Sexuality, Contraception, and Abortion in Medieval English Literature

Sršić, Petra

Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet u Osijeku

Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskoga jezika i književnosti i povijesti nastavničkog usmjerenja

Petra Sršić

Seksualnost, kontracepcija i pobačaj u srednjovjekovnoj engleskoj književnosti

Diplomski rad

Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

Osijek, 2022.

Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet u Osijeku

Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost
Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskoga jezika i književnosti i povijesti nastavničkog usmjerenja

Petra Sršić

Seksualnost, kontracepcija i pobačaj u srednjovjekovnoj engleskoj književnosti

Diplomski rad

Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

Osijek, 2022.

Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major MA Programme in English Language and Literature (Education Studies) and History (Education Studies)

Petra Sršić

Sexuality, Contraception, and Abortion in Medieval English Literature

Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Ljubica Matek, Ph.D., Associate Professor

Osijek, 2022

Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of English

Double Major MA Programme in English Language and Literature (Education Studies) and History (Education Studies)

Petra Sršić

Sexuality, Contraception, and Abortion in Medieval English Literature

Master's Thesis

Scientific area: humanities

Scientific field: philology

Scientific branch: English studies

Supervisor: Ljubica Matek, Ph.D., Associate Professor

Osijek, 2022

IZJAVA

Izjavljujem s punom materijalnom i moralnom odgovornošću da sam ovaj rad samostalno napisao/napisala te da u njemu nema kopiranih ili prepisanih dijelova teksta tuđih radova, a da nisu označeni kao citati s navođenjem izvora odakle su preneseni.

Svojim vlastoručnim potpisom potvrđujem da sam suglasan/suglasna da Filozofski fakultet u Osijeku trajno pohrani i javno objavi ovaj moj rad u internetskoj bazi završnih i diplomskih radova knjižnice Filozofskog fakulteta u Osijeku, knjižnice Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku i Nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice u Zagrebu.

U Osijeku, 30. kolovoza 2022.

P. Srsić 0122224416

ime i prezime studenta, JMBAG

Abstract

During the medieval period, women's lives were shaped by the Church and the patriarchal society. They had little control over their lives and had to conform to the rules and norms of acceptable behaviour. They were mostly subjected to male authority and had little agency or power. After describing the position of women in society and the medieval understanding of female sexuality, contraception, and abortion, this paper examines how female characters from three literary works use sexuality, as well as contraceptive and abortive means to achieve agency and power. The thesis examines different aspects of sexuality and factors connected to it in Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" and "The Merchant's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue," and *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Namely, all discussed literary texts mention and deal with marital sexuality and rape, and talk about sexuality through food metaphors. Moreover, the thesis examines the possibility of the use of contraceptive and abortive means to establish control over one's body. A detailed analysis shows that female protagonists utilize their sexuality in a commercial or spiritual sense to achieve agency and authority in other areas of their lives, while contraceptive and abortive means are used to control their bodies and make such uses possible.

Keywords: sexuality, contraception, abortion, agency, Margery Kempe, Geoffrey Chaucer.

Contents

Introduction 9

1. Women, Sexuality, Contraception, and Abortion in Medieval England 12

2. Sexuality in Medieval English Literature 17

2. 1. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" 17

2. 1. 1. Experience versus Authority 17

2. 1. 2. Marital sexuality 19

2. 1. 3. The Conceptualization of Sexuality 20

2. 1. 4. The Influence of the Planets 23

2. 1. 5. Female sovereignty 26

2. 1. 6. "The Tale" 28

2. 2. "The Merchant's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue" 31

2. 2. 1. The Marriage Encomium 31

2. 2. 2. Pagan Elements 32

2. 2. 3. Characterization 33

2. 2. 4. Passivity and Agency 35

2. 2. 5. Sexuality as Food Metaphors 38

2. 2. 6. Violent Sexuality 39

2. 3. *The Book of Margery Kempe* 42

2. 3. 1. Marital Sexuality 43

2. 3. 2. Childbirth as the Objective of Marital Sexuality 45

2. 3. 3. Temptation and Punishment 46

2. 3. 4. Penance as a Form of Sexual Control 48

2. 3. 5. Manifest Chastity 49

2. 3. 6. Fear of Rape 50

2. 3. 7. Spiritual Sexuality 51

3. Contraception and Abortion in Medieval English Literature 54
3. 1. “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” 54
3. 2. “The Merchant’s Tale, Prologue, and Epilogue 57
3. 3. *The Book of Margery Kempe* 59
Conclusion 62
Works Cited 64

Introduction

During the medieval period, the patriarchal Christian society limited female agency and relegated women to specific roles and positions within it.[1] Women had no political rights and could but seldom wield power and influence on their own. Although some, if not most, women could choose a husband for themselves, others were married off to men that the male members of the family have chosen for them. They were to bear children and provide heirs of the estate and thus ensure the continuation of the patriarchal line. There were many expectations and instructions as to how they should behave. The most influential role model of proper female behaviour was the Virgin Mary. Like Mary, women had to be obedient wives, attentive mothers, modest, and graceful. However, the long tradition of clerical misogynistic writing portrayed them as sexually insatiable, greedy, and conniving. By labelling women as such, men successfully constrained them within the boundaries they imposed. Female agency and influence threatened male dominance and thus had to be limited to an appropriate degree. Therefore, the Church and society controlled many spheres of women's lives, including the most intimate, their bodies and sexuality. However, women did not always comply with the norms and boundaries set upon them and did what was necessary to achieve agency and power.

The literature of the period portrays the position of women and testifies to the roles they had in society. By analysing literary works by Geoffrey Chaucer and Margery Kempe, this paper will present how women use sexuality and the available means of contraception and abortion to achieve power and influence in medieval English literature. When it comes to female sexuality, and somewhat less to contraception and abortion, in literature, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* offer valuable insight into how these issues were perceived by men. Chaucer probably began writing *The Canterbury Tales* in the late 1380s and they remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1400 (Saunders, "Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*" 452). The tales are told by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury and belong to different literary genres. This paper analyses "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" and "The Merchant's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue."[2]

In "The General Prologue", Chaucer introduces the Wife of Bath, Alisoun, as a cloth maker from "beside Bath" (line 445). She was married five times and journeyed to many holy places on pilgrimage (*GP* 463). In her long "Prologue," Alisoun talks about her marital

[1] Plenty of research confirms these claims (see Bullough and Brundage (1996), Arnold and Lewis (2004)).
[2] Henceforth, the title "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" will be abbreviated to *WBPT*, the title "The Merchant's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue" to *MPTE*, and "The General Prologue" to *GP*.

experiences and her "Tale" is a romance about a knight who has to learn and enact the lesson of what women desire most. There is a large body of research on the Wife of Bath. Mostly she is viewed as a negative and disruptive character who tries to break out of the prevailing masculine narrative but ultimately fails (Carruthers 38; Dinshaw 118). Chaucer's second tale, *MPTE*, is a fabliau which follows January, an old knight, who wishes to marry. After expounding on the benefits of married life, January chooses young May as his wife. At first she is passive and submissive to him, but in the end she has an affair with January's young squire and makes January a cuckold.

The third literary work the paper examines, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, was rediscovered in a country house in 1934. The earliest autobiography in the English language, *The Book of Margery Kempe* recounts her religious and spiritual experiences. It was written in 1438 by a priest to whom Margery, since she could neither read nor write, dictated her life (Windeatt, Introduction 9). Margery's autobiography, although mostly dealing with religious matters, is unlike other female religious writing of that period[3] as mentions of her sexual experiences are interspersed throughout the book, describing Margery's wish to live in chastity with her husband and her struggle against the temptation of lechery. Whereas Deborah S. Ellis states that "the *Book of Margery Kempe*, is the work of a woman – and, at that, a woman in rebellion against conventional English outlets for piety and domesticity" (603), her belief is always proven to be orthodox and her actions within society's limits. Margery mentions visits to religious figures, negative reactions and slander people spread about her, and various instances of being questioned for heresy. There is an ongoing debate among critics over where to "position Margery on a continuum between a devotional subject explicable by the available models of her day and a unique individual who can be subjected to some degree of psychological analysis" (Stanton 170).[4] However, this paper will only attempt to provide psychological analysis in parts where it can be done without much hindrance to the main topic.

The first chapter deals with the position of women in society and their roles as wives and mothers. It mentions important influences on the creation of the patriarchal Christian discourse and the norms of the period. Moreover, medieval understanding of female sexuality, contraception, and abortion is examined in order to present a framework for the analysis of the

[3] Biographies of saintly women differ greatly from Margery's account. Whereas *The Book of Margery Kempe* begins with marriage and the first childbirth, other biographies start from childhood, the saints showing signs of devotion early on (Windeatt, Notes 302; Williams 535).

[4] Critics often term Margery's religious system as "terrible hysteria," "neuroticism," calling her "a hysteric, if not an epileptic," "a sufferer from morbid self-engrossment," and "quite mad" (qtd. in Aers, ch. 2). Windeatt describes her behaviour as "hysterical personality organization" (Notes 301).

selected works. By presenting the medieval discourse on these topics, it is possible to analyse how the selected works deviate from the norm and how women use their sexuality and contraceptive or abortive means to achieve agency and power.

The following chapter focuses on the analysis of sexuality in the selected works. The analysis of each literary work is divided into several other subchapters, which deal with specific areas of sexuality. The first subchapter examines sexuality in *WBPT* and its subchapters focus on: Alisoun's marital experience which she juxtaposes with the writings of Church authorities on the topic, her relationship with her husbands, talking about sexuality via food metaphors, talking about sexuality as a commodity, characterization of women as influenced by the planets, the process of achieving sovereignty in marriage, and a brief analysis of sexuality and sovereignty in the "Wife of Bath's Tale." The second larger subchapter deals with sexuality in *MPTE*. Smaller subchapters begin with January's praise of marriage and continue with the influence of pagan elements on the characters and the characters' meaningful descriptions. The analysis of May's initial passivity and the assuming of agency is followed by once again examining sexuality presented through food metaphors. The final smaller subchapter deals with violent sexuality. Lastly, the third larger subchapter examines sexuality in *The Book of Margery Kempe.* The subchapter begins with an examination of Margery's intimate relationship with her husband and continues with the analysis of her unwanted pregnancies, sexual imagery and urges as a form of temptation and punishment, penance as a form of controlling her sexual urges, and Margery' desire to showcase her chastity. Sexual violence towards Margery and her fear of rape are discussed in the next subchapter. The last subchapter extensively examines Margery's framing of her spirituality in familial and somewhat erotic terms.

The third and final chapter deals with contraception and abortion in the selected works. The first subchapter describes Alisoun's possible reasons for avoiding or terminating a pregnancy and the subtle hints that she might have used contraceptive or abortive means. The next subchapter deals with January's desire for an heir and the possibility of consuming pears as a contraceptive in order to avoid an unwanted pregnancy. Lastly, the third subchapter of the analysis discusses Margery's lack of knowledge about contraception and the desire to live chastely as a means of preventing pregnancy. Additionally, the possibility that Margery used contraception or had an abortion prior to the events of *The Book* is considered. Lastly, the analysis is followed by a recapitulation of the findings and a few concluding observations.

1. Women, Sexuality, Contraception, and Abortion in Medieval England

In medieval literature, female characters have various roles, but mostly they are secondary characters who serve to measure the heroic achievements of the male protagonist, represent love interests, or offer help or comfort. In the Late Middle Ages, as women were becoming more active, some literature presented them as active subjects, but mostly in a negative light as being troublesome or shrews (O'Pry-Reynolds 43). The establishment of their agency and power was mostly done through subverting existing norms and was thus termed as unacceptable and deviant. In order to successfully analyse how the characters in the selected works used sexuality, contraception, and abortion to gain agency and power, it is necessary to explain the position of women in society, and the medieval understanding of female sexuality, contraception, and abortion.

The medieval world is strictly hierarchical in political, religious, and social terms. The position of women in this hierarchy was determined by the belief that they were inferior due to the fact that their bodies do not produce semen and the lack of it makes their body temperature naturally lower. As such, women were considered cold and moist and connected to weakness and softness, as opposed to men who were warm and thus strong and hard (Cadden, ch. 3; Allman and Hanks 40). Medieval medicine promoted balance of the humours[5] and the superfluities of the body had to be either expelled or converted into something else. Medieval Aristotelians believed that useful superfluities were converted into "passive nutrient for foetuses" in cooler bodies and into "formative principle and motive power of generation" in warmer bodies (Cadden, ch. 3). Therefore, men were considered active and women passive. Moreover, maleness was associated with rational thought, whereas women were carnal (Salisbury, ch. 4).

Young girls transitioned into adulthood, and were considered ready for marriage, at about the age of twelve (Bardsley 98). They learned about sexuality mostly from other, more experienced women around them, from folktales and stories, or from the preaching of churchmen. The writings of church fathers, holy men, and the Bible influenced every sphere of medieval life, including views on women, sexuality, marriage, contraception, and abortion. The advice the clerics gave regarding sexuality propagated virginity and virtue. According to the writings of Saint Paul, virgins are closest to God in grace. They are followed by widows, and lastly, by married women. However, whilst virginity was the highest ideal of womanhood in the Middle Ages, women were still considered sexually insatiable and "always ready for

[5] There are four humours: blood, phlegm, bile, and black bile. (See Jouanna 335-359).

intercourse"; a conclusion made by Aristotle and confirmed by such authors as Albertus Magnus (qtd. in Cadden, ch. 3). It was even considered women were strengthened by sexual intercourse because they "are made hot from the motion that the man makes during coitus" and the hot sperm warms a woman's body (qtd. in Cadden, ch. 3). On the other hand, women were likewise thought of as sexually reticent and diffident, an opinion which enabled and authorized male sexual intervention (Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* 82). "The female sexual drive was generally characterized as passive," women being the recipients of the deed and men the agents (Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*, 85).

During the late Middle Ages, there were two socially acceptable ways of life for a woman. Women could either marry or become nuns. Women who chose to become nuns were considered the brides of Christ, entering into a spiritual marriage as virgins. Women who chose neither of the options worked a trade or as prostitutes, since it was one of the rare occupations open to them. Prostitution was deemed a necessary evil. Men who needed to satisfy their sexual desires before marriage could safely do so with a prostitute, rather than harrying virgins or matrons (Brundage 43). Even though prostitutes were considered deviant and immoral as they promoted recreational sex, they were tolerated in order to keep the peace in society. However, a woman's primary role was that of a wife and it was important a woman marries due to the belief she might fall ill or become hysterical if she remains unmarried, that is, if she does not engage in sexual relations regularly (Knowles; Green 22). Sexual release was regarded as a necessary excretory function in which the body expelled certain superfluities. Thus, sexual abstinence was potentially unhealthy (Cadden, ch. 3). Regarding the selection of a spouse, the same rules did not apply for the aristocracy and the lower classes of society – the lower the class, the greater the freedom of selection. Thus, young women rarely married older men and it usually happened among the aristocracy (Davis 41). Nevertheless, in most cases the woman's father or a close male relative chose the husband, as the peaceful sharing of women in arranged marriages benefited the patrimony (Rose 29). If a girl was married before she got her menstruation, the marriage was not consumed until after she did.[6] A wife was viewed as a piece of "valuable property over which the laws of religion and society gave the husband overwhelming power, massive domestic, legal, and political privileges" (Aers, ch. 2). Wives of the elite were generally in a "far more passivized and domestically powerless position than those of lower-class urban and rural families" (Aers, ch. 2). The position of a married woman from a lower-class family was different from that dictated by the common law. To exemplify, local customs allow the woman

[6] The average age of menarche, that is, the first menstruation, was around fifteen, whereas today it is around twelve or thirteen (Bardsley 98).

control over her property and liberty of contract and trade (qtd. in Carruthers 210). The customs of the bourgeoisie "gave propertied married women rights" that enabled them to retain the ownership and control of their property and enter "into contracts in their own names, their husbands having neither legal liability nor power of consent in such matters" (Carruthers 210). Thus, women could independently own a business or property.

Standard Church teachings regarding marriage and sexuality relied on Gratian's *Decretum*, a textbook of canon law which stated that "marriage was part of natural law and ordained by God" (Gulley 135; Brundage 39). However, there is a clear duality to medieval thought and writing featuring such views that marriage is ordained by God and, on the contrary, that it is to be avoided because it entails sexual relations between the couple, which were viewed as venial sin. Some well-known authorities who presented marriage in a negative light were St. Paul and St. Jerome. The Christian doctrine that sex is for procreative purposes only is supported by St. Jerome, St. Isidore, St. Augustine, St. Gregory, and St. Thomas Aquinas (Gulley 139; Harris 13; Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* 78). Sexual relations were only to be practiced by married couples, in the time allowed and for the purpose of begetting children. *Decretum* allowed sexual intercourse in marriage "in order to beget a child, or to avert temptations to marital infidelity" (qtd. in Brundage 40), or to pay the debt of marriage (Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* 79). In addition to these restrictions, and in order to protect married couples from excessive lust, sexual abstinence was proscribed for about five months of the year, or more if the woman was pregnant: during menstruation, during pregnancy, throughout Lent, Pentecost, and Advent, on major liturgical feast days, all Sundays, and three or more days before receiving communion (Brundage 36; Gulley 139; Mount 108; McCarthy 66-8). Moreover, only the missionary position during sexual intercourse was condoned by the Church (Brundage 40). The breaking of these rules was considered sinful and even if people had sexual relations within the clerical prescriptions for meritorious intercourse, it was still considered venial sin (Brundage 41; Aers, ch. 2). However, both husband and wife were obliged to pay the debt of marriage (Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* 79). The latter term refers to the right to demand and be granted sexual intercourse within marriage under medieval canon law (Windeatt, Notes 303).[7] Both husband and wife were obliged to pay the debt of marriage. Although it should be reciprocal, the doctrine assumes that husbands will invoke the debt of marriage more often than wives, coercing them to intercourse (Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* 81).

[7] The concept of marital debt is based on St. Paul's writing in 1 Corinthians 7.3-4 (Gulley 140; McKinley 371; Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* 81).

During the medieval period, women could bear children during an interval which lasted from about fifteen to forty years and a "fertile" marriage could have six to seven children who would survive childhood, depending on children mortality (Riddle 16; Bardsley 108-109). Mercantile families on average had three to four children, but ten or eleven children were also common (Phillips 24). Well-to-do families often had more children because mothers did not breast-feed children themselves but gave them to wet-nurses for care. Since breast-feeding delays the onset of menstruation, these women could bear children sooner than those who took care of them (Bullough 38). During the medieval period "mothers were expected to be loving and nurturing figures who provided early religious and moral instruction for their children within the home" (Williams 532). However, there were women who for some reason did not want to conceive or give birth to a child, and thus resorted to contraceptive and abortive means. The medieval view of contraception and abortion was complicated due to the unclear definition of conception. It was considered that conception occurs sometime after sexual relations, with the forming of an embryo, which was only thought of as alive in the third month of pregnancy, and it had no soul until it started moving (Bardsley 110). The prevalent belief was that women likewise expel seed necessary for conception, and the expulsion of seed results in pleasure.[8] Therefore, a woman who gets pregnant after having sexual relations must have enjoyed them, which legally nullified the accusations of rape if it resulted in pregnancy (Cadden, ch. 3).

There were various reasons for the use of contraceptive or abortive means. Extramarital sexual relations are one of them, especially if the woman in question is an aristocrat, as there could be no doubt about the lineage of the heir of the estate (Bednarski 292; Brundage 42). The same reasoning applied for first-time-brides who were expected to be virgins. If a woman was unmarried, sexual activity resulting in pregnancy could have harmed her and her family's reputation. In the rules for providing aid in the hospital of St. John in Cambridge, it is stated that "the infirm and debilitated were to be admitted 'except for pregnant women, lepers, the wounded, contracted and insane"' (Metzler 281). Irina Metzler concludes that the ban for pregnant women implies an immoral activity from single women without support of the family (281). An adulteress caught in the act or pregnant as a result of her crime could be expelled from her home, separated from her children, and her dowry could be confiscated by her husband (Brundage 42). Some women who gave birth prior to marriage were so disgraced they murdered their infants (Müller 155). Another reason for the use of contraception and abortion was a difficult financial situation of the family. The Church considered the use of contraception a sin,

[8] This female seed had a different nature from the man's seed due to the difference in their body temperature (Cadden, ch. 3).

as it prevented conception and meant that sexual relations were practiced for pleasure. St. Jerome compared contraception to murder (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 111). Gratian's *Decretum* included a chapter written by St. Augustine and judged contraception as destructive for marriage and equal to murder (Bullough 52-4). Pope Gregory IX wrote a collection of cannon law in which the use of contraception was termed an act of murder and it was valid until 1917 (Bullough 54). Likewise, Church authorities mostly condemned abortion, with the exception of some theologians who supported Aristotle's theory that the soul of the foetus develops in three stages and that abortion is morally acceptable until the foetus reaches the third phase and becomes rational (Bullough 50). The period of development lasts forty days for male souls and eighty for female. This belief became cannon law with the writings of Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241) (Bullough 1-2; Müller 25). However, Christian authors did not condemn abortion undertaken to save a woman's life and there are several accounts of Irish saints preforming abortions to help women (Betancourt). Such an abortion can be excused by the pitiful circumstances of the female victim, and redeemed by an appeal to the clemency of the Virgin Mary (Van de Walle 329).

Based on the contents of confessional prayer books, contraception was a widespread sin and confessors were to give difficult penance for its use (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 112). Examples of contraceptive means used during the Middle Ages are herbal potions, magical amulets, interrupted coitus, and oral and anal sex. Despite Church prohibitions and preaching, some medical and natural philosophy books contained knowledge of contraception and abortion, and some offered advice to stimulate the arrival of menstruation as a cure to a common disease called amenorrhea (Cadden, ch. 3). *Thesaurus pauperum* from Peter of Spain, the writings of Albertus Magnus, Rhazes, and Avicenna, Hippocrates' texts on the illnesses of women, Soranus' gynaecological treatises, and the Trotula texts from Salerno were all known, copied, and spread throughout the Middle Ages (Riddle 33; Atkinson 52). Although mostly male physicians wrote treatises on gynaecology, the main role regarding birth, help with the conception, prevention of conception, and abortion belonged to women who counselled other women about medication and therapy (Atkinson 57; Blumenfeld-Kosinski 96; Müller 153). However, as there was no way to test the efficiency of certain recipes, it was important to follow the instructions and be careful with the amounts of certain, possibly deadly, ingredients. This was not always possible because recipes often did not specify which part of a plant should be used or if it was to be made into a potion or a pessary[9] (Cadden, ch. 3). Some methods of contraception include sneezing after sexual relations (De La Roncière 216), douching of the vagina with vinegar and salt water

[9] A pessary is "a small piece of solid medicine that is placed inside a woman's vagina and left to dissolve, used to cure an infection or to prevent her from becoming pregnant" ("pessary").

(Bullough 99), and vaginal suppositories (La Roy Ladurie 173). There were even some superstitious methods such as amulets worn around a woman's neck made of a weasel's leg, cat's liver or the bones of black cats, and a uterus of a barren goat (Green 99). It was believed that a woman will not conceive if she thrice walks around a place where a pregnant wolf urinated (Knowles). Furthermore, some methods of abortion include surgical removal of the foetus, herbal potions made from plants such as wild carrot, different types of wormwood, mint, birthwort, rue, and savin juniper (Bardsley 110; Jöchle 429-431; Riddle 32; Müller 152). Most of these plants likewise cause dizziness, nausea, retching, organ damage, and, in worst cases, death. Due to the sinful and sensitive nature of the topic and the fact that it was a female area of expertise, there is a limited number of references to contraception and abortion in European fiction of the time. In his study of birth control in European short fiction in the period of 1150-1650, Etienne Van de Walle states that "majority of the tales focus on pre-marital or extra-marital sexual encounters where conceptions are likely to be unwanted, and the narratives provide a context and motivations for the use of birth control" (321). However, Van de Walle found only one reference to both contraception and abortion in *The Canterbury Tales* - in "The Parson's Tale." Other works, such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, tales of Matteo Bandello, and Marguerite de Navarre's *The Heptaméron* likewise contain sparse mentions of birth control. *The Decameron* contains two mentions of abortion in 100 tales, Matteo Bandello's 214 tales feature one mention and *The Heptaméron* none in 72 tales (Van de Walle 322). At the time, concealment of pregnancy and infanticide receive much more attention in fiction, legal sources, and court cases (Van de Walle 323).

2. Sexuality in Medieval English Literature

2. 1. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale"

2. 1. 1. Experience versus Authority

The Wife of Bath describes her marital experience in the "Prologue," which is longer than her "Tale." At the beginning of the "Prologue" Alisoun establishes the value of her knowledge gained through experience: "Experience, though no written authority / Were in this world, is good enough for me / To speak of the woe that is in marriage;" (*WBPT*, lines 1-3). Her experience is such that she is "Of five husbands' schooling" (*WBPT*, line 44f) and, considering "Differing schools make perfect clerks, / And differing practice in many various works / Makes the workman truly perfect;" (*WBPT*, line 44c-e), it might be stated she considers being a wife her craft, which she perfected. Alisoun was married "since I was twelve years of age," (*WBPT*, line

4), which is rather early for someone of her, probably middle-class, social status. It can be surmised that Alisoun comes from a middle- or a lower-class family greedy enough or poor enough to marry her off at such an early age (Carruthers 214). Since then, Alisoun has accumulated knowledge of Church doctrine and clerical writing, and mentions of Biblical stories and ancient and medieval literary works that promote a long tradition of misogyny are dispersed throughout *WBPT*. Alisoun's knowledge of Church doctrine can be termed as extensive, as she mentions and critiques many treatises and stories. Her ultimate goal is to present her companions with an alternative interpretation of prevailing rhetoric on marriage and women and to defend a theology that acknowledges sexual activity and desire (Dinshaw 117). Church doctrine recommends a life of chaste widowhood, but Alisoun marries repeatedly so she can enjoy herself sexually and still achieve salvation.[10] She states that it should not be considered evil to have so many husbands because "God commanded us to grow fruitful and multiply" (*WBPT*, line 28) and "he made no mention of number" (*WBPT*, line 32) of spouses one might marry. Alisoun does not plan to stop at five marriages but welcomes the sixth husband (*WBPT*, line 45) because she "will not keep myself chaste in everything" (*WBPT*, line 46). Thus, she must marry because "It is better to be wedded than to burn" (*WBPT*, line 52). Alisoun argues that Jesus never counselled virginity, and the Apostle Paul only advised it: "For had God commanded maidenhood, / Then had he damned marriage along with the act (of procreation)" (*WBPT*, lines 69-70). Her ridicule of such clerical teaching is supported by the fact that in reality a wealthy widow was considered a desirable match (Carruthers 213). At the end of the prologue, Alisoun mentions the "book of wicked wives" (*WBPT*, line 685) which contains much of St. Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, a treatise in which he harshly attacks marriage and women for Jovinian states that virgins, widows, and married women, even remarried widows, are of equal merit in the Christian community (Gulley 136; Arnell 938). Jankin, Alisoun's fifth husband, who is a clerk, reads the book to Alisoun in his spare time because "it is an impossibility / That any clerk will speak good of women, / Unless it be of holy saints' lives," (*WBPT*, lines 688-90). His attempt to re-educate her, who has already had four husbands and judges her experience worthier than any authority, ends with Alisoun's decision to burn the book. The burning of the book negates its antifeminist discourse and message, and signifies female resistance against it.[11] Alisoun states that "if women had written stories . . . They would have written of men more wickedness / Than all the male sex

[10] There is mixed criticism of marrying more than once, with St. Jerome stating that a second or fifth marriage was licit and Gratian's *Decretum* stating "there is a general ban on men and women contracting marriages frequently" (qtd. in D'Avray 142-3). Two twelfth-century papal decretals stated that second marriages should be treated differently (D'Avray 143).

[11] Carruthers mentions the controversy surrounding *Adversus Jovinianum* in which St. Jerome himself came to approve the destruction of the treatise, and calls Alisoun's treatment of it a "rich joke" (211).

could set right" (*WBPT*, lines 693-96); that is, they would retaliate by writing about men in the same way they do about women. Thus, Alisoun condemns the writings of clerics and other authorities and uses her experience to present how to build a true marriage.

2. 1. 2. Marital sexuality

Regarding the choices of her husbands, Alison has mostly been guided by desire and avarice. She states that "I have picked out the best, / Both of their lower purse (scrotum) and of their strongbox" (*WBPT*, line 44a-b), "strongbox" referring to the money chest. Her statement probably refers to husbands two through five, as her first husband was most likely chosen by her parents. Alisoun's references to her first husband show that this type of an arranged marriage ignores, and probably goes against, the woman's desires. As Carolyn Dinshaw states, "if the patriarchal economy of the trade of women proceeds without woman's necessary acquiescence, it is always potentially performing a rape" (115). Lesley A. Coote agrees and states that Alisoun "appears to be implying that male-dominated society is much more culpably violent towards women, and that the marriage of a twelve-year-old girl to an old man is a rape in which both society and the Church collude" (206). The usage of the rape motif later in her tale may indicate that Alisoun thinks of her first marriage in similar terms. Alisoun had three good husbands and two bad ones (*WBPT*, line 196). Her reasoning behind marrying the fourth husband is never fully disclosed but it may be due to him often being away for work and her getting the chance to visit people, enjoy her freedom, and spread word about her business (Carruthers 214). The three good husbands were "good men, and rich, and old" (*WBPT*, line 197), but "Hardly might they the statute hold (pay the debt [of matrimony])" (*WBPT*, line 198). Nonetheless, she made them work at night event though she "set no store by it" (*WBPT*, line 202-203). Despite not being fully sexually satisfied, Alisoun would rather "bestow the flower of all my age / In the acts and in fruit of marriage" (*WBPT*, lines 113-114), than live in chastity. She views her sexuality as a flower that does not wilt with age and one that cannot be plucked but must be bestowed by her. Moreover, these lines imply that Alisoun accepts marriage as an acceptable social and religious boundary of female sexuality. This is open to interpretation as *GP* mentions "other company in youth" (line 461) and she states "I swore that all my walking out by night / Was to spy out wenches with whom he had intercourse; / Under that pretense I had many a mirth" (*WBPT*, lines 397-99). The ambiguity of the statements prevents any conclusions about whether she was married at the time she had other company and what "mirth" refers to. Moreover, Alisoun states that: "He is too great a miser that would refuse / A man to light a candle at his lantern; / He shall have never the less light, by God" (*WBPT*, lines 333-35), implying that a cheating wife will

nonetheless pay her marital debt, but her sexual behaviour is not regulated by her husband (Pugh, "Queering Genres" 128). However, the narrative does not provide a description of an adulterous sexual act; thus, it can be stated that "detailed representation of the erotic experience of adulterous female desire thus stands as a taboo" (Allman and Hanks 56).

At the moment of speaking Alisoun is an older woman, but she is still sexually vigorous and ready for another marriage. In the next few lines, Alisoun discusses the function of male and female genitalia and states it is not only "made for purgation / Of urine" (*WBPT*, lines 120-121) but "for both; / That is to say, for urination and for ease / Of procreation, in which we do not displease God" (*WBPT*, lines 127-129). Moreover, Alisoun invokes the debt of marriage that husbands are to pay with their "blessed instrument" (*WBPT*, lines 127-129). Her use of the adjective "blessed" might be a mockery of the debt of matrimony or of the instrument itself due to the dominance of men in society. Moreover, Alisoun views her sexuality as a gift and thus not sinful: "In wifehood I will use my instrument / As freely as my Maker has it sent" (*WBPT*, lines 149-50). She promises her "husband shall have it both evenings and mornings, / When it pleases him to come forth and pay his debt" (*WBPT*, lines 152-153). Here Alisoun may be equated with the stereotype of the insatiable woman who is always ready for sexual intercourse. The following lines, which refer to her fifth husband, support this characterization:

> But in our bed he was so lively and gay,
>
> And moreover he so well could deceive me,
>
> When he would have my "pretty thing";
>
> That though he had beat me on every bone,
>
> He could win back my love straightway. (*WBPT*, lines 508-12)

These lines, coming from a male author, corroborate a stereotype that to women, sexual prowess is the most sought for and valued characteristic in men, and that women would suffer anything only to keep such a man by their side. They also suggest that the Wife is resigned to male violence toward women, at least in her relationship with Jankin (Allman and Hanks 49). Moreover, she states he was "standoffish" in his love (*WBPT*, line 514) and calls such treatment female fantasy: "Forbid us a thing, and we desire it" (*WBPT*, line 519).

2. 1. 3. The Conceptualization of Sexuality

One of the ways sexuality is conceptualized in both *WBPT* and *MPTE* is talking about sexuality using vocabulary that falls into the semantic field of food. In the first part of the

prologue, Alisoun states Christ and the saints lived in perfect chastity and she "will envy no virginity" (*WBPT*, line 142). She borrows St. Jerome's analogy and refers to virgins as "bread of pure wheat-seed" and to wives as "barley-bread" (*WBPT*, lines 143-144). She does not discredit barley-bread, yet states that "with barley-bread, Mark can tell it, / Our Lord Jesus refreshed many a man" (*WBPT*, lines 145-146).[12] Alisoun expands this food analogy and "parodies a sacramental image through its vehicle" (Allman and Hanks 55). Since it is Christ who distributes the bread as spiritual and bodily refreshment it can be viewed as transubstantiating of women. Later, when age takes her beauty and vigour, which she refers to as her "flour", she must sell bran (*WBPT*, lines 475-78), the outer cover of grain left over in the process of making flour. Her use of food metaphors – virgins as bread of pure wheat-seed, widows as barley-bread, flour as beauty and vigour and bran as what is left – confirms Allman and Hanks' statement that Alisoun's dominant metaphor for her own sexuality is consumption, "with herself as the provision and her husbands – and male auditors of her performance" as the consumers (*WBPT*, line 55). The following lines, "And have his suffering also / Upon his flesh, while I am his wife" (*WBPT*, lines 156-57), and "many a night they sang 'Woe is me!'" (*WBPT*, line 216), exemplify how her husbands' acceptance of her flour and barley-bread is forced and fearful. Allman and Hanks state that Chaucer remakes a passive, objectified image of female sexuality into an "image of self-conscious aggression and agency, specifically a self-administered and inverted sacrament, a force-feeding of sexualized grace" (56). Moreover, Alisoun expands the food metaphor to refer to men as well: "And make me a feigned appetite; / And yet in bacon (old meat) I never had delight" (417-18). She states she has no appetite, this time referring to her older husbands as bacon, old and chewy meat from a pig.

Food metaphors are combined with the metaphor of the wife as a commodity and a merchant (Delany 72). The lesson Alisoun learns in her first marriage, and applies in the following, is that "marriage is contracted for money" (Carruthers 214). The marital transaction is clear in the following lines: "Thou shalt not both, though thou were crazy with anger, / Be master of my body and of my property" (*WBPT*, lines 313-14). These lines refer to her first three marriages during which she was young and beautiful and could still sell her flour to her rich husbands. Later she makes this claim again: "I would no longer in the bed abide, / If I felt his arm over my side, / Until he had paid his penalty to me" (*WBPT*, lines 409-11), and concludes with "Anyone can profit, for everything is for sale" (*WBPT*, line 414). Thus, Alisoun initially considers the institution of marriage solely as a financial agreement: "For profit I would endure

[12] It is actually John, not Mark who recounts the miracle of the loaves (Justman, "Literal and Symbolic" 201).

all his lust" (*WBPT*, line 416). Alisoun views herself as a commodity and as the merchant because she trades her body for land and money and chooses her deals, that is, husbands. She expounds on her sexuality and assures her husbands of her constant availability not because she enjoys the sexual relations, but because she is marketing her wares and expects to profit in return. The strategy of setting mercantile conditions on their private encounters turns her husband's sexuality into a weakness she exploits (Cartlidge 226). Marriage is a means through which she can freely fulfil her sexual urges and a profitable business endeavour. By choosing her next husband and "selling herself," Alisoun establishes control and ownership over her body. Moreover, since no children are mentioned, it can be concluded that the profit is hers to keep. Furthermore, Alisoun states that every wise woman knows how the economy of sexuality functions, by principle of supply and demand: "With niggardliness we spread out all our merchandise; / A great crowd at the market makes wares expensive, / And too great a supply makes them of little value" (*WBPT*, lines 521-523), proclaiming it a universal feature of medieval thinking. The evidence of her successful marital agreements is her position of a skilled cloth maker, a business she probably inherited from one of her husbands.

Alisoun is a successful merchant as she "was never yet without providing beforehand / For marriage, nor for other things also" (*WBPT*, lines 570-71). She seduces Jankin before her husband's death and, whereas she did not love her previous husbands, she loves Jankin. Alisoun only ever mentions love in terms of what each of her husbands feel for her, and never says that she loves them. She states that they loved her so well that she reckoned "little of their love" (*WBPT*, line 208) and she only pleased them for her profit and her pleasure (*WBPT*, line 214). Pugh states Alisoun "sees love as so much trifling nonsense" ("Queering Genres" 124). However, in the episode of her fourth husband's funeral Alisoun states: "Jankin, our clerk, was one of those / … / That all my heart I gave unto his keeping" (*WBPT*, lines 595-99), implying that she develops feelings for him. The possible development of emotions is caused by "a pair / Of legs and of feet so neat and fair" (*WBPT*, lines 597-98), signifying the feelings are caused by bodily attraction and implying the connection between her perception of love and sexuality. This is further emphasized by the fact that she continues to talk about her pronounced sexuality and desire as a way to explain her poor decision of marrying beneath herself. Carruthers states that Alisoun saying "Alas, alas! That ever love was sin!" (*WBPT*, line 614) is a kind of self-apology for her folly "in the light of the practical wisdom of her class" (216), and it confirms that Alisoun did not understand love as nonsense but simply wanted to choose who she will love. Carruthers notes that it is the independence ensuing from her accumulated wealth that brings Alisoun the

"freedom to love" (209), implying the connection between wealth, autonomy, and love. Financial independence allows Alisoun to choose a husband based on love and attraction, which implies that love can be bought. Furthermore, Alisoun states that she always follows her inclination regarding attraction she feels towards men (*WBPT*, lines 615-18). Therefore, Alisoun is the embodiment of the carnal woman, but one who will trade love for wealth and vice versa in the case of Jankin, to whom she gives her land and property (*WBPT*, line 630). Delany states Chaucer condemns Alisoun's sexual economics and thus critiques "the competitive, accumulative practices of the medieval bourgeoisie at large" (73) and Stewart Justman suggests that Chaucer is using the Wife of Bath to picture the "folly of the bourgeoisie – its appetite for goods both social and economic – as the ancestral licence of Woman" ("Trade as Pudendum" 345).

2. 1. 4. The Influence of the Planets

When she is talking about scolding her husbands and also later in her "Tale," Alisoun enumerates stereotypes about female behaviour along with some desirable traits they possess and creates an image of a woman that Puhvel calls an "Everywoman," essentially a portrayal of herself as an archrepresentative of womankind ("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 292). She embodies several misogynistic stereotypes that contemporary literature spread about women: "Deceit, weeping, spinning God has given / To women naturally, while they may live" (line 401-2) and reveals and assumes "the place that patriarchal discourse accords the feminine" (Dinshaw 115). In doing so, she "converts a form of subordination into an affirmation" and begins to make a place for women without being simply reduced to the antifeminist portrayal (qtd. in Dinshaw 115). Similarly, in Alisoun's Tale, many other characteristics and stereotypes are mentioned, such as women's desire for riches, honour, gaiety, and lust in bed (*WBPT*, lines 925-927). By enumerating all the stereotypes, Alisoun exposes the discourse and uses it to her own advantage. She exploits such a representation and medieval notions of male and female behaviour to exert power over men by means of persuasion:

> That it is fair to have a wife in peace.
>
> One of us two must bow, doubtless,
>
> And since a man is more reasonable
>
> Than a woman is, you must be able to bear suffering. (*WBPT*, lines 439-42)

In the part where she describes how she fell in love with Jankin, Alisoun likewise describes herself. She is lusty, fair, rich, young, and well fixed and she has "the best pudendum that might be" (*WBPT*, lines 605-8). Furthermore, Alisoun interprets her urges as being influenced by her horoscope sign – "My ascendant was Taurus" (*WBPT*, line 613) – and the planets in position at her birth, Venus and Mars. Venus influences her in feeling – she has given her lust and amorousness and "made me that I could not withdraw / My chamber of Venus from a good fellow" (*WBPT*, lines 617-18). Mars has influenced her heart by giving her sturdy boldness and a warlike disposition to avenge herself with words (*WBPT*, lines 425, 609-12). Carruthers states that Alisoun provides the fellowship with this information to explain her foolish behaviour, that is, falling in love with Jankin who turns out to be violent and restricts her freedom (*WBPT*, line 216). Therefore, she describes herself as a child of Venus – a lover (*WBPT*, line 697), who "loves riot and extravagant expenditures" (*WBPT*, line 700).[13] She explains her decision to marry a penniless clerk as "influenced by Venus" and states that she never loved in moderation and physical appearance and status were not as important, "provided that he pleased me" (*WBPT*, lines 622-25). Similarly to January, Alisoun has a "colt's tooth" (*WBPT*, line 602), referring to the sexual attraction she feels for Jankin, who is twenty when she is forty. Moreover, Alisoun mentions the influence of alcohol on her lustfulness: "And after wine on Venus must I think, / For as surely as cold engenders hail, / A gluttonous mouth must have a lecherous tail" (*WBPT*, lines 464- 66).

Whereas Venus has given her amorousness, Mars has given her sturdy boldness (*WBPT*, line 612), which is expressed in her speech and use of language as a means of controlling her husbands. She is portrayed as a manipulator, a common female stereotype:

> I governed them so well, according to my law,
>
> That each of them was very blissful and eager
>
> To bring me gay things from the fair.
>
> They were very glad when I spoke to them pleasantly,
>
> For, God knows it, I cruelly scolded them. (*WBPT*, lines 219-223)

The wife usually governs the estate, but Alisoun rules over her husbands by way of sexual manipulation and the interchange of cruel scolding and pleasant speaking. She advises women to

[13] Medieval astrologers created careful figures of horoscopes and predicted a person's disposition according to the position of celestial objects in the skies at one's birth, for a longer discussion on the Wife of Bath's disposition see Curry, Walter Clyde. *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*. 2d ed., Barnes & Noble, 1960, pp. 9-118.

"speak and accuse them wrongfully, / For half so boldly can there no man / Swear and lie, as a woman can" (*WBPT*, lines 226-28). Alisoun uses stereotypical male arguments against women as a weapon in the battle for control she leads against her husbands and attributes the responsibility for such anti-feminist discourse to them: "Thou sayest, just as worms destroy a tree, / Right so a wife destroys her husband" (*WBPT*, lines 376-77). It can be stated that Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath not only to portray typical women manipulators but also to emphasize sexuality and language as their areas of control in marriage and the only way they are able to exert power in society. Moreover, Alisoun uses rhetoric to gain freedom to do as she likes and to exact revenge by chiding her husbands. In order to further manipulate her husband and try to present herself as loyal, Alisoun states:

> What ails you to grouch thus and groan?
>
> Is it because you want to have my pudendum all to yourself?
>
> . . . . . .
>
> For if I would sell my "pretty thing,"
>
> I could walk as fresh (newly clothed) as is a rose;
>
> But I will keep it for your own pleasure. (*WBPT*, lines 443-49)

Alisoun implies she is sacrificing financial gain by being a loyal wife and thus prompts her husband to be the one to clothe her as fresh as a rose on account of her loyalty. It is possible to conclude that Chaucer provides the audience with a comic spin on marital liberties of the woman in accordance with the prevalent opinion that women should be subject to their husband's will by providing a negative example of the Wife of Bath who, through her sexual and linguistic agency asserts control (Allman and Hanks 55). However, Alisoun's representation is one of a profiteer, a scold, and a liar, thus embodying the qualities of Jankin's wicked wives, whose speech is sinful and wicked (Arnell 939). Along with asserting control, Alisoun uses her deceptive language to seduce her fifth husband saying she "falsely swore that he had enchanted me" (*WBPT*, line 575). Then Alisoun tells Jankin her dream:

> And also I said I dreamed of him all night,
>
> He would have slain me as I lay on my back,
>
> And all my bed was full of real blood;

But yet I hope that you shall do me good,

For blood symbolizes gold, as I was taught. (*WBPT*, lines 577-81)

The symbolism of blood as gold can be explained in multiple ways. Him slaying her as she lay on her back might refer to the loss of virginity and the blood that ensues with the breaking of the hymen, meaning the woman was really a virgin. Since Alisoun gained wealth through her former marriages, the blood may refer to menstruation, the coming of which meant she is not pregnant and could keep all the inheritance to herself. Samantha Katz Seal states that the line may refer to the prospect of Alisoun's death and Jankin getting her property and enriching himself (*Father Chaucer* 57). Such an interpretation implies Alisoun is aware of the reversal of roles between her and Jankin. She is now the rich old spouse while Jankin is the young beautiful one and she is using her own marital logic of attracting him with the promise of wealth. The falsity Alisoun tells likewise hints at the violence of their marriage in which Jankin will beat her and she will nonetheless have sexual relations with him. The Wife also associates lovemaking with a man's stabbing of a woman (Allman and Hanks 48). Allman and Thomas agree with the theory that Alisoun alludes to the blood of defloration, but as she likens the act to a bloody slaying, she brings the violent image of knife or sword into the erotic relationship (48).

2. 1. 5. Female sovereignty

As noted, Alisoun uses her sexuality to gain land and riches, while language controls her husbands, because she wants a spouse "Who shall be both my debtor and my slave, / And have his suffering also / Upon his flesh, while I am his wife" (*WBPT*, lines 155-57). Moreover, Alisoun calls herself the whip of suffering in marriage (*WBPT*, lines 173, 175). It is evident she wishes to have control over her husband who has to both pay the debt of matrimony and pay for her to do the same. Moreover, she is the one who controls the timing of their sexual relations: "I have the power during all my life / Over his own body, and not he" (*WBPT*, lines 158-159). Through her experience she has learned how to manipulate men. She states she can teach them how to behave in marriage because "Whoever will not be warned by (the examples of) other men, / Shall be an example by which other men shall be corrected" (*WBPT*, lines 180-81). However, when she marries out of love and attraction, Alisoun becomes vulnerable and gives Jankin her land and property, but is left disappointed as "He would not allow me anything of my desires" (*WBPT*, line 633), and he beats her. Alisoun realizes that with the passing over of her land and property she passed on her sovereignty to Jankin. His abuse mirrors her actions during her previous four marriages. She goes from only playing the role of the victim in her marriages

to being the actual victim, beaten and accused of vice (McTaggart 47-50). There is a reversal of roles in which she is the old lecherous spouse giving the younger, attractive one wealth in exchange for love, but by doing so, she relinquishes control. Moreover, whereas a woman's modes of control are language and sexuality, men use violence and authority. Being a young clerk, Jankin relies on old authorities and reads the book of wicked wives to her (Carruthers 215; Arnell 938). As such, he represents Alisoun's final battle against authority and male domination. Alisoun refuses the authority he is trying to impose, tears three leaves from the book, and hits Jankin on the cheek (*WBPT*, lines 790-92), using his mode of control against him. He hits her on the head, causing her to lose hearing, and gets frightened she is dead. He tells her: "So help me God, I shall never (again) smite thee! / What I have done, it is thyself to blame (you drove me to it)" (*WBPT*, lines 805-6). She hits him again and they make an agreement in which Jankin, out of remorse, gives her the control of house, land, his tongue, and hand, and she makes him burn the book; that is, he gives her "all the sovereignty" (*WBPT*, lines 818). Anne McTaggart states that Alisoun and Jankin reach their lowest point in this episode and realize that the struggle for power ends in destruction (52). After the agreement they never fight again and she is true and kind to him as he is to her (*WBPT*, line 825). He is now both her debtor and her slave since he gives her control of his "house and land" and "tongue and hand" (*WBPT*, lines 815-15) – he surrenders his modes of control to her.

Although Alisoun ultimately achieves balance in their marriage, her emotions cause her to forget her own lessons and give Jankin her property. Her partial deafness is symbolic of her mistaken belief he will love her afterwards, and serves as a constant reminder that economic independence equals power. The burning of the book likewise symbolizes Alisoun's taking over the power in their marriage and female victory over "the hegemonic symbol of male scripted rhetoric" (McAvoy, "aftyr hyr owyn tunge" 160). However, Alisoun gains her power through an act of violence committed both my her and her husband which might signal that Alisoun is positioning herself as Jankin's equal, as she is using his own mode of communication – physical violence – against him. McTaggart states Alisoun views human relations as a "chain reaction of vengeance, consisting of symmetrical acts of aggression" (43), which is also applicable during her first three marriages when she endures sex for profit. Alisoun does not really enjoy sexual relations with her old husbands and later avenges herself for their lust by scolding them. Alisoun is "merely repaying ('quiting') the debt incurred by centuries of abuse and misrepresentation of

men painting lions" (McTaggart 692).[14] Although Alisoun gains sovereignty, she chooses to be Jankin's equal: "I was to him as kind /… / and also true, and so was he to me" (*WBPT*, lines 823, 825). Whereas Susan Crane states that Alisoun's preoccupation with sovereignty is based on the conviction "that women should not strive for equality in marriage but should, rather, refuse to wield power that they have securely won," a tactic which resolves "the battle of the sexes into blissful reciprocity" (26), and Dinshaw agrees that Alisoun wants mutual recognition and satisfaction of desires (125), it seems more probable that equality is achieved through female victory and recognition on account of which the woman can choose between tyranny and benevolence. By viewing her first three marriages as financial agreements, Alisoun chooses tyranny as the preferred mode of behaviour.[15] Although she experiences difficulties in her marriage with Jankin, she nonetheless chose him "for love, and no riches" (*WBPT*, line 526), thus her victory allows her to choose benevolence and create a true marriage with a person she actually loves.

2. 1. 6. "The Tale"

"The Wife of Bath's Tale" is an Arthurian romance about a knight who commits a crime and must atone for it by answering the queen's question. Even though there are several parallels between her Prologue and Tale, the most important being the issue of sovereignty, Crane states that Alisoun chooses a romance to "celebrate women's emotive power" because her prologue does not justify a woman's claim to sovereignty; thus she needs to combat "the negative formulations" of Jerome (21). Kendrick observes that Chaucer used the romance genre to undermine patriarchal ideology more powerfully than it would be possible with a fabliau (qtd. in Pugh, "Queering Genres" 118). Carruthers proclaims Alisoun chooses this tale to show how sentimentality belongs to the "old days of King Arthur" (*WBPT*, line 857) and joy is actually based on financial independence (218), whereas Susanna Fein agrees with the notion that Alisoun is "challenging any rewriting of love as abstract and romantic" but suggests that Chaucer's *thynges* in all their meanings form the basis of desire (16). In the "Tale," a knight is riding to court and on the way he rapes a girl: "By utter force, he took away her maidenhead" (*WBPT*, line 888). This "accomplished act of uninvited coitus that is unequivocally rape" (Allman and Thomas Hanks 49) – not the only instance of rape in *The Canterbury Tales* – serves

[14] In her "Prologue" Alisoun asks "Who painted the lion" (line 692), a reference to the Aesopian fable of the painting of the lion (Carruthers 209). The phrase is used to state that those about whom something is written would write the account differently. Alisoun uses it in reference to male writing on marriage and women (*WBPT* lines 692-6).

[15] There are numerous theories concerning Alisoun's characterization, one of which argues Alisoun "adopts a radically pro-feminist position in which marriages should be ruled by women" (Pugh, "Queering Genres" 122).

to initiate the plot. The girl who is raped has no voice and after the act disappears from the narrative. The emotional or physical consequences she suffered are not mentioned. For the act of rape, the knight is put on trial and Arthur condemns him to death (*WBPT*, line 891). However, the queen intervenes and commands him to discover what it is women desire most and gives him a deadline of a year and a day. In this situation a woman, the queen, is in a position of power, whereas the man, the knight, is subjected to her decision. Thus, the situation is a reverse of the rape episode in which the knight takes away the woman's agency.

The knight spends a year looking for an answer but no two women can agree on the matter. On his way back to court, the knight stumbles upon an ugly old woman and promises to fulfil her one wish if she tells him the answer. She does and the queen, along with an assembly of women, grants him freedom. Dinshaw claims the women are present in order to hear a man publicly acknowledge feminine desire (127) contained in the answer that a woman, above all, wants sovereignty and mastery over "her husband as her love" (*WBPT*, line 1039). Puhvel views the old woman as Alisoun's alter ego ("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 293), the one who teaches the man a lesson. It is clear both from Alisoun's "Prologue" and "Tale" that sovereignty is what she desires and all women desire, as it is the answer to the queen's question; likewise, it gives gravity to Alisoun's flippant statement that one should "Note that whatever thing we may not easily have, / We will cry all day and crave for it" (*WBPT*, lines 517-18) to which it gives gravity in light of a woman's position in society.

The queen wanted to teach the knight a lesson. By his act of rape, he subjected the girl to himself and, by asserting his sovereignty, he took away her agency. "The Wife of Bath's Tale" ultimately underlines that "Women desire to have sovereignty over men in their life because that is the only way they may exercise any kind of power" (Allman and Hanks 49), or, as Susan Carter states, the point is "about liberation from gender role restriction" (329). The old woman wishes for the knight to marry her but he tries to dissuade her. He considers her beneath himself: "Alas, that any of my family / Should ever be so foully degraded!" (*WBPT*, lines 1068-69), but still marries her out of necessity, again reversing their roles – the old woman as an oppressor and the knight as the oppressed. This reversal is evident in the bedroom scene where the knight is despairing because his new wife is so "loathsome, and so old also" (*WBPT*, line 1100) that he does not wish to pay the debt of marriage. The old woman provides the knight with a lesson in virtue and offers him a choice; she can remain old and ugly but true to him or become young and beautiful but possibly unfaithful. The knight shows her he has learned that a woman should be able to choose for herself what and how she should be: "I put me in your wise governance"

(*WBPT*, line 1231). Considering the old woman is teaching the knight the same lesson Alisoun teaches her fellow travellers, it can be stated that the knight surrenders to the anti-feminist portrayal of a woman as presented by Alisoun (qtd. in Carter 332). Kathryn L. McKinley states that the knight expects the woman to choose remaining old and loyal when he says: "Choose yourself which may be most pleasure / And most honor to you and me also" (*WBPT*, lines 1232-33), thinking, after her lesson on virtue, that her remaining loyal will bring them both honour (364). When she chooses both youth and loyalty, it is her reward for his acceptance of her less appealing characteristics as a form of sacrifice he makes (McKinley 364-5). Dinshaw argues that the "Tale" problematizes men's listening to women in that they accept the "immediate self-gratifications of antifeminism" which deprive them of understanding (126-7). In Alisoun's "Tale," and other romances, the old woman controls the knight's devotion by reason of her excellence, whereas in her "Prologue" and satire in general, women do so by force and subterfuge (Crane 23). Their agreement and their marriage are confirmed by a sexual act: "A thousand time in a row he did her kiss" (*WBPT*, line 1254). However, although she achieves mastery, the old woman chooses to "[obey] him in every thing / That might do him pleasure or enjoyment" (*WBPT*, lines 1255-56), fulfilling her wifely duties, and there is no mention of her exercising her power over him. Puhvel suggest that these lines refer to sensual pleasure instead of granting him mastery over her ("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 297) because they are surrounded by references to physicality, whereas Dinshaw and Hansen disagree, stating that the old woman gives up her power and conforms herself to his desire (qtd in McKinley 370). McKinley views the ending as a way of establishing marital reciprocity and equality, with both spouses sacrificing something – the Knight his sovereignty and the woman gives herself over to a rapist and becomes sexually submissive to him (373-4). The knight believes that gentlemen can do whatever they want to anybody – except marry penniless old hags – without losing their "gentilesse" (Carruthers 217). However, the "Tale" paints an idealistic picture in which possessions play no part and the hag is Alisoun's painted lion, a woman able to recover her youth and enjoy it with her young husband. Alisoun's final words:

> Jesus Christ us send
>
> Husbands meek, young, and vigorous in bed,
>
> And grace to outlive them whom we wed;
>
> And also I pray Jesus shorten their lives
>
> That will not be governed by their wives;

And old and angry misers in spending,

God send them soon the very pestilence! (258-64)

undercut the romance and belong in a fabliau (Pugh, "Queering Genres" 134). They represent a comic finale to her section of *Canterbury Tales* and place a curse upon ungovernable old misers. The words function within the patriarchal structure, but acknowledge feminine desire and governance.

2. 2. "The Merchant's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue"

In the "Prologue" of his tale, the Merchant talks about the trouble and sorrow of his short marriage to a cruel shrew (*MPTE* lines 1222, 1225) and likewise, in his "Tale" he portrays the dangers of a marriage between an old man and a young woman. He is concerned with the functioning of the institution of marriage (Neuse 115) so he chooses a fabliau story as a warning to the rest of the company. Negative representation of women continues in the "Epilogue" when the Host complains about his wife's behaviour which is so disagreeable he regrets marrying her (*MPTE* line 2432).

2. 2. 1. The Marriage Encomium

In the first part of his "Tale," the Merchant introduces January, a knight from Pavia who is sixty years old and decides to marry for the first time because he wishes to know "of that blissful life / That is between a husband and his wife" (*MPTE* lines 1259-60). January produces a marriage encomium extending through 400 lines. The Merchant's mocking tone is evident in this introduction when he states: "'No other life,' said he, 'is worth a bean, / For wedlock is so easy and so pure, / That in this world it is a paradise.' / Thus said this old knight, who was so wise" (*MPTE* lines 1263-66). January likewise wishes to marry to have an heir and "lead his life in joy and pleasure" (*MPTE* lines 1272-73). Therefore, he seeks the ideal wife: obedient, true, eager to care for him, one who "For happiness or woe she will not forsake him; / She is not weary of loving and serving him" (*MPTE* lines 1290-1). In a similar vein to the Wife of Bath, January defends marriage against clerical authorities who speak against it. He reiterates Theofrastus' arguments that true servants or real friends are better than wives because they will easily cheat you, and calls them foolish (*MPTE* line 1309), which is an ironical statement considering what is to come. However, January views marriage from a biblical and theological perspective: "A wife is God's gift truly" (*MPTE* line 1311). He considers women as created "for man's help" (*MPTE* line 1324). The following lines: "All that her husband desires, well pleases her; / She says not once 'nay,' when he says 'yea'" (*MPTE* lines 1344-45) confirm Richard Neuse's statement that

January's "language of sacramental idealism is coupled with totally profane notions of marriage as instituted to serve the husband's crassly practical needs and interests" (Neuse 119). January wishes God to send him "A wife to last unto his life's end" (*MPTE* line 1354), believing his life will be set in security, for wives "are so true and therewithal so wise" (*MPTE* line 1359). Natalie Hanna states January uses the term wife ("wyf") six times in reference to May and thirty-six times to refer to hypothetical descriptions, generalizations and idealizations of a future wife during his speech about marriage (65), meaning he believes in the ideal marriage and is thus metaphorically blind to the reality of it. Moreover, the term husband ("housbonde") is used only four times in the "Tale," suggesting that the emphasis is on the roles and duties of the wife, and not the husband (Hanna 63). In direct opposition to the book of wicked wives, January enumerates worthy wives: Rebecca, Judith, Abigail, and Ester, and talks about the need to cherish one's wife (*MPTE* lines 1363, 1366, 1369, 1371, 1388). However, most of them achieved their ends, however noble, by deceiving or manipulating their husbands and lovers (Walling 18).

2. 2. 2. Pagan Elements

Although the Tale's marital discourse is Christian, pagan elements appear and threaten the established order. January chooses a young girl named May to marry, and during their wedding Bacchus pours wine and Venus "Dances before the bride and all the company" (*MPTE* lines 1728), implying they will be influenced by both, Bacchus's wine and Venus' amorousness. The god of wedding, Hymen, is likewise in attendance. The fact they are attending the feast after the marital ceremony can be interpreted as them influencing the marriage with their elements, and corrupting its Christian understanding and guarantee of marital bliss. As will later be proven, Venus exerts her influence the strongest, on January, May, but also Damian, who is consumed with desire for May. Near the end of the Tale, when May and Damian are about to trick January, Pluto and Proserpine appear in January's garden with their entourage and May's infidelity inspires an argument between them. The primary use of the garden is for January to "pay his wife her marital debt / In summer season" (*MPTE* lines 2048-49).

In the "Tale," Pluto and Proserpine appear as the rulers of Fairyland, god and goddess of the Roman underworld and king and queen of the Celtic otherworld. Pluto gives a long antifeminist speech about the faithlessness and frailty of women and, wishing to preserve the man from faithless wives and tricksters, gives January his eyesight back so he can witness May's deception. However, Proserpine acts in defence of women who suffer the type of violence she suffered at Pluto's hands, and decides to "give her [May] sufficient answer, / And all women

afterwards, for her sake" (*MPTE* lines 2266-67), that is, swift wit to beguile and manipulate her husband into thinking her innocent. Proserpine gives women the power to "face it out boldly, / And weep, and swear, and chide deceitfully, / So that you men shall be as ignorant as geese" (*MPTE* lines 2273-75), the same power the Wife of Bath uses in her "Prologue." Proserpine's gift of rhetoric helps May assert agency and articulates a theory of rhetoric that helps balance gendered power dynamics within marriage and helps defend women from male violence throughout the *Canterbury Tales* (Turner 428). Likewise, it implies that female nonconformity and agency go against patriarchal, Christian values but come from the other – the wild, uncivilized world. Joseph Turner states that "Women chide, lie and swear in response to misogynist men" (451). Furthermore, May's success in tricking January has been foreshadowed in the first part of the "Tale" when January mentions Cato's advice to "Submit to thy wife's tongue… / She shall command, and thou shalt submit to it" (*MPTE* lines 1377-78), adding "And yet she will (seem to) obey by way of courtesy" (*MPTE* line 1379). In the end, it is January who submits to May's lies and chooses to believe them.

2. 2. 3. Characterization

The naming of the characters suggests their disposition: the old knight is named January, the month of peak winter, cold and lifeless, probably suggesting that he is as barren as the earth in winter. Thus, January corresponds to Pluto, the king of the dead (Zedolik 500). Youth is personified by and embodied in May, young, vernal and Venusian (Coote 328): "she was like the bright morning of May, / Filled with all beauty and delight" (*MPTE* lines 1748-49). Whereas Proserpina is the spirit of spring, May is its incarnation (Stevens 128). May's description is given in the first part of the "Tale":

> Her fresh beauty and her tender age,
>
> Her small waist, her arms long and slender,
>
> Her wise self-control, her nobility,
>
> Her womanly bearing, and her seriousness. (*MPTE* lines 1601-4)

May is described as a series of idealized features imagined by January – his fantasy, not as a complete character (Sheridan 33). January's description and May's later actions suggest the duality of her portrayal. The side imagined by her husband is in accordance with the virtuous representation of women of the time –largely in contrast to what is said about women in the prologue and epilogue – she is beautiful but also wise in how she behaves, noble, serious, and

carrying herself with dignity, as suggested by January's impression of her womanly bearing. She is described as passive in regards to him and serves to reflect January's masculine worth (Crocker 185). However, her later actions testify that she is one of the Wife of Bath's wise wives who tricks and manipulates her husband. May is of low rank, but her youth and beauty are enough for January (*MPTE* lines 1625-26), who is described as a man of exaggerated sexual vigour and relentless sexual appetite. Pleasure is the most important thing for him, as he states, after expounding on the benefits of marriage:

> That I in her could have no pleasure,
>
> Then I should lead my life in adultery
>
> And go straight to the devil when I die.
>
> Nor any children should I upon her beget;
>
> Yet I would rather hounds had eaten me. (*MPTE* lines 1434-38)

He states he knows the reasons people usually marry but similarly to the Wife of Bath, he is not one to abstain from sexual passion (*MPTE* lines 1441-56). January feels "[his] limbs strong and sufficient / To do all that is proper to a man" (*MPTE* lines 1458-59), that is, he considers himself ready for sexual intercourse and the begetting of heirs. Moreover, he compares himself to a tree:

> Though I be white-haired, I fare as does a tree
>
> That blossoms before the fruit is grown;
>
> And a blossom-filled tree is neither dry nor dead.
>
> I feel me nowhere white-haired but on my head;
>
> My heart and all my limbs are as green
>
> As laurel through the year is to be seen. (*MPTE* lines 1461-66)

Alcuin Blamires considers January's description of his white hair like spring blossom on a tree, presaging fruit, "a grotesquely conceited joke" ("May in January's Tree" 113). Coote calls January's lust for young May perverted (328), even though at the time it was perfectly acceptable for an older man to marry an often much younger woman.

Although after their first sexual encounter January is happy and singing in the morning, the picture Chaucer paints is that of a vile and disgusting old man. January's description is

reminiscent of a frog: “The slack skin about his neck shakes / While he sang, so chants he and croaks” (*MPTE* lines 1849-50), possibly implying that May is trapped with a lecherous frog. Therefore, Chaucer presents January’s “own body as a grotesquerie of old age” (Allman and Hanks 54). Before marrying, January speaks with his two friends, Placebo and Justinus, who offer differing advice. Placebo agrees with and supports January, whereas Justinus portrays the realities of married life in antifeminist terms and mocks January’s decisions saying: “You shall not please her fully years three -- / This is to say, to do her full pleasure” (*MPTE* lines 1562-63), due to January’s age. Justinus suggests that it is not possible to subject feminine agency to oneself and that marriage might mean the dissolution of masculine agency (Crocker 190). January wishes to find a wife “fair and tender of age” (*MPTE* line 1407), because “these old widows, God it knows, / They know so much trickery on Wade’s boat” (*MPTE* lines 1423-24). His statement is in agreement with The Wife of Bath’s description in her “Prologue.” January underestimates youth and states: “one can guide a young thing, / Just as one can mold warm wax with hands” (*MPTE* lines 1429-30), which proves to be a mistaken belief when May uses warm wax to make a copy of his key to the garden as part of her plan to cheat on him (*MPTE* lines 2117). This anticipatory wording – “words with one meaning in the first, immediate context but with a different meaning in the context of the rest of the tale” (Burger 108) – actually subverts the original meaning in a show of irony and rejection of female passivation.

2. 2. 4. Passivity and Agency

The wife, May, is trapped by the prevailing patriarchal discourse on marriage. From the beginning of the “Tale,” the role of the wife is objectified and spoken of in relation to her husband: “And especially when a man is old and white-haired; / Then is a wife the best part of his treasure” (*MPTE* lines 1269-70). “A Young wife and fair” (*MPTE* line 1271-72) is a valuable commodity for her ability to provide heirs and pleasure to her husband. Christian Sheridan calls the wife the ultimate commodity (31), who the husband is to protect, enclose, and enjoy (Zedolik 492; qtd. in Calabrese 273). She is given the role of “a helper” (*MPTE* line 1328) and is to be “man’s help and his comfort, / His earthly paradise, and his source of consolation” (*MPTE* lines 1331-32) because of her obedience and virtue. May is not named when January chooses her for his bride but a hundred lines later, because unmarked, she is able to embody any man’s desire (Sheridan 33).

After the wedding during which May suffered January’s lecherous staring comes their wedding night: “And January has fast in arms taken / His fresh May, his paradise, his mate / He lulls her; he kisses her full often” (*MPTE* lines 1820- 23). May is the passive partner in their

relationship, subjected to January's lust. Only in regard to Damian does she take action. With January she must be, and is, subservient to the will of her husband. Soon May starts to care about Damian, the pity she feels turning to love: "To love him best of any creature, / Though he had no more than his shirt" (*MPTE* lines 1984-85). However, it is again a relationship whose goal is to satisfy a man's needs, this time Damian's: "Where she might satisfy his desires, / For it shall be right as he will devise" (*MPTE* lines 1999-2000). Katz Seal states that May does not make the choice to desire, but must "acquiesce to her gender's designation as the reactionary, passive half of humanity" ("Pregnant Desire" 305). Thus, May is not the instigator of her extra-marital affair; she accepts Damian's advances but is still secondary. Martin Stevens calls compliance her trademark (125) and Amanda Walling states that "a wife's most salient quality is her capacity for self-negating submission: that the nature of the feminine is not to be hierarchically inferior to the masculine but to erase its own agency in service to it" (14). The only difference is that May willingly chooses this relationship, whereas the marriage with January was arranged by her male relatives in return for land and wealth. With Damian, May relies on secrecy and concealment (Walling 20), that is, hiding his letter and communicating with "secret signs" (*MPTE* line 2105).

Walling states May's inscrutability is the most significant feature of her character because it is the only form of agency she is able to exercise in such a patriarchal, antifeminist world (20). Similarly, Holly A. Crocker argues that May's passivity makes her inscrutable and enables masculine fantasies of agency, thus allowing her to exercise agency as she wishes (178). May passively accepts and tolerates all of January's sexual advances, no matter the form. She experiences lust and longing only after seeing Damian at his bedside, the visual moment instigating the development of lust ("Pregnant Desire", 296). Later text suggests that May "must have him [Damian] as she wishes" (*MPTE* line 2095), which is the only wish and opinion the author mentions in connection to May. She is treated as a prized object even more after January goes blind and his frail ego, possessiveness, and jealousy surface when he muses that we would rather May not marry nor have a lover but always live as a widow (*MPTE* lines 2077-80).[16] Soon January establishes total control over her by always touching her and accompanying her everywhere. He defines her role and place in society only in relation to him.

[16] His loss of eyesight (*MPTE* line 2067) is a literal reflection of his fantasies and blindness to the reality. Whereas Neuse states January's "sudden blindness might be a sign of his failure to see May as other than an object for his 'bodily delight'" (*MPTE* lines 1249) (125), Cadden attributes it to his excessive sexual desire, due to the opinion that excessive intercourse weakens men because they spend heat and moisture, and this especially affects older men (ch. 3). However, it seems more likely that his blindness is connected to his mistaken beliefs about marriage. McTaggart deems it poetic justice that January's blindness to May's desires render him blind to the fact of his own cuckoldry (50).

As stated, May's agency surfaces when she plans her illicit affair. Crocker states May does not "shift from passive to active" but demonstrates that feminine passivity requires agency, that is, she uses agency "to maintain the appearance of passivity" (179). Such behaviour may be termed false passivity, whereas, after her encounter with Damian she may be labelled sexually active. May incites January to go into the garden and enjoy himself: "That January has caught so great a desire, / Through incitement of his wife, to enjoy himself / In his garden, and no one (there) but those two" (*MPTE* lines 2134-36). The focus is again on January's enjoyment until he calls May "to take our pleasure" (*MPTE* line 2147), which might be a premonition of the pleasure she has planned for herself and Damian. When January asks May to remain true to him, she finally gets to express herself with a longer speech. Until that moment she was not an agent of speaking, but "a figure that calls masculine speaking into being around her" (Walling 16). In the speech, she claims she will remain true and talks about her sexuality as the tender flower of her wifehood (*MPTE* line 2190). The motif of the flower of wifehood, or the flower of marriage as in the "Wife of Bath's Prologue," implies that sexuality can only be allowed to bloom within marriage and with one's spouse, a notion May does not adhere to. During their conversation she employs the Wife of Bath's advice of attacking first and accusing her husband of something he did not do and she is getting ready to:

> But men are always untrue,
>
> And women have reproof of you always.
>
> You have no other manner of behavior, I believe,
>
> Except to speak to us of distrust and reproof. (*MPTE* lines 2203-6)

Once again, in Chaucer's *Tales,* female language is used to trick and manipulate men, portraying it as one of their strongest weapons. Female rhetoric is used to present "shrewish feminine agency" and portray May as a liar and a hypocrite (Crocker 192).

However, the female voice nonetheless acts as "a measure of the female subject's conformity to social mores and of the male ability to control her" (McAvoy, "aftyr hyr owyn tunge" 159). Although January knows, "He screwed thee; I saw it with my eyes" (*MPTE* line 2378), May manages to persuade him that she was only in the tree struggling with the man to help get his eyesight back. She passes off her agency as medicine for January's blindness and exploits the fiction of feminine passivity "so that it allows her to exercise agency as she wishes" (Crocker 193). J. D. Burnley states that January's denial of sin in his garden is juxtaposed by the

commencement of sin in Eden and that the pear tree is a conceptual neighbour to the tree of the garden (24). May is thus in a paradigmatic relationship to Eve, although her sin does not have consequences (Burnley 24). May complies with James A. Brundage's statement that: "ample evidence suggest that a great many medieval people rejected the more rigorous theological prohibitions of common sexual practices and simply refused to believe that fornication and other run-of-the-mill sexual offences would doom perpetrators to eternal torment in hell" (42). In the end, May tells January: "Until your sight be settled a while / There may full many a sight deceive you" (*MPTE* lines 2405-6), meaning she will likely do the same again and deceive him in the same manner.

2. 2. 5. Sexuality as Food Metaphors

At the beginning of the tale the Merchant states that: "And followed always his bodily desire / On women, where was his [January's] appetite" (*MPTE* lines 1249-50). January does not care about the status or wealth of his new bride, only her age and beauty because his ultimate goal is to satisfy his sexual desires, his sexual *appetite*, with her. Thus he states: "Old fish and young flesh would I gladly have" (*MPTE* line 1418), saying he does not mind old fish in the literal sense as a meal but equating his future wife with flesh in the abstract sense of her pleasing characteristics. The flesh comparison is further emphasized in the following line: "And better than old beef is the tender veal" (*MPTE* line 1420). He equates young women with tender veal, meat that is easy to cut or chew; clearly stating that he wishes young flesh, instead of a thirty-year-old woman who is "but dry bean-stalks and coarse fodder" (*MPTE* line 1422).

Older women as dry, tough, and coarse juxtapose the metaphor of young women as being tender, juicy, and pliable, easier for January's old teeth to chew. January traded his wealth and lands for young female flesh, the object of his predatory desire, revealing the economic basis of their marriage (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 295). According to Blamires, this food metaphor suggests that men become sexual connoisseurs by tasting every meat and developing a discriminating palate (*Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* 95). The image of satisfying one's appetite is made more explicit when January eats bread in bed following the consummation of his marriage, "gratifying his sexual desire and physical hunger simultaneously" (Hanna 64). May's body brings January more pleasure than anything else in his life – "How fairer are thy breasts than is wine" (*MPTE* line 2142) – implying that she is his sustenance. The only food May mentions are pears, and there are many theories on their symbolism in the "Tale." Among other things, during the Middle Ages pears were connected to male genitalia (Falvo Heffernan 34), thus a possible interpretation of the following lines: "May have for fruit so great an appetite /

That she may die but she have some of it" (*MPTE* lines 2336-7), as May's sexual desire for Damian, once again represents a food metaphor. It is possible to state May lusts after Damian and expresses her lust in terms of hunger. Katz Seal states that the tale is "a story about appetite, encompassing the process of stimulative formation and the potential ambiguities of knowledge created by the spectre of unmoderated desire ("Pregnant Desire" 304-5).

2. 2. 6. Violent Sexuality

Guided by his appetite, January does not listen to Justinus' advice "that you use, as is proper and reasonable, / The pleasures of your wife moderately, / And that you please her not too amorously" (*MPTE* lines 1678-80). January uses May sexually as he wishes and whenever he wishes, without any regard for her desire and pleasure. As their sexual relationship is highly unbalanced, with January having complete control of it and May the passive sufferer of his desire, it can be labelled marital rape.[17] Sexual relationships that oppress women derive from the need to "deprive them of desire, in order that they not oppose their exchange between men" and know their place in the exchange system, "which is in effect a rape culture" (qtd. in Rose 28). Thus, rape must be understood and studied as "embedded within the language, institutions and social practices" of medieval culture (Robertson and Rose 3). The medieval sense of rape, that is, *raptus*, conveys the meanings of assault, kidnapping, threats, sexual violation or violence (Rose 25).

Literature makes rape tolerable by coding it as "moral, comic, heroic, spiritual, or erotic" (qtd. in Rose 30), and even representing it as a part of medieval culture. The fact that "The bride was brought to bed as still as stone / And when the bed was by the priest blessed / Out of the chamber has every one gone" (*MPTE* lines 1818-20) on their first wedding night indicates that this is an institutional, Church-approved rape of a young girl. Aers agrees stating that legal rape is evident in the example of May and January, but it gets mediated around a man "satirized for misrecognition of his excessive age rather than for his violation of another human being's subjectivity" (ch. 2); that is, rape is used as a trope to ultimately mock January's age and sexual desire. Although they serve a different purpose in the "Tale," the descriptions of sexual encounters and January's fantasies corroborate the statement that marital rape occurs.

May is so beautiful that January is entranced every time he looks at her (*MPTE* lines 1750-51), but he uses violent language to express his desire: "But in his heart he began to

[17] Saunders states that the first sexual act between May and January is portrayed as unwanted by May, if not as rape itself, as May does not refuse that part of the marital contract but "she does withhold active consent" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 296).

menace her / That he that night in arms would her strain / Harder than ever Paris did Helen of Troy" (*MPTE* lines 1752-54). Moreover, he describes his desire as "sharp and keen" (*MPTE* line 1759), creating an image of his masculine eroticism as an attack with a sharp instrument, a knife or a sword (Allman and Hanks 50). In the *Canterbury Tales*, January is the character most conscious of "eroticism as stabbing," and the one who enjoys it most (Allman and Hanks 50). However, May does not think highly of his lovemaking: "she rates his playing not worth a bean" (*MPTE* line 1854), proving his "blade" has dulled. The image of stabbing is repeated in the following lines:

> With thick bristles of his beard rough,
>
> Like to the skin of a shark, sharp as brier --
>
> For he was all freshly shaved in his fashion --
>
> He rubs her about her tender face,
>
> And said thus, "Alas! I must do injury
>
> To you, my spouse, and you greatly offend." (*MPTE* lines 1824-29)

His rough beard is juxtaposed with her tender face. It is as sharp as a brier and it anticipates what is about to happen in that room. Just as his rough beard rubs and pokes at her face, so shall his sharp desire sting her and cause her injury. January bases this claim on the presumption that women are sexually reticent and May is inexperienced and probably frightened. He is aroused by the violent picture he creates and the power he holds over her, signifying that the erotic sphere of the "Tale" is more concerned with power and agency than with carnal desire (Walling 14). Moreover, this monologue, along with others of its kind, confirms Walling's claim that January seems to be "more aroused by his own rhetorical performances and agency than by his sexual performances" (14). Similarly, Pugh states that January enjoys the comforts of male speech and sexuality in contrast to May's initial silence ("Gender, Vulgarity, and the Phantom Debates" 485). His sexuality is thus narcissistic and there is no room for the consideration of May's desires. Violent language and aggressive sexual scenes such as the following can hardly be considered anything other than marital rape:

> Straightway he prayed her to strip herself all naked;
>
> He would of her, he said, have some pleasure;
>
> He said her clothes got in his way,

And she obeys, whether she wants to or not.

But lest that prudish folk be with me wroth,

How he worked, I dare not tell to you,

Or whether she thought it paradise or hell. (*MPTE* lines 1958-64)

Despite the teller withholding information of May's enjoyment or lack thereof, her lack of consent is enough to deem January's acts as rape. As stated, January, an old man, is aroused by the power he has over his young wife, whom he uses sexually. May is generally unresponsive and obedient, and the acts of rape focus not on her pain but on January's show of power and the disempowering of his victim (Rose 30). However, January claims marital sex is lawful and succumbing to desire cannot hurt them: "A man can do no sin with his wife, / Nor hurt himself with his own knife, / For we have leave by the law to enjoy ourselves. / Thus labors he until the day dawned" (*MPTE* lines 1839-1842). Whereas he cannot hurt himself, he can hurt others, and acknowledges he will cause injury to May with his desire.

Although there is no mention of blood, a knife wound implies bleeding. Moreover, the image of the woman bleeding is present in the Wife of Bath's "Prologue" (line 579). Allman and Hanks state that descriptions of sexual intercourse across a variety of genres, including fabliau, follow the bodily economy of the erotic in which males pierce and women bleed (53). Therefore, such violent sexual imagery maintains the binary gender opposition in the "Merchant's Tale," eroding Crocker's theory that the Tale "catalogues the failure of gender" (180). When May and Damian meet in the tree, their encounter is swift: "And suddenly at once this Damian / Pulled up the smock, and in he thrust" (*MPTE* lines 2352-53). The man is once again the agent, the active partner, and the woman is the recipient, the passive partner. Although a verb connected to wounding is used, this is not rape as May actively planned for their encounter to happen.

Furthermore, the climax of the "Tale" is influenced by Pluto and Proserpine, whose appearance further confirms the thesis about marital rape. Since Chaucer mentions that Claudian authored the story of Pluto and Proserpine and "his mythological epic *De Raptu Proserpinae* (fifth century A.D.) is a major subtext of the tale," it is important to mention that the epic views marriage "from the woman's perspective as a kind of rape and a kind of death" (Neuse 124). As the original myth goes, Proserpine was taken to the Underworld by Pluto and made to stay there during one-half of the year, which thus became the seasons of autumn and winter. Moreover, May has been given in marriage to January and endures it in silence (Turner 448). May and

Proserpine have both been taken from their innocent and virginal states by powerful men (Turner 449). In addition, Hanna states that January refers to marrying as "taking a wife," the expression being associated with a sense of wrongdoing (67). Pluto and Proserpina appear in a garden walled with stone, which January builds as a place of his enjoyment, sexual and otherwise. What exactly happens is not disclosed: "And things which that were not done abed, / He in the garden performed and accomplished them" (*MPTE* lines 2051-52), suggesting possible perverted desires. Coote states that "the hideousness of the old man's lustful desires" makes the horror of their marriage even stronger (328). For January, the marriage to May is a successful mercantile agreement, land and wealth in exchange for a wife whom he wishes to "have her entirely, / So that no one shall share his bliss" (*MPTE* lines 1629-30).

Building an enclosed garden as a place where he can realise his fantasies, likewise strengthens January's control over May by limiting sexual access to her. Much like with May, his earthly paradise, "which he encloses within his old arms" (Zedolik 496), is only for him to enjoy. January is the only one who has the key to the garden because he "[s]uch pleasure has in it to walk and play" (*MPTE* line 2043), and as with May, he does not want to share the garden with anyone. The symbolism of the garden likewise denotes May's entrapment in their marriage; only January has the key to the garden and the only people ever to enter are he and May. Thus, the key to the garden symbolizes January's power and agency, whereas May has none. The ultimate establishment of January's complete enclosing of May is keeping a hand on her always and restricting her movement.

However, May tricks him and, through her, Proserpine likewise avenges herself upon her abductor husband Pluto (Zedolik 503). May manages to turn the locus of her imprisonment and rape, her hell, to the place of her rebellion and pleasure. She inverts January's metaphor and fantasy of a young wife as warm wax and uses warm wax to make a key for the gate and ultimately tricks January. May destroys the exclusivity of January's garden and their marriage, proving that the "result of imposing unreasonable enclosures" is a breaking of the enclosures (Zedolik 491, 503). The tale finishes with a comedic inversion of May enjoying the freedom and control in a place meant to contain her and January stuck in an illusion of a true marriage (Zedolik 503).

2. 3. *The Book of Margery Kempe*

Margery Kempe was born in 1373 in the port city of King's Lynn in Norfolk to a prosperous family. Her father, John Brunham, served as the mayor and a Member of Parliament

for several years. Margery was married at twenty to John Kempe, son of a successful Lyn merchant with whom she had fourteen children. *The Book* describes Margery's religious and spiritual journey and all the tribulations and challenges she experiences along the way. It mentions Margery's pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, and later other holy places in Europe and England. However, instead of describing her travels in detail, Margery focuses on religious and spiritual matters, and describes her episodes of sobbing and weeping as induced by God, as well as her conversations with God, Jesus Christ, St. Mary, and other saints, which she experiences both during her travels and during her stay in Lyn. These conversations and the commandments she receives, such as the one to wear white clothes, make up most of the narrative. Margery's account opens with a prologue which states that it is written for sinners in need of redemption, "thus its purpose is didactic and redemptive" (Stanton 169).

2. 3. 1. Marital Sexuality

The first mention of sexuality is found in chapter three of *The Book*, with Margery stating that after hearing the melody of heaven and feeling its joy, she loses the desire to have sexual intercourse with her husband, in such a measure that she even states that: "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" (Kempe 46). Margery is a religious person and is thus aware of the Church's doctrine on sexual relations and marriage, especially the works of St. Jerome and the preaching of St. Paul. Her narrative might be considered an "example of the power of clerical doctrine to induce self-disgust over an individual's sexual joy within marriage" (Aers, ch. 2), a sudden change which occurs after hearing the divine melody. Margery says to her husband: "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" (Kempe 46). Her husband, however, does not acknowledge her words and desires, and continues to "have his will with her" (Kempe 46). Margery is very aware of her position in society and respectful of the Church's definition of marriage (Gulley 134). Being a dutiful wife, Margery obeys "with much weeping and sorrowing because she could not live in chastity" (Kempe 46).

Although marital sex was not considered as great a sin as extramarital sex was, the Church preached that people should have sexual relations only to procreate, and it is entirely possible that Margery considers her role and obligation of bearing children fulfilled. Thus Margery wishes to live chaste, saying to her husband they have "often displeased God by their inordinate love, and the great delight that each of them had in using the other's body" and advising "abstaining from the lust of their bodies" (Kempe 46-47). Margery is likewise

concerned with the degree of pleasure they experienced. Even though Margery's use of language suggests that their marriage is rooted in love and affection and is one that conforms to "the standard teachings of the Church and society" (Gulley 135), her husband refuses her request and "uses her as he had done before, he would not desist" (Kempe 47). As there are no other options to get her husband to agree to live chastely, Margery relies on God's help and spends the following three or four years praying that he relents to her request. Considering the fact that Margery no longer enjoys or wishes to have sexual relations with her husband, but is nonetheless used by him, his treatment of her, similar to January's treatment of May, is an example of marital rape, which Delany names legal rape (Delany 80; McAvoy, "Virgin, Mother, Whore" ch. 9). Margery does not wish to ask for divorce and break the bond of holy matrimony, and even if she did, she does not have the necessary legal grounds; rather, as a dutiful wife, she obeys her husband's wishes and pays the debt of marriage. Although Margery can own property and run a business, she cannot dispose of her person, she is subject to John, and even when going on pilgrimage, she requires his letter of approval.

In chapter 9, Christ tells Margery she must fast on Friday from meat and drink and he will slay "all sexual desire" in her husband (Kempe 56). Christ fulfils his promise and on Wednesday of Easter week, when Margery calls for his help, her husband has no power to touch her that way, "nor ever after that with carnal knowledge" (Kempe 56). Margery believes it is Christ who is helping to quench her husband's sexual desire. In chapter 11, after they have been chaste for eight weeks, Margery's husband inquires whether she would let his head be cut off or have sexual relations with him to save him. Her answer: "I would rather see you being killed, than that we should turn back to our uncleanness," prompts him to state: "You are no good wife" (Kempe 58). According to her husband's attitude, The Wife of Bath was a good wife to every husband she had because she did not abstain from sexual relations, but rather much enjoyed them. Margery's husband wants to have sexual intercourse but "he was made so afraid when he would have touched her, that he dared do no more" (Kempe 58). The importance of faith in both of their lives is evident in Margery's wish to be chaste and her husband's attitude that he will not agree to the vow of chastity because "now I can make love to you without mortal sin, and then I wouldn't be able to" (Kempe 59).

Along with honouring God, Margery uses the concept of Christian purity to assert mastery over her body. For a married woman in the late medieval period, taking a vow of chastity is the only way to take control over her body and transform herself from an object of sexual desire to a subject with agency to decide for herself. Margery declares that it shall be as

the Holy Ghost wishes. Her husband, seeing she is serious, asks three things of Margery in return for the granting of chastity and they reach an agreement: "Grant me that you will not come into my bed, and I grant you that I will pay your debts before I go to Jerusalem. And make my body free to God, so that you never make any claim on me requesting any conjugal debt after this day as long as you live – and I shall eat and drink on Fridays at your bidding" (Kempe 60). Essentially, Margery's body is being exchanged between her husband and God (Williams 537). The agreement they achieve is one of an economic nature, in which Margery will pay her husband a negotiated fee, and pay off his debts (Fienberg 138; Ellis 609), while at the same time erasing the debt of matrimony. This episode is a reversal of men paying for female sexual services and of the Wife of Bath's trading sex for land and property within marriage. Instead, Margery uses her property to pay her husband to get his consent to live chastely. Moreover, unlike other men mentioned in *The Book*, and the treatment of female speech in *The Canterbury Tales*, Margery's husband seems to enjoy her company, as it is his desire to share a meal with her on Fridays.

2. 3. 2. Childbirth as the Objective of Marital Sexuality

Margery expresses the desire to live chastely three or four years before she manages to persuade her husband to take a vow of chastity. Until then, she probably gave birth to most of their fourteen children, with the possibility of two or three pregnancies that occurred in the period between hearing the heavenly music and taking the vow of chastity. Thus, it may be stated that one of the reasons for the loss of sexual desire towards her husband may be to prevent further pregnancies and births. Chapter 21 describes events that happened before the taking of the vow of chastity and features a conversation during which the Lord tells Margery she is pregnant and that he will arrange for the child to be looked after. Margery experiences feelings of guilt and desire for punishment which are evidence that "she believes lustful sex – even within lawful marriage – is sinful" (Gulley 135). In the following exchange: "'I am not worthy to hear you speak, and still to make love with my husband, even though it is great pain and great distress to me.''Therefore it is no sin for you, daughter, because it is reward and merit instead for you, and you will not have any the less grace, for I wish you to bring me forth more fruit'" (Kempe 84), God states that suffering marital rape brings Margery heavenly reward and merit, and that he wishes her to have more children.

Paradoxically, although unable to improve her husband's soul through chastity, she fulfils her Christian vocation of the dutiful wife who pays her marital debt and births children (Gulley 140). This might be considered an example of Margery's conscious or unconscious

psychological defence in that she uses the religious aspect of conversing with God to justify her husband's behaviour and further pregnancies as being desired by God more than her chastity. Dyan Elliott terms the impulse toward chastity "a revolt against the reproductive imperative" (qtd. in Williams 537). It is possible that Margery constructed her religious and spiritual system as a way to cope, perceive, and try to change her current, undesired circumstances in the only way she, as a woman in the late medieval period, could. This goes along the lines of the argument that Margery is struggling against traditional family roles by creating what Gibson calls "a theatre of devotion" (Aers, ch 2; qtd. in Stanton 170; Bynum 40).

2. 3. 3. Temptation and Punishment

Two years after the request for chastity, Margery is punished for the sin of presumptuousness with three years of great temptations. Margery states that our "spiritual enemy" (Kempe 48) probes our temperament and "lays his snare" "wherever he finds us most frail" (Kempe 49). It is therefore interesting to note that she was tempted with "lechery," that is, excessive sexual desire, which, according to her previous statement, would mean that is one of her greatest temptations and that not wishing to have sexual relations with her husband is not necessarily only connected to her desire to remain chaste but strengthens the claim that she decides so to stop possible pregnancies.

A further proof of that is visible in her statement that "in all this time she had no desire to have intercourse with her husband, and it was very painful and horrible to her" (Kempe 49). She writes she has no desire to have intercourse with her husband but soon a "man whom she liked" tempts her, inviting her to become his mistress (Kempe 49). His words trouble her and she thinks God has forsaken her. Margery goes to the man "[i]n order that he should have his will of her" but he "puts forward such a pretence" (Kempe 49) that she does not understand him. However, she is prepared and willing to have sexual relations with him and only his response deters her. Later Margery "lay beside her husband, and to have intercourse with him was so abominable to her that she could not bear it, and yet it was permissible for her and at a rightful time if she had wished it. But all the time she was tormented to sin with the other man because he had spoken to her" (Kempe 50). Margery ascribes her attraction to the other man to God testing her, while it is possible she is naturally attracted to him, whereas she no longer is to her husband. Margery further dictates that she consents in her mind and goes to the man, but he rebuffs her in a humiliating manner (Kempe 50). In this episode, Margery is not a passive figure subjecting herself to the desire of a man. She actively decides to accept the man's offer. Afterwards Margery is shaken and in doubt but she continues to do penance. Still, God increases her

temptation and she is tempted to lechery and despair for the following year. Her trials finish on a Friday before Christmas Day when Jesus forgives Margery's sins and tells her she will pass straight into the bliss of heaven when she dies (Kempe 51).

Although Margery gains control over her body with the vow of chastity, both it and her mind are still subject to the will of God, whose punishment for doubting Him she suffers in chapter 59. Unclean thoughts, which Windeatt defines as: "a brief recurrence of a psychotic period lasting a week or two, in which she was deluded and possibly hallucinated about the sexuality of the males surrounding her" (Notes 301) torture Margery for twelve days:

> and upon many other holy saints, even so now she had horrible and abominable visions . . . of seeing men's genitals, and other such abominations. She saw . . . various men of religion . . . coming before her eyes . . . and showing her their naked genitals. And with that the devil ordered her in her mind to choose which of them she would have first, and she must prostitute herself to them all. And he said she liked one of them better than all the others. She thought he spoke the truth; she could not say no; and she had to do his bidding, and yet she would not have done it for all this world. But yet she thought it should be done, and she thought that these horrible sights and accursed thoughts were delicious to her against her will. Wherever she went or whatever she did, these accursed thoughts remained with her. When she would see the sacrament, say her prayers, or do any other good deed, such abomination was always put into her mind. She was shriven and did all that she could, but she found no release, until she was nearly in despair. It cannot be written what pain she felt, and what sorrow she was in. (Kempe 184)

The episode is reminiscent of compulsive sexual behaviour, "a condition in which an individual cannot manage their sexual behaviour. Persistent sexual thoughts interfere with their ability to work, maintain relationships, and complete their daily activities" (Felman). However, Margery describes it as a brief occurrence, compared to her usually increased, but successfully controlled libido. Margery's characteristic sin is once again a mechanism of her punishment for not believing what God tells her. She is troubled by her urges, which she always fights hard to subdue and remain pure in mind and body. The punishment God sends her through the devil's influence drives her nearly to despair and she feels pain and sorrow for the visions and thoughts "delicious to her against her will" (Kempe 184). Margery carefully denies consent of the will, "essential for mortal sin" (Stanton 188). She does not wish to have unclean thoughts, thus she does bodily penance and prays extensively not to be troubled by the sin of lechery, yet increased

libido sometimes overcomes her will, resulting in such episodes of unclean thoughts and actions. Partner calls this a "pattern of desire and conflict", arising out of her "unconscious guilt-stricken desire" (qtd in Stanton 176).

Agreeing with Robert Stanton's conclusion that there is a "connection between the idea of damnation and sexual temptation" (184), this episode functions as Margery's hell on Earth – she is disturbed by excessive sexual thoughts and imagery which she actually likes, and thus feels pain and sorrow because of the experience. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Margery equates men's genitals with abomination, meaning she considers them a conduit of sin which creates her personal hell, whereas in the "Wife of Bath's Tale" Alisoun refers to them as a "blessed instrument" (*WBPT* line 132). The reasoning and perception of both women contrasts sharply. Whereas Alisoun's perception of sexuality is physical and materialistic in terms of experiencing pleasure and using her body to gain financial profit, Margery perceives sexual urges as impediments on her journey to reach spiritual purity.

2. 3. 4. Penance as a Form of Sexual Control

There are three modes of sexual behaviour within *The Book*: "lust as a representative of excessive attachment to the world", abstinence as an appropriate form of control, and penitence as punishment (Stanton 178). Margery's "conflicting sexual feelings reveal subtle and complex mechanisms of sin and contrition that keep her in their grip as she struggles to understand and resist them" (Stanton 176). Before they take the vow of chastity, Margery does penance for her and John's sexual sins and the lust she feels. She does penance in several ways, one of which is the wearing of a hair shirt, a symbol of penitence in the Middle Ages. The wearing of the hair shirt can be considered a "subtle act of subversion" of her husband's wish; Margery's obedience is performative and her true intentions are implied by the hair shirt she is wearing on the surface of her body (McAvoy, "Virgin, Mother, Whore" ch. 9). The fact that her husband does not even notice the hair shirt Margery is wearing suggests his intentional blindness to her plight. Later in *The Book,* Margery's penance for "very many delectable thoughts, physical lust, and inordinate love for his [her husband's] body" (Kempe 221), which she had in her young days, is caring about John when he becomes old and senile and acts like a child both mentally and physically. Margery states she is "glad to be punished by means of the same body" (Kempe 221).

Another type of penance is fasting, which Susan Morgan connects with sexual abstinence saying Margery "utilised control of one bodily appetite, hunger, by fasting, as an explicit means of controlling another bodily appetite, sexual desire, by abstinence" (429). Margery punished and

disciplined her flesh in order to subvert the dominance of lust over her body and maintain her chastity (Morgan 429). Moreover, Christ tells Margery that she must give up eating meat so she substitutes actual food for spiritual food as commanded by Christ in somewhat erotic terms: "eat my flesh and my blood, that is the true body of Christ in the sacrament of the altar. This is my will, daughter, that you receive my body every Sunday, and I shall cause so much grace to flow into you that everyone shall marvel at it" (Kempe 51).[18] This implies that the renunciation of meat and the discipline Margery has over her body bring her a union with Christ in which she receives his body in communion and produces grace. Or, as Laquita Higgs states: "Margery made the 'barley bread' holy" (63) and reinterpreted the Wife of Bath's words that with barley bread "Our Lord Jesus refreshed many a man" (*WBPT* 146).

2. 3. 5. Manifest Chastity

Margery and John take the vow of chastity in about 1413 in front of the Bishop of Lincoln, and thereafter they are always careful to uphold it and avoid slander by staying in separate hostelries when they travel and living in different houses in Lyn (Kempe 220). It is evident that Margery cares a great deal about the opinion of other people and she wishes for them to know she is chaste and pure. Windeatt states that "her behaviours served as a constant source of attention and, in her own terms, of confirmation from others around her" (Notes 301).

Further evidence of that may be the wearing of white clothes, which has no other explanation, expect that she wears it because God commands her to wear it and suffer the rejection and reactions she receives from people (Kempe 67). It may be stated that in Margery's construed system, white clothes, a sign of virginity and usually worn by nuns (Windeatt, Notes 307), signify and present to the world her spiritual virginity and chastity, for though she is not a virgin, she nevertheless wishes God to love her like one (Mazzoni 172). This is evident in chapter 21 when God assures her that he loves wives also, "specially those wives who would live chaste if they might have their will, and do all they can to please me as you do. For though the state of maidenhood be more perfect and more holy than the state of widowhood, and the state of widowhood more perfect than the state of wedlock, yet I love you, daughter, as much as any maiden in the world" (Kempe 84-5). Thus, God confirms the legitimacy of her marital vocation and assures her that through will, she can restore the virginity of spirit, as the good intention is as important as the deed. Moreover, Jesus tells Margery she is a maiden in her soul and that she will "dance in heaven with other holy maidens and virgins" (Kempe 88). Margery's effort to achieve

[18] It is important to note that during the late medieval period monthly communion was considered frequent, thus the weekly reception of the Eucharist would have been a unique privilege for a lay person (Morgan 433).

spiritual virginity resounds with the Wife of Bath's words: "The prize is set up for virginity; / Catch it whoever can, let's see who runs best" (*WBPT* lines 75-6). In addition, Margery, again consciously or unconsciously, justifies the wearing of white clothes partly as an instigator of the people's rejection of her behaviour, which she converts into persecution and bears it for Christ's sake (Windeatt, Notes 301).

2. 3. 6. Fear of Rape

Her sworn chastity and spiritual virginity is so important to Margery that in chapter 27, when her company abandons her whilst travelling to Jerusalem and God sends her an old guide, she prays to him: "drive away my enemies, and preserve my chastity that I vowed to you and let me never be defiled, and if I am, Lord, I vow that I will never return to England as long as I live" (Kempe 101). Margery views herself as a penitent sexual sinner and her fear of rape and loss of chastity is mentioned throughout the narrative and it is often well justified since she sometimes finds herself alone during travelling. In chapter 47, while she is in Leicester, the Mayor accuses Margery of heresy and the Steward, after questioning her, "took her by the hand and led her into his chamber, and spoke many foul, lewd words to her, intending and desiring, as it seemed to her, to overcome her and rape her" (Kempe 150). Margery begs him for mercy but he continues to struggle with her: "making filthy signs and giving her indecent looks, through which he frightened her so much that she told him how she had her speech and conversing from the Holy Ghost and not from her own knowledge" (Kempe 151). The Steward uses violent speech and the threat of sexual violence to frighten Margery. He attempts to weaken her resolve and debase her to the position he thinks she should hold. Even though she is not afraid of imprisonment for God's love, Margery fights and struggles against a possible rapist who can take away her agency and subject her to his will.

Later, Margery goes on pilgrimage to Aachen and is left alone by her company. She is around sixty at the time and a group of priests "spoke many filthy words to her, giving her indecent looks, and offering to lead her about if she liked" (Kempe 281). Their behaviour is an iteration of Margery's vision of naked priests showing her their genitalia and the devil encouraging her to prostitute herself to them. Margery's firm refusal of such behaviour and the priests' sexual advances showcase the hypocrisy and corruption within medieval Church and society. Instead of showing her respect, they "sexualize her predicament, presuming upon her availability and commonality" (McAvoy, "Virgin, Mother, Whore" ch. 9). Such behaviour emphasizes the injustice towards women in society and attempts to constrain them (McAvoy, "Virgin, Mother, Whore" ch. 9). Considering everything she has been through, it is not

surprising that Margery's fear of being violated grows: "And at nights she was often most afraid, and perhaps this was because of her spiritual enemy, because she was always afraid of being raped or violated. She dared trust no man; whether she had reason or not, she was always afraid. She scarcely dared sleep any night, because she believed men would have raped her" (Kempe 285). Female awareness and solidarity motivate young women to be Margery's sleeping companions and bring her comfort during her journey.

2. 3. 7. Spiritual Sexuality

As well as dealing with physical pleasure and sexuality, *The Book of Margery Kempe* focuses on the spiritual one. Tara Williams states that Margery supplements "her marriage to John with a relationship with Christ that proves to be more intimate, more exclusive, and more productive" (538). During the medieval period it was common to imagine various scenarios which included Jesus Christ, and sometimes his portrayal encouraged thoughts of a more intimate character, as belonging to the tradition of erotic mysticism. To exemplify, Margery sometimes wishes that the "crucifix should loosen his hands from the cross and embrace her in token of love" (Kempe 48). She uses the figurative language of traditional spiritual literature, particularly the nuptial imagery of a mystical union with God (Windeatt, Introduction 23). Williams states that "Margery's use of the imagery of desire reworks those traditions in several important ways: by reforming its nature, by depicting its real-life context, and by combining it with other elements" (548).[19] After the three-year-period of her trials finishes, Christ speaks directly into her head and tells her to call him Jesus, her love, "for I am your love and shall be your love without end" (Kempe 51). Furthermore, Jesus tells her "when you sorrow because you are kept so long from the bliss of heaven, then you are 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" (Kempe 67). There are many instances in which Jesus calls Margery his bride, wife, or spouse, and reaffirms his love for her (Kempe 88, 200, 254).

During mass and the reception of the Eucharist, Margery experiences visions and bouts of weeping, crying and sobbing sent from God "for she could not bear the abundance of love that she felt in the precious sacrament" (Kempe 177). Communion represents for Margery "a mystical union with Christ in all his corporeality, the absorption of flesh into flesh as she ate God through the host" (Morgan 434). Furthermore, Margery is commanded by God to wear a ring

[19] Williams states that whereas numerous female religious figures, for example, Angela of Foligno, Adelheid Langmann, and Catherine of Siena, envisioned marrying Christ or God, or used images of Christ as lover, their "desire is figurative, and Christ is a divine lover" (548- 9). For Margery desire is "homely and familiar, and Christ is a daily partner with whom she shares exclusive intimacy" (Williams 549).

with *Jesus est amor meus* (Jesus is my love) engraved on it and calls it "my good wedding ring to Jesus Christ" (Kempe 114). The ring functions as a physical representation of their spiritual holy love. In chapter 35, while Margery is in Rome, God speaks to her and takes her as His bride: "'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" (Kempe 123). This marriage ceremony is the climax of Margery's relationship with God. She is portrayed as the wife of the Godhead, but also as its mother (Williams 552).

Furthermore, through the spiritual union, Margery assumes her authoritative roles within The Holy Family (Davis 42) and God gives her: "flame of fire of love – marvellously hot and delectable and very comforting, never diminishing but ever increasing; for though the weather were never so cold she felt the heat burning in her breast and at her heart" (Kempe 125). Williams states that in "most medieval devotional texts, sexual imagery expresses spiritual longing" (528), and, considering Margery's increased libido and passion are supressed, they are sublimated in expressing her longing for the Godhead in erotic terms, visible in the following sentences Christ tells her:

> 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. (Kempe 126-127)

Although Margery's use of sexual elements has been labelled as inappropriately literal or uneducated (Williams 528; Bynum 44), Williams states that Margery is well aware of her terminology and uses it in order to establish an intimate connection to the Godhead (529). Moreover, the presence of Christ in the bedroom is not anomalous as even St. Jerome advises virgins to let Christ into their bedrooms (qtd. in Williams 534). Margery uses the maternal imagery in combination with sexual imagery to "enhance her authority as a religious figure in the image of the Virgin Mary" (Williams 530; Davis 42), and construct "a relationship with Christ that exceeds what anyone else – even Mary herself – could claim" (Williams 548). Some female mystics likewise described an erotic connection with Christ in more literal terms and married saints described the connection as freer and more amatory than the one they had with their

husbands (Williams 530; Staley, Introduction). With her abundant mentioning of maternal imagery, Margery exploits the relationship between physical and spiritual maternity (Williams 532). Moreover, she imitates the Virgin Mary, which can be confirmed by Margery's devout prayer to her: "the Mother of God, the well of grace, flower and fairest of all women that God ever made on earth, the worthiest of all to be seen and heard by God, and the highest that has deserved it in this life, benign Lady, meek Lady, charitable Lady" (Kempe 296).

Parallel familial-yet-erotic relationships are interspersed throughout Margery's narrative and apply for the Godhead (Williams 531). Familial relations between a mother and a son are combined with those of a wife and husband because Christ desires all of the love Margery has to give. Margery being a "mother to the infant Jesus, laying with him as a lover, being a bride to the Godhead, a handmaiden to Mary, a nurturer and comforter, provider of food and drink" is an "effective legitimation of her public activity through conventional and acceptable models of being female" (Morgan 436). Moreover, Margery achieves spiritual growth by being fully herself with Christ (Bynum 41). Alison Gulley and Karen Cherewatuk focus more on the roles of the wife and mother, with Gulley stating that through Margery's actions they are reinforced as a legitimate Christian vocation, and Cherewatuk that Margery's experiences as wife and mother initiate and seal her conversion (Gulley 134; Cherewatuk 20-1). Isabel Davis states that Margery conforms to social expectations about "wifeliness and pious devotion in order to legitimate more eccentric, socially and religiously suspect kinds of behaviour (47), and Crane posits that Margery defends her sex "partly by accepting cultural models of female submission" (22).

If viewed from the perspective of it all being Margery's unconscious or conscious negation of her position, she is to give Christ the love reserved for her husband and her children, transferring her focus from being a wife and mother to her family to being a wife and mother to Jesus; Margery "paradoxically seeks both to leave behind and to build on her identity as wife and mother" (Williams 528). This is further confirmed by Margery's prayer at the end of *The Book*: "And as regards any earthly man's love, as surely as I would have no love but God to love above all things, and love all other creatures for God and in God, so surely quench in me all fleshly lust, and in all those that I have beheld your blissful body" (293). Even though Margery's autobiography focuses on religious matters and features many examples of spiritual motherhood, it does not mention her actual children in any detail. In Book II, Margery describes her conversations with her son in which she acts not as a physical mother to him, but as a spiritual one, prompting him to follow Christ (Kempe 265). Yet Margery never describes and rarely mentions the upbringing of the rest of her children. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that

Margery's conversion is an escape from her reality and her framing of sexuality is influenced by the desire to uphold the external and internal image of a chaste, holy woman she creates. She justifies it by having Jesus tell her "he has made your body freely available to me, so that you should serve me and live chaste and clean" (Kempe 220).

3. Contraception and Abortion in Medieval English Literature

3. 1. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale"

Chaucer does not outright mention the use of contraception nor abortion in *The Canterbury Tales*, but his opinion on the matter may be inferred from the "Parson's Tale." The Parson's preaching suggests that Chaucer's opinion on it is derived from Augustine's rhetoric (Falvo Heffernan 35). They are listed under the sin of Anger and the Parson discusses them as a form of homicide:

> Also when man disturbs conception of a child, and makes a woman either barren by drinking venomous herbs through which she can not conceive, or slays a child by drinks willfully, or else puts certain material things in her secret places to slay the child, or else does unnatural sin, by which man or woman sheds their nature (commits sodomy) in manner or in place where a child can not be conceived, or else if a woman have conceived, and hurts herself and slays the child, yet is it homicide. What say we also of women that murder their children for dread of worldly shame? Certainly, an horrible homicide. Homicide is also if a man approaches to a woman by desire of lechery, through which the child is killed, or else smites a woman wittingly, through which she loses their child. All these are homicides and horrible deadly sins. ("The Parson's Prologue and Tale" 575)

These lines suggest that Chaucer was familiar with the use of pessaries, herbal potions, and unusual positions of intercourse to avoid pregnancy (Falvo Heffernan 35). However, considering none of them are ever mentioned in the *Tales*, it is possible to assume he truly considered them great sins not to be spoken of openly, so as not to encourage or provide his audience with forbidden information.

In *WBPT* there is no mention of Alisoun's children, not even if she has any or not. Motherhood, an important part of a woman's married life at the time, is never mentioned. It may be assumed that she does have children, since she has had five husbands over the span of twenty-

eight years and has had regular sexual relations with them. However, many critics argue that the Wife of Bath has no children. Karen Harris states there are many theories "as to why the Wife of Bath is childless": her husbands' impotency, infertility caused by her sexual appetite, and as a symbol of her barren, materialistic life (Harris 11). Alisoun's first three husbands were older, thus possibly impotent. If her "Prologue" is read as a tale of warning to sinful wives, it can be concluded that Alisoun has no children as a result or reflection of her excessive greed or lust (Harris 11). It can likewise be concluded that Alisoun's silence on the matter of children might be due to the fact that through her deliberate actions and awareness of contraceptive and abortive techniques she did not have any. There are several reasons as to why she might have considered it prudent to practice contraception, and, if it fails, have an abortion.

Firstly, as previously mentioned, Alisoun's main commodity of trade was her body and her sexuality that would not be equally attractive and valuable had she given birth once or more times. Secondly, considering the laws regulating inheritance, the oldest son would have inherited his father's property (qtd. in Harris 13), leaving Alisoun with her dowry and marriage portion.[20] Therefore, it was prudent to prevent or terminate a pregnancy and ensure the passing of her old husbands' property solely to her, as husbands frequently left property to their wives and widows were made executors (Carruthers 210). Harris adds that the burden of childrearing would curb Alisoun's freedoms (14), but that might not necessarily be so, as Margery likewise journeys to Jerusalem when some of her children are probably quite young. Delany states Alisoun comprehends God's commandment to "grow fruitful and multiply" (Kempe 28) in terms of profit rather than children (71) and only when she reaches her goal of becoming financially independent, does she choose to marry out of love and attraction. However, she does not mention children and it is possible she is no longer capable of conceiving due to long-term exposure to various contraceptive or abortive means that mostly have dangerous side effects if taken incorrectly. Although Alisoun mentions procreation as a function of the genitalia, she does not appear to adhere to her explanation, but uses it to justify her sexual activities.

Regarding contraception and abortion in *GP* and *WBPT*, there are several hints that can be interpreted as Chaucer's subtle approach to the topic. Considering the company in which Alisoun travelled – eighteen men, a Prioress, and two Nuns – it is no wonder she does not openly speak about contraception and abortion. In *GP*, Chaucer describes Alisoun as having large hips (472), meaning she was then considered a healthy woman capable of childbirth. However, that capacity might be negated by the fact "She knew, as it happened, about remedies for love / For

[20] This would amount to a third of the husband's estate (Katz Seal, *Father Chaucer* 61).

she knew the old dance (tricks of the trade) of that art" (*GP* 475-76). As previously mentioned, Alisoun equated love with sexual attraction and sexual relations, therefore the remedies she mentions might be those that prevent or terminate a result of love – a pregnancy – and refer to knowledge of contraceptive and abortive means.[21] Harris states that one definition of the word "remedy" from around 1400 is "A means of counteracting a source of misery or difficulty; a means of relieving a bad situation or avoiding a problem" (qtd in Harris 12); if a pregnancy or a child is considered a problem, then a remedy may also be a contraceptive or an abortive. Moreover, these lines are positioned at the closing of the Wife's description – "a spot typically reserved for a dramatic or climactic commentary about each pilgrim" (Harris 12), which makes it likely they have a hidden meaning and might refer to something controversial. This description can be connected to Alisoun's statement from her "Prologue" when talking about the falsified dream she told to Jankin: "But I followed always my mother's teaching, / As well in this as in other things more" (*WBPT* lines 583-4). Alisoun's mother is the one who oversaw her upbringing and, along with possible maids or wet-nurses, taught her and gave her advice about how to run a household and how to manage a husband. It is evident from these lines: "I falsely swore that he had enchanted me-- / My mother taught me that trick" (*WBPT* lines 575-6) that her mother gave her advice on how to seduce men. Alisoun states that she followed her mother's teaching in many things, some of which might even relate to knowledge about contraceptive or abortive methods, which were regularly orally transmitted among women.

Moreover, in the falsified dream Alisoun mentions that her bed is full of real blood, which symbolizes gold (*WBPT* lines 579-81). When connected with the wealth she gains from her marriages, the blood may refer to her menstrual cycle, which she encourages by using contraceptives and abortive means, and thus prevents conception and the transfer of inheritance. It can also be interpreted as the blood of unborn children; her bed being "the space where male bloodlines die" (Katz Seal, *Father Chaucer* 58). Therefore, blood is gold, but only Alisoun's gold. Katz Seal states that through the withholding of heirs Alisoun attacks the very institution of male authority which protects itself through patrilineal lineage (*Father Chaucer* 58). Alisoun is used to challenging and destroying male authority, but her own can only last during the marriage and her, by necessity, barren life, as producing a child would mean she needs to share it. In addition, in Alisoun's "Tale" the old woman speaks about nobility: "Thy nobility comes from God alone. / Then our true nobility comes from grace; / It was not at all bequeathed to us with

[21] In his edition of "The Wife of Bath's Tale," Peter G. Beidler states that "remedies of love" refer to aphrodisiacs (qtd. in Harris 11), whereas Martin Puhvel, in his article "The Wife of Bath's "Remedies of Love,"' develops a theory they may also refer to Alisoun murdering her husbands with poison (307-9).

our social rank" (*WBPT* lines 1162-64), and undermines the prevailing social hierarchy based on patrilineal lineage. Furthermore, when speaking about the book of wicked wives, Alisoun enumerates Trotula as one who was mentioned by Jankin whilst reading, meaning that Chaucer has heard about medical treatises on women's health ascribed to her, which contained information regarding contraception and abortion.[22]

3. 2. "The Merchant's Tale, Prologue, and Epilogue"

Similarly to *WBPT*, although there is no specific mention of contraception nor abortion in the *MTPE*, several hints at contraceptive practices may be found. May, young and fertile like the month of spring she is named after, probably does not conceive a child with January. Critics agree that the reasoning likewise lies in his name – he is old and barren like the month of January, when the earth yields no fruit. However, his desire for offspring is clear throughout the Tale. Michael A. Calabrese states that January wishes to procreate mostly to perpetuate his economic security beyond the grave by passing on his wealth and property to an heir (267). However, when January describes himself as a tree it is to portray his virility and capability of bearing fruit. The tale leaves us in no doubt of his conjoined preoccupation with bloodline and heirs, "tree" and "fruit" (Blamires, "May in January's Tree" 113). Prior to their first wedding night, January is described as drinking "mulled wine, claret, and strong white wine / With hot spices to increase his desire" (*MPTE* line 1808). He satisfies his sexual appetite but is unable to satisfy or awaken desire within May. According to medieval physiological science, "May could not conceive with January in the absence of release of female "seed" in orgasm, but would be thought to conceive with Damian" (qtd. in Blamires, "May in January's Tree" 115). Moreover, Blamires states that when May reproaches January for misjudging what he has seen in the tree, she insinuates his misjudgement is connected to his inappropriateness as a partner with whom to conceive, as the original phrasing she uses is: "He that mysconceyveth, he mysdemeth."' (*MPTE* line 2140) ("May in January's Tree" 115). However, her illicit affair with Damian is another matter. He is young and virile and there is a possibility she conceives a child with him. The following procreative pun refers to Damian who threatens to infiltrate her marital bed: "O perilous fire, that in the bedstraw breeds!" (*MPTE* line 1783).

When they are in the garden, Damian climbs the pear tree, loaded with fruit (*MPTE* line 2211) and waits for May. She tells January: "I must have some of the pears that I see, / Or I must

[22] The name Trotula refers to a group of three texts on women's medicine that were composed in Salerno in the twelfth century. The title Trotula means "the little (work of) Trota" and was misunderstood as the author of the texts which circulated Europe from the late twelfth century to the late fifteenth century (Green xi).

die, so sore I long / To eat some of the small green pears" (*MPTE* lines 2331-33) and provides her "condition" as a reason for her appetite (*MPTE* line 2335). She asks him "The pear tree within your arms to take" (*MPTE* line 2342) and enable her to climb up by standing on his back (*MPTE* 2345). She does so and has sex with Damian. Beidler states it is not possible to determine whether Damian reaches a climax during their encounter or not, thus we are unable to determine if May conceives a child with him or not (42). Carol Falvo Heffernan emphasizes the importance of the pear three, stating it was "among the substances traditionally used by early doctors to prevent conception" (31) and that May might want to avoid conception by Damian (31-32). As has been mentioned, there is a number of theories regarding the significance of the pear tree, some of them connected to the resemblance of the pear to female breasts or male genitalia (qtd. in Falvo Heffernan 34; Rosenberg 268). It may symbolize the irony of it being Damian's genealogical tree instead of January's; the fruit may refer to Damian's genitalia, sexual fruition or the child that might result from the encounter, or May as the fruit to be plucked (Blamires, "May in January's Tree" 114). The tree is also used to define an adulterous relationship (Falvo Heffernan 32).

Regarding the use of pears as contraceptives, Albertus Magnus, the Dominican bishop of Regensburg, states that: "those who cause sweating by the use of magical items say that the root of pears, and especially stiptic roots and roots of slow ripening pears, carried and tied on women, impede conception: and similarly if a woman has the pear on or near herself and she will have a hard time giving birth" (qtd in Falvo Heffernan 37). Moreover, Albertus discusses the usefulness of stiptic pears in making plasters which can be plastered over the groin to contract the stomach (qtd. in Falvo Heffernan 38). Avicenna's statement that plasters made with stiptic pears cause the retention of matter might suggest they interfere with contraception by means of retaining menstrual fluid, the coagulation of which was necessary for conception according to ancient thinking (Falvo Heffernan 38). Harris states that May is wise to consume the pear before having sex with Damian because she might not be pregnant as her "condition," in the original version "plit" (*MPTE* line 2335), could be an instance of double meaning and also refer to her need to prevent pregnancy during her extra-marital exploits (17). The fact that she uses such phrasing might be interpreted as a precaution in case the pear does not help and Damian truly impregnates her. This way it would not arouse suspicion if that were to happen. Even though Carol Ann Everest states it is possible that May's craving for pears is due to the pica of pregnancy, "the desire of pregnant women for strange or unpalatable foods" (Everest 72), medical theories of conception discredit the possibility. Contrary to *WBPT*, in *MPTE* it is not possible to deduce if

May had any previous knowledge of contraception or not. If May did not learn anything about contraception prior to marrying January, it would be very difficult for her to do so in his household, especially after he goes blind and keeps one hand on her at all times.

3. 3. *The Book of Margery Kempe*

Margery only mentions her children a few times in her narrative and, with the exception of the son who lives in Germany, never says anything about them. Her children are mostly mentioned in prayers and conversations with Christ (Kempe 55, 253, 295). There is only one mention of the fact that Margery has fourteen children and it occurs when she is imprisoned in Leicester, on doubts of being a Lollard. During the trial she states she had borne fourteen children (Kempe 153). In chapter 17 Margery attributes the decision not to have more children to God's commandment: "One day long before this time, while this creature was bearing children and was newly delivered of a child, our Lord Christ Jesus said to her that she should bear no more children" (Kempe 73). This child is probably the fourteenth child she delivered and afterwards comes the period when her husband is afraid to touch her and they make the vow of chastity so they have no more children. As contraception is never explicitly mentioned in *The Book* and Margery chooses to live chastely rather than having sexual relations with her husband, it is possible to conclude she has no knowledge of contraceptive and abortive means available to women during the late Middle Ages and living chastely was Margery's only way to avoid becoming pregnant again.

Another possible reason for the lack of mention of contraception or abortion, combined with the fact that Margery saw abstinence, that is, chastity, as the only way to stop further pregnancies, is that she might have had negative experiences in the past. At the beginning of the narrative Margery is sick during pregnancy and exhausted by childbirth and she calls a confessor: "for she had a thing on her conscience which she had never revealed before that time in all her life" (Kempe 40). For the sin, she does penance alone "but she would not reveal that one thing in confession" (Kempe 40). During the confession "her confessor was a little too hasty and began sharply to reprove her before she had fully said what she meant . . . soon after, because of the dread she had of damnation on the one hand, and his sharp reproving of her on the other, this creature went out of her mind and was amazingly disturbed and tormented with spirits" (Kempe 40). Windeatt states that her breakdown is psychotic in nature and that the guilt she felt was sexual (Notes 300), which is entirely possible considering she states in the narrative that lechery is her greatest temptation.

Moreover, critics consistently classify the sin as sexual in nature, whether as incest, masturbation, or general sexual guilt (Williams 533; Stanton 178; McAvoy, "Virgin, Mother, Whore" ch. 9). Morgan labels this episode of insanity as "Severe postnatal psychosis . . . exacerbated by the guilt of an unconfessed sin" and Stanon as "her postpartum dementia" (Morgan 430; Stanton 172). It is likewise possible that her sin is connected to contraception or abortion. Margery marries at "twenty years of age, or somewhat more" (Kempe 40), which is not unusual for a medieval urban Englishwoman (Phillips 24). Since women then reached sexual maturity when they were about fourteen years old, it is entirely possible that Margery had sexual relations that led to pregnancy prior to her marriage. The sickness she experiences during her first pregnancy and the labour-pains she has during childbirth, though typical of pregnancy and childbirth, were so severe "she despaired of her life" (Kempe 41), and might be consequences of an earlier abortion she had by some of the available means. It is possible that her unconfessed sin is one of extramarital sex and ensuing pregnancy, which she terminated. Her temptation passes when Christ appears to her in the form of a beautiful man and asks her: "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and I never forsook you?" (Kempe 42). Afterwards she calms down and is able to think clearly again. It is possible she imagines Christ in order to convince herself that she is forgiven of her sin as a way of coping with the guilt and trauma of whatever her sin was, and later dedicates her life to proving to herself and everyone else that she is indeed pure and worthy.

Her religious escapism might be said to continue after her business ventures fail and she does not wish to have any more children. Margery turns to religion and changes her life in the only way she is able to during that period. In chapter 21, the Lord tells Margery she is pregnant and he will arrange for the child to be looked after (Kempe 84). It is possible she is trying to justify and rationalize her continual pregnancies with the words she hears from Jesus: "I wish you to bring me forth more fruit" (Kempe 84), and views them as compensation for the abortion she had. Her whole spiritual religious system might be the product of a neuroses developed from pressing guilt combined with sickness and childbirth. Thus, as in chapter 21, she continually asks for confirmation of God's love and wishes it to be the same love he shows to virgins, to confirm her purity and pardon of her sin. As Margery dictates her account later in life it is possible she combines and adds elements of other female saints' stories into her narrative as she does so.[23]

However, during her trial in Leicester, Margery states: "I take witness of my Lord Jesus Christ, whose body is here present in the sacrament of the altar, that I never had part of any

[23] She mentions Bridget of Sweden, St. Catherine of Alexandria, Mary of Oignies, Elizabeth of Hungary, St. Mary of Egypt, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Barbara, and St. Margaret (Windeatt, Introduction 17).

man's body in this world in actual deed by way of sin, except my husband's body, to whom I am bound by the law of matrimony, and by whom I have borne fourteen children" (Kempe 153). Considering the fact that Margery is a devout woman, it is highly unlikely that she would give false testimony after swearing on Christ; thus, the theory that the sin torturing her is abortion is refuted. It is possible that the sin is one of enjoyment of irregular sexual activities[24] within marriage, because Margery later states, when she is nursing her old and senile husband, that: "she in her young days had had very many delectable thoughts, physical lust, and inordinate love for his body. And therefore she was glad to be punished by means of the same body" (Kempe 221).

[24] Such as anal sex or possible fetishes.

Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis has sought to demonstrate how women represented in medieval literary texts use sexuality and contraceptive and abortive means in order to achieve agency and gain power. Each female protagonist, fictional or nonfictional, uses her sexuality to achieve agency and gain power in other areas of her life and in her position in society. Likewise, at least one of the analysed female characters possibly uses contraceptive or abortive means to control her body and prevent the begetting of heirs with whom she would have to share wealth and power.

Two of the female protagonists, Alisoun and May, subvert the appropriate and correct notions of female sexual behaviour and thus fall into stereotypical categories of the insatiable woman and the trickster. Alisoun's acceptance of the marital economy within which she is the commodity and the merchant allows her to garner wealth and power by trading sex for profit. Moreover, Alisoun uses feminine rhetoric to manipulate her husbands, which, along with sexual manipulation, gives her control over their bodies and souls. Although the tale does not specifically mention any type of contraceptive or abortive means, it is nonetheless possible to conclude that Alisoun was aware of them, probably through the teachings of her mother, and utilized them as a remedy for love. Through control of her own body she controlled her husbands as well, maybe even with the promise of a child which she never planned to fulfil. Her understanding of marriage as a mercantile agreement and decision to remain childless subvert the dominant Christian ideology that the role of marriage is to produce heirs of the estate. Alisoun profited from not producing offspring (Harris 13).

In *MPTE*, May is mostly silent and placed in the role of a complacent wife who eventually cuckolds her old husband. Almost until the end of the Tale, May's desires and wishes are completely disregarded and her apparent submission to the religious patriarchal ideal of the female spouse is almost complete. Thus she uses her body to subvert his hold on her and gain agency by means of an illicit affair. She strengthens her position with Proserpine's gift of clever use of language and manipulation, again stressing the importance of rhetoric in marital relations as one of the few spheres women have any influence. The reasoning behind May's possible use of the pear as a contraceptive might be to take control over her body and rob January of desired heirs, legitimate or illegitimate.

On the other hand, Margery Kempe manages to take control of her body through religion and live "in the matter of chastity as if [she] were a widow" (Kempe 200). All control of

Margery's body and soul is transferred to God, who acts through her and prompts her actions. She upholds her spiritual virginity and sexual chastity in order to make her body pure and free for God, for through her connection to him and the various roles she assumes, sometimes even those of erotic character, she becomes "a true daughter," "a true mother," "a true sister," and "true spouse and wife" (Kempe 67). Moreover, Margery portrays sex and spiritual devotion in closer terms then they usually are and combines them in examples of erotic devotion and her intimacy to Christ and God (Williams 554). Margery might understand such intimacy as giving her more authority on the matter than other religious figures have. Moreover, her religious experience and the desire for chastity might be her way of preventing further pregnancies and establishing control over her body, as abstinence is clearly the only form of contraception she knows about or feels comfortable using.

Although there is already a considerable amount of research on sexuality in the selected works, innovative interpretations are possible and further study is called for the role, or lack thereof, of contraception and abortion in medieval literature, in particular in relation to the point of view and reliability of the narrator and scribe (in Margery Kempe's case).

Works Cited

Aers, David. *Routledge Revivals: Community, Gender and Individual Identity (1988): English Writing, 1360–1430*. Routledge, 2017.

Allman, W. W., and D. Thomas Hanks. "Rough Love: Notes toward an Erotics of the *Canterbury Tales*." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2003, pp. 36–65. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25094234. Accessed 16 Aug. 2022.

Arnell, Carla. "Chaucer's Wife of Bath and John Fowles's Quaker Maid: Tale-Telling and the Trial of Personal Experience and Written Authority." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 102, no. 4, 2007, pp. 933–46. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/20467542. Accessed 12 June 2022.

Arnold, John H., and Katherine J. Lewis, editors. *A Companion to The Book of Margery Kempe*. D. S. Brewer, 2004.

Atkinson, Clarissa W. *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Medieval West*. Cornell UP, 1991.

Bardsley, Sandy. *Women's Roles in the Middle Ages*. Greenwood Press, 2007.

Bednarski, Steven. "Keeping It in the Family? Domestic Violence in the Later Middle Ages: Examples from a Provençal Town (1340–1403)." *Love, Marriage, and Family Ties in the Latter Middle Ages*, edited by Isabel Davis et al., Brepols, 2003, pp. 277- 97.

Beidler, Peter G. "The Climax in the 'Merchant's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1971, pp. 38–43. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25093178. Accessed 29 June 2022.

Betancourt, Roland. "Abortion and Contraception in the Middle Ages." *Scientific American*, 11 Dec. 2020, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/abortion-and-contraception-in-the-middle-ages/#. Accessed 4 May 2022.

Blamires, Alcuin. *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*. Oxford UP, 2006.

---. "May in January's Tree: Genealogical Configuration in 'The Merchant's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2010, pp. 106–17. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.5325/chaucerrev.45.1.0106. Accessed 21 June 2022.

Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Renate. *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*. Cornell UP, 1990.

Brundage, James A. "Sex and Cannon Law." Bullough and Brundage, pp. 33- 50.

Bullough, Vern L. ed. *Encyclopaedia of Birth Control.* ABC-CLIO, 2001.

Bullough, Vern L., and James A. Brundage, editors. *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*. Routledge, 1996.

Burger, Douglas A. "Deluding Words in the 'Merchant's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1977, pp. 103–10. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25093420. Accessed 28 June 2022.

Burnley, J. D. "The Morality of 'The Merchant's Tale.'" *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 6, 1976, pp. 16–25. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/3506384. Accessed 29 June 2022.

Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. Zone Books, 1992.

Cadden, Joan. "Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy." Bullough and Brundage, ch. 3.

Calabrese, Michael A. "May Devoid of All Delight: January, the 'Merchant's Tale' and the 'Romance of the Rose.'" *Studies in Philology*, vol. 87, no. 3, 1990, pp. 261–84. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174364. Accessed 6 Aug. 2022.

Carruthers, Mary. "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions." *PMLA*, vol. 94, no. 2, 1979, pp. 209–22. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/461886. Accessed 8 June 2022.

Carter, Susan. "Coupling the Beastly Bride and the Hunter Hunted: What Lies behind Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2003, pp. 329–45. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25096219. Accessed 8 June 2022.

Cartlidge, Neil. "Marriage, Sexuality and the Family." *A Concise Companion to Chaucer*, edited by Corinne Saunders, Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 218-40.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. "General Prologue." *The Canterbury Tales: Complete*. Harvard U, https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/general-prologue-0. Accessed 7 Apr. 2022.

---. "The Merchant's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue." *The Canterbury Tales: Complete*. Harvard U, https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/merchants-prologue-tale-and-epilogue. Accessed 10 June 2022.

---. "The Parson's Prologue and Tale." *The Canterbury Tales: Complete*. Harvard U, https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/parsons-prologue-and-tale. Accessed 8 Apr. 2022.

---. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale." *The Canterbury Tales: Complete*. Harvard U, https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/wife-baths-prologue-and-tale-0. Accessed 7 Apr. 2022.

Cherewatuk, Karen. "'Becoming Male, Medieval Mothering', and Incarnational Theology in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' and the *Book of Margery Kempe*." *Arthuriana*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2009, pp. 15–24. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870971. Accessed 27 May 2022.

Coote, Lesley A., editor. *The Canterbury Tales*. by Geoffrey Chaucer, Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2012.

Crane, Susan. "Alison's Incapacity and Poetic Instability in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale.'" *PMLA*, vol. 102, no. 1, 1987, pp. 20–28. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/462489. Accessed 9 June 2022.

Crocker, Holly A. "Performative Passivity and Fantasies of Masculinity in the 'Merchant's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2003, pp. 178–98. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25094244. Accessed 7 Aug. 2022.

Curry, Walter Clyde. *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*. 2nd ed., Barnes & Noble, 1960.

Davis, Isabel. "Men and Margery: Negotiating Medieval Patriarchy." Arnold and Lewis, pp. 35-54.

D'Avray, David. *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society*. Oxford UP, 2005.

Delany, Sheila. "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and Her Sect*, edited by Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson, Routledge, 1994, pp. 71-86.

De La Ronciere, Charles. "Tuscan Notables on the Eve of the Renaissance." *A History of Private Life, Vol. 2, Revelations of the Medieval World*, edited by Georges Duby, Belknap Press, 1988, pp. 157- 309.

Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. The U of Wisconsin P, 1989.

Ellis, Deborah S. "The Merchant's Wife's Tale: Language, Sex, and Commerce in Margery Kempe and in Chaucer." *Exemplaria*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1990, pp. 595-626.

Everest, Carol Ann. *Medicine, Aging and Sexuality in Chaucer's "Reeve's Prologue," "Merchant's Tale" and "Miller's Tale"*. 1992. Uni of Alberta, PhD dissertation.

Falvo Heffernan, Carol. "Contraception and the Pear Tree Episode of Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale.'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 94, no. 1, 1995, pp. 31–41. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27711097. Accessed 24 Apr. 2022.

Fein, Susanna. "The 'Thyng Wommen Loven Moost': The Wife of Bath's Fabliau Answer." *Medieval Women and Their Objects*, edited by Jenny Adams and Nancy Mason Bradbury, U

of Michigan P, 2017, pp. 15–38. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.9222733.5. Accessed 13 June 2022.

Fienberg, Nona. "Thematics of Value in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Modern Philology*, vol. 87, no. 2, 1989, pp. 132–41. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/438481. Accessed 26 May 2022.

Green, Monica H. *The Trotula, A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine*. U of Pennsylvania, 2001.

Gulley, Alison. "Not Tonight Dear, I Have a Vow of Chastity: Sexual Abstinence and Marital Vocation in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Enarratio*, vol. 6, 1999, pp. 133-147. *Knowledge Bank*, http://hdl.handle.net/1811/71249. Accessed 24 May 2022.

Hanna, Natalie. "'To Take a Wyf': Marriage, Status, and Moral Conduct in 'The Merchant's Tale.'" *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2016, pp. 61–74. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24720616. Accessed 15 Jul. 2022.

Harris, Karen. "Wise Wyf's Remedies of Love: Birth Control in 'The Wife of Bath.'" *Graduate Research Journal*, vol. 1, 2014, pp. 11-18.

Higgs, Laquita. "Margery Kempe: 'Whete-Breed or Barly-Breed?'" *Mystics Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1987, pp. 57–64. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20716791. Accessed 24 May 2022.

Jouanna, Jacques. "The Legacy of the Hippocratic Treatise *The Nature of Man*: The Theory of the Four Humours." *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, edited by Philip van der Eijk, Brill, 2012, pp. 335–60. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w76vxr.21. Accessed 25 Aug. 2022.

Jöchle, Wolfgang. "Menses-inducing Drugs: Their Role in Antique, Medieval, and Renaissance Gynecology and Birth Control." *Contraception*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1974, pp. 425-39.

Justman, Stewart. "Literal and Symbolic in the *Canterbury Tales*." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1980, pp. 199–214. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25093502. Accessed 27 June 2022.

---. "Trade as Pudendum: Chaucer's Wife of Bath." *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1994, pp. 344–52. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25095858. Accessed 20 June 2022.

Katz Seal, Samantha. *Father Chaucer: Generating Authority in The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford UP, 2019.

---. "Pregnant Desire: Eyes and Appetites in the 'Merchant's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2014, pp. 284–306. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.5325/chaucerrev.48.3.0284. Accessed 29 June 2022.

Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Translated by Barry A. Windeatt, Penguin Books, 1994.

Knowles, John. "A History of Birth Control Methods." *Planned Parenthood*, 11 Jan. 2006, https://web.archive.org/web/20080517045452/http:/www.plannedparenthood.org/resources/research-papers/bc-history-6547.htm . Accessed 11 Jan 2020.

Mazzoni, Cristina. "Of Stockfish and Stew: Feasting and Fasting in *the Book of Margery Kempe*." *Food & Foodways*, vol. 10, 2003, pp. 171–182.

McAvoy, Liz Herbert. ""Aftyr Hyr Owyn Tunge": Body, Voice and Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Women's Writing*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2002, pp. 159-176.

---. "Virgin, Mother, Whore: The Sexual Spirituality of Margery Kempe." *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture: The Word Made Flesh*, edited by Susannah Mary Chewning, Routledge, 2017, ch. 9.

McCarthy, Conor. *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages: A Sourcebook*. Routledge, 2004.

McKinley, Kathryn L. "The Silenced Knight: Questions of Power and Reciprocity in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 30, no. 4, 1996, pp. 359–78. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25095942. Accessed 20 June 2022.

McTaggart, Anne. "What Women Want? Mimesis and Gender in Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Prologue' and 'Tale.'" *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, vol. 19, 2012, pp. 41–67. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41925333. Accessed 13 June 2022.

Metzler, Irina. "Liminality and Disability: Spatial and Conceptual Aspects of Physical Impairments in Medieval Europe." *Medicine and Space: Body, Surroundings and Borders in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, edited by Patricia A. Baker et al. Brill, 2012, pp. 273- 96.

Morgan, Susan. “Body Symbolism in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.” *New Blackfriars*, vol. 76, no. 897, 1995, pp. 426–40. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43249779. Accessed 23 May 2022.

Mount, Toni. *Dragon’s Blood & Willow Bark: The Mysteries of Medieval Medicine*. Amberley, 2015.

Müller, Wolfgang P. *The Criminalization of Abortion in the West: Its Origins in Medieval Law*. Cornell UP, 2012.

Neuse, Richard. “Marriage and the Question of Allegory in the ‘Merchant’s Tale.’” *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1989, pp. 115–31. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25094110. Accessed 25 Apr. 2022.

O’Pry-Reynolds, Anita Kay. “Men and Women as Represented in Medieval Literature and Society.” *Saber and Scroll Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2013, pp. 37-45.

“pessary.” *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/pessary?q=pessary. Accessed 20 Aug. 2022.

Phillips, Kim K. “Margery Kempe and the Ages of Woman.” Arnold and Lewis, pp. 17-34.

Pugh, Tison. “Gender, Vulgarity, and the Phantom Debates of Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*.” *Studies in Philology*, vol. 114, no. 3, 2017, pp. 473–96. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/90011221. Accessed 7 Aug. 2022.

---. “Queering Genres, Battering Males: The Wife of Bath’s Narrative Violence.” *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2003, pp. 115–42. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225785. Accessed 14 June 2022.

Puhvel, Martin. “The Wife of Bath’s ‘Remedies of Love.’” *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1986, pp. 307–12. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25093967. Accessed 14 June 2022.

---. “The Wife of Bath’s Tale: Mirror of Her Mind.” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, vol. 100, no. 3, 1999, pp. 291–300. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43346205. Accessed 14 June 2022.

Riddle, John M. *Eve’s Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West*. Harvard UP, 1999.

Robertson, Elizabeth, and Christine M. Rose, editors. *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*. Palgrave, 2001.

Robertson, Elizabeth, and Christine M. Rose. Introduction. Robertson and Rose, pp. 1- 20.

Rose, Christine M. „Reading Chaucer Reading Rape." Robertson and Rose, pp. 21-60.

Rosenberg, Bruce A. "The 'Cherry-Tree Carol' and the 'Merchant's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1971, pp. 264–76. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25093168. Accessed 7 Aug. 2022.

Salisbury, Joyce E. "Gendered Sexuality." Bullough and Brundage, ch. 4.

Saunders, Corinne. "Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*." *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, edited by Corinne Saunders, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 452-75.

---. *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*. D. S. Brewer, 2001.

Sheridan, Christian. "May in the Marketplace: Commodification and Textuality in the 'Merchant's Tale.'" *Studies in Philology*, vol. 102, no. 1, 2005, pp. 27–44. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174807. Accessed 12 Jul. 2022.

Staley, Lynn. Introduction. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, by Margery Kempe, Medieval Institute Publications, 1996, *Robbins Library Digital Projects*, https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/staley-book-of-margery-kempe-introduction. Accessed 26 May 2022.

Stanton, Robert. "Lechery, Pride, and the Uses of Sin in *The Book of Margery Kempe*." *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2010, pp. 169–204. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.5325/jmedirelicult.36.2.0169. Accessed 26 May 2022.

Stevens, Martin. "And Venus Laugheth: An Interpretation of the 'Merchant's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1972, pp. 118–31. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25093220. Accessed 28 June 2022.

Turner, Joseph. "Rhetoric and Performing Anger: Proserpina's Gift and Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*." *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2016, pp. 427–54. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26378052. Accessed 11 Jul. 2022.

Van de Walle, Etienne. "'Marvellous Secrets': Birth Control in European Short Fiction, 1150-1650." *Population Studies*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2000, pp. 321–30, *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2584788. Accessed 4 May 2022.

Walling, Amanda. “Placebo Effects: Flattery and Antifeminism in Chaucer’s ‘Merchant’s Tale’ and the ‘Tale of Melibee.’” *Studies in Philology*, vol. 115, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1–24. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/90016769. Accessed 28 June 2022.

Williams, Tara. “Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in *The Book of Margery Kempe*.” *Modern Philology*, vol. 107, no. 4, 2010, pp. 528–55. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.1086/652270. Accessed 23 May 2022.

Windeatt, Barry. Introduction: The Text of Margery Kempe’s *Book*. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, by Margery Kempe, Penguin Books, 1994, pp. 9-28.

---. Notes. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, by Margery Kempe, Penguin Books, 1994, pp. 298-330.

Zedolik, John. “‘The Gardyn Is Enclosed Al Aboute’: The Inversion of Exclusivity in the ‘Merchant’s Tale.’” *Studies in Philology*, vol. 112, no. 3, 2015, pp. 490–503. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43921935. Accessed 12 Jul. 2022.