

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

SEXUALITY in LITERATURE – Postclassical Period

Roman literature, passed into and through the filter of Christianity, provides the raw material for the major pageants of erotic literature in the Western Middle Ages, ca. 500-1500 A.D. Three chief historical panels open here. There is the rough hewn tale, in French the mediaeval *fabliau* (1150-1400 A.D), which has its antecedents in the romantic novels of late antiquity. There is the tragic tale of a love triangle, in the fashion of *Tristan and Iseut* (12th century) or *The Roman de la Rose* (13th century). This kind of tale is created as adulterously sinful and ends with death. Then there is the highly subtle literary presentation of eros and love by Chaucer (1343-1400 A.D.), in The Wife of Bath's Tale, from *The Canterbury Tales*. These three diverse strands belong to a widespread 'interiorization' of culture, which relates to the geopolitical expansion of the mediaeval world--dwarfing as it does the smaller polities of pre-Christian Culture--as well as to growing 'urbanization,' individualization, and 'self-consciousness.' Accordingly these three historical panels are simply hints toward the multiple social-cultural developments dividing late antiquity from the Renaissance.

Fabliaux are short comic narratives, chiefly composed (and for the most part in northern France) between the mid twelfth and mid fourteenth centuries. (We see some fabliaux even in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.) There remain some 150 of these tales, whose intended audience, apparently, largely overlapped with that of the courtly poetry of the time; gritty, human, but frequently culminating in a moral. In fact, although fabliaux are regularly erotic, it is with the aim of laughter, not of sexual arousal. To wit: a summary of a run of the mill *Tale of the Butcher*, by Eustache d'Amiens, 13th century. A butcher went to market, and on returning, finding it late, had to stop in a village. He asked for lodging, and was sent to the priest's house. The priest rebuffed him as a crude country yokel, and sent him packing. The butcher goes back to town, but stops when he sees a flock of sheep, learns that they belong to the priest, and then returns to steal one of the sheep, which he takes back to the priest as a gift, then selling it to him—to the priest's delight, at acquiring the fine animal. The priest wants the animal slaughtered and dressed, but being unable to do so himself, retires to his bedroom (and sweetheart) leaving the butcher to make the preparations—which he does. A fine meal is prepared, which the butcher enjoys. Then, when the priest has left for mass, the next morning, the butcher enters the priest's bedroom and makes out with the priest's girl, finally making her a present of the fine remaining sheepskin. On his way out, the butcher gifts the downstairs servant made with the same sheepskin, screws her, and heads home. The priest's reflection:

He has well tricked and deceived me,
And screwed my whole household;
He sold me my own sheepskin!
'He has wiped my nose with my own sleeve';
I was born in an evil hour.

This level of bawdiness is picked up in English by Chaucer—in the Miller's Tale, and in The Tale of the Wife of Bath--as well as in the tales of Boccaccio.

Opposite in character and outcome is the **classical mediaeval epic romance**—*Tristan and Isolde* (in many versions, the classic from the mid 12th century); formal verse romance, valued on the highest literary/courtly level. Depending on the version, the theme of this literary genre is coercive and tragic, and is in every version saturated with the erotic power inherent to its situation. The basic theme is lustful and fateful. A Cornish king—but the location could be anywhere—wishes to invite an Irish princess, Isolde, to be his bride—and to be his bridge toward a unification of the two kingdoms. The king sends Tristan, his emissary, to instruct and bring back Isolde, but on their return they accidentally drink a love potion which make them fall deeply in love with one another. Adultery, a crime in mediaeval Christendom, follows, as

does horrible dream-born remorse, which staggers the two lovers. Nonetheless, the original marriage is carried through, bringing with it the full consciousness, of all three partners, of the dreadful secret that has poisoned them. (The excruciating sexual knowledge, which joins the three participants, is never anatomized, but is left fuming over the heads of the fallen. Nightmares haunt each member of the trio.) Finally Mark decides to have the adulterous pair put to death. At this point though—and depending on the version—the lovers agree to separate permanently, and Tristan marries another woman. The crisis of adultery eventually dissipates, but nothing can eradicate the stain of sexual sin that marks the memory of this tragic trio.

The **third** strand, in this diverse set of hints toward the complexity of mediaeval erotics, can be taken from **Chaucer's work in *The Canterbury Tales***. This work, first conceived in 1386, envisages, from a highly transformed literary standpoint, the real life situation of religious pilgrims on their way to the shrine of the martyr St. Thomas à Beckett, who was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170. Chaucer initially imagined well over a hundred stories, to be told going and returning by pilgrims who stop at the Tabard Inn, and though in the end he completed only twenty-two tales, offered up by a wide variety of pilgrims—a knight, a squire, a franklin, a nun, a widow of five husbands (The Wife of Bath), and several others—he achieves a panoramic fresco of the three estates of late mediaeval England. Among the most memorable of the tales, that of the Wife of Bath stands out for her exceptional immersion in the intersection between love and sexuality. In her prologue (ll. 1-862) she takes us on a roller coaster ride, describing her five marriages—to younger than her, older than her, from good in bed to lousy—and at the same time taking us on a tour of her own rich moods—self-defensive, braggardly, lustful—her experience, she says, indicates that genitals are not just for urination--controlling (of husbands), humiliating (of husbands), happy with husbands providing, always providing, she is the one in control of the marriage.

Lo, here, the wise King, old Solomon,
I think he had more wives than one!
As would to God it were permitted me
To be refreshed half so oft as he!
A gift of God had he of all those wives!
No man has such that's in this world alive.
God knows, that noble king, as I see it,
The first night had many a merry fit
With each of them, so happy was his life!
Blessed be God, that I have wedded five,
And they I picked out from all the best,
Both for their nether purse and their chest.

In the 'tale' to which she proceeds, after recounting her sexual history, she moves discourse back into King Arthur's time, a time of faeries and elves...and moral tales. Her protagonist is a fine young knight who rapes a lovely girl, and is given one chance to escape the death penalty: he has a year to come up with an answer to the question: what do women want? The answer he comes up with, and which saves his life, is 'women want to rule over the people they love,' a correct response he gets on the last day of his reprieve, from the world's ugliest woman, who confirms her own answer, when persuading the knight to marry her, by becoming the most beautiful and sexy woman in the world.

Discussion Questions

Is the Wife of Bath telling a story about herself, in her tale about the Ugly Old Woman, who turns into the most beautiful woman in the world?

Is there a theme of lust running through the stories and tales of the later Middle Ages? What was the prevailing view of human carnality, during that period? Did the teachings of the Christian Church militate against the pleasures of the body?

There was a strong anti-feminist tradition in the early centuries of the Christian Church. Do you find traces of that tradition in the erotic literature of the time?

What connection do you see between the eroticism of The Wife of Bath's Tale and that of the story of the Butcher and the Priest?

Selected Readings

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Example: From Chaucer, *The Miller's Tale*

The parish clerk, the amorous Absolon,
Who was for love all woebegone,
Upon the Monday had been at Oseneye
With company to disport and play,
And asked a cloisterer by chance
What he knew about John the carpenter;
And the cloisterer took him away from the church,
And said, "I don't know. I haven't seen him working
Since Saturday; I believe he has gone
For timber. Our abbot sent him;
For he often goes for timber,
And lives at the barn a day or two;
If not there, he is certainly at his house.
Where he is, I cannot certainly say.

Absolon was jolly and light of heart,
And thought, "now is time to stay awake all night;
For surely I have not seen him stirring
About his door since the break of day.
So may I thrive. I shall, at cock's crow
Secretly knock at his window
That stands low there by his bedroom.
Then to Alisoun I will tell all
My love-longing. I can't fail
To at the very least get a kiss.
Some manner of comfort I shall have, in faith.
My mouth has itched all this long day;
That is a sign of kissing at the least.
Also, all night I dreamed I was at a feast.
Therefore, I will go sleep an hour or two,
And all the night then will I wake and play."
When the first cock had crowed, then
Up rose this jolly lover Absolon
And arrayed himself beautifully, to perfection.
But first, even before he had combed his hair,
He chewed grain and licorice
So he would smell sweet.
Under his tongue an herb he bore,
For thereby he thought to be gracious.

He roamed to the carpenter's house,
And still he stood under the window--
Unto his breast it reached, it was so low--
And softly he coughed with a quiet voice--
"What are you doing, honey-comb, sweet Alisoun,
My fair bird, my sweet cinnamon?
Awake, my love, and speak to me!
Very little do you think on my woe,
That I sweat for your love wherever I go.
No wonder is it, though, that I faint and sweat;
I moon like a lamb after the teat.
Indeed, lover, I have such a love-longing,
That like a true turtledove is my mourning.
I cannot eat as much as a maid."
"Get away from that window, Jack fool," she said;
"So help me god, it will not be 'come kiss me.'
I love another--else I would be to blame--
Another much better than you, by Jesus, Absolon.
Get on your way, or I will throw a stone,
And let me sleep, in the Devil's name!"
"Alas," said Absolon, and "welladay,
That true love was ever so ill used!
Then kiss me, since it can be no better,
For the love of Jesus, and for the love of me."
"Will you go away then?" said she.
"Yes, certainly, lover," said Absolon.
"Then get ready," said she, "I'm coming."
And to Nicholas she said quietly,
"Now hush, and you shall laugh your fill."
Absolon got down on his knees
And said, "I am a lord of all ranks;
For after this I hope there comes more.
Lover, your grace, and sweet bird, your favor!"
She opened the window in haste.
"Get on with it," said she, "come on, and get on with it
Or the neighbors might see you."
Absolon wiped his mouth dry.
The night was as dark as pitch, or as coal,
And out the window she stuck her hole,
And Absolon it befell no better or worse,
But with his mouth he kissed her naked arse,
Savoring it before he knew what it was.
Back he jumped and thought it was strange,
For well he knew a woman has no beard.
He felt a thing all rough and long haired
And said, "Fie! Alas! what have I done?"
"Tee hee!" said she, and slammed the window shut.
Absolon went forth on his sorrowful route.

The Miller's Tale is essentially a fabliau, built out by Chaucer, in *The Canterbury Tales*, into a ribald and exaggerated plot. The essence is simple: An elderly carpenter is married to a sexy twenty year old, who collects admirers like flies. One of them, a lodger in the Carpenter's house, devises a trick to get temporarily rid of the Carpenter, and to spend the night in bed with Alison. While they are making love a second aspirant to Alison arrives, singing love lyrics at her low-off-the-ground privy trap door. Rebuffed by the lovely lady, he begs for at least a kiss, and she obliges, in the fashion sketched above.