

WE OTHER CHAUCERIANS: DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES IN ADAPTATIONS OF
THE CANTERBURY TALES

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THESIS ABSTRACT

We Other Chaucerians: Diverse Perspectives in Adaptations of *The Canterbury Tales*

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In an examination of modern adaptations of Chaucer, an understanding of Chaucer as an intertextual author and through a shared relationship with postmodern critical analyses of Chaucer's relevance today is integral in providing new diverse and inclusive perspectives into Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. By eschewing traditional adaptation studies methods of examining the fidelity of an adaptation towards its source material, the goal is to understand the adaptations as separate but equal works of art that help to make Chaucer more modern and more accessible for students who ascribe to a variety of marginalized identities. *The Canterbury Tales* directed by Jonathan Myerson and published by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) employs female animators to offer feminist outlooks on Chaucer's presentation of women with proto-feminist values, while also managing to explore the nature of masculinity through the tales of the Reeve and Miller. In the Italian filmmaker and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini's adaptation *I racconti di Canterbury*, the author employs his queer perspectives on Chaucer's tales and examines the dueling natures of social normalcy and deviancy to question the nature of a regressive society. In Marilyn Nelson's adaptation, *The Cachoeira Tales*, she explores the nature of the pilgrimage through the experiences of a member of the African-American

diaspora and uses Chaucer to create an African American history in the face of centuries of erasure of black identity. Each adaptation engages with postmodern Chaucerian critics and provides for new methods of understanding and relating to Chaucer in relation to growing student diversity on campuses across America, while destabilizing the privileged readings of Chaucer as a symbol of English nationalism.

Introduction

Adaptation studies is a problematic field within the greater world of academic criticism. Unlike other forms of textual analysis, adaptations are often viewed as tangential to the study of narrative, and the field itself is generally stagnated by ideas and values of “fidelity” to source material. Thomas Leitch writes “the valorization of fidelity amounts to a valorization of literature as such in the face of the insurgent challenge of cinema studies.” This valorization leads to a scholarly condition in which “only adaptation study... remains obsessed with asking whether a film is any good as a preliminary, a precondition, or a substitute for asking how it works.”¹ Consideration of an adaptation on its own merits is troubled by an audience demand to put a source material first. While this is incredibly problematic in the discussion of a growing style of criticism, it is damned even further by the erasure of identity that ignoring the merits of adaptation provides. Adaptation manages to provide a diverse lens through which to view a source, and understanding an adaptation only how it relates to its presentation of the source text robs adapters of their voice and devalues or denigrates the contribution of a diverse set of experiences to a growing critical marketplace. When looking at an adaptation, the question should not be about how it stacks up against the source material, but instead, it should focus on what the director, writer, animator, or author is attempting to display in their adaptation. In adapting classic texts, contemporary adaptations represent modern concerns. Looking at the work of a heteronormative, white male author through the perspective of a female animator, a queer director, or an African-American author represents the universality of our human condition and suggests a way that cultural

¹ Leitch, Thomas, “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory,” *Criticism* 45.2 (2003): 149-71, 162.

progress reaches backwards as well as forwards to recognize and display new valences and applications. No greater example of this exists than with the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, who is widely heralded as the most important poet in the history of English literature. Yet valorizing Chaucer as an author, as the “wellspring of Inglysch undefiled,” or the “Father of English poetry” devalues Chaucer’s own authorial conditions and expectations to be a translator and adapter of textual traditions.

Chaucer’s most famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*, is a collection of adaptations, tales from classical Roman authors, such as Boethius and Ovid, as well as contemporary Italian, French, even Flemish and English sources, such as Boccaccio and Petrarch. Essentially, Chaucer’s work as an adapter nativizes these already established tales, applying the perspective of medieval English society into already established literary traditions, and as a translator, he renders foreign stories into his own burgeoning English literary culture. However, the field of Chaucerian studies has often sought to venerate and privilege Chaucer as a truly original English poet, and the centuries of criticism of Chaucer’s work only contributes to an idolatry of Chaucerian poetry as exemplifying a root of English imperial nationalism. The celebration of Chaucer’s poetry has its origins in English colonialism and imperialism, of recognizing him as the first in a protracted line of English exceptionalism. Chaucer’s work is of course worth praise and admiration, but to break his study away from the textual conditions that produced him denies a sense of history needed for worthwhile criticism. Without a sense of Chaucer as an adaptor, of the global contexts of medieval English literature, studying his poetry can lead to an oppressive sense of English privilege resulting in student alienation, especially in the diverse classrooms of today.

In fact, only in recent years have postmodern critics been allowed to evolve their study into areas that were often deemed forbidden territory due to the devil of anachronism. Reading feminism or queer theory into Chaucerian texts has been deprecated for approaching the study of Chaucer from an ahistorical perspective. Enriching traditional historicisms and formalism with a postmodern, multicultural context and understanding, adaptation studies allows a more diverse space for studying and enjoying the works of Chaucer. Chaucerian adaptation contributes to a destabilization of the privilege of Chaucer as imperialist figure, and opens critical inquiry to a contemporary society filled with diversity inclusive of multiple perspectives. Here I study Chaucerian adaptation seriously—specifically *The Canterbury Tales* (1998), an animated adaptation from BBC, *I racconti di Canterbury* (1972) from Italian filmmaker and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini, and *The Cachoeira Tales* (2005) from African-American scholar and poet Marilyn Nelson—looking to understand of how adaptation functions in a digital society and in new media spaces. I argue for a more contemporary image of Chaucer that subverts the venerated and elitist study of Chaucer with respect to Chaucer’s historical circumstances while diversifying the breadth of audience and interpretation to create a new Chaucer with enriched possibilities for interpretation and value.

A growing climate troubles current students of English literature, a nagging sense of illegitimacy of the medieval era. As our society struggles to express its multicultural, diverse truth, ancient texts seemed disconnected and inapplicable to contemporary values of inclusion and cultural respect. Cultural, racial, social, and sexual stratifications and hierarchies define our way of being. However, despite obvious technological advancements, there are several important ways that we still live in a world bound by

medieval concerns. We still live in a world where ink lines on parchment divide us into an arbitrary geography. Where patriarchy structures a limited access to sexual and gender equality. Where wealthy despots dominate its affairs with little concern for the people struggling to achieve happiness and fulfillment. These problems, among others, are hardly recent innovations, and their enduring challenges ultimately intensify the need to study and understand the medieval roots of the serious issues we face today. The terms of our humanity often seem locked in paradigms of medieval origin. Edmund Burke wrote in 1790 that “people will not look forward to prosperity, who never look backward to their ancestors,”² and while it has become cliché, this idea is extremely important for the field of the humanities. However, understanding how this complex issue manifests in the study of the humanities in contemporary society means that new considerations must be utilized. The humanities must evolve with the changing times, while maintaining the importance of history, but scholars today can look to modern forms of telling old stories. Chaucer’s poetry is a perfect crucible to test the challenges of humanistic study, since his work continues to be retold and adapted into myriad new forms, with new audiences and new perspectives.

Understanding privilege in modern American society is our duty in the world of academics. For years, the notion of racial, sexual, and economic superiority has hindered our progress as a society. America’s straight-white-male prerogative plays out in many battlefields in society. From discussions of marriage rights, gendered pay gaps, and systemic racism, the nature of our society is one that recognizes a need to change from supporting elitism. The conversation about privilege allows us to understand the outside

² Burke, Edmund, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, (London, 1790)

of issues that directly inform and support elite culture. Scholars and students need to understand canonicity as the literary expression of privilege, and challenge its colonizing effects. A more diverse American society can focus its authors to recover their own engagement with issues of diversity and inclusion. Literary history has favored white males of high status and catered to their tastes and whims. Those authors who seem to support their ideological values and communicate their limited, partial view of the world, have been promulgated and celebrated by a literary and academic culture dominated by their concerns and interests. However, diversity does not go away when one recalibrates history, and questions of multiculturalism and intersectionality have only grown more insistent in claiming their share of our critical attention. Contemporary students are demanding that their education reflect the current movement toward inclusiveness, realizing long-held critical distrust of the ideologies behind canon formation for themselves. They demand recognition and a voice in the conversation. In 2016, students at Yale composed a petition that questioned the colonialist nature of requirements for the English major, focusing on a single two-semester course focusing on eight major English poets from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, beginning with Geoffrey Chaucer. It has long been considered an integral part of the education of English major at that university. Former Yale student, Adriana Miele writes that

I thought that Yale’s English Department would be my home—instead, it has belittled, frustrated and disappointed me. I’m disappointed that the department remains complicit in a larger culture of literary elitism.³

For Miele, the problem was hardly to do with issues of difficulty, because by her own admission she “majored in English” because she is “a writer” who “in the lowest

³ Miele, Adriana, “MIELE: Leave the fourth floor” (New Haven: Yale Daily News, 2016).

moments of my life turned to poetry and theater and well-written television” and that she doesn’t “hate reading John Milton.” Instead, the problem is that “the department does not cultivate a well-rounded academic experience—the department educates students in venerating the English canon.”⁴

The reaction to the petition has been often fierce, from traditionalists and conservatives alike, claiming the petition as evidence of a millennial generation’s sense of entitlement and overly fragile sensibilities. Katy Waldman, a writer at Slate, acknowledges that the traditional English literary canon is indeed “sexist...racist...colonialist, ableist, transphobic, and totally gross,” but also claims that “the ‘stay in your lane’ mentality that seems to undergird so much progressive discourse...ignores are common humanity.”⁵ Waldman can only offer to alienated students the solution that they just swallow their medicine and smile. While on the more extreme side of things, a video on YouTube created by a channel that calls itself “We the Internet,” uses mockery and elitism to parody the notion that students find the canon to be problematic. Using an actor dressed in Shakespearean garb and standing in an empty theatre, this video makes the claim that students “don’t want to read Shakespeare because [they’re] lazy.”⁶ This train of thought is incredibly regressive and offensive, and while it tries to hide behind the cloak of comedy, it instead comes off as elitist, and vaguely racist. Both critics exemplify the issue that the petition is directly seeking to express—which is the elitism surrounding these texts and their venerations by scholars. They in fact undergird and enact the problem millennial students have with the idea of the canon.

⁴ Miele, Ibid.

⁵ Waldman, Katy, “The Canon is Sexist, Racist, Colonialist, and Totally Gross. Yes, You Have to Read It Anyway.” (Slate, 2016).

⁶ Perez, Lou, “Is Shakespeare Too White for College,” (You Tube: We the Internet, 2016).

Miele herself responds to these notions in her admittance that the issue is “venerating the English canon,” and that it does students a disservice if they are “taught how to analyze canonical literature” or why a work “canonical, or the implications of canonical work that actively oppress and marginalize nonwhite, nonmale, trans, and queer people.” For Miele, the issue is directly related to the instructional methods on the Yale campus, but they are representative of the trend of veneration of works and styles of criticism that plagues American universities. I agree with Miele’s points—even though I love reading the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Spenser—I understand that what becomes problematic is the nature of focusing on them as untouchable ideals within the history of English literature. While I have been lucky enough to be educated by scholars who are incredibly progressive in their handling of early English authors, not many students are this lucky. I am also a straight, white, cis-male, and I am aware that I occupy a position of privilege based on those facts alone. However, being aware of this position means that I have a responsibility to admit that while it might be easy for me to enjoy reading and studying these authors, it is not the same experience for all. As a scholar, I should be dedicated to finding a method of instruction that best imparts why I am so passionate about these texts.

In Waldman’s defense, she also admits that authors like Chaucer and Shakespeare are full of intellectual and cultural merit, even though the authors occupy spaces of privilege within their society. Of Chaucer, Waldman writes, “there are few...who rival Chaucer in wit, transgressiveness, texture, or psychological insight,” and that Shakespeare’s

female characters are as complexly nuanced as any in circulation today, *Othello* takes on racial prejudice directly, and *Twelfth Night* contains enough gender-bending identity shenanigans to...occupy legions of queer scholars.⁷

Even in her dismissiveness of the central issues motivating the student petition, there are some concessions made on Waldman's side, which makes it even more troublesome that she misses the points made by Miele. These statements about Chaucer and Shakespeare's transgressive are true, and it is our job as educators and scholars is to bring these issues to light. The goal is to make older texts accessible to the modern world. This can be accomplished by illuminating their blemishes as well as their beauty, and by arguing for a less monolithic version of historical cultures. Just as our own culture has many diverse voices, so does the ancient world. Complexity and multiplicity is the rule for any cultural production, and there is never a single, "authorized" voice at any given time. To make these antique texts, such as Chaucer and Shakespeare, come to life for modern, millennial readers, we must investigate the ways that these authors and works work on many different levels, speak to different audiences, and address the problems of their world. For me, even in my station as a straight, white male, having instructors that illuminate the attention to class critique within the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare made them accessible to me, because of my working-class background. Both authors are considered literature of a higher status, and their veneration throughout my educational history often left me feeling alienated. Today, we view Shakespearean drama as something only for the intellectual and privileged. Discussing the merits of Hamlet's philosophical lamentations with my co-workers in a warehouse would never take precedence over conversations about women or parties, yet in an academic setting where a professor examines the nature

⁷ Waldman, "The Canon is Racist, Sexist, Colonialist, and Totally Gross"

of Shakespeare writing solely for the groundlings—those theater goers who often bought the cheapest seats on the floor at the edge of the stage—made Shakespeare more responsive to my own life experiences. These conversations were easily relatable to my own discussions with co-workers about how the higher-ups had no concern for those of us working at the bottom. The veneration of Chaucer as the representative of beauty in English poetry by authors and scholars alike hardly makes him seem as interesting as an episode of South Park with my friends. However, learning that Chaucer accurately tried to represent the highs and the lows of medieval society with a diverse group of pilgrims from upper and lower stations in life presented me with tales that were oftentimes far more humorous. We need venerate these authors less, avoid totalizing or universalizing their claims, and read them for their cracks and contradictions.

Chaucer's critical history is complex, and at times, his work has been venerated for his language and imagery. In this history of criticism, Chaucer is ever deified as the worthy origin of English poetry. This glorification is found in early examinations of Chaucer, where critical appraisal of Chaucer was in his role as translator. In his "Ballade to Chaucer," medieval French poet Eustache Deschamps wrote of Chaucer lovingly calling him "Grant translateur, noble Geoffrey Chaucer" repeatedly and putting Chaucer on par with great minds like Socrates, Seneca, and Ovid of Classical fame. Criticism in Chaucer's age was relegated to acknowledging Chaucer's role as translator of stories, and while today we are unsure as to whether Chaucer's work was made to be read or recited in his time, we know that many of his tales were adapted from other works. In his role as translator, Chaucer brought tales from Latin, French, and Italian to the people of England. Later critics during the 1400s-1800s would attempt to surmise the biographical nature of

Chaucer, and the bibliographical nature of his writings. In the 17th century, Chaucer's "language becomes less familiar and new learning replaces that of the Middle Ages" allowing for critics to distance themselves from Chaucer due to his bawdy tales.⁸ John Dryden writes of Chaucer in 1700 "though he must always be a great poet, he is no longer esteemed as a great writer." This statement signifies that Chaucer is representative of the "infancy of our poetry," and that authors of the time should dedicate themselves to translating Chaucer for their period—or in their approximation, he needs to be perfected according to the poetic standards of the day.⁹ Dryden discusses this all in the preface to his collection of translations, *Fables Ancient and Modern*. By this period, many understood of Chaucer as important to the history of English literature, but only by disavowing his more profane tales. This is a trend that continues through the 1700s, as many authors seek to translate "Grant translateur, noble Geoffrey Chaucer."

In continuing to venerate the work of Chaucer, critics and authors in the 1800s began to explore the realism of his tales. Many scholars in this period focused on Chaucer's pilgrims and his presentation of English society. Influenced by the thinking of Romantic era artists and authors, Chaucer's pilgrims represent the hierarchical microcosms of English society that "are the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life," and as William Blake writes about the pilgrims "Names alter, things never alter."¹⁰ Given that the Romantic era began to focus on the struggles of class distinction in society, Chaucer's pilgrims began to fulfill the role of understanding the nature of

⁸ Saunders, Corrine "The Development of Chaucer Criticism," *Chaucer (Blackwell Guides to Criticism)*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 6.

⁹ Dryden, John, "Preface," *Fables Ancient and Modern: translated into verse, from Homer, Ovid, Boccace, & Chaucer: with original poems*, (London, Internet Archive 1700/2007), 19-22.

¹⁰ Blake, William, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures, Poetical and Historical Inventions* (London, 1809).

societal roles established in England from the medieval up until that point. Much of this study was still concerned with the nature of translating Chaucer, as the English language continued to grow and differ from Chaucer's written language. These trends informed the movement of Chaucer studies into the 1900s, which largely became interested in "antiquarianism, philology, the origins of the English language and early English writing" to take the writings of Chaucer and "invest them with a new authority."¹¹ The act of investing this authority into Chaucer's writing is to maintain the imperial and colonial powers of England for nationalist purposes, so by focusing on the antiquated examples of English society and language, it became easier for Britain to represent its society as a truly advanced and benevolent one. The ideas of nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism were not present in Chaucer's society. However, the implications of Chaucer's work as a venerated example of the prolific history of English literature and society are precisely the issue that causes conflict with students today. In examining this trend of critical inquiry, it becomes clear how a need for new approaches to a text shakes off the problematic issues layered on Chaucer's work by scholars who worked towards a nationalist and colonialist purpose.

At the end of the 19th century, scholars began to dedicate their studies on manuscript studies of Chaucer's work. The idea behind this movement of criticism was to help collect Chaucer's work into a definitive text, one single voice. In addition, authors in this time were still dedicated to translating Chaucer into modern linguistic and poetic formats. Scholars still valued "Chaucer's stylistics, language structure, usage, versification, and prosody" as "central critical issue," yet there was a growing trend in

¹¹ Saunders, "Introduction," 9.

critics examining Chaucer's value outside of just studying the merits of history, prosody, and linguistic importance. By the advent of the 20th century, critics like G.L. Kittredge and J.M. Manly would think of Chaucer in terms of understanding how "Chaucer learned to move away from medieval literary conventions into a new mode of realism."¹² Here, critics attempted to redeem Chaucer as something more than just a linguistic curiosity, but as contributing to a triumphant march of English literary history. Many critics of this time examined Chaucer under the guise of experimental author, who sought to break down literary conventions.

In the 20th century, the school of New Criticism began to focus on the necessity of close reading texts and poems to evaluate them based on the words, imagery, and ideals written within the text. For critics of Chaucer, New Criticism allowed them to close read the text and explore the ambiguities and ironies within Chaucer's Tales. This led to a trend in Chaucer studies to examine Chaucer's work in relationship to the tales and societies from which he adapted them. Charles Muscatine writes that "to use such terms as 'irony,' 'ambiguity,' 'tension,' and 'paradox' in describing Chaucer's poetry is to bring to the subject our typical mid-century feeling for an unresolved dialectic."¹³ New critical approaches to Chaucer explore the issues present in Chaucer's text dealt with what was written, how it was written, and why it was written to inform an understanding of Chaucer representing the complexities of medieval English society through moments of irony, erasure, and ambiguity, yet still maintained a dedication to veneration of the text. While New Criticism sought to open up the critical exploration of Chaucer in

¹² Ibid, 10.

¹³ Muscatine, Charles, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (University of California Press, Berkeley), 9-10.

different methods, much of the criticism focused on exploring medieval concepts like courtly love and chivalry, while still presenting Chaucer as the most venerated author of the medieval period.

During this time, as New Critical theory into Chaucer studies sought to explore the nature of Chaucer's society within Chaucer's own words, D.W. Robertson Jr. would popularize a style of criticism dedicated to preserving a study of Chaucer's period through an examination of primary sources. Whereas New Criticism sought to examine the irony and ambiguities within Chaucer's work, Robertson's *A Preface to Chaucer* accuses New Critics of being "quick to supply 'contraries' for purposes of generating the 'tensions' necessary to make our medieval ancestors seem modern."¹⁴ In essence, Robertson believed that it was necessary only to understand the problems represented in Chaucer's text being that of Chaucer's society, and any attempt to superimpose these issues onto our sense of modernity is a false equivalency. For Robertson, Chaucer represented part of a grand international tradition of ancient Christianity, which he felt was being abandoned in a post-war society. Robertson sought to venerate Chaucer as a moralistic hero whose work represented traditions that kept the world morally correct, and he sought to challenge New Critical approaches that came across as nihilistic or anti-moral. Today, while understood as important, Robertson's work is no longer considered the norm. In her article, *New Approaches to Chaucer*, Carolyn Dinshaw writes that

In these scholarly instances the medieval, and particularly Chaucer, was used in a process of mourning, or rather, if we accept Freud's distinctions, in a melancholic refusal of loss, the putative modern-day loss of good love, revealed truth, and fullness of being.¹⁵

¹⁴ Robertson Jr, D.W., *A Preface to Chaucer: studies in medieval perspectives*

¹⁵ Dinshaw, Carolyn, "New Approaches to Chaucer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 270.

Dinshaw represents the overall problem with Robertsonian criticism as its practitioners “explicitly create a fantasy Middle Ages to supply what is perceived as missing in the present day.” Instead, scholars today focus on how “reading Chaucer’s texts relate to the world in which we live.”¹⁶

From the 1980s until now, Chaucerian criticism has been focused on a variety of postmodern approaches to the text. Lee Patterson’s approach to studying Chaucer sought to understand how “history impelled Chaucer toward the modern...by investigating not just the idea of history...but...the historical world itself.”¹⁷ Patterson seeks to understand how Chaucer makes “himself as a man at once in and out of history” able to comment both on historical pasts and his contemporary world and how history and society relates to the pressures placed on the individual. Carolyn Dinshaw’s landmark text, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, sought to “analyze Chaucer’s poetry in terms of its allegorical representation of the text as a woman read and interpreted by men.”¹⁸ Dinshaw challenges imperialist and masculine readings of Chaucer that choose to focus on allegory represented as “truth veiled by obscurity,” but instead “Chaucer attempts to discern the consequences of literature and literary tradition” that chooses to understand “literary endeavor as masculine acts performed on feminine bodies” by not employing “an image or reify[ing] a traditional idea.”¹⁹ Both approaches represent revolutionary considerations of Chaucer within the sense of a modern point-of-view. Whereas Patterson makes the case that Chaucer was greatly considerate of modern appraisals of his text by

¹⁶ Ibid, 271.

¹⁷ Patterson, Lee, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 26.

¹⁸ Dinshaw, Carolyn, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 12.

¹⁹ Ibid, 25-27.

his own adherence to classicalism and historical origins, and Dinshaw examined gendered sexualized readings of the text, both authors are responsible for also providing commentary on the nature of Chaucer studies in the modern age. Their work inspires contemporary scholars like Tison Pugh, whose book *Chaucer's (Anti-)Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages* provides a reading of Chaucer's work through the lens of a queer theory analysis.

Just as the history of Chaucerian studies evolves in academic environments, the role of Chaucer has been altered and adapted to suit the society reading him. Today, in the face of growing diversity on campuses, Chaucer studies must further adapt to become relevant to discussions today. One claim in the Yale student petition lamenting the forced instruction of canon poets was that “a year spent around a seminar table where the literary contributions of women, people of color, and queer folk are absent actively harms all students, regardless of their identity.”²⁰ Yet, there is a method of critical evolution available to Chaucer scholars able to encapsulate Chaucer's importance, and prescience of issues in contemporary society—which is through the creation and study of adaptations of Geoffrey Chaucer. Lately, there have been a few attempts at theorizing Chaucerian adaptation. However, many of them seem to be lacking in critical appraisal. Many critical approaches to adaptation up until this day have been focused on the first-wave concept of adaptation study, which is largely focused on the merit of an adaptation in relation to its fidelity to its source material.

Understanding Chaucerian adaptation is a burgeoning line of inquiry, taken more and more seriously by medievalist scholars. Itself a fledgling field, adaptation studies is

²⁰ Wang, Victor, “Student Petition Urges English Department to Diversify Curriculum,” (New Haven: Yale Daily News, 2016).

divided into two waves of inquiry. First-wave adaptation studies seek to understand the nature of an adaptation in relation to a text based on issues of fidelity. Reading adaptations as faithful to source texts privileges the written source while diminishing the value of the adaptation. First-wave Chaucerian adaptation studies are no different, and tend to collection adaptations and explore them on a basis of their fidelity. Steve Ellis argues in *Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination* that he attempts “to trace Chaucer’s various manifestations in modern culture outside the academic arena.”²¹ While Ellis’s exploration is “the first occasion that the relevant material has been treated in any sustained manner,” Ellis argues that historically “attention has been largely confined to pre-twentieth century responses to his work, and to the Middle Ages more generally.”²² Ultimately, Ellis’s collection seeks to explore modernized Chaucer in an attempt to break from a centuries-old tradition, but offers little in the way of critical inquiry, simply relying on summary. Candace Barrington’s approach to gathering adaptations of Chaucer is like Ellis’s, but Barrington differs by focusing her work on adaptations of Chaucer within American literature. Barrington writes that American Chaucers employ a variety of characteristics such as announcing, “their appropriation of Chaucer” and by expecting “only a familiarity with his name and a vague awareness of his historical literary importance.” Barrington’s goal is to show that “American popularizations of Chaucer transform both to create a new text, thereby illustrating the adaptability of Chaucerian narratives and characters to key features of American

²¹ Ellis, Steve, *Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xviii.

²² Ibid, xviii

ideology.”²³ Both authors represent the issues of first-wave adaptation studies, and the larger issue present in Chaucer studies. While exploring a variety of adaptations, by limiting their exploration as representative of fidelity to the source text, they continue the tradition of venerating the written Chaucer over the different approaches to *The Canterbury Tales* created by a diverse history of adaptation. Both Ellis and Barrington represent the “majority of English and American Chaucerians” who have “privileged Chaucer’s works over his sources—and continues to privilege Chaucer’s works over subsequent adaptations.”²⁴

In a model of the rising second-wave of adaptation studies, Kathleen Forni chooses to examine Chaucerian adaptation through the lens of reception theory in her book *Chaucer’s Afterlife: Adaptations in Recent Popular Culture* by examining how “this cultural recycling attests to the continued symbolic and commercial value of Chaucer’s name and texts across a range of cultural fields.”²⁵ Forni’s book chooses to focus on recent adaptations, as opposed to the larger collection of adaptations presented in the works of Ellis and Barrington. Forni’s selection of adaptations represents ideals that are far more modern. She chooses to explore issues of Chaucerian adaptations representations in the study of intertextuality, genre, digital media, race, and commercialism. By exploring Chaucer under a variety of fields of study, Forni begins to represent the notion of a more progressive examination of Chaucer for a more modern

²³ Barrington, Candace, *American Chaucers*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 2.

²⁴ Kelly, Kathleen Coyle and Tison Pugh, *Chaucer on Screen: Absence, Presence, and Adapting the Canterbury Tales*, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016), 4.

²⁵ Forni, Kathleen, *Chaucer’s Afterlife: Adaptations in Recent Popular Culture*, (Jefferson, McFarland & Co., 2013).

audience, but also for a critical appraisal of Chaucer that destabilizes his high-status, and instead starts to universalize Chaucer.

In these appraisals of Chaucer, little is said about the specific role of the adapted work and the nature of the adapter. For adaptation studies to not suffer the pitfalls of first-wave limitations, that is to avoid appraising an adaptation based on fidelity alone, it needs to represent the evolutionary nature of Chaucer studies itself. Instead of viewing the work as merely a tribute to Chaucer, or merely a translation, the study of adaptation of Chaucer needs to focus on the elements presented by the writers, animators, or directors working on the adaptation. Adaptation should address these players as having important interpretive claims to make. In a collection of essays focused on Chaucerian adaptation, Tison Pugh and Kathleen Coyne Kelly write in their introduction that they would “like to disrupt chronological thinking that positions Chaucer as the privileged ur-storyteller, requiring a definition of analogues as those tales that exist prior to or contemporary with Chaucer.”²⁶ If there is one way to counteract the sense that ancient authors write from privileged perspectives, and that proxy venerate these texts, then it is by examining the work of Chaucer in the hands of other artists. Adaptation can be used to respond to the concerns of millennial students alienated by studying ancient texts. It is extremely important that the study of Chaucer, and more explicitly, the study of *The Canterbury Tales*, be viewed through the lens of diverse artists who represent different races, cultures, and sexualities. Therefore, studying Chaucerian adaptation becomes a dynamic and expressive way of engaging with Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, by providing students with a variety of critical interpretations representative of diverse perceptions.

²⁶ Kelly and Pugh, *Chaucer on Screen*, 8.

In modernizing the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, adapters “acknowledge the continuing influence of this text...on the imagination of writers, designers, artists, and readers alike” (Rudd, 182). Modernization of Chaucer becomes an intertextual act, as an adapter adapts the work of “le Grant translateur, noble Geoffrey Chaucer.”²⁷ Gillian Rudd writes:

Chaucer is essentially an intertextual writer, it is only fitting that his own works have become integral to latter-day intertextuality. Certainly, the persistence of Chaucerian allusion is a testament to his standing in our view of English literary heritage...research in this area marks a continued interest in Chaucer across time, rather than an insistence on asserting a single, unchanging, correct interpretation of his works²⁸

Richard de Bury, English bishop and noted medieval bibliophile, adapted the Bible when he wrote in his *Philobiblion*, “Of the making of many books, there is no end.”²⁹ The presence of adaptation, and the possibility of making more, suggests a similar textual infinitude, that the process of interpretation and reconfiguration is never done. There is always room for one more go at arguing the cultural merits and relevance of a text. Anyone can have a try at handling the timeworn story, and discovering new meaning therein. If the voice of the marginalized seems to be missing from a text, we can always seek how a member of a marginalized group might interpret the previously canonical text. That way we must acknowledge that the act of making meaning does not stop with the imprimatur of the dominant culture or with the ideology of the powerful. By examining specific adaptations created by artists from marginalized groups, we can understand how the ancient author already relates to issues of the modern world. New

²⁷ Jenkins, T. Atkinson. “Deschamps’ Ballade to Chaucer,” in *Modern Language Notes* 33, no. 5, (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1918), 269.

²⁸ Rudd, Gillian, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, (Abingdon: Routledge Guides to Literature, 2005).

²⁹ de Bury, Richard, *The Philobiblion of Richard de Bury*, (Ann Arbor: *The University of Michigan Press*, 2007), 232.

worlds of meaning are opened in retransmission. The potentials of adaptation shine a liberatingly anachronistic light on the subtle nuances within Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, whether in the feminist take presented in Jonathan Myerson's three-episode animated adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales* (1998), the queer lens of the Italian director and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini in his deviance-focused adaptation *I racconti di Canterbury* (1972), the links to the African-American diaspora presented in Marilyn Nelson's *The Cachoeira Tales* (2005), or through the modern mixture of the amateur medievalism and the digital technology in online adaptations of Chaucer on YouTube. Modern adaptors of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* embody the spirit of Chaucer himself, and reclaim and uncover diverse viewpoints within a seminal English text. Much like Chaucer himself, these authors seek to make *The Canterbury Tales* more accessible and relatable to the modern world, but also offer complex critical appraisals of Chaucer's themes through their own diverse lenses. Chaucerian adaptation creates a Chaucer for the modern age, opening up a reading that is both anachronistic and free of its traditional place in the nationalist, imperialist canon. A skillful, sensitive retelling also pulls out deeper thematic concerns in Chaucer's work that are often left submerged by dominant critical interpretations oriented towards straight white males of high status, restoring much-needed multivocality and complexity to texts that, like de Bury's books, never seem to end.

Women and Gender Roles in Chaucerian Adaptation

In 2000, to feature more educational programming, the BBC commissioned an animated adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales*. While Jonathan Myerson serves as the principle director on the project, the work honors Chaucer's innovated polyvocality and diversity of perspective by amalgamating the work of different animators, directors, and writers to create a version that is both modernized and historical, bringing to light subtle possibilities at least latently present in the original tales. Myerson casts himself (much Pasolini does, as we will see below) as a sort of Chaucer the author, the collector and redactor of various adaptations made by a diverse cast of men and women. He is its governing principle, and organizes these multiple interpretations to uncover a *Canterbury Tales* for the marginalized—specifically women, and people who struggle with gender identity. By using these differing voices and interpretations, we can illuminate Chaucer's own attempts to negotiate the patriarchy and misogyny of his own time through his *Tales*, as well as link those early attempts to see through gender ideology to our continuing issues with male-dominated society. This feminist perspective is most apparent in Joanna Quinn's retelling of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Here, Quinn foregrounds the story's invocation of rape culture and the male gaze to lay bare the brutal terms of the story's jaundiced view of the gender struggle and its desire for “sovereignty” of one gender over the other.

In many ways, Quinn's reappropriation of the tale is mobilized and made possible by the groundbreaking work of Carolyn Dinshaw. Few studies of the implications of gender and sexuality in Chaucer can even approach the depth and power of Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Dinshaw claims to “analyze Chaucer's poetry in terms of its

allegorical representation of the text as a woman read and interpreted by men.”³⁰ In her exploration of the masculinized reading practices that subject and appropriate a textual artifact gendered as feminine, she argues “Chaucer does not passively employ an image or reify a traditional idea; he finally insists on accounting for the exclusion and effects of just such a representation.”³¹ In exploring this idea, Dinshaw invokes the example of Richard of Bury, who “openly identifies the care and preservation of books with the care and preservation of the patriarchy.” Dinshaw states that this “paternal care is necessary to preserve the purity of the race of books against the loss of their ancient nobility, against defilement by impostors pretending to be authors.”³² It is this very action of “paternal care” of a patriarchal literary culture that Chaucer endeavors to subvert, and that the practice of continuing adaptation re-initiates repeatedly. Masculine control over knowledge extends from masculine control over feminine bodies and sexualities. The race of books (figured as women) must have its “purity” defended “against defilement” and “loss” to perpetuate their power to support the patriarchal structure. In adapting Chaucer—himself a great adaptor of texts—directors, animators, and writers actively subvert patriarchal control of knowledge, at the same time subverting puritanical notions about sexuality often presumed to exist in early cultures but just as often imposed by later eras upon historical understanding. The sheer variety of visual media used to adapt the texts reflects the possibilities of containing a host of marginalized voices. In denying that masculine power, or seeing beyond it, Chaucerian adaptation becomes an opportunity to include and respect the readings and interpretations of marginalized people.

³⁰ Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 12.

³¹ *Ibid*, 27.

³² *Ibid*, 18.

The power of Dinshaw's reading becomes most focused in the instance of the Wife of Bath's problematic presentation of her biography and her tale. Dinshaw argues that the Wife of Bath rebels most especially to the learned practice of "glossing." In rebelling against these "glosses," Alisoun uses "her 'joly body' against their [educated men's] oppressive teaching and glossing."³³ These masculinist glosses—authorial and authoritative inventions into the presentation of a written page—are representative of a patriarchal control that seeks to limit and circumvent what a text can say. Therefore, the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is focused on challenging the male anti-feminist stereotypes of the medieval period. The Wife of Bath reveals the "exclusion and devalorization" of competing discursive forms performed by male-centered interpretive practices by mimicking "the operations of patriarchal discourse...such mimesis functions to reveal those operations...to make a place for the feminine."³⁴ Yet, these words are not the words of an actual woman, but instead the words of Chaucer. Furthermore, Dinshaw observes that

through the Wife, Chaucer imagines the possibility of a masculine reading that is not antifeminist, that does acknowledge, in good faith, the feminine... He represents the struggle and violence to the feminine that accompany the articulation of this fantasy...Chaucer recuperates the sexualized hermeneutics that he recognizes as both pervasive in the medieval literary imagination and manifestly flawed.³⁵

The Wife of Bath's assertion of feminine power and sexuality is re-prioritized and centered in the modern adaptations of the Prologue and Tale. Through repurposing, the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale represent the female voice as "assertively mocking

³³ Ibid, 113.

³⁴ Ibid, 115.

³⁵ Ibid, 117.

masculine discourse” and through this act of wry defiance; adapters actively subvert the patriarchy’s presumption of the power to care for feminine desire.

Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, is the final storyteller in the first episode of series, called “Leaving London. (1998). Instantly, the wife is displayed as an important figure, as Chaucer introduces her and the several characters around her. The beginning of her speech incites a fight between the Friar and the Summoner. However, Alisoun quickly takes control of the situation. Through this act, Myerson implies the Wife’s indomitable power over the masculine, and sets the space for her tale. It is the tale that represents best the power of the feminine, and the power of sex for the female. Nevertheless, it is a story that begins in sexual violence against women, in the subjugation of the Wife’s sphere of power to male control and desire. It suggests a hard and cruel limit to the authority and self-control that Alisoun can exert in patriarchal society. Yet through this rape, the knight is emasculated legally and forced to perform a restorative penance at the pleasure of the feminine audience of Guinevere’s court. Myerson makes a sly commentary on his source material here: while Chaucer speaks for a woman’s desires from his male perspective, Myerson places the tale in the hands of Joanna Quinn as animator and director. Employing a female artist subtly reminds us that the original tale is really ventriloquy. In Chaucer’s hands, the tale is the voice of man through the puppet of a woman. Alisoun acknowledges in her prologue when discussing her husband Jankyn’s “cursed book.”³⁶ The wife questions the nature of this book full of tales of wicked women, and remarks “Who peynted the leoun, tel me who?” about the notion of male authors writing about the ills of women, and offers commentary on the notion of her voice coming from a male

³⁶ Chaucer, Geoffrey, *Riverside Chaucer*, (London Oxford University, Press, 2008) III.789

author. Quinn's adaptation allows Alisoun to properly "written of men moore wikednesse / Than al the mark of Adam may redresse."³⁷

Quinn's artistry is subtle and delicate, crosshatched pencil lines that quiver with the injustice of the story. The gentleness of its nuances belies its powerful advocacy of feminine desire and sexuality. After beginning with a stark and violent representation of a predatory rape scene that ends with the defloration of a young virgin, signified with a collapsing arm clutching a wilted flower, Quinn's adaptation drastically changes its presentation from the bright and spacious setting of the rape, to a dark and dismal presentation of the Knight prostrate before a throne. Here, the knight is laid before Queen Guinevere and Guinevere alone. In Chaucer's tale, the Knight is brought before Arthur who then defers to his queen to mete out punishment to the knight. Quinn removes the figure of Arthur altogether, but only uses Alisoun's narration to mention that Arthur "handed him over to Guinevere."³⁸ Guinevere is shown deftly controlling an axe and using it threateningly towards the knight. Through the words of a male—Chaucer—the female is still represented in deference to a masculine overlord. Quinn's removal of Arthur, and presentation of Guinevere in a masculine sense alludes to her feminine power. She is the master of the court and as strong as any man is. Her court is filled with women as well, who cheer and laugh as she toys with the knight and informs him that she will save his life if he "can tell us what do women most desire" and thrusts his head into her breasts. The word "desire" is enunciated and said breathily, as if to imply sexual desire. The whole court erupts into laughter, except for the young victim—who stands bruised with a swollen black eye amid a group of cackling women holding the same

³⁷ Ibid, III.695-695

³⁸ Myerson, Jonathan, "Leaving London," *The Canterbury Tales*, (London: BBC, 1998).

wilted flower from the moment of her loss of innocence. She looks on dejected as Guinevere informs the knight that his answer will “keep your neckbone safe from this hard iron,” while dropping the axe head on the ground to emphasize its heft. When the knight cannot produce an answer, he is informed by Guinevere that he can have “twelve months and a day” to come up with one. Here, Quinn displays the young victim once again, and as she lowers her head in sadness at the judgment of her queen, who allows the rapist to go unpunished into the world, the camera cuts from her sad face to her hands desperately clutching the wilted yellow flower. While Guinevere is represented as the figure of feminine power—through Arthur’s deference to her and through the displays of strength she shows with the axe—her decision to give the knight freedom if he found an answer to her question represents the inability of a system of justice to save a victim. Even more than that, the consideration of the victim represents the importance of having a female perspective represent the tale. In the hands of a male, the feelings and consequences for the victim are completely glossed over, in favor of presenting the tale of how a woman’s mercy and power can save man. Quinn presents that even if the story is about men learning that women desire “sovereynettee,” there is still a victim at the center of this tale whose life is irreparably changed and ignored by justice. While Quinn displays physical wounds, which in time will heal, the imagery of the flower represents the deeper spiritual wounds received from her rape.

Of course, the knight’s quest is not over at learning that:

Woomen desiren to have sovereynetee
As well over hir housbond as hir love,
And for to ben in maistrie hym above.³⁹

³⁹ Chaucer, Geoffrey, *Riverside Chaucer*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2008) III.1038-1040

He must go further to discover the power of feminine desire. In the animated adaptation, the animators' pencil line work provides a diverse space for metamorphosis and change. After the knight weds the old woman who saved his life, the two engage in a conversation about how the woman should appear. The knight voices his disgust about the woman's naked body, which is drawn as skeletally and monstrosly as possible. The old woman offers the knight a choice between "plain and old, your faithful obedient wife or young and beautiful and a dangerous whenever friends visit our house."⁴⁰ This is where the knight learns the power of feminine desire and sexuality, as he chooses:

My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
I put me in youre wise governance;
Cheseth yourself which may be moost pleasance
And moost honour to yow and me also."⁴¹

After the knight relinquishes his control over the feminine, and offers her the choice, he gives up his sovereignty to her, and his reward is the best of both decisions—a wife both beautiful and faithful. However, the animated version counteracts this happy resolution. During the final scene of the knight in bed with his wife, the pencil lines shift and change showing both the old woman and the young beautiful one. Here the animators present that the victory is quite possibly illusory, and that the power of feminine sexuality might lie in how it alters the male perspective. Love and beauty are subjective, based in emotion and devotion. Perhaps the Wife of Bath knows of what she speaks: in her prologue, she discusses frankly her sexuality by engaging in masculine discourse, and champions her experience as a wife by saying, "Of fyve husbondes scoleying am I."⁴² She celebrates the power of the female sex to tame the beast that is man. Therefore, the old woman tames

⁴⁰ Myerson, "Leaving London."

⁴¹Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, III.1230-1233

⁴² Ibid, III.44f.

the young, lustful knight with her sex, fulfilling his fantasy, even if it may be only illusory. In the hands of female animators, the importance of feminine sexuality is integral to the liberation of the feminine in patriarchal society.

Through the feminine lens, Valeri Ugarov's adaptation of *The Merchant's Tale* calls to attention prominent issues with gender roles and masculinity presented in Chaucer's presentation of the old knight Januarie's quest to find a wife. Upon reaching retirement, Januarie decides that it is time for himself to settle down and find a wife. Januarie ultimately finds himself cuckolded, which seems to be the trend in Chaucer's marriages between old men and young women, but May is able to convince him that she serves only him even after being caught in the act. His sense of masculinity remains intact. Here the gods give May her sexual power, and her protector is Proserpina, the captive bride of Pluto. In the conversation between Pluto and Proserpina, Proserpina displays her feminine power and dominance over her husband, the King of the Underworld. This exemplum is especially important given Proserpina's status as young, captive bride of Pluto. In employing these figures, Chaucer engages intertextually with classical mythology to establish his dominant image of the power of the female sex to maintain the upper hand in their relationships with men. It is Proserpina, who, in challenging her husband, bestows May with the ability to obfuscate her transgression and keep her husband happy. Much like Alisoun of Bath, May uses her sexuality to establish her "sovereynetee." Centrally this tale is about the Merchant's own displeasure with his own wife, "the worste that may be," and instead of telling his own woes, because of his "soory herte I telle may namoore," he chooses to tell the story of an old knight who attempts to buy a younger wife. Once again, Chaucer uses a tale to discuss the control of

female sexuality, but this time he uses a rich, retired knight and displays that control cannot be bought.

Valeri Ugarov's influence on the tale leads to the presentation of conflicts with Januarie's masculinity. For Ugarov, a central question at the heart of the marriage between old Januarie and young May is ultimately a question of fertility, and throughout the animation Ugarov calls attention to this problem. During the selection of his wife, Ugarov uses Januarie's dagger to signify that he has a sexual drive; however, throughout the adaptation the visuals constantly portray testicular images. These images of testicles are highly prominent within the adaptation, as testicles call to mind male fertility. The question of age in Januarie's marriage leads to the question of whether he can produce an heir, or if his relationship is just a need for sexual gratification without payment or sin. Pears shaped like testicles, a cat licking himself with his testicles prominently displayed, Januarie's loss of vision, and the virile youth Damian all serve as reminders of this notion of Januarie's possible infertility. The character of Damian becomes the mode of fertility as he is influenced by the goddess Venus—goddess of beauty, sexuality, and fertility. In the adaptation, her intercession into the tripartite romance of Damian, Januarie, and May lends to her role as goddess of fertility. She seeks to offer May, not only sexual gratification, but also to implant the seeds of fertility into the tale—seeds that Januarie obviously lacks. The loss of sight further lends to the testicular imagery, as it represents the loss of his virility. It is only by the fecundity of May through her sexual indiscretion in the blossoming pear tree with Damian that brings back Januarie's sight. Yet, even though he is given sight, he is still blind to the truth of May's actions as her subterfuge works to delude him into a false sense of security.

The scene in the pear tree continues this theme. May states that she needs pears because of her “condition,” and in the tree, the image of Damyan’s legs with a testicle shaped pear is displayed while Januarie rubs her stomach. The scene that follows is more explicit in the original text, and causes the Merchant to recite:

Ladies, I prey yow that ye be nat wroth.
I kan not glose. I am a rude man.
And sodeynly anon this Damyan
Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng”⁴³

While in the adaptation, the image is censored by a well-placed pear, or a low-hanging fruit to use the proper pun, and the Merchant states “Ladies I’m sorry, what can I say. I’m a basic sort of bloke. They...y’know. He...”⁴⁴ This alteration is probably due to issues with real-world censors, yet it captures the emotion given in the original perfectly without the obscene mention of “in he throng.” However, the pear scene is an excellent example of the fertility discussion. It is through this discussion that Ugarov completely exposes Januarie’s ineffectiveness as a man. May cuckolds Januarie and the story ends with May saying “Silly old men,” as the narrator says “Is Januarie happier now? At least he’s got a son and heir. Someone’s son, his heir,”⁴⁵ with the close of the tale leaving Januarie cuckolded and defrauded—ultimately robbed of his wife and his money.

Chaucer’s *The Miller’s Tale* has its own, more jaundiced perspective on female sexuality, and the problems and dangers inherent to its patriarchal control, but nonetheless presents a complex image of the relationship between women and men. Viewed in tandem with the answering, vengeful *Reeve’s Tale*, we get two versions of the story of the sexual manipulation of women. As always, sexual violence is ever-present,

⁴³ Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, l.2350-2353

⁴⁴ Myerson, Jonathan, “Arriving at Canterbury.” (London: BBC, 2000).

⁴⁵ Myerson, “Arriving at Canterbury.”

from Nicholas' harassing grab of Allisoun's "queynte," to the double rape of a miller's wife and daughter within the span of four hundred lines. In her article, "Reading Chaucer Reading Rape" Christina M. Rose argues, "Chaucer displays a disturbing propensity to inscribe rape in his narratives, yet often directs the readers away from reading rape to not-rape."⁴⁶ Rose argues that traditionally:

reading rape in Chaucer has been...reading over rape, or reading around, rape. Taught to read literature by men, as men...women readers of literature have had to submerge their own reaction to rape in a work of literature to the traditional 'male' reading of rape—and may in fact fail to react at all to the violence perpetrated on some female characters.⁴⁷

Rose argues that addressing the instances of rape in Chaucer is necessary to explore how "Rape acts as a figure for agendas other than sexual; property crimes, homosocial interaction, acts of war, or religious evil."⁴⁸ In the animated adaptation of *The Reeve's Tale*, the animators choose to occlude the rape while focusing heavily on the implications of homosocial interaction.

Dieniol Morris—animator from the famed Aargh! Studios animation company in Wales—uses his adaptation of *The Reeve's Tale* to draw attention to the notion of "homosocial interactions." While Chaucer employs these figures to make a commentary about the relationship between the peasantry and the ruling class—the Reeve's role in medieval society was to oversee working peasants like the Miller, essentially establishing a conflict of class—the implications presented in the animated adaptation are about the destructive nature of male conflict. In fact, Oswald's tale is meant to be a rebuke to the tale told by Robin, as he feels slighted at Robin's discussion of a cuckolded, old husband

⁴⁶ Rose, Christina M., "Reading Chaucer Reading Rape" (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 22

⁴⁷ Ibid, 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 35.

by his young, lusty wife. His goal in the tale is to “hym quite anoon; / Right in his cherles terms wol I speke.”⁴⁹ For the Oswald, the telling of his tale is an act of revenge. In fact, in response to the cuckolding of the Carpenter John in Robin’s tale, Oswald chooses to represent “conflicting yet converging views of Symkyn’s sexual prowess” by alluding that “he may be impotent...lack interest in intercourse...or he may perform the sexual act with less erotic vigor than young John.”⁵⁰ In using Robin’s “cherles terms” to represent the cuckolding of Symkyn, Oswald employs the act of rape in a method not only to cuckold his Miller figure, but also to defraud him of his property. In the tale, the two students—John and Alayne—patronize the Miller to examine claims that he steals grain from people who come to him for milling. For their revenge, they use the rape of Symkyn’s daughter and wife as a property exchange---steal grain from me, and I’ll rape your wife and daughter—which to modern audiences is a horrible implication, but for Oswald it is hardly one to be considered. In fact, he views it as a justified act in challenging Robin’s tale.

While the two tales are presented in tandem—each tale being told in a dueling fashion—Morris chooses to focus on the competition between the two men, while occluding the rape scene in Oswald’s tale. It seems odd that the rape would be purposefully glossed over in Morris’s adaptation, especially considering that the early presentation of Alisoun’s tale has already presented rape, but perhaps this is a larger issue dealing with the implication of masculine storytelling. Much like Chaucer himself, the rape is hardly mentioned—in fact, Morris’s presentation of the entire affair is

⁴⁹ Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, I.3916-3917.

⁵⁰ Pugh, Tison, *Chaucer’s (Anti-)Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 135.

problematized by the imagery of giggling, shifting sheets where a double rape is supposed to occur. Much like Chaucer, Morris's female characters become transactional figures in the competition between men. They serve as nothing more than exchange items in the revenge of Oswald upon Robin. However, Morris's adaptation still manages to comprise a meritorious adaptation in that it explores the nature of male competition. If Chaucer's representation of the conflict between Robin and Oswald was representative of their conflicting estates, then Morris's adaptation ultimately uses masculinity to open up a discussion space about the nature of masculine competition and its destructive nature. Closing out the last episode of Myerson's *The Canterbury Tales*, Morris's presentation of these two tales in this fashion destabilizes the almost harmonious nature of the tales before it. While there may have been slight dust-ups between other pilgrims, no other tales or interactions in the adaptations are as destructive and violent as those of Robin and Oswald are. This violent storytelling leads to the rest of the pilgrims to rush into a village and close the gates, effectively locking Robin and Oswald outside of the village, as Chaucer proclaims, while holding the gate against Robin and Oswald's violent advances, that this ends his tales.

Queer Perspectives: Social Deviance and Fabliaux in *I racconti di Canterbury*

In Chaucer's *General Prologue*, he represents the figure of the Pardoner by saying:

A voys he hadde as small as hath a goot
no berd haadde he, ne never should have;
As smother it was as it were late shave.
I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare.⁵¹

This image of the pardoner as a longhaired, beardless man with a high-pitched voice is driven home by Chaucer's comparing him to a neutered or female horse. In presenting the Pardoner as effeminate, or even possibly as a eunuch, Chaucer is representing the Pardoner as a queer figure. This mention is to question the nature of the Pardoner's gender, and represents the concept of an idea of a gendered society with societal norms about what constitutes masculinity. In her article "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How it Matters," Monica McAlpine claims that:

the subject of homosexuality offers Chaucer the opportunity to distinguish between behavior and state of...Any physical acts in which the Pardoner expressed his homosexuality would be viewed by the medieval church as sinful, and Chaucer does not challenge this teaching. But he does challenge the belief that such sins are uniquely abhorrent, poisoning the whole character and extirpating all good and all potential for good.⁵²

This imagery presented of the Pardoner eschews the traditional narrative of socially deviant characters poisoning a society. Through the benevolent imagery of the pardoner, even given his status as a queer figure in a religiously dominated society, Chaucer represents the contradictory nature of a system that establishes alienating social norms. For Pier Paolo Pasolini, his adaptation brings to light the concerns of a queer perspective of the world. Within Pasolini's adaptation, imagery of socially deviant and socially

⁵¹ Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, l.688-691

⁵² McAlpine, Monica E., "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters" in *PMLA*, 95 (1980), 18.

normal figures serve to offer commentary on the very notions of restrictive society, and how oftentimes what seems to be socially normal, is in fact equally, if not more so, detrimental to society than what seems to be socially deviant. In perverting these images through adaptation, Pasolini encapsulates Chaucer's own usage of a dichotomy of eroticism and anti-eroticism within his tales to illuminate the contradictory and conflicting elements of social normalcy.

In understanding Chaucer as a queer author, Tison Pugh's book, *Chaucer's Anti-Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages*, argues that "love's frustrations, rather than its succors, lay the foundation for the plots of Chaucer's tales" and that "the quest for sexual fulfillment, even if achieved by story's end, exposes the desperate lengths to which ordinary humans will pursue erotic union." These ideas of "erotic pursuits" being "camouflaged by the anti-erotic desire that serve as their latent counterpart...[call] into question the very meanings of desire in Chaucer's corpus—as well as in numerous other literary, religious, and social paradigms of the Middle Ages."⁵³ In essence, Pugh examines Chaucer's attitudes towards the erotic in both the lower tales of the fabliaux, and the elevated tales told by noble figures. In the representation of these erotic and anti-erotic tales, Chaucer establishes the nature of social norms as it relates to eroticism within medieval stories. While Chaucer focuses his efforts on how people "pursue erotic union," it is his focus on how "amatory pursuits at time necessitate amatory transgressions."⁵⁴ Pugh makes the argument that this is represented by a literature that focuses on courtly love and that through a contrast of a Christian society this type of literature prevents such amatory pursuits and "evoke analyses based on queer theoretical perspectives, those

⁵³ Pugh, *Chaucer's Anti-Eroticisms*, 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 2.

attuned to disjunctions between individual desires and social practices. Therefore, for Pugh's study of Chaucer, "Queer theory allows a broad view into the nexus of eroticism and anti-eroticism."⁵⁵ The meaning of queer perspectives within Chaucer, as argued by Pugh, is that Chaucer presents the issue that

One cannot love freely within an ideological framework that polices sexuality, yet loving queerly creates escapes from social structures inimical to eroticism and its at times violent expressions. Normativity depends on the queer for its privileged cultural position, as the fatigued binary logic of ideology builds power through opposition to and denigration of the abjected Other, yet the queer then builds a radical means of reassessing the cultural codes that demand its subjected status.⁵⁶

In this nature, Chaucer presents the dual systems of erotic and anti-erotic love as representative of the conflicting nature of the societal norms of his time. It is this very sense of conflicting societal restraints of eroticism and anti-eroticism that motivates Pasolini's adaptation. Through the visualization of these elements, Pasolini's adaptation becomes as important and as political as Chaucer's original work.

One of the most dynamic points in Pasolini's adaptation is how the director places himself in the role of author. At the onset of the film, Pasolini in the role of Chaucer enters the world of Chaucer's England through a gate "bringing the viewer along with him."⁵⁷ From here, Pasolini introduces viewers to the pilgrims on his journey. While no name is given to the arriving pilgrims, everyone makes an appearance. Instead of establishing the pilgrimage, Pasolini's representation of Chaucer brings viewers into "the heart of a vivid, larger-than-life Middle Ages" while it also "directs our attention to the enunciation of the narrative."⁵⁸ In establishing the frame, Pasolini, as Chaucer, brings the

⁵⁵ Ibid, 2-3.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 23.

⁵⁷ Blandeau, Agnes, *Pasolini, Chaucer, and Boccaccio*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2006), 14.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 14.

reader into medieval society, yet even more so, Pasolini himself admits that his film is “devoid of any intention of realism,”⁵⁹ by claiming that “If my film is subversive, that is because it is real, and not realistic.”⁶⁰ The film is not meant to focus on a historical approximation of Chaucer’s England, or even of Chaucer’s tales, but instead to focus on the real issues at the core of Chaucer’s narrative. From this point on in the film, there is an absence of the pilgrims and little consideration of their prologues. All that remains is Chaucer as “a pilgrim, busy taking notes on his bed at night among the other sleeping penitents, but never intervening as narrator.”⁶¹ Instead, Chaucer’s appearances show him writing silently, and occasionally smirking or laughing after a particularly raucous tale, which makes the central focus of Pasolini’s adaptation the tales themselves. Yet, while Agnes Blandeau claims that this “reduction of familiar components that usually define narrative in its traditional shape offers countless possible interpretations,” the specific tales chosen by Pasolini, and the focuses he makes, represent a trend towards focusing on elements of social normalcy and social deviancy.

Using only eight of Chaucer’s tales, Pasolini manages to examine the conflict between social normalcy and deviancy, while offering commentary on the nonsensical and oftentimes conflicting natures of these systems. In his version of “The Merchant’s Tale,” the focus on Januarie’s fertility is still at question, but also Pasolini most accurately depicts the truth of Januarie and May’s marriage—several instances of marital rape. In Chaucer’s original, he asks:

But God woot what that May thought in hir herte,
Wan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte;

⁵⁹Ibid, 15.

⁶⁰ Qtd in Blandeau, *Pasolini, Chaucer, and Boccaccio*, 15.

⁶¹ Ibid, 15.

In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
She preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene.⁶²

Obviously, Chaucer wanted to convey the one-sidedness of this sexual relationship, and May's hesitance to "preyseth" Januarie's lovemaking displays her contempt for the situation. It is this very one-sidedness that Pasolini uses to display the conflicting image of social normalcy. For the relationship on the screen, Januarie is presented as an almost monstrous figure. Overweight, aged, and disheveled, Januarie, portrayed by Hugh Griffin, seems animalistic in his pursuit of the young, virginal May. In this very imagery, Pasolini acknowledges the social normalcy of their relationship—the young bride, and the old patriarch—yet he portrays it as monstrous and horrifying. During a scene when Januarie crawls monstrously and hungrily along the bed towards May, May gazes off into space with a thousand-yard stare. The image presented here accurately encapsulates the horrors of a system of social normalcy where women are subject to monstrous men eager to devour their flesh. In this shocking contrast, Pasolini makes the case that social norms often seem incredibly socially deviant. The system of patriarchy that allows young women to be married to men much older than them, and subject to issue like marital rape is presented to the viewer as frightening as it would be for the young May.

Much like the Myerson, Pasolini pays attention to the fertility of Januarie and Damyan, yet the fertility focus in Pasolini's adaptation is used to portray the imagery of deviance triumphing over social norms. The relationship between Damyan and May is clearly deviant, in that it trespasses on Januarie's marriage—and by proxy; property—rights, and leaves him cuckolded. While Januarie is the exemplum of social norms, his advanced age makes it clear that he may have issues with fertility. Yet, In Pasolini's

⁶² Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, IV.1851-1854.

adaptation of the tale, Damyan is the very model of fertility. Pasolini displays this by showing Damyan constantly stroking his engorged member through his tights. Almost every scene of Damyan shows him touching his enlarged member—almost as if it would fly away at any given time without his hand on it—which represents the youth and fertility that Januarie is obviously lacking. During their bestial sex scene, Januarie climbs off after a few short pumps saying, “I want to rest now. I begin to be weary.”⁶³ The scene cuts to a shot in the garden of a naked Pluto and Proserpina playing amongst giant phallic hedges. Here is the intrusion of the gods into the relationship, which leads to Januarie’s blindness. During this period of blindness, May exchanges letters with Damyan and the two organize a meet in the tree. Once again, Damyan fondles his hard-on in the tree waiting for May. Damyan’s constant erect status obviously displays the level of his virility, and while continuously representing Januarie as the emasculated fool. May even manages to convince him that his vision restoring blurred his sight so that he only thought that she was having sex with another man. Pasolini removes the need for May to create a story about magic, and instead Januarie is won over by her protestations and beauty, displaying once again how feminine sexuality creates a space for male dominance. In addition, the nature of Pasolini’s adaptation makes the argument that in order for Januarie’s duties in the eyes of social normalcy be fulfilled—the need to sire an heir—it is through the deviant actions of Damyan and Januarie that allow this to happen.

Chaucer’s *The Cook’s Tale* presents a dynamic space for Pasolini to commentate on social deviance. This tale follows the tales of the Miller and the Reeve, and it promises to delve even further into debauchery and ribaldry. The Cook only has enough time to

⁶³ Pasolini, Pier Paolo, *I racconti di Canterbury*, (Criterion Collection, 1971).

introduce his character, and to set up the raunchy premise of his tale, before Harry Bailey ends it abruptly. It is hard to state definitively where Chaucer intended to take this tale, because according to Gillian Rudd “he had no source to follow.” Rudd concludes that the tale remains incomplete “because in striving to out-fabliau the fabliau genre, Chaucer comes to an imaginary wall.”⁶⁴ Thus, the Cook ends his prologue by saying:

And therefore, Herry Bailly, by thy feith,
Be thou nat wroth, er we departen heer,
Though that my tale be of an hostileer.
But natheless I wol nat telle it yit;
But er we parte, ywis, thou shalt be quit.”⁶⁵

This signifies that the Cook is trying to recreate the rivalry between the Miller and the Reeve. Not only does the Cook attempt to “out-fabliau the fabliau,” he also attempts to create a masculine rivalry between himself and the host, Herry Bailly, to mimic the Reeve and Miller’s actions and tales. However, the Cook’s tale is not just an example of the Cook attempting to “out-fabliau the fabliau,” it works as an example of the Cook attempting to mimic the themes in the stories he’s heard but being unable to due to a lack of ability to properly articulate his story. The Cook’s tale seems to end because he has mixed feelings about being philosophical and being bawdy. In the beginning of the tale, he quotes a proverb: “Wel bet is rotten apple out of hoard / Than that it rotie al the remnant,”⁶⁶ and the tale ends with the image of a “wyf that held for countenance...and swyved for hir sustenance,”⁶⁷ or a prostitute.

The chaotic nature of this tale and its abrupt ending provides Pasolini with a completely open space to create a new narrative. Yet, Pasolini still leaves the story

⁶⁴ Rudd, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 117.

⁶⁵ Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, l.4358-4362.

⁶⁶ Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, l.4406-4407

⁶⁷ Ibid, l.4421-4422.

unfinished, chaotic, and raw. After showing Chaucer writing “*Racconti di coucc*” with a quill pen, Pasolini abruptly begins Perkyn’s tale with a man throwing another man into the street and haranguing him, telling him to “Get out! Get out! Go on get out! Out of here you lazy sod, and don’t you ever show your stinking face again! You ugly little sod! You bastard! You little bastard! Huh? Piss off!”⁶⁸ Perkyn is then shown travelling the streets, stealing food from children, and running from the police. Perkyn’s activities are centered upon deviance, as he travels the streets violating social norms at every turn. Even his very entrance into the narrative is a deviance from the norm. Violently tossed into the streets and labeled as a “sod” and a “bastard,” Perkyn’s entry into the scene is startling coming in so loudly after the quiet scenes of Pasolini as author. In keeping with the tale, Perkyn meets his “compeer of his own sort” and his “wyf that held for contenance...and swyved for her sustenance.”⁶⁹ Perkyn runs off with this new “compeer” and finds himself in bed with him and his wife. In his bed, he dreams he is in a room with naked women dancing and playing musical instruments. It is during this dream that Perkyn is arrested, and he finds himself obnoxiously singing in the stocks. Through this tale, Pasolini interprets “*The Cook’s Tale*” and creates a story about patriarchal punishments centered on the control of sexuality. The wife of Perkyn’s companion is described by Chaucer as swyving “for her sustenance,” and in Pasolini’s adaptation, Perkyn is arrested while in bed with a known prostitute. In the space of the short chaotic adaptation, Pasolini manages to mention the idea of sexual regulation of one’s bodies, and how the implications of one taking control of one’s own sexuality can create problems for all of those involved. If Chaucer’s tale is abruptly ended because the Cook

⁶⁸ Pasolini, *I racconti di Canterbury*

⁶⁹ Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, 1.4419-4422.

is not articulate enough to tell it, then Pasolini's tale is ended because the world is over-regulated and the free-spirited scamp, Perkyn, is doomed never to be free.

Perkyn is not the only transgressive figure present in Pasolini's adaptation. In fact, the second tale that Pasolini chooses to adapt after the Merchant's tale is that of the Friar. *The Friar's Tale* presents the story of a summoner who is in league with Satan. Chaucer's representation of the Summoner and the Friar represents a rivalry similar to that of the Miller and Reeve. The Summoner serves as an arm of the ecclesiastical courts, while the Friar himself represents the poor arm of the church. In Chaucer's approximation, the Friar seems to be a much more noble character, in that his tale chooses to rest on moral laurels, while the Summoner resorts to base, bodily insults about the Friar. Pasolini includes this rivalry but manages to portray both figures as irredeemable agents of social normalcy who derive pleasure out of their inclusion in the status quo. In his adaptation of *The Summoner's Tale*, Pasolini uses the relationship between the Devil and The Summoner to comment on the nature of a society that adheres to social norms that deem it is acceptable to deny life and liberty to people who engage in deviant desires. Pasolini uses two queer figures as his representatives of deviance, while using the dual nature of The Summoner and Lucifer to comment on the truly heinous and sinister nature of a system that establishes and enforces social normalcy. For Chaucer, the Summoner represented the corruption in the Church's ecclesiastical court. In his General Prologue, Chaucer writes that the Summoner can be bought

And if he foond owher a good felawe,
He wolde techen him to have noon awe
In swich caas of the ercedekenes curs,

But if a mannes soule were in his purs;
For in his purs he sholde ypunysshed be.⁷⁰

The “ercedekenes curs” was the curse of excommunication handed down by an archdeacon through the ecclesiastical court. By representing his ability to be bought, Chaucer tells readers from the outset of the frame narrative that the Summoner can be bought. The Friar reinforces this imagery of corruption by likening the Summoner to the most corrupt and evil figure in all of Christendom—Lucifer himself.

This presents a problem for the Summoner, who tells his tale in response much like Oswald the Reeve does with Robin the Miller. First, in his prologue he tells of a friar who was brought to Hell by an angel. Upon reaching the end of his trip, the friar asks the angel “han freres swich a grace / That noon of hem shal come to this place?”⁷¹ The angel’s reply is to then call out to Satan and ask him to “Shew forth thyn ers, and lat the frere se / Where is the nest of freres in this place,”⁷² before Satan lets pour a river of friars from his “ers.” This anal imagery is continued in the tale, as it represents a friar who is pestering a sick man for money. After much pestering, the sick man decides to prank the friar by asking him to “grope wel bihynde. / Bynethe my buttoke there shaltow fynde / A thyng I have hyd in pryvetee.”⁷³ In reaching down near the man’s “tuwel,” or anus, the monk receives the donation of “a fart of swich a soun.”⁷⁴ In emphasizing this anal imagery in his takedown of the friar, the Summoner not only represents the “rivalries between Canterbury Pilgrims” and the “medieval fabliau tradition,”⁷⁵ but also suggests

⁷⁰ Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, I.653-657.

⁷¹ Ibid, III.1683-1684.

⁷² Ibid, III.1690-1691.

⁷³ Ibid, III.2141-2143

⁷⁴ Ibid, III.2151

⁷⁵ Beechy, Tiffany, “Devil Take the Hindmost: Chaucer, John Gay, and the Pecuniary Anus,” in *The Chaucer Review* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, JSTOR, 2006), 71.

the notion that this places the Friar in the realm of “transgressive sexuality and...evil and abomination.”⁷⁶ If the Friar presents the image that the Summoner is an agent of Satan, then the Summoner presents that the Friar is far worse because he lives inside the most evil and abominable place on the most evil and abominable figure, which is in the “ers” of Satan. It is this imagery that Pasolini uses to represent the greatest exemplum of social normalcy, the Church itself.

Earlier in the film, Pasolini uses *The Friar's Tale* to explore how the church punishes deviance with death, and ultimately functions as a tool of the figure of Lucifer, the most evil. Yet, at the film's conclusion, Pasolini chooses to continue the imagery of the evil anuses to thumb his nose at the religious institutions that ultimately defined morality and societal norms—such as the condemnation of homosexuals. While Pasolini adapts *The Summoner's Tale* and uses the image of a friar pestering a dying man for charity, a large focus of this adaptation is more concerned with the short tale told in *The Summoner's Prologue*. Instead of concluding the tale with Chaucer's famous ending about the distribution of a fart amongst the monks, Pasolini chooses to end the tale and the film by focusing on adapting the Summoner's joke. The friar is taken to hell with an angel, and Pasolini portrays hell as a place of widespread deviance. Images of demons sodomizing men on beds are contrasted on a background of ashen ground and desolation, while a horrendous din of screaming permeates the air. Pasolini's hell does not seem like a pleasant place to be. After traveling along the debris-filled path through hell with the angel, the friar asks him where the monks are, and the Angel yells to Satan “Hey Satan! Lift your tail and show him where the friars nest.” Afterwards, a large red “ers” begins to

⁷⁶ Beechy, Tiffany, “Devil Take the Hindmost,” 73.

defecate human bodies dressed in robes. What makes this conclusion exceptionally dynamic is the idea that Pasolini portrays. Throughout the film, homosexuality and deviance have been punished, and this is no different in hell. However, the image of the monks residing in Satan's ass shows that those who establish themselves as "normal" are most likely more deviant than those they condemn. While the deviants are free to engage in debauchery and ribaldry throughout hell, the friars must spend their time crammed in Satan's "ers." Pasolini's uses his own queer identity to establish a discussion of the role of deviance in society, and portrays that those who judge are no better than the judged. This scene concludes by shifting to an image of Pasolini as Chaucer smiling and resting his head on his hand. The scene then cuts to the front of a Church with people littering the street in front of it. People kneel before the church, crossing themselves, while praying. With the utterance of the word Amen, the scene fades back to Pasolini as Chaucer smiling and then the movie ends with Pasolini writing "Here end the Canterbury tales, told only for the pleasure of telling them. Amen."⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Pasolini, *I racconti di Canterbury* (1972).

Pilgrimage and the African American Diaspora in Marilyn Nelson's *The Cachoiera*

Tales

In considerations of Chaucer's text, the issue of race is a difficult one to breach. Ascribing racial commentary onto a text by a white male author from a predominately white male society creates problems for scholars in contemporary society. I had the pleasure of hearing a talk from Cord Whitaker on the nature of race in Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*, and from what I can remember of the talk, the conversation was focused on Alisoun in the Miller's Tale and how she becomes associated with impurity and blackness. In his article, "Race-ing the Dragon: The Middle Ages, Race, and Trippin' into the Future," Whitaker makes note of the treatment of blackness in medieval literature "usually resists positive connotations" and that "in all cases...blackness denotes abnormality" because "to be black is, in the European Middle Ages, to be other."⁷⁸ In discussing the nature of a venerated Chaucer, and a venerated study of the Middle Ages that "has denied blacks the right to a shared medieval past that would, in turn, authorize them to share the present that emerges from it",⁷⁹ a venerated core in studying English literature in modern society becomes the central conflict for modern scholars. African-American students find themselves in conflict with Chaucer and medieval studies because

denying blacks medieval coevalness allows Euro-centric cultures to relegate modern blacks to a strictly modern status in which their history appears to be without the authorizing length and depth available to whites. The denial of medieval coevalness encourages students to ask, 'Where were the black people in

⁷⁸ Whitaker, Cord, "Race-ing the Dragon: The Middle Ages, Race and Trippin' into the Future," in *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 6.1 2015, 3.

⁷⁹ Whitaker, "Race-ing the Dragon," 4

the Middle Ages?’ in a tone that suggests they are not entirely certain whether black people existed at all.⁸⁰

The denial of a shared history presented in modern medieval studies is problematic because it participates in the history of white erasure of blackness. This conversation of the erasure of black history is directly related to the nature of the African diaspora. The greatest ill of slavery is the destruction of black history, as many African-Americans are unaware of their origins and history. It is this condition that Marilyn Nelson addresses in *The Cachoeira Tales*, an adaptation of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* told from the perspective of a member of the African diaspora.

The first point of contention with adapting Chaucer from the perspective of an African-American poet deals with the nature of the pilgrimage. In medieval society, the pilgrimage is integral to the history of English peasantry and their relationship with Catholicism. Yet for a member of the African-American diaspora, the question of a pilgrimage is problematic. Nelson addresses this directly in her adaptation of the general prologue. Much like Chaucer’s prologue, this establishes the frame and introduces Nelson’s pilgrims. Nelson begins by mirroring Chaucer’s opening lines. “Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote”⁸¹ becomes “When April rains had drenched the root / of what March headlines had foreseen as drought”⁸² in both a modernization of language, and of the science of weather. After establishing the time of year, Nelson begins to deviate from Chaucer. Instead of a random assortment of representatives of medieval society who just so happened to go on a

⁸⁰ Whitaker, “Race-ing the dragon,” 5.

⁸¹ Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, I.1-2.

⁸² Nelson, Marilyn, *The Cachoeira Tales and Other Poems*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 11.

pilgrimage at the same time, Nelson's pilgrims are part of her "extended family" that through "artificial spontaneity" she decides to invite to a "pilgrimage."⁸³ In appropriating "the structure and style" of Chaucer's magnum opus, Nelson uses the tales "to explore a number of interests relating to pilgrimage: the transformative potential of travel, manifestations of religiosity, the quest for cross-cultural diasporic identity, and...the synthetic spiritualism of African diasporic religions"⁸⁴ while also creating "a postmodern pilgrimage of the black diaspora."⁸⁵

For Chaucer's pilgrims, their destination is decided upon due to their Catholic heritage and English traditions. Travelling to Canterbury to pay homage to the relics of Saint Thomas of Becket, former Archbishop of Canterbury who was martyred in his conflict with King Henry II, this pilgrimage is tied to the history of Chaucer's pilgrims. For members of the African Diaspora, especially the ones represented in Nelson's adaptation, this connection to a traditional history is less established due to the systematic destruction of black identity caused by the Atlantic slave trade. In planning her pilgrimage as "a reverse diaspora," Nelson attempts to trace a history of African-Americans that spreads the globe. Nelson suggests a variety of places in a search for a "place sanctified by the Negro soul."⁸⁶ Yet, in her discussions with her co-pilgrims, many of their options are shut down for a variety of reasons: Zimbabwe for being too dangerous due to tyrannical president Robert Mugabe, Senegal being far too expensive and "Impossible. Unless we didn't eat," and Jamaica and Trinidad "for visiting Bob

⁸³ Ibid, 11.

⁸⁴ Forni, *Chaucer on Screen*, 107.

⁸⁵ Edmonson, Todd C., "The Ambivalence of Pilgrimage in Marilyn Nelson's *Cachoeira Tales*," (*REA: A Journal of Religion, Education, and the Arts*, Issue 6, 2009), 5.

⁸⁶ Nelson, *The Cachoeira Tales*, 11.

Marley's grave...and connecting with Jah in the incense of a joint" an "option [which] offered no apparent point."⁸⁷ Ultimately, the party decides to travel to Bahia, in Brazil at the insistence of Nelson's son, who is a student there. In Bahia, the pilgrims could visit Nelson's son, James,

and go to *A Igreja do Bonfim*,
a church on a hill overlooking All Saint's Bay,
sacred to Christians and followers of Candomblé.⁸⁸

In this decision, Nelson represents the African diaspora in the connections of a syncretic religion—the religion of Canomblé, which “is a mixture of traditional Yoruba, Fon, and Bantu beliefs which originated from different regions of Africa...[and] also incorporates some aspects of the Catholic faith”—in her adaptation to encapsulate her “thematic interest in the dynamic and inspiring potential of syncretic cultural traditions.”⁸⁹ Instead of returning to the motherland of Africa, Nelson uses Brazil as a space to explore the nature of a created syncretic identity for members of the African diaspora.

Another thing to note about Nelson's adaptation is her choice of pilgrims. As covered earlier, Nelson decided to use her family and close friends as her pilgrims. Yet, while some of the characters seem to be stereotypical from their name alone, all of Nelson's pilgrims represent positive imagery of African-Americans. In her presentation of the pilgrims, which is much shorter than Chaucer's presentation, Nelson “describes the friends who went...simplifying each to a major attribute.”⁹⁰ Nelson's pilgrims “actively participate in black culture and aesthetics,” and she uses “stereotypes in the same way that Chaucer draws on the estates for his characters...affectionately drawn...without the

⁸⁷ Ibid, 12.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 12.

⁸⁹ Forni, *Chaucer's Afterlife*, 107.

⁹⁰ Nelson, *The Cachoiera Tales*, 12.

social satire.”⁹¹ Nelson, a scholar herself, understood the importance of creating characters of diverse perspectives, even if they are all members of the African diaspora, because of the need to make the text accessible to all. By avoiding satirical sketches of her pilgrims, Nelson can do something that few representations of black people in modern media do—which is represent black figures positively. While a degree of playfulness comes through in her character sketches, ultimately each pilgrim is displayed as flawed, but idealistic and hopeful. Nelson’s pilgrims are a director who remains uncompromisingly dedicated to her principles, a jazz musician who had no vices aside from cigarettes and carried with him a wealth of history in the music world, a retired pilot with a history in politics and a love of Emerson’s essays, and an activist who “had broken a killing secrecy / by making “Danny’s House” in Washington, D.C. home to programs on AIDS and HIV.”⁹² In Bahia, the pilgrims are joined by intermittent guests Harmonia and Moreen, who are also on pilgrimage in Bahia “in the midst of their own retracing of the African Diaspora.”⁹³

While the central motivation of Chaucer’s text is the tales, in Nelson’s adaptation, the tales are offered as interstitial breaks in the pilgrimage, which seems to be the central focus of the adaptation. It is through the pilgrimage that we are given the addition of Harmonia and Moreen, who contribute their own assortment of jokes and trickster tales into the narrative, but as for the tales of the pilgrims in Nelson’s party, only the Jazz Musician and the Activist are given a tale. Yet, these tales are not standalone stories, but instead short vignettes told alongside the narrative of the pilgrimage. As a result, the

⁹¹ Forni, *Chaucer’s Afterlife*, 108.

⁹² Nelson, *The Cachoeira Tales*, 12-15.

⁹³ Edmondson, *The Ambivalence of Pilgrimage*, 12.

entire motivating factors of Nelson's adaptation are less focused on the stories of the travelers, and instead the travelers as characters in a story. For Chaucer, the pilgrims represented complex images of medieval society to be forever preserved in the annals of history, while Nelson's pilgrims serve as companions on her own search for identity. Together, the group journeys through Salvador, Brazil, seeking identity and a lost history through the syncretic collection of experiences in Cachoiera. By employing Chaucer's narrative frame, and making that the focus of the adaptation, Nelson does not mimic Chaucer in representing a complex image of members of the African diaspora for historical posterity, but instead she is focused on creating identity through her journey. Much like Harmonia and Moreen, who are tracing the diaspora, Nelson and her pilgrims are themselves attempting to establish an identity. This is why the space for individualized tales is so sparse. The images of the characters is ultimately unimportant, as they could be representative of any member other African diaspora. What is important in Nelson's adaptation is the journey of self-discovery and the use of the poetic, written word to help create history and identity where there is none.

Youth and Digital Culture: Concluding Thoughts on the Future of Chaucerian

Adaptation

Chaucer's representations in modern digital society are extremely important in destabilizing academic veneration of Chaucer, but even more, it allows for dynamic, modern criticism and appraisals of the medieval. In her latest book, *How Soon is Now*, Carolyn Dinshaw argues that "amateurs can lead us outside a straitened approach to problems, beyond a rigid dynamic of one problem/one solution, one object/one subject" because

To focus on amateurs, to find shared desire in both amateurs and professionals, indeed to find the amateur in the professional (such as myself), is to encourage real interaction and dialogue between these two estranged groups; it is to resist the soulless professionalization of the university and to help create a public space for activities that are not now recognized as intellectually consequential.⁹⁴

In reflection of this idea, Dinshaw directly relates to the notion of modern adaptation through new media. While big budget adaptations from figures like Jonathan Myerson, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Marilyn Nelson may have been constructed by a variety of professional figures—professional filmmakers, authors, artists, and poets—they represent how amateurs add to the large-scale discussion of Chaucer in the modern digital era. However, more importantly is the representation of Chaucer in a variety of new media formats.

If adaptation study allows diverse interpretations of Chaucer from diverse perspectives to take center stage, then the act of amateur adaptation of Chaucer in new media formats allows students and fans of Chaucer to not only engage with the text in ways that become increasingly meaningful to self-identity, but also by allowing them the

⁹⁴ Dinshaw, Carolyn, *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 38-39.

ability to embody Chaucer himself—in effect to act as their own version of “le Grant translatuer.” Videos on YouTube represent a dynamic space for amateur creation. We live in the age of YouTube celebrity, where a variety of figures create content for a variety of interests, who also create a new type of humanity to understand. No matter your interest, there is a space on YouTube that addresses it—so long as it avoids any racy, or sexually explicit imagery—that at times can be wonderful and informative, and at other times terrible and frightening. YouTube can be a space where feminists share their perspectives on male hegemony and offer educational outlooks on feminism only to be threatened with physical violence, or digital scrutiny for sharing their beliefs. Anti-racist videos and racist videos occupy the same spaces. Information sidles up alongside disinformation. Yet within all this, even here is a space for Geoffrey Chaucer.

Many videos on YouTube that are about Chaucer are related to schoolwork and education. Just a simple search of the term “Chaucer” presents a page of lectures, PowerPoints, and historical analyses. A video of the comedian Bill Bailey telling a “pub joke” in the style of Chaucer is sandwiched neatly between a lecture on the age of Chaucer, and a reading of Chaucer’s General Prologue in Middle English, which, much like Chaucer’s own tales, represents a conflation of high and low forms of entertainment. While a search for General Prologue brings up a smattering of results related to teaching or reading Chaucer’s General Prologue, in the first page of results is an English project done by a student that uses puppets—made of illustrated paper cut-outs glued to popsicle sticks—that are displayed on screen as a student reads a description of the depicted pilgrim. These student projects are often the most experimental presentations of modern Chaucerian adaptation. In fact, if we are to make Chaucer tractable to students today, a

method of allowing them the freedom to adapt the tales in their own voices, utilizing their own experiences, would greatly lead to a destabilization of the privileged enjoyment of Chaucer while incorporating even more diverse and dynamic interpretations of his work. Nothing exemplifies this more than the plethora of “Canterbury Tales Rap” videos.

In rapping *The General Prologue* of *The Canterbury Tales*, most of the time impressively done in Middle English, adapters embody the medieval more than they realize. Traditionally, “Chaucer’s works were...read out aloud or recited from the texts, so that he had to write for the purpose of oral delivery and, more importantly, aural reception.”⁹⁵ Therefore, in rapping Chaucer, adapters are generally embodying the spirit of Chaucer himself in reciting his work for the enjoyment of all. It is this synthesis of amateur production and professional scholarship that many scholars today should aim for in hopes to destabilize alienating privileged readings of Chaucer in favor of making Chaucer tractable to students of all ages, races, sexualities, and genders. Rapping Chaucer’s *General Prologue* functions much in the way recitation of Chaucer did in medieval society. For Chaucer’s work to reach the masses many of whom were illiterate, performance and recitation of the tales became necessary in establishing the texts importance in medieval society. While not everyone in medieval England could read *The Canterbury Tales*, the tales were still immensely popular due to a cultural literacy that encouraged readings and performances of Chaucer’s magnum opus. Today, we still have an analogous situation with the rise of digital media that allows readers to engage with texts in a unique way. Film, television, and YouTube have established new spaces for cultural literacy to blossom, which allows even the most unsophisticated of readers the

⁹⁵ Volke-Birke, Sabine, *Chaucer and Medieval Preaching: Rhetoric for Listeners in Sermons and Poetry*, (Tübingen: Gunter Naar Verlag, 1991), 14.

ability to adapt and understand Chaucer in new and exciting ways. By allowing students the ability to find ways to not only adapt Chaucer in a sense that is relevant to their own identities, and by allowing them to adapt them in a performative sense, ensures the legacy of Chaucer will remain intact for many years to come, well outside the realm the veneration heaped upon it in academia for centuries.

These amateur readings, performances, and adaptations of Chaucer can only continue to grow alongside digital culture as long as we scholars find ways to destabilize the privilege of textual veneration tied to a history of nationalist and imperialist history creation. Today, Geoffrey Chaucer “hath a blog” and “doth Tweet” to modern audiences in full Middle English. Tweets from Chaucer in Middle English are interspersed with retweets of AT-AT Walkers from Star Wars in the perfect blend of the archaic and the modern, and the perfect representation of Chaucer in the digital age. If anything, allowing Chaucer into these spaces provides wonderful educational outlets for professional and amateur Chaucerians alike. Much of this is related to Chaucer’s own status as adaptor, which has allowed him to stay relevant, not only for his historical significance, but also because of the adaptability of his work into any format. Aside from perhaps *Gawain and the Green Knight*, so few medieval works lend themselves to adaptation. *Piers Plowman* seems far too complex to receive an adaptation, as well as the *Confessio Amantis* by John Gower. While Gower and Chaucer may have been equally popular in medieval society, today only Geoffrey Chaucer has a blog, and to quote the subtitle of Chaucer’s blog, “Take that, Gower!”⁹⁶

⁹⁶ “Geoffrey Chaucer Hath a Blog” (Blogspot, 2016).

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