Noctua:

Medieval and Renaissance Studies at The W

Image source: Bodleian Library, MS. Bodley 764, Folio 73r

The W™

Volume 1
Spring 2016

NOCTUA:
MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES AT THE W

Volume 1

Spring, 2016

Editor:

Elizabeth Varvel

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. Kristi DiClemente

Influencing Chaucer's Marriage Template

Justin Kidd

Many of the stories told in the *Canterbury Tales* are heavily focused on the actions of husbands and wives within their marriage, actions they feel are the proper course, regardless of the positive or negative effects on their partner. Chaucer went to great lengths to inform the reader of the origins of these marriages, particularly if they are arranged or not, giving the impression that arranged marriages were the norm, and the concept of marrying for love was remote. The "marriage group" of Chaucer's *Tales* share similarities with works of Giovanni Boccaccio. Boccaccio's views on marriage influenced Chaucer showing that giving sovereignty to one's partner, and having that sovereignty reciprocated, was the key to establishing happiness within a medieval marriage, and, ultimately, life. Comparing Boccaccio's *Decameron X, 10* and Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, and *Decameron X, 5* and *The Franklin's Tale,* it is clear that these stories share striking similarities. Each of these stories deal with marriage through similar plots, characters, and other literary devices to convey the author's separate thoughts on marriage. Chaucer used the influence from Boccaccio, not to relay the same message, but to ask and answer, two very important questions concerning problems of 14th century marriage: could marriage work for both women and men in a positive light, and what is the criteria for making this happen?

Giovanni Boccaccio portrayed marriage throughout his tales by constructing several stories of marriage under different parameters. Boccaccio's works in the *Decameron* would become one of Chaucer's greatest influences of tales of marriage and love. In the book, *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales: New Essays on an Old Question,* there are several essays that support the idea that Chaucer knew of Boccaccio and the *Decameron.* In the essay *Just Say*

Yes, Chaucer knew the Decameron, Peter G. Beidler, supports the idea that Chaucer was influenced by Boccaccio suggesting that Chaucer would have most likely read many of Boccaccio's works and used them as inspiration in his *Canterbury Tales* (*New Essays/Old Question* 26). Biedler says that there are several of Chaucer's tales that share commonalities with the *Decameron*, including, "The Merchant's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale. Through comparing the similarities between the stories by Boccaccio and Chaucer, Biedler concludes that it is apparent that Chaucer was obviously influenced by Boccaccio (26). Bielder is not the only scholar following supporting for the claim that Chaucer would have known of Boccaccio.

Another scholar that supports the idea that Chaucer was influenced by Boccaccio is N.S. Thompson. Thompson, in his book called, *Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of the Decameron and the Canterbury Tales,* suggests that the stories told by the Merchant and the Clerk are two of the more serious tales that revolve around marriage and have, what he calls, "*Decameron* analogues" (177). To give a better understanding to the problems Chaucer noticed that arose from marriage, Thompson offers a definition of what marriage meant to 14th century readers suggesting that marriage was a symbol of one's status. That marriage was used by medieval people in an effort to propel themselves politically, morally, and economically, and at the same time establish dynastic stability (229).

Chaucer offers several stories that pertain to love. In each of these stories he gives representations of problems that plagued 14th century marriage, problems he most likely saw firsthand. During the 14th century marriage was used to gain something of value for those that participated, except for women who, more often than not, were mere pawns. It's doubtful that there were any marriages that were recognized for love and affection during Chaucer's medieval time period, again referring back to Thompson's idea that marriage was mainly a means to better

one's worth or social status (229). Three stories clearly express the problems Chaucer notes in *The Canterbury Tales.*

The first of these tales deals with a story that has been retold several times, each retelling carrying its own message. The renditions of Chaucer and Boccaccio are very similar, yet the devices used by each author to tell their tales give each an entirely different meaning. "The Clerk's Tale" and the *Decameron's X, 10* offer similar stories revolving around a female protagonist and a maniacal, untrusting husband. Both show how an untrusting husband can lead a marriage into certain anxiety, but that a stoically patient and obedient wife will be rewarded for her faithfulness. In both stories the ruler is petitioned by his subjects to marry and have an heir. The ruler agrees only if he can pick his bride. In both instances the rulers pick a fair but poor girl to wed. It is the husband's devious plan to prove his wife's faithfulness and obedience, which leads the reader to sympathize with the wife, Griselda. Thompson supports this idea, stating, "It is remarkable that the pathos achieved by Chaucer can be found in Boccaccio's rendering" (281). This suggests that both authors strive to make the reader sympathize with Griselda.

While at first glance the intention of these stories is to show that women should act as Griselda does in order for marriage to work, it is the narrators chosen by Chaucer and Boccaccio that reveal the true intention of these stories. Boccaccio tells the narrative of Griselda through Dioneo, who recognizes how ludicrous the story is. Dioneo believes that a story like this would never happen. This gives the impression that anything represented in the story is meant to be sarcastic. By implementing a sarcastic tone with Dioneo, Boccaccio gives the impression that women should not shadow the actions of Griselda.

Chaucer gives a similar indication through a different narrator, a narrator that has a completely different outlook on women than the one Dioneo represents. Chaucer uses a clerk to tell his rendition of Griselda. This is an outstanding choice of a narrator, as it shows what Chaucer felt was the most problematic concern centered on 14th century marriage. The Clerk is not as lighthearted as Dioneo. The Clerk is expressed as a more serious narrator with an almost sinister perception of women as given by the church's teaching of the antifeminist tradition. In fact, in *The General Prologue*, the Clerk is described as, "Of studie took he moost cure and moost heede" (303). This hints to the how seriously the Clerk held to the anti-feminist tradtion taught by the church.

The Clerk is serious when he tells his story of a woman totally devoted to her husband. The Clerk has most certainly studied the bible and tells that its teachings are true and should be followed by Christians. It just so happens that these teachings are often manipulated into subjecting women to the rule of men. This is a lesson the Clerk is trying to teach the other pilgrims, especially the Wife of Bath, as *The General Prologue* states, "And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche" (308). Thompson suggests that the Clerk tried to make Griselda as human as possible and goes so far as to compare her to the Wife of Bath (281). This ties the Clerk's tale and the Wife's tale together in a remarkable way. There are similarities with the plot, setting, and characters of these stories, but a different message is conveyed by the author's choice of narrator to tell these stories. Chaucer brings to light the most overwhelming of his concerns with marriage: that the clergy and its misinterpretation of the bible and subsequent preaching of this philosophy is part of the antifeminist tradition. Chaucer expands on this in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" by giving an example of an average Christian man that takes the antifeminist tradition of

the clergy to heart, and that the lack of womanly sovereignty is the next major concern in 14th century marriage.

Chaucer offers medieval women a voice through Allison, the Wife of Bath, with her narrative in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." Allison voices her own concerns about 14th century marriage in her prologue and reinforces Chaucer's idea that antifeminism taught by the clergy was the biggest factor to the problems that plagued 14th century marriage. In her prologue, Allison tells her sympathetic story of being married off at the age of twelve. She goes through five husbands, with the infamous Jankyn being her fifth. Allison divulges that Jankyn is a clerk, and, like the Clerk in the *Canterbury Tales,* is very serious about the role his wife should play.

The seriousness represented by these two clerks suggests that the endless cycle of the antifeminist tradition being learned and taught throughout subsequent generations led to women losing love for the men that practiced this tradition as depicted in "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." Allison explains, "We love no man that taketh kep or charge Where that we goon; we wol ben at oure large (321-322). Allison condemns clerks and the clergy for the actions of men that take heed to their antifeminist traditions stating, "That any clerk wol speke good of wyves, But if it be of hooly seintes lyves" (689-690). To show the seriousness clerks use to teach women to be more like Griselda, Allison claims that Jankyn would beat her and recite from his "book of wikked wives," a book written by the clergy (673-796).

Chaucer further gives medieval women their voice when he uses the queen in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" as she states, "What thing is it that wommen moost desiren" (905). This question, a question only a woman could ask, gives the sense that Chaucer feels that the lack of sovereignty given to women because of the clergy is the second most important problem with marriage. He does, however, offer a solution to this with "The Wife of Bath's Tale." The

solution, much like the question, comes from a woman, because only a woman can truly know what women want most. That question is answered when the old hag suggests, "For to be free and do right as us lest" (936). With the major issues of marriage brought to light in search of a resolution, Chaucer gives his own rendition on another of Boccaccio's stories to show some of the problems that are, in comparison to what the clergy offers, minor, but play a significant part within their own respective marriages.

These problems are represented in Boccaccio's *Decameron VII, 9* and Chaucer's, "The Merchant's Tale." Again, there are apparent similarities between the two, yet how the stories play out offers an emphasis on the difference of the moral lessons within the two. Both stories have a similar plot, setting, characters, and a marriage involving a much older man and a much younger wife; however, it is the actions of the characters that give a different meaning to each story. For instance, in the *Decameron,* Boccaccio's suitor is pursued by the young wife. However, in Chaucer's tale, it is the suitor that does the pursuing. This offers a sense of who each author feels is more at fault in marriage, whether that fault lie with the men or the women. Another major difference happens at the end of each story, involving the actions taken by the husbands. Each ruler is fooled at the base of a pear tree in a garden, where the couples in each story spend time together. In Boccaccio's version, the ruler is merely manipulated into leaving the wife alone with her beau. By his actions he is slightly facilitates in the infidelity of his wife. However, in Chaucer's version, the ruler takes great precautions to keep his wife faithful, and does considerably more to facilitate his wife's infidelity.

This leads to anxiety and distrust in the relationship, which, paired with his terrible love making, not only leads to his wife's infidelity, but to him facilitating greatly in her infidelity. The Merchant emphasizes in his tale of the husbands facilitation, stating, "He stoupth doun, and on

his bak she gooth" (2348-2349). Once in the tree, the idea that May was sexually unsatisfied with January, and was only looking to satisfy her sexual desires, is represented by how Damyan treats her once she is in the tree with him. "The Merchant's Tale" states, "And sodeynly anon with Damyan Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng" (2352-2353). With this, Chaucer emphasizes the point that insecure, anxious husbands literally facilitate their wives infidelity. This point is enforced by Peter G. Beilder as he offers, "In both Chaucer and the *Decameron,* on the other hand, the young wife is disappointed in her husband's sexual efforts and *therefore* is attracted to a younger man. May's unexciting wedding night makes this only too clear in the Merchant's Tale, while in the *Decameron* version Lidia makes her motivation in seeking Pirro's love" (*Italica* 270). With the problems surrounding 14th century marriage, it is a wonder that anyone entered into this holy contract, despite whatever gains might be had.

The two authors help clear up the doom and gloom of marriage by offering one final tale. The tales told by the two are again very similar, and offer a perspective on the idea that a marriage that was good for both husband and wife could be obtained. Chaucer suggests through the stories that focused on marriage that with understanding, patience, honor, and sovereignty, shared equally between husband and wife, the problems that riddled 14th century marriages could be overcome. "The Franklin's Tale" and the *Decameron X, 5* both offer such tales. Although both of these stories revolve around a husband and wife that exhibit the previously mention qualities, their marriage was still jeopardized by the influences of the medieval societal constructs. This notion is represented by persistent suitors looking for the love of each respective wife. Each wife denies the advancement of their suitors by requesting them to do impossible tasks. Both suitor employ a magician to complete these impossible tasks. It is only the speeches of the husbands that change the minds of the suitors and allow the wives to keep their honor and

virtue. Thompson confirms the parallelism of the two stories by stating, "Although there are major differences in Chaucer's narrative, its concerns exhibit the complexity that would come if both of Boccaccio's versions had been an influence—even if we can never know this absolutely—because the evidence for such a dual perspective is there" (265).

The similarities between the two authors is apparent, but the subtle differences and actions of their respective characters lead to a different perception of marriage in the 14th century. Chaucer offers a unique perspective on stories that had already been told to form questions and answers to what problems plagued 14th century marriage. It is apparent that he was heavily influenced by the earlier works of his predecessor, Boccaccio. Between the parallels these authors offer in their writings, one can see that Chaucer uses this influence to a more serious approach to the matters that plagued medieval marriages. The questions he offers go directly against the antifeminist traditions implemented by the church, and give husbands a good idea of things to avoid in marriage. Unlike Boccaccio, Chaucer offers women a voice to bring to light the oppression they experienced due to the antifeminist tradition and the insecurities of husbands. Through his stories, Chaucer suggests that women should be like Griselda yet maintain the more assertive and independent qualities of the Wife of Bath, if the need arises. This helped to educate the people of the 14th century, and gave them a feasible means that would have allowed them to abandon the old traditions and exhibit better qualities. In doing this, marriage could possibly become a greater union for both men and women

Works Cited

Beidler, Peter G. "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale and the Decameron". *Italica* Vol 50, No.2 (1973): 266–284. Print.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio*. Trans. John Payne. New York: Walter J. Black, Inc, 2007. Print.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. F.N. Robinson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1987. Print.

Koff, Leonard Michael and Brenda Dean Schildgen. *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales: New Essays on an Old Question*. Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 2000. Print.

Thompson, N.S. *Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of the Decameron and the Canterbury Tales.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Print.