

EROTICISM AND SEXUALITY IN CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES

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Abstract

Geoffrey Chaucer's 14th century masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales* is renowned for its vivid characters, social commentary, and bawdy humor. This paper explores how Chaucer depicts eroticism and sexuality in *The Canterbury Tales*, analyzing key tales and characters through the lens of medieval attitudes toward sex. By openly portraying sexuality, seduction, adultery, and sexual transgressions, Chaucer's work provides valuable insights into 14th century English social mores and erotic imagination. The fabliaux genre used in several of the most sexually explicit tales, such as *The Miller's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale*, allows Chaucer to portray earthy, physical comedy and to satirize courtly notions of romantic love. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Prologue* depict a strong female character who unabashedly celebrates her sexual appetites and marriages while challenging medieval patriarchal attitudes. Through his varied cast of characters, Chaucer depicts a spectrum of sexual behaviors, relationships, and attitudes, from the obscene to the courtly, providing a window into the private erotic lives of medieval people. Overall, *The Canterbury Tales'* bold, humorous, and complex depiction of human sexuality is one of the elements that has made it an enduring classic of English literature.

Keywords: Geoffrey Chaucer; *The Canterbury Tales*; sexuality; eroticism; fabliaux; medieval literature

1. Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, written in the late 14th century, is considered one of the greatest and most influential works in English literature. The text consists of a collection of over 20 stories told by a group of pilgrims journeying from London to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. Chaucer depicts an array of medieval characters from

different classes and walks of life, vividly bringing to life the social fabric of 14th century England. One notable aspect of *The Canterbury Tales* that has intrigued readers for centuries is its bold and varied depictions of human sexuality and eroticism.

Living in a time when discussing sex was still quite taboo, Chaucer exhibits a remarkable frankness and jocularly in portraying the erotic desires and behaviors of his characters. Several of the tales deal explicitly with sexuality, particularly the fabliaux told by the Miller, the Reeve, the Cook, and the Merchant. These bawdy stories feature salacious sexual situations, love triangles, and adultery, providing a counterpoint to the text's more courtly romances and spiritual parables. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale stand out for their provocative discussions of female sexuality and gender power dynamics in relationships. Throughout the diverse tales and characters, Chaucer depicts the spectrum of medieval sexuality, from lusty physicality to courtly love to violent sexual assault.

This paper examines how Chaucer portrays eroticism and sexuality in *The Canterbury Tales*. First, it discusses the historical and cultural context of sexuality in medieval England. Then it analyzes the fabliaux tales as examples of medieval obscene comedy and the portrayal of sexuality as bawdy, corporeal, and often adulterous or transgressive. Next, the paper focuses on the Wife of Bath as Chaucer's most in-depth exploration of female sexuality and challenges to patriarchal notions of feminine sexual behavior. Finally, it looks at how the varied depictions of sexuality and erotic relationships across *The Canterbury Tales* provide insight into medieval English social attitudes toward sex. By boldly and humorously depicting human sexuality in all its diversity, Chaucer created an enduring work that continues to fascinate, amuse, and provoke readers today.

2. Sexuality in Medieval England

To fully appreciate Chaucer's bold depictions of sexuality and eroticism in *The Canterbury Tales*, it is important to understand the historical context in which he was writing. The medieval

period is often mischaracterized as a homogeneous era of sexual repression, Christian asceticism, and unchecked male dominance over women. However, historians have shown that medieval understandings and practices of sexuality were complex and variable, differing by region, social class, and time period (Karras, 2017).

The influence of the Catholic Church undoubtedly shaped medieval European perspectives on sex to a large degree. Christian doctrine generally held that sexual activity was only permissible within monogamous, procreative marriage, and that celibacy was the holiest state (Elliott, 1993). Church writings often depicted women in particular as sexually voracious and morally weaker than men, justifying their subjugation (Salisbury, 1991). At the same time, the cult of courtly love that emerged in the 12th century romantic literature of France and Germany glorified an idealized, spiritual form of adulterous love between aristocratic men and unattainable ladies (Schultz, 2006).

However, there was often a disconnect between these prescriptive notions of sexuality and the everyday romantic and erotic lives of medieval people. For the clerical class of monks, nuns and priests, who were supposed to be celibate, it was not uncommon to find instances of "lapses" in sexual behavior, sometimes even resulting in offspring (Brooke, 1989). Among the peasantry and working classes that made up the bulk of the population in Chaucer's England, evidence suggests pre-marital sex and pregnancy were frequent occurrences (McSheffrey, 1995). Prostitution and adultery were regular features of both urban and rural life, seen simultaneously as sinful but also inevitable (Karras, 1998). The emergence of a middle class of merchants and artisans in the 14th and 15th centuries led to changes in marriage practices and family structures that provided more space for individual romantic choices (Fleming, 2001).

Chaucer lived and wrote during a time of great social upheaval in England. The Black Death, Peasants' Revolt, and decline of the feudal system reshaped the social landscape (Goldberg,

2004). Against this backdrop, *The Canterbury Tales* portrayed, in an often hyperbolic and humorous way, a cross-section of 14th century society grappling with issues of love, sex, marriage, and power in their everyday lives. Chaucer's depictions of lusty young wives cuckolding their old husbands, lecherous clergymen attempting to seduce women, and women boldly fighting against patriarchal control all have roots in the social realities and erotic imagination of medieval England.

3. Fabliaux and Sexual Comedy

Some of the most vivid and sexually explicit tales in *The Canterbury Tales* fall into the fabliaux genre. Fabliaux were short, humorous stories that originated in 12th and 13th century France before spreading throughout Europe (Lacy, 1998). Characterized by exaggerated physical comedy, realistic low-class settings and characters, and sexual humor involving lust, adultery, trickery, and bodily functions, fabliaux appealed to medieval audiences with their obscene, rollicking, anti-heroic tone (Perfetti, 2003).

The Miller's Tale, perhaps the most famous of Chaucer's fabliaux, is a prime example of the genre's outrageous sexual comedy. It tells the story of a lecherous clerk named Nicholas who tries to seduce Alisoun, the young wife of a dimwitted carpenter in whose home he is lodging. Nicholas crudely grabs Alisoun's "queynte", a Middle English slang term for the vagina: "And prively he caughte hire by the queynte, / And seyde, 'Ywis, but if ich have my wille, / For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille'" (Chaucer, 2008, l. 3276-3278). The blunt description of sexual assault is played for laughs, as Alisoun is portrayed as a willing participant who is bored with her jealous old husband.

The tale's climax is a series of farcical bedroom swapping scenes where Nicholas tricks the carpenter into spending the night in a bathtub, convinced a Biblical flood is coming. Nicholas and Alisoun romp in the conjugal bed, only to be interrupted by Absolon, a vain parish clerk also vying for Alisoun's affections. In the dark, Absolon surprises Alisoun at the window and

asks for a kiss. In response, Alisoun "at the window out...putte hir hole" (l. 3732) – sticking out her buttocks for Absolon to kiss. In shock and disgust, Absolon later returns to get revenge, bringing a hot poker to brand Nicholas' buttocks. The ensuing slapstick violence leaves Nicholas burned, the carpenter concussed, Absolon sneering, and Alisoun unchanged.

This climactic slapstick scene encapsulates the fabliaux style at work in *The Miller's Tale* and other tales in the collection like *The Reeve's Tale*, *The Cook's Tale*, and *The Merchant's Tale*. The fascination with orifices and anuses, the graphic if euphemistic depictions of genitalia and sex acts, and the rowdy love triangles all serve to create a lusty, corporeal, and transgressive depiction of sexuality unbound by courtly idealism or religious moralism. While the fabliaux often portray young women as lustful and adulterous, they reserve most of their satirical bite for the men who attempt and fail to control female sexuality due to their own foolishness and conceit (Dinshaw, 1989).

Chaucer's obscene fabliaux provide a counterpoint to the more romantic, spiritual models of love idealized in medieval Christianity and courtly literature. They revel in the messiness and folly of human erotic behavior and relationships. The fabliaux style allows Chaucer to portray a visceral, bawdy version of sexuality grounded in realistic medieval bodies and social settings. By deploying scatological humor and sexual taboos and euphemisms, the fabliaux create a "temporarily licensed release from social decorum and inhibition" (McDonald, 2002, p.15) while still ultimately serving to uphold social norms through negative exemplars. The earthy comedy of the fabliaux would have entertained Chaucer's contemporary audiences while providing modern readers a valuable glimpse into the medieval erotic imaginary.

4. The Wife of Bath and Female Sexuality

While most of the Canterbury pilgrims are men, Chaucer's most in-depth portrayal of a female character's romantic and sexual history comes in the Prologue and Tale of the Wife of Bath. Alisoun of Bath, the only female character to be given a name, is a strong-willed, opinionated

woman who has been married five times. In a lengthy prologue framed as a literary confession, she boldly recounts her sexual and marital experiences while expounding her views on gender dynamics, female desire, and what women really want from men.

From the start, Alisoun flouts religious and social norms about female sexuality. She proclaims that God gave people sexual organs to use for both procreation and pleasure: "For if ther were no seed ysowe, / Virginitee, wherof thanne sholde it growe?" (Chaucer, 2008, l. 71-72). She argues against the ideal of virginity espoused by the Church, pointing out Christ only commanded virginity to those who could hold to it: "Men may conseille a womman to been oon [a virgin], / But conseillyng is no comandement" (l. 77-78). Alisoun sees her own sexual appetites as natural and justified. She even interprets the Biblical tale of the Samaritan woman at the well, who Jesus says has had five husbands, as Christ giving tacit approval for multiple marriages.

Throughout the prologue, Alisoun depicts herself as a canny manipulator of men, boasting about how she dominated her husbands to get what she wanted from them, especially sexually. She remarks:

"I hadde hem hoolly in myn hand And sith they hadde me yeven all hir land, What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese, But it were for my profit and myn ese? (l. 211-214)

Alisoun's self-described methods include withholding sex, berating the men verbally, accusing them (falsely, she admits) of infidelity, and exploiting their guilt – a reversal of the "traditional" power dynamic between husband and wife. She is a "woman on top" both literally and figuratively, as she jokes bawdily: "I was his purgatorie on erthe, / And God it woot, that sat me wonder lo!" (l. 489).

However, despite Alisoun's swagger and claims of complete control, the prologue also reveals the precariousness of her position as a woman operating within a patriarchal society. As a young maiden, her first marriage was arranged for economic reasons to an old man she found

sexually repulsive. Her favorite and fifth husband, the handsome, virile Jankyn, won her heart but then physically and verbally abused her. Alisoun admits she truly loved him but had to deploy manipulative tactics to "tolle" or rule over him. Their power struggle culminates in a scene of domestic violence, with Jankyn striking Alisoun so hard her ears ring. Yet it is this beating that finally forces Jankyn to cede "governance" to his wife, leading to their reconciliation.

Critics have debated whether the Wife of Bath is ultimately a proto-feminist figure or a misogynistic caricature (Morgan, 1994). Her very name, "Alisoun", is a reference to the Alison of *The Miller's Tale*, implying a connection between the two adulterous, scheming female characters. Despite her defiance of patriarchal marital conventions and her sexual confidence, Alisoun arguably still defines herself within masculine structures of power and desire. Her tale, which depicts the rehabilitation of a rapist knight through a forced marriage to a magical hag, who transforms into a beautiful maiden once he accepts her sovereignty, provides a fantastical resolution to the question of what women want. Yet it is one still predicated on women's desirability to and need to "tolle" men.

Regardless, the Wife of Bath remains Chaucer's most potent and memorable commentary on female sexuality and gender in *The Canterbury Tales*. Her prologue gives rare voice to a female character frankly expressing her own sexual history and appetites, something quite taboo for Chaucer's time. While inflected by medieval antifeminist stereotypes, her characterization resists and complicates assumptions about women's sexual purity. She forces examination of the sexual double standards, transactional nature of marriage, and ingrained power imbalances between men and women in medieval society and literature. The Wife of Bath's sexual swagger, rhetorical savvy, and provocative "proto-feminism" have made her a source of both outrage and fascination for centuries of readers.

5. Diverse Depictions of Sexuality

Beyond the sexual comedy of the fabliaux and the provocations of the Wife of Bath, The Canterbury Tales showcases a diverse spectrum of erotic and romantic relationships between men and women across its many other tales. The Knight's Tale, Chaucer's longest individual story, presents a courtly love triangle between two noble knights, Palamon and Arcite, who vie for the affections of a beautiful noblewoman Emily while imprisoned. Their brutal competition, which ultimately leads to Arcite's death, allows Chaucer to both glorify and critique the courtly love tradition (Woods, 1997). The Franklin's Tale also centers on issues of love, fidelity and gentillesse (noble generosity) as a young wife agrees to become a courtly lover's mistress if he can complete a seemingly impossible task.

Other tales portray the dangers of unchecked masculine sexual aggression and violence against women. The Reeve's Tale, a fabliaux-style story told in response to the Miller's Tale, features the sexual violation of a miller's wife and daughter as vengeance. The Prioress's Tale, a religious miracle story, depicts an innocent young Christian boy murdered by a lecherous Jewish cabal – a problematic anti-Semitic myth but one reflective of medieval blood libel fears around deviant sexuality and religion (Geller, 2013). By far the most disturbing sexual content in the Tales comes in the Physician's Tale, which graphically relates the attempted rape of a young Roman girl, Virginia, and her father's decision to behead her to save her from sexual violation and dishonour. The horrible logic of honour killing reveals the brutal consequences for women of the sexual double standards and Madonna-whore complex embedded in medieval culture (Corfis, 1988).

The Pardoner's Tale provides a different view of medieval sexuality in its depiction of a corrupt pardoner who is characterized as effeminate, beardless, and having a "gelded" voice and "heer as yellow as wax" (l. 675-683). These details code the pardoner as a stereotypical medieval representation of a "gay" man (Frese, 1994). The Pardoner openly attempts to seduce the Host

and other pilgrims, prompting shocked reactions. As with the lecherous Summoner and debauched Friar, Chaucer uses the Pardoner's sexuality to illustrate the corruption and hypocrisy of the 14th century clergy. But the inclusion of this queer figure, even in a negative light, points to the existence of non-heteronormative sexual identities in the medieval imagination.

Collectively, this diversity of tales and characters allows Chaucer to depict the broad spectrum of 14th century English sexuality, from the idealized to the obscene, the consensual to the violently coercive. Through the multiplicity of character viewpoints, Chaucer portrays how gender, class, age, occupation, and individual personality shape medieval people's erotic desires and romantic experiences. The many sexual betrayals, deceptions, and power plays demonstrate the complex intertwining of sex and social relations in the Middle Ages. As a whole, *The Canterbury Tales* neither fully condemns nor celebrates sexuality, but rather recognizes it as an essential part of the human comedy - one that provokes laughter, passion, controversy, and brutality.

6. The Erotic Imagination in *The Canterbury Tales*

Chaucer's vivid, multi-faceted depiction of sex and love in *The Canterbury Tales* is not just a reflection of the social realities of his time - it also provides a window into the erotic imagination of medieval English culture. The bawdy fabliaux, with their gleeful depictions of sexual transgressions, offer an earthy, physical vision of desire unbound by courtly or religious conventions. At the same time, the romantic intrigues of the Knight's and Franklin's Tales, while more refined in tone, are still driven by powerful erotic passions that disrupt social hierarchies.

A recurring theme across many of the tales is the uncontrollable, often destructive nature of sexual desire. In *The Miller's Tale*, the young lovers' reckless infatuation leads to violence and public scandal. *The Knight's Tale* portrays the two lovers' unrestrained rivalry over Emily as a

primal, animalistic force: "The fyr of love the which that hem brente,/ And eek the love that made hem to go lente/ Was cause of all hir wo and hir unrest" (Chaucer, 2008, l. 1923-1925). In *The Man of Law's Tale*, the Sultan's lust for the Roman princess Custance is so overwhelming that he agrees to convert to Christianity and force all his subjects to do the same. *The Physician's Tale* and several other tales equate masculine sexual desire with the threat of rape and violation of feminine honour.

At the same time, several of the tales and characters celebrate the pleasures and powers of sexuality in a more positive light. *The Wife of Bath*, of course, unabashedly recounts the sexual vigor and satisfaction of her marriages. *The Merchant's Tale's* bawdy climax, where the blind old January finally consummates his marriage to his young wife May as she secretly trysts with her young lover in a pear tree, humorously affirms the life-giving force of sexual desire: "This fresshe May, that is so bright and sheene,/ Gan for to syke, and seyde, "Allas my syde!/ Now sire," quod she, "for aught that may bityde,/ I moste han of the peres that I see,/ Or I moot dye, so soore longeth me." (l. 2331-2335). *The Shipman's Tale*, while presenting a cynical view of marriage and female fidelity, still delights in the erotic ingenuity of the merchant's wife as she tricks both her husband and her lover to get money and sex.

The multiplicity of erotic situations, attitudes, and depictions in *The Canterbury Tales* creates a rich, unflinching portrait of the medieval English sexual imagination in all its variety. Chaucer's treatment of sex ranges from the idealized to the obscene, the spiritual to the corporeal, the playful to the violent. His tales show the erotic intruding into all aspects of medieval social life - disrupting class hierarchies in the *Knight's* and *Miller's Tales*, causing moral downfall in the *Pardoner's* and *Friar's Tales*, providing economic opportunity in the *Shipman's Tale*. In *The Canterbury Tales*, as in the medieval English mind, sexuality is an ever-present, powerful, and unpredictable force.

At the same time, Chaucer filters this erotic imagination through a bold yet empathetic literary lens. He is unsparing in his depictions of the destructive potential of unchecked sexual aggression and the cruel impact of sexual double standards on women. Yet he also treats his lustful characters with humor and humanity, showing the relatability of their desires and transgressions. The Wife of Bath's unvarnished accounts of her sexual misadventures are funny as well as poignant, illuminating the challenges of female erotic agency in a patriarchal society. Chaucer's sex comedy in the fabliaux is not just obscene for obscenity's sake, but makes pointed social commentary - as when the Miller literally "pokes fun" at the Reeve's insulting description of him. Through the diverse erotic portraits of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer provides an expansive yet incisive depiction of the medieval English sexual imagination.

7. Sexuality and Medieval Textuality

The varied, provocative sexual content of *The Canterbury Tales* also provides insight into medieval textual and interpretive practices around eroticism and obscenity. Living in a culture still largely defined by Catholic orthodoxy and a manuscript literary culture, Chaucer took bold risks in incorporating bawdy sexual humor and provocative erotic situations into his magnum opus. Examining *The Canterbury Tales* through the lens of medieval book production and circulation reveals the ways Chaucer both encoded and enabled erotic meaning-making.

For one, the textual variability and interpretive openness of the medieval manuscript culture allowed for a diversity of sexually explicit content to hide in plain sight. With each manuscript copy of a text being a unique scribal creation, eroticized or obscene passages could be literally erased through excision or bowdlerization by later scribes, or foregrounded through illustration and rubric (Rust, 2006). The earliest surviving manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* show evidence of both censorship and amplification of the text's erotic elements. The Hengwrt manuscript (c. 1400) "has more outspokenly sexual and scatological content than any of the other early manuscripts", with unique lines in *The Miller's Tale* describing Absolon's pubic

hair and vivid sexual puns, along with a racy illustration of Nicholas' buttocks (Beidler, 1991, p.162). In contrast, later 15th century manuscripts like Ellesmere and Harley 7334 omit some of The Canterbury Tales' more scandalous sexual passages like the Prioress's anti-Semitic blood libel (Cooper & Eberle, 1985).

The inherent interpretive ambiguity of medieval textual transmission also enabled Chaucer to embed erotic meanings in his bawdy and satirical passages that could be read in multiple ways. Chaucer's sexual comedy often operates through "a Bakhtinian double-entendre, a sexual pun that operates by surface and depth", allowing him to veil his obscenity through clever verbal play (Fein, 1988, p.30). The Miller's Tale puns outrageously on variations of the word "pryvetee" to refer to both male and female genitalia, allowing the obscenity to hide behind the veneer of circumlocution. Chaucer's use of *occupatio* or "nonnarration" also serves to make sexual implications without explicitly describing the acts, as in the Reeve's Tale lines: "And shortly, lest this tale soure,/ Bothe Malyne and Symkyn assented" (l. 4321-4322). The rhetorical techniques of euphemism, puns, *occupatio*, and double-entendre allow Chaucer to maintain plausible deniability while still conveying bawdy erotic messages to his readers.

Chaucer also uses the frame narrative of the pilgrim storytelling contest to situate his ribald sexual content as social commentary and satire rather than gratuitous obscenity. The Tales' famous opening lines make clear that Chaucer the pilgrim will faithfully report even the most scandalous stories: "Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,/ He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan/ Everich a word, if it be in his charge,/ Al speke he never so rudeliche and large" (l.731-734). Having the churlish Miller, Reeve, and Cook tell the bawdiest tales allows Chaucer the author to distance himself from their sexual transgressions and deflect any clerical criticism (Labbie, 2019). At the same time, satirical elements in the Tales like the Pardoner's offer of indulgences for "lecherous deeds" (l.906) in his prologue or the Shipman's cynical conflation

of sex and money let Chaucer slyly comment on the hypocritical attitudes around sexuality in his society under the guise of humor.

The manuscript context and circulation history of *The Canterbury Tales* also points to how medieval readers approached and interpreted the text's erotic content. The earliest 15th century manuscripts were produced for an upper-class, largely male readership, some even potentially the royal family; Hengwrt may have been created for Prince Henry, the future Henry V (Mosser, 2015). For this aristocratic audience, the *Tales*' mix of courtly romance, bawdy sexual humor, and clerical satire may have functioned as an entertaining portrayal of the erotic exploits and intrigues that were an acknowledged part of elite medieval life, made humorous through ironic class juxtaposition. At the same time, the geographic dispersal of *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts and Chaucer's rising influence on 15th century English letters suggests that his sexual comedy reached an increasingly broad readership (Prendergast, 2003). The cultural controversies that swirled around obscene sexual content in medieval English texts, such as the Lollards' condemnation of erotic poetry and their bowdlerized translations of scripture, indicate that works like *The Canterbury Tales* provoked debate and varied interpretations (Smith, 2020). Overall, the textual complexities of *The Canterbury Tales* manuscript tradition demonstrate that medieval literary obscenity was not a simple matter of censorship or escapism, but rather a multivalent, interactive process between author, scribe, and reader. Through his variety of literary techniques, narrative frames, and eroticized situations, Chaucer cloaked his sexual comedy within the medieval textual transmission process in ways that ensured its preservation and interpretive flexibility. The diverse medieval readership of *The Canterbury Tales* would have approached its bawdy, provocative sexual content based on their social context, personal morals, and interpretive abilities. The rich tradition of erotic marginalia, double-entendres, and euphemisms in medieval literature highlights how Middle English authors like Chaucer and

their readers collaborated in producing meanings around sexuality - meanings that could educate, implicate, and titillate.

8. Conclusion

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* provides a remarkable window into the intimate sexual lives of medieval people across the social spectrum. From the bawdy sexual antics of the Miller's Tale to the provocative sexual boasts of the Wife of Bath to the chilling sexual violence of the Physician's Tale, Chaucer presents a panoramic, unflinching view of human sexual behavior in all its variety. While inflected by medieval social mores and religious beliefs, Chaucer's depiction of sexuality is not prudish or homogeneous, but rather showcases the diversity of 14th century English erotic attitudes and experiences.

The fabliaux tales like the Miller's Tale offer a rollicking, obscene vision of sexuality as a bawdy, corporeal, and often adulterous transgression of social boundaries. With lewd humor and outrageous plot twists, these tales delight in the messiness and folly of sexual desire. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale stands out as Chaucer's most complex and provocative exploration of female sexuality. Through her voice, Chaucer portrays a rare medieval female character brazenly recounting her own sexual history and appetites while fighting against the sexual double standards of her patriarchal society. From the courtly romances of the Knight's Tale to the religious corruption of the Pardoner's sexuality, Chaucer illuminates the diversity of sexual identities, relationships, and power dynamics in medieval society.

For modern readers, the sexual content of *The Canterbury Tales* can be both disturbing and enlightening. Chaucer's casual depictions of sexual assault and antifeminist attitudes provide a stark reminder of the vulnerable and precarious position of medieval women in a culture that privileged male honor and dominance. At the same time, the Tales' refreshing bawdiness and complex depictions of female desire allow readers to recognize the shared humanity and humor of erotic experience across centuries. By exploring sexuality with a bold, unflinching, and

oftentimes empathetic eye, Chaucer created a lasting work of literature that continues to amuse, shock, and provoke reflection on this most intimate sphere of human relations.

The rich textual history of *The Canterbury Tales* also reveals important insights into medieval literary culture's complex relationship with erotic and obscene content. Through his use of double entendre, euphemism, narrative framing, and satirical social commentary, Chaucer embedded his sexual themes within the interpretive openness and variability of the medieval textual transmission process. The preservation yet bowdlerization of his more graphic erotic passages in manuscript copies points to the ways medieval readers and scribes interacted with and reacted to literary depictions of sexuality. Chaucer's sexual comedy, with its mix of ribald humor and serious social satire, exemplifies how medieval obscenity could both entertain elite audiences and provoke moral debates.

Ultimately, *The Canterbury Tales*' bold, multifaceted depiction of human sexuality has made it an enduring classic that continues to speak to modern readers. By fearlessly exploring the intricacies of erotic life with humor, empathy, and literary sophistication, Chaucer's great work provides an indelible portrait of the complexities of sex, love, gender, and power in the Middle Ages. Six centuries later, *The Canterbury Tales* remains a pivotal text for examining the history of sexuality, the medieval erotic imagination, and the literary construction of obscenity. In its bawdy laughter, raucous sexuality, and poignant struggles with love and power, Chaucer's magnum opus continues to shed light on the timeless comedy and tragedy of human intimate relations.

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