The Appropriation of Masculine Discourse and the Disruption of Gender Identity in Chaucer's "The Merchant's Tale"

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ABSTRACT

Where Chaucer's attitudes lie on feminism and even anti-feminism is a contentious and perhaps unanswerable question. While some scholars offer readings of Chaucer as a misogynist poet who deprecates women, others, such as Elaine Tuttle Hansen, attempt to mitigate that misogyny by placing it in a broader political context, one which is sensitive to the political nuances of Chaucer's time. In this way, Hansen wants to argue that any feminist critique of Chaucer must cleverly negotiate those political and literary conventions in which Chaucer wrote, namely, the hierarchical position of the masculine over the feminine. Yet as Hansen explores Chaucer's sexual politics in the hopes of recuperating a more humanist Chaucer, she maintains the fixity of those gender roles, arguing that women often "die" in their attempts to transgress gender lines. In The Merchant's Tale then, I intend to move beyond Hansen's treatment of women and thereby suggest that it is only through a transgression of stable gender categories, an appropriation of the authoritative masculine discourse, that May may gain access to political agency and thus elide adulterous recriminations.

We can comfortably read Chaucer's The Merchant's Tale, as a tale about a deluded, old husband who is cuckolded by his young, resourceful wife. Like Chaucer's other fabliaux The Miller's Tale, The Merchant's Tale relies upon conventional comedic oppositions between old, ignorant husband and young, resourceful wife to inform its narrative on adultery. Like the plot of The Miller's Tale, within The Merchant's Tale January's wife, May, constructs an elaborate ruse to allow for an adulterous tryst with Damian, her secret liaison. May leads her (temporarily blind) husband to their fruit garden - in which Damian is hiding within a pear tree - so that she may climb upon his back and enter the tree. Yet soon after the tryst begins, January recovers his sight and sees the adultery. Like Alison in The Merchant's Tale, May elides recriminations from her husband. But how does she achieve this elision? Alison's avoidance of recriminations stems from her husband's ignorance over the adultery. Yet January sees May cheat with Damian. The similarity between the plot devices thus only goes so far. As we will see, May achieves her elision by convincing January that she did not commit adultery. May argues that she was in the tree with Damian only to restore January's sight. Convinced of May's marital fidelity, January reaccepts May as his faithful - if not wholly sexually faithful - naive wife. To the extent that May convinces January that she did not commit adultery, we explore the means, the conventions, May uses to restore the marriage to its illusory state of innocence.

I then offer a Foucauldian reading of The Merchant's Tale, one that focuses on the dynamic at work between discourses which can be categorized into two groups: masculine and feminine. Significant about these discourses is how they politically differ from each other. According to Foucault, the feminine is that marginalized discourse characterized by uncertainty and a lack of authority. The masculine discourse, in contrast, is imbued with political agency. It speaks with an authority and rationality that one cannot ignore nor dismiss. Significant in The Merchant's Tale, I'll argue, is May's appropriation of that masculine discourse of authority. Through that discourse May gains access to political authority and thereby removes herself from those positions of social subordination associated with the feminine: she essentially "defeminizes" herself. And yet May's access to political agency is January's subsequent loss of it. January's discourse and thought occupy those inferior social positions previously occupied by May: the feminine.

May's appropriation of the masculine discourse, and January's loss of such, thus has a causal relationship to the contention over political authority that distinguishes these discourses. To allow for the uncertain within an authoritative discourse amounts to admitting to the insufficiency of that form of discourse or to acknowledging the presence of boundaries which limit its usefulness. In essence, acknowledgment of the uncertain is an acknowledgment that a gap exists between one's discourse and the real, and the admission of such a gap poses a threat to an authoritative language, since it marks a spot of vulnerability; it amounts to accepting that another discourse may be equally legitimate or perhaps more legitimate than one's own. Such an admission could be lethal to the hegemony of that language.

In order to maintain the linguistic hegemony, then, a discourse must maintain the image of its universality.
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Bakhtinian terms, "the discourse must pose itself as a unitary language, a language that disavows its boundaries, its specificity, and its historicity; it works toward an ideological and political centralization, toward assimilating and thus neutralizing marginal discourses" (72). We do witness the rational, masculine discourse undertaking this project in The Merchant's Tale, primarily through May persuading January that she did not commit adultery. The success of such persuasion validates rational categories of experience and delegitimizes those categories associated with marginal discourse, namely, January's (feminine) discourse. There is then an intimate relationship between judgment and authoritative language. When dialogic contentions arise, an authoritative language must vindicate its authority by demonstrating its ability to resolve the conflict, thus vindicating its privileged relationship with the real. Thus, after May convinces January of her fidelity, she restores his (delusional) prelapsarian reading of the marriage, she deftly elides January's recriminations.

This paper then argues that it is only through a defeminization of the self, an appropriation of the masculine discourse, that May can restore January's innocent reading of the marriage and thereby escape his recriminations. Through the authoritative discourse, May "blinds" January to the deception she covers up. January finally believes May when she says, "Good woot, I did it in ful good entente" (2375), her position that the adultery was done only to restore January's sight, and this is the salient point: May problematizes January's interpretation of her tryst with Damian and convinces him to see her through a feigned prelapsarian lens. Ironically, then, the restoration of January's sight still leaves him blind to May's marital transgression.

My definition of feminization will be Elaine Tuttle Hansen's, who defines feminization as a "social, psychological and discursive crisis wherein men occupy positions and/or perform functions already occupied and performed, within a given text and its contexts, by women..." (16). I then define "defeminization" in ways similar to Hansen's, but also different. May is defeminized when she occupies those positions and/or performs functions already performed by men. Yet this definition of "defeminization" does not spell out those "positions already... performed by women." And we need to understand the feminine so that we can identify May's eventual divergence from it, and, consequently, January's eventual occupation of it. We then enlarge our definition of "feminine" with Simone de Beauvoir's description of woman. Beauvoir writes that woman "appears essentially to the male as a sexual being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man... She is the Other" (54). As Kara Donaldson puts it, as the Other, a woman's words are "divorced from power and her body is subject to the interpretation and mediation of the men who... want to control her sexuality" (140). Significant in this definition of "feminine" is the notion of possession and control of the feminine by the man. This definition speaks to how May's self and her sexuality are never "correctly read" by January but are instead divorced from her. January sees in May, only what he wants to see and makes Other that side of May which would make inaccurate his reading of her. January then controls and possesses only an illusory image of May, but an image that will nevertheless conform to his expectations of her: sexually naive and in love with him. May's feminization of January is thus her making Other that side of January which could undermine her discourse: the masculine. May ironically reads in January's discourse and actions that which cannot refute her authoritative discourse: the feminine.

My intent, now, will be to argue against Hansen who argues, "Role reversal [can] really only go one way; both the risks and the benefits and gender instability are for men only" (170). As Hansen writes, "Both White and Alceste die" (16) in their attempts to masculinize themselves. To paraphrase Hansen, in several medieval poems, opportunities for women to masculinize themselves are "foreclosed," as in The Legend of Good Women and Troilus and Criseyde (Hansen 16). In Hansen's reading of Chaucer's Good Women, women who try to occupy those conventional male spaces are either killed or socially marginalized, a punishment imposed upon them by the narrator for their transgression of gender lines. Yet, in The Merchant's Tale, there is gender crossing, and it does extricate May from her betrayal of January. A connected subtext of Hansen's thesis I will thus argue against is her position that "for women, the crossing of gender lines is often fatal" (170). I will argue that through a defeminized mode of thought, speech, and action, only by an appropriation of the discourse which is not socially and politically hers, can she assert herself, her "text," into January's "reading" of her transgressive actions, and "dominate"...the [man] who foolishly desire[s] to [control] her" (Hansen 255). More precisely, May's domination of January results in his acceptance of the impression of her prelapsarian innocence she has imposed upon him, a delusion that she had his interests in mind.

May's situation brings into serious doubt Hansen's assertion that "crossing gender lines is often fatal," as May would be at much greater danger if she did not try to cross gender lines, if she did not appropriate the masculine discourse. She would not then be able to undermine January's authority. Important in a distinction between May and other Chaucerian women is that May successfully defeminizes her this definition of feminization as a psychological and discursive crisis wherein men occupy positions and/or perform functions already occupied and performed, within a given text and its contexts, by women..." (16). I then define "defeminization" in ways similar to Hansen's, but also different. May is defeminized when she occupies those positions and/or performs functions already performed by men. Yet this definition of "defeminization" does not spell out those "positions already... performed by women." And we need to understand the feminine so that we can identify May's eventual divergence from it, and, consequently, January's eventual occupation of it. We then enlarge our definition of "feminine" with Simone de Beauvoir's description of woman. Beauvoir writes that woman "appears essentially to the male as a sexual being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man... She is the Other" (54). As Kara Donaldson puts it, as the Other, a woman's words are "divorced from power and her body is subject to the interpretation and mediation of the men who... want to control her sexuality" (140). Significant in this definition of "feminine" is the notion of possession and control of the feminine by the man. This definition speaks to how May's self and her sexuality are never "correctly read" by January but are instead divorced from her. January sees in May, only what he wants to see and makes Other that side of May which would make inaccurate his reading of her. January then controls and possesses only an illusory image of May, but an image that will nevertheless conform to his expectations of her: sexually naive and in love with him. May's feminization of
January's fantasy of May is that, for all intents and purposes, there is a real May, one informed with a sexual prowess and, as we will see, a lack of love for January. January's deluded reading of the marriage is then informed by his belief that May is a young, sexually ignorant woman who loves him. And before the marriage, January tells May of the "sincerity" of his love for her: "For Goddess sake, thank how I thee chees, / Noght for no coveitise, doutelees, / But oonly for ity" (2105-68). January is thus shocked to see the totality of this "yong thyng's" sexual awareness, which is dramatized by her tryst with Damian. Revealed to January is certainly May's sexual awareness, but also the fact that she desires a man other than him. Their pact of marital fidelity broken, January is forced to come to terms with a May he has really never known. As Cixous would argue, May's introduction of her bodily discourse into January's reading of her as the "sexually inexperienced wife," disrupts the "sexual, social and political economy" (249), a disruption dramatized by January's outrage over the adultery.

For May to then re-stabilize the sexual-social economy, to restore January's innocent conception of her, she must employ that language which January understands and by which he can be persuaded: the masculine discourse. Through that discourse May gains access to what is socially and politically denied to her: a political value ascribed to her language. May's use of the masculine discourse frees her from that set of "subordinated or marginalized positions historically occupied most often by female human beings" (Hansen 17), allowing her to speak in ways unconventional for a woman yet expected for a man. Her discourse is now informed by what Foucault terms the "general politics of truth," a "discourse which society accepts and makes function as true to gain the status of those who are charged with saying what is true" (Foucault 72-73). May thus competes with January through an equal or greater language and inverts his dominance and control over her.

May's appropriation of the masculine discourse thus effectively disrupts gendered structures of power between herself and January. Rhetorically and thematically, the crisis of gender crossing is no longer May's, but is instead January's. January's language now occupies the unsteady and uncertain feminine discourse which, as Bakhtin describes, "is denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society" (342). To slightly alter and reverse Cixous' positioning of the feminine, and to explicate May's negation of January's language, when a woman [January] speaks, "[his] words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine" (Cixous 251). January's discourse hopelessly occupies that political position which is denied all power: the feminine. January's inability to undermine the authority of May's discourse is represented in his transition from certainty to uncertainty in his interpretation of May's tryst with Damian.

If we apply a Bakhtinian analysis, we see that January initially argues through a patriarchal, mono-interpretive form of discourse imbued with certainty. In keeping with his masculine discourse, January reacts to the marital transgression with wrath: "Ye, algate in it wented! / God yeve yow bothe on shames deth to dyen! He sowyved thee; I saught it with myne yen, / And elles be I hanged by the hals!" (2376-9). Yet here we see a slight shift in January's certainty and anger, a tacit movement away from the authoritative masculine to the unsteady feminine. Underlying this shift is January's weakening resistance to May's authoritative discourse, his acknowledged that it is her discourse, and not his, which is authoritative. Though he then still maintains May transgressed marital fidelity, his "me thoughte" realizes a slight weakening in certainty: "I se . . . as well as evere I myghte, / Thonked be God! With bothe myne eyen two, / And by my trouthe, me thoughte he dide thee so" (2384-2386). Reversing January's treatment of her, May has othered January's discourse. She "does not acknowledge [his] language; from her position of 'authority' she 'glosses' his language to fit her own domination of him" (Donaldson 140). Thus, she answers to his shouts: "Sire, what eyeth yow? / Have pacience and resoun in youre mynde" (2369-2370). The degradation of January's authority and certainty continues when he says it only appeared that she had sexual relations with Damian: "I wende han seyn / How that this Damyan hadde by thee leyn / And that thy smok hadde leyn upon his brest" (2393-2395). January cannot refute May's reasoning and acquiesces to her discourse: "Beth war, I prey yow, for by hevane kyng, / Ful many a man weneth to seen a thyng, / And it is al another than it sesmeth" (2406-2409). The denouement of his shift from the masculine to the feminine, is then his concession to May that he may be wrong in his reading of the tryst: "Com doune, my lief, and if I have mysseyd, / God helpe me so, as I am yvele apayd" (2391-2392). May decides to come down from the tree only after she is finished "teaching" January about interpretation and its ambiguities.

Implicit in May's jump from the tree is a subtle interplay of power between herself and January. May says no more to January because her "lesson" to January on interpretive ambiguity has finished. January becomes silent as he has learned the lesson and realizes - is deluded - that his eyes did not see what he thought they saw. In his eyes, May has not betrayed marital fidelity. The narrator thus writes: "And with that word she kep doune fro the tree" (2411). May's authoritative discourse also serves to elide her broken "bargain" with January over how he should treat her should she be unfaithful.

Thus far I have discussed how gender crossing between May and January results in an inversion of power between the two. I have shown how May's appropriation of the masculine discourse allows her to legitimize her self and her sexual awareness to January. I have thus shown how, in January's eyes, May restores the marriage to its prelapsarian state. I will now return to what I earlier discussed, January's control of the feminine, his control of an illusory May. Such a discussion will explore the extent to which January's identity depends upon his (delusional) reading of the marriage. We will see that May's tryst with Damian disrupts not only January's prelapsarian reading of the marriage, but also his very identity.

As Robert W. Hanning explains in Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers, people in the Middle Ages could be "both the grammatical and the literal object of 'glosynge': People thus 'glossed' are reduced to the status of texts that the wily glossator can 'explain' (i.e., control) as he pleases" (Shichtman 40). As an example of how January the 'wily
To understand how January could "create" May, we note Nelly Furman's contention that, while the "body is a concrete, observable object within a sign system, it is a social signifier. While sex is an anatomical fact, sexuality is culturally devised" (Furman 73). January's creation of May is finally not a physical one, but, rather, "a depiction of what January sees in his mind's eye as he . . . thinks of May" (Hansen 252). Created from within January's imagination, May is denied that which would undermine January's reading of her as his wife: a sexual prowess. Though January sexualizes May (as in the lines above) he refuses to let that sexualization be anything but a descriptor of May's physical identity. In his imaginings January refuses to give May an object or person which she may manipulate; he refuses to give her something over which she may exercise her sexual prowess. May's "freshe beautee . . . armes longe and skldre," then represent not so much a desiring body, a sexually aware May, as they represent a measured and calculated epitome of beauty and sexuality. To let May be a desiring body, someone not only receptive to desire, but, perhaps, someone able to express desire, threatens January's control over May. For if she is already sexually aware and experienced, we may speculate, January would be unable to inculcate into May those particular attitudes he wants her to have. As we observed earlier, January believes that a sexually experienced wife cannot be controlled and molded into his wife. Such a woman is "passy twenty year," and thus not of that "age tendre." January's ideal wife is thus that undefinable and virtuous "yong thynge" of "age tender" whom he may, in a large way, "direct" and control through his "herte" and in his "thoghth."

There is then a tension between January’s illusory conception of May and a "real" May whose identity, whose sexual desire, he has conveniently othered. This is an irreconcilable tension for January insofar that he is not aware of this tension. To maintain his gloss of May, he otherizes that sexually aware text of hers. His awareness of such a text - his acceptance of the possibility that she may not be sexually inexperienced—would be the realization of his worst fear: the fear that May might not be pure. Such a realization would be January’s confrontation with the reality that he may not be able to control and mold May to his choosing. Within the market-place we see January’s vision of May as a type of sexual commodity. It is his hope that a woman will elevate his social position and thereby make him appear worthy to his friends and to the town; offered is not a clear perception of May:

And when he on hire was condescende, 
Hym thoughtte his choyes not been amended.
For what that he hymself concluded hadde,
Hym thoughtte ech ootho mannes wit so badde
That impossible it were to replyye
Agayn his choyes, this was his fantasye

(1604-1610)

An element of the fictional then informs January’s reading of May but also of himself. Fer January’s reading of himself is based upon an illusory image: his illusory May. January’s reading of himself as sexually potent depends upon his reading of May as sexually inexperienced. If May is sexually inexperienced, as January believes her to be, she cannot compare his love-making with anyone else. Opened, then, in January’s mind, is the possibility that May will reinforce his image of himself as sexually potent. Before they are about to have sex, January thus warns May of his sexual libido, an affirmation of his perceived sexual potency: “Allas! I moot trespace / To you, my spouse, and yow greatly offende / Er tyne come that I wil doune descende” (1828-30). Believing May to be that sexually ignorant woman whom he may in sexual matters guide and “mold” as he pleases—and thus sexually satisfy—he reacts to his ‘great sex’ with May in ebullient and victorious tones:

And thanne he taketh a sop in lyn clarte, 
And upright in his bed thanne sitteth he, 
And after he sang ful loude and cleere, 
And kiste his wyf, and made wanton cheere 
He was al coltish, ful of ragerye 
And ful of jargon as a flekked pye 

(1843-48)

Crucial here is May’s reaction: She thinks his “pleying” is not “worth a bene” (1846). May’s thought that his “pleying” is not “worth a bene,” undermines January’s constructed sexual prowess as it reveals to us May’s. Curiously, while May’s appraisal of January’s “pleying” reveals to us her sexual prowess, May’s parlance, namely, her phrase “not worth a bene,” ascribes to May a certain type of comparative sexual knowledge. She not only knows of sex, but she can discriminate between good and bad sex; she can, at least, “praise another man’s playing as worth a few beans” (Hansen 260). May’s tacit appraisal of January’s playing serves to reveal the disjunction between January’s imaginatively constructed May and some other, “real” May who fully retains her sexual prowess, and, perhaps, is not at all “genteel” as January would believe her to be.

If May is silently implicated in her own “genteel” undoing - at least in the reader’s eyes, if not yet January’s - then the narrator works against May to try to elide such undoing. Like January, the narrator is implicated in trying to maintain an image of May as a sexually ignorant and ideal woman. After January’s sexual performance, the narrator partially reveals to us May’s reaction to January’s playing: “But God woot what that May thoughte in hir hette . . . ?” (1851). We can read the passage as saying that, perhaps, only God knows May’s true feelings. Yet such a reading fails to account for that which the narrator refuses to wholly articulate: the reality that May is not sexually ignorant and pure. The narrator’s refusal to articulate May’s thoughts on January’s playing ironically reveals that which it tries to
Yet January is ignorant of May's taciturn revelation. And it is January's ignorance of her true feelings for him, his seeing her as "real," his illusorily constructed May, that allows May to make a pact of marital fidelity with him:

I pray to God that neve dawe the day,
That I ne sverve, as foul as womman may,
If ever I do unto my kyn that shame,
Or elles I empeyre so my name,
That if I be fals; ... 
I am a gentil womman and so wenche
(2195-2202)

Yet May is a "wenche." She is "fals." But, again, May masks from January her intent to have a tryst with Damian. It is May's tryst with Damian that then abruptly reveals to January her "not so innocent" and demure sexual awareness. To retain the idea that May loves only him, January must square his prelapsarian text of May informed with acquiescence to his authority, with a postlapsarian text informed with her sexual prowess and infidelity. Unable to retain a prelapsarian reading of her, January reads May as betraying her marital fidelity-and thus reacts with anger.

To alter January's reading of her as "fallen", as well as to overturn the controlling gaze of his sexuality, May must make public what had been private: her masculine "text." Because the feminine discourse is marginalized and muted by the "word of the Father" (Donaldson 140), January's original discourse, and thus cannot overturn his reading of her as sexually transgressive, she must, as Cixous writes, "put herself into [January's] text, ... by her own movement" (245). By putting herself into his text of her, May subverts January's misogynistic glossing of her body.

May's recuperation of the marriage's prelapsarian state (if only in January's mind), underlies May's self-extrication from a crisis ironically brought on by herself: "and if I do that lak, / Do strepe me and put me in a sak, / And in the nexte ryver do me drench" (2199-2202). Though there is a likely degree of hyperbole in May's hypothesized scenario, there is a promise between May and January in which May expects, in effect, the marriage be dissolved, should she be a wenche instead of a "gentil womman." But January does not fulfill the promise. For May does not let him continue with the thought that she is a wenche. May's authoritative discourse obviates January's suspicions that she is a wenche, allowing her to successfully rescue herself, both symbolically and literally, from the fatality Hansen connects to the act of crossing the lines of gender.

Chaucer's rhetorical strategy is not to let us believe January forgets her "pact" with him and the consequences if it were broken, but, ultimately, that there is never an opportunity in which he could exercise the agreement. Persuaded by May that her tryst with Damian was in his best interest, January offers no recriminations against May, as she has restored his prelapsarian reading of the marriage. There is no longer ambiguity in January's interpretations of her act in the tree: She did not transgress marital fidelity. If May wants to "overcome the patriarchal layers of interpretation being performed upon her" (Donaldson 142) by January and overcome his reading of her actions as transgressive, she must do so from within the patriarchal system itself. May must adopt a mode of speech not uniquely her own, but, rather, a masculine mode of speech. Only through a masculine mode of speech, an equal and valid mode of speech, can May disrupt January's interpretation of her actions, her sexuality, and restore the marriage to its illusory prelapsarian state.

REFERENCES


ALAN is a senior English major with minors in Political Science and History. He will pursue a Ph.D. in English at Syracuse University in Fall 2000 specializing in Critical Theory and Romantic Studies. This paper was written for L305, Chaucer, and was motivated by an interest to explore the unexamined relationship between gender, discourse and identity in Chaucer's The Merchant's Tale. Through these lights, the author hoped to reveal a political Chaucer not clearly aligned with (or against) feminism or anti-feminism, but, rather, slippery and deftly moving between both schools of thought. Alan presented his work at the 1999 Ball State CAES (Committee for Advancement for Early Studies) Conference and 2000 IUSB Undergraduate Research Conference.