find myself being angry while reading part of one of Chaucer's stories, and then laughing at the same story a few minutes later.

Chaucer's Canterbury Tales are an illuminating example of his literary talent. My paper will specifically deal with four of the Canterbury Tales. These four are called the "Marriage Group" by many scholars who have studied and written about them. The group begins with "The Wife of Bath's Tale," proceeds with "The Clerk's Tale" and "The Merchant's Tale," and concludes with "The Franklin's Tale."

In formulating a clear thought process for my paper, I have decided on a certain method. I will begin with a brief overview of each story, give a short background of the pilgrim storyteller, then discuss what each tale says about the state of marriage. I will next discuss which tale, if any, seems to present a solution to the "marriage problem" and what that ideal marriage is like. I will analyze whether the tale offers a view of marriage consonant with Christianity or with the code of courtly love. The conclusion of my paper will present my personal views on what the ingredients seem to be to create a good, or ideal, marriage.

In order to write this paper, one must believe, as I do, in Kittredge's theory that a "marriage group" exists (Kittredge 185). Many believe that there is no actual proof of intentional grouping, but I believe that Chaucer meant for these four pilgrims to discuss marriage, playing one account off against the other.

"The Wife of Bath's Tale"—Overview

"The Wife of Bath's Tale" is a strong story, which is probably why Chaucer chose it to begin his group. The story opens with a young knight meeting a fair maiden. Chaucer surprises us here with a little unexpected violence when the knight rapes the young girl.

By law the rapist knight should be beheaded; however, the queen steps in and asks her husband if she (and the ladies of the court) can decide his fate instead. He agrees, and the queen decides on a rather interesting "sentence" for the knight. She gives him one year to discover the secret of what every woman wants within a marriage. If he can discover the secret, she will not execute him.

He travels around during the year, searching for this secret. However, on the day when his year is up, he is wandering back to the castle without an answer to the riddle. An old and very unattractive lady sees him and makes him a proposition; if he will marry her, she will provide him the answer he needs to save his head (literally).

As the knight tells the (women's) court the answer they want to hear, his wife delights in happiness over her new husband. Every woman's desire is revealed to be ruling over her husband. This answer proves to be true later in the story when the wife asks her husband if he would rather she would be unattractive and faithful or pretty, young, and potentially unfaithful. When the knight replies that whatever she wants he will abide by (and therefore, lets her rule), the next morning she is magically young, beautiful, and presumably faithful. And they lived happily ever after.

"The Wife of Bath's Tale"—Analysis

In my introduction when I discussed feeling a range of emotions while reading Chaucer, this tale was the main one I was talking about. Is there no justice in Chaucer's world? Why would a rapist be saved from death by a group of women? And, more important, why does the rapist get the "happy ending"?

I didn't have to look very far to find the answer to these questions. Chaucer was an artist who looked closely at details. He assigned each story to the pilgrim whose telling would give it the most impact. The Wife of Bath is a very intriguing story in herself, and one must first understand her to understand her story. She is not only "a realist and a pragmatist," but has outlived five husbands and wishes for a sixth (Shelly 216). She doesn't condemn virginity, but does not see it as a realistic choice in her life. This is my theory of why the rape doesn't seem to bother her at all.

R.E. Kaske adds another twist to this theory with a speculation that the queen and her court felt that the knight was on the right track in learning about women through his "passionate physical lovemaking" (52).

The reason behind the queen's intervention with (and ultimately, rescue of) the knight, seems fairly obvious. The queen and her court want the knight to have a second chance to prove himself and be better educated about women. Moreover, the queen ruled over her husband by receiving the duty of sentencing the knight, and wants to prove that she can find a better solution than just cutting off his head (Kaske 51).

The basic reason behind the ending of "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is that the teller must prove her point, and any other ending would be inconsistent with her character. Her argument is that "obedience is not her duty, but the husband's. . . men are no match for women anyway. . . let them sink back to their proper level, and cease their ridiculous efforts to maintain a position for which they are not fit. Then marriages will all be happy" (Kittredge 188).

Obviously, the Wife of Bath could not convince anyone in the expedition that her ideas were consistent unless the knight had a delightful ending to his story (Owens, 84).

"The Wife of Bath's Tale" sets the stage for the rest of the marriage group, because the other three tales present different versions of the same story. "The Clerk's Tale" and "The Merchant's Tale" refer to the Wife of Bath by name; "The Franklin's Tale" also contradicts the first tale (though not specifically mentioning it). As Kaske points out, "all four tales tell stories that might be fairly summarized, "How two people got married and what happened then" (46).

Christianity vs. Courtly Love

Kaske argues convincingly that "The Wife of Bath's Tale" also shows that in these marriage tales, "Christianity and Courtly Love stand squarely opposed" (47). Courtly Love is based on physical desire, whereas Christian thought has always tended to subordinate the specifically physical in marriage" (Kaske 47). As for the question of sovereignty, Christians firmly believe in the wife's subordination to the husband, while Courtly Love is more "liberal" in the sense that it is not unheard of for the partners to be "equals," or even for the woman to have some dominance over her husband (Kaske 48).

Two questions dominate the marriage group based on the descriptions of Christianity versus Courtly Love given in the preceding paragraph: 1) Who should rule in the marriage and 2) What role sex should play in the marriage (Kaske 47). I will discuss what each tale says about these two questions at the end of each analysis. "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is very straightforward about each subject: obviously, "women should rule and sex is supreme" (Kaske 53).

"The Clerk's Tale"—Overview

"The Clerk's Tale" is a story about a marquis named Walter, who for many years remained a bachelor, much to his subjects' dismay. After they repeatedly

prodded him to produce an heir, Walter finally relented and began a thorough search for a wife. After careful consideration, Walter chose a young peasant girl named Griselda to be his bride. After receiving permission from her father, they wed and began their life together.

For a time, Griselda lived a fairy-tale existence. She received favor not only in her own land, but also in neighboring lands for her beauty and goodness. Her subjects loved her with all their hearts, as Walter appeared to do. However, after her first child (a daughter) was born, Walter decided to test the patience of his wife.

This testing consists of a series of violations against Griselda and her character that Walter inflicts, purposely to see how truly "good" his wife is. He takes first her daughter, and four years later, her son, away from her. He does send them to his sister, but lets Griselda believe the worst: that they are dead. He then brings his own children back, making the twelve-year-old girl pose as his new bride. Griselda doesn't ever crack, not even after Walter tells her that he is "divorcing" her to marry this child. She doesn't suspect anything, and when Walter asks her to help with the wedding preparations, she accepts.

In a final act of cruelty, Walter sends her back to her poor state with exactly what she brought into their marriage: the clothes on her back. She goes back to her father's house without complaint, and resumes her low station there. Walter then calls her to him on his wedding day and asks her what she thinks of his new bride. Griselda requests only that Walter be more gentle with his second bride than he was with Griselda because of the delicateness of the young girl.

At the conclusion, Walter finally tells Griselda the truth, and she and her children are reunited. She and Walter go back to an even happier existence than they had before, and she regains her status in society. The Clerk praises Griselda's patience and humility.

"The Clerk's Tale"—Analysis

At the beginning of this story, a reader feels the traditional happiness that comes from a Cinderella-like story such as this one, i.e. rags to riches. However, Chaucer changes all of those feelings as soon as he moves into the story. As Walter continually tested his wife's patience and faithfulness, I found myself asking "Why?" The following are some of the reasons that might explain Walter's harshness and cruelty.

Again, Chaucer selected the right pilgrim to tell this story. In finding background information on the Clerk, he was described by Kittredge as a "professional logician and a conscientious moralist" (196) and by Manly as a "fascinating puzzle" (260). The Clerk is a very serious student, and there could be no better opponent to draw a complete antithesis to "The Wife of Bath's Tale"—exactly what "The Clerk's Tale" accomplishes (Kittredge 195). The Clerk makes it very clear that the meaning of his story is not that wives should be as patient as Griselda was, "for that would transcend the powers of human nature. It teaches all of us, men and women alike, how we should submit ourselves to the afflictions that God sends" (Kittredge 196).

One philosophy behind the seemingly uncontrollable cruelty of Walter is that Chaucer purposely made him so cruel in order to see how very constant was Griselda's faith. In making "Walter more cruel, Griselda both meeker and more outspoken . . . Chaucer sharpens the story in all directions" (Kaske 53). This contrast adds emotional appeal to the story. Also, as Kaske convincingly argues, Walter can signify God only by demanding for himself the kind of devotion the Christian can offer only to God; and in the same way, Griselda can signify the faithful Christian only by giving Walter the kind of devotion which the Christian can offer only to God" (54).

I did find another viewpoint, however, that differs from the other greatly. This viewpoint implied that Walter was not as bad as he seems. In Walter's defense, he did provide Griselda with a "preview" of what life with him would

be like when he asked her to take the "oath of perfect obedience" (Shelly 276). Walter did "rescue" Griselda from a life of poverty, loved her, made her his queen and the mother of his children. One could even argue that what he did for the children was best, since Griselda wouldn't know how to rear children that would one day inherit the throne. On the other hand, his sister, royal herself, would teach them exactly how to act among the high social sect.

Christianity vs. Courtly Love

In considering whether Christian or Courtly Love is expressed in this tale, it is quite obvious that only Christianity is represented here. As for the question of rulership in the marriage, "Walter's direct rulership over Griselda is employed fully and without restraint, to the virtual extinction of her as a person" (Kaske 49). Regarding the role of sex in the marriage, "their role— at least by comparison with the other tales in the group—is muted to the point where one hears of Griselda's children with something like surprise" (Kaske 54).

"The Merchant's Tale"—Overview

"The Merchant's Tale" is strikingly different from the first two in the marriage group. The tone is light, but the message is serious. "The Merchant's Tale" is about an old bachelor named January, who has led a life of folly up until now. January began to want a life that includes settling down with a wife. He, as a knight, asks his court for their opinion regarding this matter. After hearing two very different versions on marriage (one good and one bad), January begins his search for a wife.

Choosing a bride "on his own authority" (Chaucer 384), January takes a fair young maiden called May to his heart. All seems well; however, a young squire named Damian who works for January also loves May. Damian falls ill while pining for May; she takes pity on him and soon they are passing glances and notes. May and Damian are closer to the same age, and May begins to tire of her older husband and his almost constant demands regarding her wifely duties. Soon January is taking May to a locked, walled-in garden to

have sex as well. When January goes blind, the affair between May and Damian progresses even faster. However, January will not let May leave his side for almost anything, so May has to resort to extreme measures—she has to read Damian's letters while she goes to the bathroom. Soon May becomes brave enough to try the unthinkable—have an affair with Damian while January stands nearby.

The young would-be lovers arrange a meeting in the garden where May will climb into a tree for a quick session of lovemaking. (Chaucer uses some vibrant language at this point in the story.) However, just as the couple begin their act of deception, January regains his sight. The story concludes with May's logical explanation to January regarding the situation, and her continuation of deception, according to the wishes of the goddess Proserpine.

"The Merchant's Tale"—Analysis

"The Merchant's Tale" evokes sympathy for all of the characters involved. January is an old man searching for the secret of peace and happiness in this life, but in his search, he chooses the exact opposite of what he is looking for. However, he is the most fortunate of the three main characters because he is content with his life. May is a young girl trapped in a loveless marriage to an old man who simply ravages her body at every opportunity. Damian, the squire, is the unhappiest of the three—lovesick and hopeless. Why does Chaucer have January marry May and why doesn't he let either May or Damian have any happiness? Finally, does January have any redeeming qualities that we can point to as a reason that he deserves happiness?

Let's look first at the storyteller, the Merchant. While it is obvious that the Merchant (as Kaske describes him) is "an embittered and insensitive man with a negative point of view" (54) about marriage, there is actually more depth to him than meets the eye. Manly points out that the Merchant is a foreigner who has apparently exchanged foreign money "at illegal rates of profit" (193). The Merchant is also involved in a bad marriage, so he has problems in the two main areas of life—business and love. He tells a powerful

story that is bound to evoke debate because of the state his life is in at this point.

While the meaning of this story is clearly "man's folly" (Kittredge 202), my first question is directed toward the reasoning behind the marriage of January and May. January asks for his friends' help but not their advice concerning his desire to be married. However, January receives conflicting views on marriage from his two brothers, one being a flatterer and the other being a realist (Shelly 255). After hearing (or listening superficially) to these views, January still rushes into marriage. Shelly believes that "his haste springs from a sudden doubt as to the safety of his immortal soul" (255). As previously mentioned, January had led a colorful life and somehow expected all past sins to be forgotten once he settled down. Kaske, however, argues that it is a "marriage founded on little except male lust" (56), an interpretation which certainly seems to be supported by January's actions after the wedding. Through Chaucer's writing, a reader can tell that even he seems to "clearly disapprove of January's peculiar approach to marriage" (Kelly 265).

My second question deals with the unhappiness faced by May and Damian. Does Chaucer feel any sympathy for these two young lovers? I believe he does. Why does Chaucer feel sympathy for a young couple who commit a mortal sin through adultery? "The sentiment may be explained in part by one of the conventions of Courtly Love," or the law of nature. Chaucer does indeed "sympathize with Damian, sick with love-longing, and with May, unhappy in her fate in being wedded to a man in his dotage" (Shelly 258-59). According to the law of nature, it is natural that "an old man who has married a young and beautiful wife should be made a cuckold, however fond and generous he may be" (Shelly 259). In turn, it is equally as "natural for May to desire a proper lover, and for Damian to fall in love with her" (Shelly 259). Although Chaucer pities both May and Damian, it would be unlike him (and the Merchant) to incorporate this feeling into the story (by giving a happy ending for the lovers).

January has many redeeming features. He has led a colorful life, but now wants to change his ways. He has no idea that his marriage is not all that he has believed it to be. He genuinely loves May, and has no idea that his lovemaking is not satisfactory to her. She never informs him of this. He also cares for Damian, so much so that he sends May to care for him while he is ill. It seems cruel that this is where both his trusted wife and his squire take advantage of him. As Shelly comments, "January is undone by his own goodness and generosity" (256-58).

Christianity vs. Courtly Love

"The Merchant's Tale" strictly deals with Courtly Love. There is no question of the tale wavering between Christianity and Courtly Love because the first is never mentioned or even alluded to in the story. To our questions pertaining to the roles of sovereignty and sex in marriage, the answers seem obvious and intertwined. Kaske has pointed out that "for January, sexual pleasure is the supreme good; and as a result, his subjection to his wife at the end of the tale is complete" (56). Another way to phrase this tie between sex and sovereignty in marriage is to say, as does Kaske, that "May's sexual and other wiles are employed fully and without restraint, to the virtual extinction of January as a person" (49). Therefore, in "The Merchant's Tale," sex is supremely important in the marriage and sovereignty belongs to the woman.

"The Franklin's Tale"—Overview

"The Franklin's Tale" is an absolutely delightful ending to the marriage group in the sense that it best depicts what an ideal marriage is like. The story begins with a couple who marry promising to obey and trust each other, rejecting jealousy and sovereignty of one over the other.

The couple, Arveragus and Dorigen, live in perfect harmony together until Arveragus seeks fame and honor in Britain. He stays there two years without his wife, while she weeps and longs for him day and night. Her friends try to cheer her by taking her for a walk along the sea, but when she sees the rocks

below she becomes even more depressed. She worries that these rocks will somehow cause the death of her husband and prays to God that the rocks will "sink in Hell" (Chaucer 431).

It just so happens that there is a squire nearby, Aurelius, who has a crush on Dorigen. Aurelius tells Dorigen of his love and asks her for her love in return; she flatly refuses. However, she jokingly adds that if he removes all the rocks from the coast that she will give her love to him. Aurelius then begins a path of self-destruction as he pines away for Dorigen. Meanwhile, Arveragus comes home and he and his wife are joyfully reunited. Aurelius's brother can endure his sibling's pain no longer; he finds a scholar that may be able to help Aurelius. In order to make Dorigen keep her vow to Aurelius, the scholar uses magic to remove the rocks from the coast, much to Aurelius's delight and to Dorigen's dismay.

Dorigen, after much weeping and worrying, goes to her husband with the problem and promise she made to Aurelius. Her husband, being a man of great honor, tells her that he loves her too much to see her break a vow. (He starts crying as he tells her his feelings about the situation.)

Dorigen then offers to keep her vow to Aurelius; however, she is so despondent that Aurelius cannot bear to see her (and her husband) go through this pain. He releases her from her promise, and the husband and wife are again reunited. The story concludes with Aurelius's being released from his contract with the scholar (or magician) to pay him what would have been his inheritance. In a sense, the story ends with everyone happy, except for the fact that Aurelius still does not have his love, nor the magician his payment. However, Aurelius still has his money to live for.

"The Franklin's Tale"-Analysis

Many scholars have studied and written about "The Franklin's Tale," which undoubtedly presents Chaucer's "solution to the marriage problem" (Shelly 281). Did Chaucer make the right decision as to who should deliver

this tale to the other pilgrims? I believe G.L. Kittredge says it best:

"Marriage, when all is said and done, is an affair of practical life" (210).

Therefore, we as an audience are more inclined to listen to the Franklin, who is "no cloistered rhetorician, but a ruddy, white-bearded vavasour, a great man in his neighborhood, fond of the good things of life and famous for his lavish hospitality" (210). The most logical choice for Chaucer's solution to the marriage problem story was the Franklin, because of his knowledge and experience.

"The Franklin's Tale" is a beautiful love story that resembles a soap opera in its content, but not in its happy ending. Specht described its double function thus: "It seems evident from its content and structure that the overall purpose of the Franklin's narrative is twofold: first, the teller intends to dramatize his own contribution to the discussion of marriage; secondly, he wishes to demonstrate his ideal of gentillesse in action" (166). Kittredge writes of gentillesse that it is "a delightful old term which includes culture, good breeding, and generous sentiments" (206). However, mixed in with all of these positive feelings are some terrible occurrences, such as Dorigen's rash promise and Aurelius's unrequited love. I will now examine what I feel are the two questions that develop from this story—what led to Dorigen's mistake, and who really is the most generous man in "The Franklin's Tale."

One view of why Dorigen made the rash promise to Aurelius is that the relationship between her and her husband was so good that it was "difficult to maintain in the nature of things" (Kaske 59). Another reason behind Dorigen's mistake was her husband's actions leading up to this time. Kaske theorizes that "Arveragus, by leaving his wife to her own devices for a year or two while he seeks glory in arms creates" (60) a situation which will potentially threaten his marriage. Dorigen is so beside herself over her husband's departure that she is willing to let Aurelius get close enough so that he can

declare his love and cause her a great distress. I think that there may be one other factor leading up to the events that occurred—Dorigen's sympathy for Aurelius. She is in such pain that she can't bear to see someone else in love suffer. I agree with Kaske that "it was in kindness; it was in decency that she made the promise" (102).

The question of who the most generous man is in "The Franklin's Tale" is an interesting and debatable one. The three candidates are the knight, the squire, and the clerk. It was very nice of the clerk to release the squire from his contract, thereby losing his rightfully earned money, but I would not classify the clerk as being the most generous. The reason is that I simply do not know enough about him; there is not enough depth to his character for him to be the winner. The knight is obviously a generous man, as he sends his adored wife "off to sleep with Aurelius" (Kaske 62). However, most believe that Arveragus is a "wise and idealistic man" who knows that Aurelius "will not have the heart to go through with it" (Kaske 63), once he sees the state of Dorigen's (broken) heart. Now we realize that although Arveragus loves his wife and is kind to her, he's not necessarily the most generous. In answering the question of "whether more generosity is shown by one who honors an improper oath or one who excuses him from performing it" (Heinrichs 150), we see that the squire emerges as the victor. He gives up his one chance at true love for Dorigen's happiness, and still resolves to pay the debt he owes the clerk (before he releases him from the contract). I predict that the squire did not go without love for long, because any woman can see what a generous man he is and how strong his love can be. I would choose him anyday over the man who left his wife for two years "to go fight in tournaments" (Kaske 64).

Christianity vs. Courtly Love

"The Franklin's Tale" marks a closing to the marriage group and does so in a most convincing manner. In a story which begins in a Courtly Love manner,

the conclusion seems to "skim the cream off the doctrine of Courtly Love, transferring its best qualities to the institution of matrimony" (Specht 167). Indeed, "with 'The Franklin's Tale', Chaucer's employment of Courtly Love ideas ceases" (Dodd 251). While both concepts are presented in the story, Christian love is deemed best through the conclusion. In answering the question as to the role of sex in marriage, in this tale there is a balance "between sexual pleasure and the less rapturous marital values" (Kaske 65). In other words, sex is important, but not all important or even a priority in marriage. As to the question of sovereignty, "Arveragus becomes recognizable as a husband who rules his wife not by dominating her, but by outthinking her: and the ending of the tale becomes a precise and meaningful contrast to that of "The Wife of Bath's Tale"—with male wisdom supreme, and woman allowed her limited freedom within it" (Kaske 64).

Conclusion

Geoffrey Chaucer wrote about marriage and what it takes to make a marriage work. After presenting three other different views of marriage in The Canterbury Tales, he presents "The Franklin's Tale" as what "marriage ought to be" (Kaske 101). While Chaucer's view might be accepted by many, I would like to look at still some other views of practicing the fine art of marriage.

In my research, I came across two very fine quotations concerning marriage. The first is from Specht (167), who says that there must be "mutual love, respect, trust, and forbearance" for a marriage to work. Kittredge also comments on marriage, saying: "In true marriage there should be no sovereignty on either side. Love must be the controlling principle,—perfect, gentle love, which brings forbearance with it" (207). Although Chaucer, Specht, and Kittredge all make valuable contributions, I felt that I should still research farther into the subject.

I turned to the oldest known source on all matters of life—The King James Bible. There are many quotations in the Bible concerning marriage; however,

I feel that I Corinthians 13, also known as the love chapter, says everything concisely and completely. I will close with this Scripture, which is what I believe constitutes a true love and shows characteristics needed for a good or ideal marriage.

Verse 4. Charity [love] suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

Verse 5. Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

Verse 6. Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

Verse 7. Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Verse 8. Charity never faileth.

And showing the importance of love, including the love which leads to marriage, verse 13 sums it up: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."

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