

The Manciple's Tale

Feminism and Women's Experience in the *Manciple's Tale*

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Readers of the *Canterbury Tales* should not be alarmed to find themselves hearing voices. The entire collection, after all, is a series of stories told by one or another pilgrim, many of whom are endowed by Chaucer with a distinctive, compelling voice. In the end, as with all fiction, it is through these created voices that human experience can be conveyed to audiences temporally and geographically displaced. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* have come to us, centuries later and across cultural and linguistic divides, in large part because these voices will not be quiet.

A number of pilgrims—the Wife of Bath, the Miller, the Host, the Pardoner, the Prioress—speak in voices that evoke three-dimensional people with distinctive experiences and concerns. Paradoxically, even as readers sense that vitality, they recognize that it speaks to Chaucer's great skill as a ventriloquist, the sleight-of-hand that compels us to deny what we know and willingly believe in the fiction. Through much of the collection, readers are in this way encouraged to hear the pilgrims' voices rather than the master behind them. The *Manciple's Prologue* and *Tale* is one rare occasion when voice comes into the spotlight and becomes the subject under discussion. With this move, Chaucer provides readers the opportunity to consider the effects of his craft, the relationships between these fictional voices and the lived experiences of those they represent.

The voice at the center of the Manciple's tale is that of the crow, who lost its beautiful and anthropomorphic voice by using it carelessly, for which it was punished. The origin story is offered by the Manciple as an opportunity for the audience to learn how to navigate the rocky waters of service and thereby avoid the fate of the crow, by appropriately controlling one's voice. This narrow reading, though, however much the Manciple insists on it in his concluding *moralitas* to the fable, is refused by the tale he presents: the story he tells demonstrates how easy it is for voices to be violently redirected by those in power, forced to become something they are not, and ultimately silenced. The crow's voice is literally destroyed by Apollo, who has the power to silence him because he is a god. Notably, Apollo's wife is even further silenced in the tale: we never hear from her, but we do witness her violent murder by her husband, permanently silencing even her actions. Instead of being transformed in humiliating fashion the way Apollo's pet bird is, his beautiful voice and body made ugly, Apollo's wife loses her life in perhaps the most common way possible for women, as the victim of domestic violence. First, she is never heard from; later, she is physically removed from the story.

As a result, the narrative in which she appears would hardly seem a viable candidate for considering women's experience in the *Canterbury Tales*. There are women in the collection who speak loudly and effectively about their experience—St. Cecilie, Prudence, Dorigen, fabliaux wives like Alison and May, as well as Guinevere and the old wife of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. Yet as the rare woman in the *Canterbury Tales* who is voiceless (Raybin 19), Phebus's wife is present only in the form of what men say about her. The tale thus ironically but correctly represents medieval women's experience as it comes to us: almost exclusively through men's voices.

Tools

Speaking Textually

The Manciple insists from the start, in his interactions with the Cook and the Host in the *Prologue* to his *Tale*, that he is merely joking—"That that I speke, I seye it in my bourde"—and that he speaks in the voice of the uneducated, for "I am a man noght textueel" (MancP 81, MancT 235). For a poorly-read joker, however, the Manciple brings to bear on his short and earnest fable any number of textual authorities. Indeed, the very first sentence of his tale contradicts his self-representation by beginning, "Whan Phebus dwelled heere in this world adoun, / As olde bookes maken mencion" (MancT 105-06). More specifically, his story of the crow is an adaptation of Ovid's story of Coronis in the *Metamorphoses* (2.531-50). Further, in telling it, the Manciple not only assumes his audience's familiarity with Ovid but also engages with the various medieval redirections of Ovid's narratives (such as the early fourteenth-century *Ovide Moralisé*) that made them support rigidly moral and typically narrowly Christian themes. The Manciple's audience might have also been familiar with two other versions circulating in late-medieval England: It appeared earlier in the century in the writing of one of Chaucer's French influences, Guillaume de Machaut's *Livre du Voir Dit*, and John Gower, another English poet of the late-fourteenth century, told a brief version of the story in his *Confessio Amantis*. Indeed this deceptively simple narrative of the crow is actually part of an intense tradition of commentary and translation of Ovid. Jamie C. Fumo calls the tale "a response to and aggressive translation of an authoritative Ovidian text," seeing Chaucer's frequent modifications as "signals of his strategic participation in an interpretive tradition propagated by the impulse of revision itself" (356). While this legend is an "exemplum against storytelling" presented in a number of different ways, they all, ironically, require storytelling, and contribute to an intensely textual tradition (Fumo 356).

The influence of this textual tradition can be seen not only in the Manciple's choice of narrative, a story of the Roman god Phoebus Apollo as told by the first-century poet Ovid, but also in the aspirational style of his tale-telling. The Manciple infuses the narrative with evidence of his extensive reading: a collection of tropes and devices familiar, then as now, only to the learned. In order to heighten the intensity of his subject, he uses apostrophes, calling out to the god of wine ("O Bacus" [MancP 99]) and to a personified version of mistrust ("O wantrust" [MancT 281]). He presents one of his insights on human tendencies toward tyranny (observed, in his case, in the domestic relationship of husband and wife) in the form of the learning of Alexander the Great (MancT 226-230), who was, it should be recalled (even as the self-described unlearned Manciple will not remind us), trained by Aristotle, which is to say that the Manciple presents his own

insight as one he shares with the great ancient philosopher. Elsewhere, in presenting a series of seemingly generic *exempla* to support his claims that no creature can be effectively constrained from its nature (MancT 163-186), the Manciple selects his brief stories from the *Romance of the Rose*. From start to finish, the Manciple undermines his claim that he is “noght textueel” (MancT 235).

In presenting his tale this way, the Manciple reveals his exaggerated self-importance, so the joke is ultimately on him. However, he also thus participates in an activity very characteristic of the Middle Ages: he presents his own observations based not on personal experience (his own or his characters’) but on textual precedent. His authority comes from that of his predecessors—Aristotle, Ovid, Jean de Meun—as conveyed in writing. These are the “auctoritee” against which the Wife of Bath weighs her “experience” in the first line of her *Prologue*: “Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, were right ynogh to me / To speke of wo that is in mariage” (WBP 1-3). As the Wife’s *Prologue* has taught generations of readers (aided, in the present, by Carolyn Dinshaw’s chapter on the Wife in her book *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*), this “auctoritee” is, above all, “textueel.” And these texts are written by men. Though he denies his own membership in this august body of male writers, the Manciple enacts it consistently throughout his tale.

Speaking for Others/Being Spoken For

In such an environment of textual authority, the experiences of those who are literally “noght textueel”—that is, women, the poor, the unlearned—are either unrecorded and unheard, or they are claimed by those with access to reading and writing, to texts, to textuality. That is to say, the perspectives represented in the writings of the medieval past are those of people with significant investment in the status quo of the society they represent, the society that endows them with access to learning and textuality from which others are excluded. It is also to say that the diverse voices we may hear in places like the *Canterbury Tales* are, all appearances to the contrary, the imaginative products of men born into a position of social, economic, and political dominance. We may believe we’re hearing from a late-fourteenth-century woman when we spend time with the Wife of Bath, but the women’s experience we encounter in the Wife’s *Prologue* and *Tale* is the experience of women as observed and interpreted by Geoffrey Chaucer (a man whose own connected position cannot be denied when we remember he seems to have been able to pay Cecilia Chaumpaigne to drop her rape charges against him). However frustrating such a realization may be, thwarting our desire to hear from the marginalized, it is important to recognize that nearly all such representations in the medieval past were constructed by a voice personally representing the dominant few. As a result, Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich take on intense cultural significance, being the two women whose voices were directly captured in writing in English—though even in these instances, those voices come through the institutional framework of the Church and, in the case of Margery, through the hand of an amanuensis.

The Wife of Bath (as voiced by Chaucer) calls attention to this very situation in her *Prologue* when she highlights the suffering she experienced while being read to by her husband, the clerk Jankyn, from his anthology of women behaving badly throughout history, what she calls his *Book of Wikked Wyves* (WBP 685). She notes that it is impossible for a clerk to say anything

positive about a woman, unless she is a dead saint; through reference to a fable of Aesop, she asks “Who peynted the leoun, tel me who?” and concludes that “if wommen hadde written stories / As clerkes han withinne hire oratories, / They wolde han writen of men moore wikkedness / Than al the mark of Adam may redresse” (WBP 693-97). Chaucer thus, in the guise of his literary creation the Wife, insists that readers acknowledge the inevitable restriction on every representation that inevitably results from the subject position of its creator. He is, in effect, inviting us to look directly at the man behind the curtain, not to challenge his authority so much as to remind us that, even here, while the suffering of the Wife may echo that of actual medieval wives, what we’re hearing is always mediated in multiple ways.

Text

The *Manciple’s Prologue* draws our attention, in humorous guise, to the powerlessness of the voiceless in the experience of the Cook. This pilgrim is so drunk that despite being enraged—by the Manciple’s public shaming of him for his very drunkenness—he is literally unable to speak. Indeed, all he can do is shake his head to express his disagreement, an action that contributes to his being thrown in the mud by his own horse (MancP 46-49). The physical dangers resulting from voicelessness recur, in different form, in the *Tale* to follow.

The Manciple begins his story of the crow’s loss of its voice by emphasizing the shared positioning of the pet bird and the wife in relation to Phebus Apollo: following a standard description of the hero in terms of his prior heroic deeds (among them, killing Python) and his extensive musical skills, the Manciple observes that “Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a crowe / Which in a cage he fostred many a day” (MancT 130-31). Just eight lines later he notes, “Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a wyf” (MancT 139). The bird and the wife are placed in such a bold structural parallel—both “hadde” by Phebus, now, in his house, which is to say, both are objects he owns and controls—that it comes as no surprise to learn that, because of his jealousy, Phebus monitors his wife to the point that she, too, is figuratively “in a cage.” These parallels are made more suggestive with the recognition that Chaucer’s is the only version of the story in which the bird is caged (Borch 291, n. 13). Like the crow, the wife here (unlike in Ovid’s version) lacks a name. Also unlike the woman in Ovid’s version—and unlike the crow in all versions—she utters not a single word.

In fact, the bird uses his ability to talk, which he has learned from Phebus, to reveal the wife’s adultery. First, he does so by sounding exactly like a bird, describing her activity by thrice repeating “Cokkow! Cokkow! Cokkow!”, bird sounds that work in this case as signifiers in identifying the husband as a cuckold (MancT 243). The crow then gives a detailed report of her enthusiastic intercourse with a man much more lowly than her husband, emphasizing that “he saugh it with his yen” (MancT 261). Suddenly, Phebus uses his bow in order to kill his wife—“And in his ire his wyf thanne hath he slayn. / This is th’effect” (MancT 265-66). The Manciple equally abruptly concludes the storytelling with “Ther is namoore to sayn,” reminding us that he himself has been participating in the act of storytelling in which he is engaging, just as the crow had, and expressing its inherent risks (MancT 266). Immediately thereafter, Phebus is full of regret and completely rewrites the story, creating for himself the true wife he wanted, an opportunity that he has only because he has killed her and thus stopped her ability to express her agency, even if only through her actions and not her words.^[1] Only now is she “Ful giltles,” the

“deere wyf. . .that were to me so sad and eek so trewe” (MancT 277; 274-75).^[2] The wife, identified only in relation to her husband, is verbally created by the crow as a cheating wife, and then (after death) she is verbally created by Phebus as a true wife. If defined only by her own words, she would not exist at all.

Yet the Manciple turns the final quarter of his tale—its last 44 lines—over to a woman’s voice. Having heard no woman, we suddenly hear the tale’s presumed truths about using one’s voice carefully so as not to offend those in power presented in the form of aphorisms from the Manciple’s mother, expressed in her voice, which he introduces with “But nathelees, thus taughte me my dame” (MancT 317); he repeatedly reminds readers that we are hearing her voice, not his, through the many repeated references to “my son” throughout her speech (e.g. MancT 318, 319, 321, 322, 325, 329, 335, 341, and continuing to the last sentence of the tale). The voice of the narrator’s mother is granted a position of social authority in being the source of public truths that the story of the crow embodies. As Jamie C. Fumo puts it, the “moralization that ends” the tale is “drawn from the world of feminine experiential wisdom” (366); Stephanie Trigg observes that the mother “has the last word” (330).^[3] Yet she is identified not through her gender or personal identity alone but through her relation to masculinity: her being the Manciple’s mother. In what Catherine Cox describes as a “cross-gendered performance” (2), this voice is itself actively reconstructed by the Manciple, a woman’s voice coming through the voice of a man (whose voice is, in turn, ultimately that of Chaucer). Yet the mother seems to have a powerful warning for the Manciple and Chaucer himself: “My sone, be war, and be noon auctour newe / Of tidynges, wheither they been false or trewe” (MancT 359-60). Even when you are respectfully and responsibly representing the experiences, the words, of another, you should not be an “author new.” Chaucer expresses his anger at such disregard for an author’s words in his poem “Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn,” wherein he threatens to curse his scribe with a nasty scalp irritation (“the scalle” [3]) if he does not follow Chaucer’s words precisely in his copying but instead his work “wryten newe” (2)—that is, if in his carelessness the scribe creates a different work than the one originally intended by the author. Here as there, Chaucer insists that the author as well as the scribe be careful in reporting what is. By presenting that warning in the voice of an authoritative woman (through her being the narrator’s own mother), the *Manciple’s Tale* also draws attention to gender, directing its warning to men about how they represent women’s experience: their words (like those of the crow, however true) have the power to destroy them.^[4]

Transformation

Activities for Further Thinking

A number of other women appear in the *Canterbury Tales*, among the pilgrims and within the stories the pilgrims tell.

1. Select one of the three female pilgrims (the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, the Second Nun) and read her portrait in the *General Prologue* (note that there is not one for the Second Nun) as well as her tale: compare the portrait, presented in the voice of the pilgrim Chaucer, and the tale, told in the voice of the female pilgrim. Consider how Chaucer

seems to negotiate his position, speaking first in the character with his own name and then in the voice of the female pilgrim.

2. Alternatively, you might choose a female character within one of the tales, nearly all of whom could be said to be in the difficult position in which we find them specifically because of their gender: Dorigen in the *Franklin's Tale*, Custance in the *Man of Law's Tale*, Emily in the *Knight's Tale*, Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*, Malyne in the *Reeve's Tale*, Alison in the *Miller's Tale*, Virginia in the *Physician's Tale*, Prudence in the *Tale of Melibee*, St. Cecilia in the *Second Nun's Tale*. Select three of these women and for each one decide what about her experiences in the tale is grounded in her gender. That is, what about her situation is determined for her (rather than chosen by her) because she is a woman? What aspects of the experience of women does Chaucer seem to be drawing audience attention to? And how?
3. Read sections 1-4 of Part I of the *Book of Margery Kempe*. (You may find a Middle English version online at <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/staley-the-book-of-margery-kempe>.) This text is as close as we can get, in medieval English writing, to a historical woman's voice. How would you describe the person Margery represents in her description of herself? What does she talk about, and what doesn't she? Does her voice sound like any of the women's voices you hear in the *Canterbury Tales*?
4. Return to the final 44 lines of the *Manciple's Tale* (starting with line 318), where the Manciple presents his tale's wisdom through the words of his mother. This sort of maternal instruction was represented in didactic texts in the later Middle Ages in forms such as "How the Good Wife Taught her Daughter" and "Dame Curtasy." Both of these instructional poems appear in a late fifteenth-century collection known as Manuscript Ashmole 61 and are available online here: <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/shuffelton-codex-ashmole-61>. Read "The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter" and see what the Manciple's mother's voice and concerns share with the mother of that text. Bearing in mind shared features, how can we determine which of those reflect actual women's experience in England in the later Middle Ages, and which might be features of the genre, rather than an authentic reflection of women's experience?

Interpretive Questions

1. When the Manciple begins his tale of the crow, he presents an extended defense of those who are, like Phebus's crow and Phebus's wife, constrained against their nature (MancT 160-195). He provides three examples—a bird, a cat, and a "she-wolf"—that seem to show each constrained creature actually has a lowly nature that leads it to be ungrateful (MancT 183). In this, his examples seem to contradict his stated purpose, which was to show that "ther may no man embrace / As to destreyne a thyng which that nature / Hath naturelly set in a creature" (MancT 160-62). Yet he insists that "Alle thise ensamples speke I by thise men / That been untrew, and nothyng by wommen" (MancT 187-188). Return to lines 160-195 and see if you think Chaucer provides readers a way to reconcile these apparent contradictions, or if he might be suggesting something different through the contradictions.
2. Other tales in the *Canterbury Tales* wear their participation in textual culture (making use of textual *auctores* like Ovid and Aristotle) openly, too, among them the *Nun's Priest's*

Tale, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, and the *Clerk's Prologue and Tale*. Select one of these texts and compare the contributions textual culture makes to the thematic concerns, or the stylistic development, of that particular text.

3. The *Manciple's Tale* is followed by the *Parson's Tale*, a prose sermon that concludes with the much-debated *Retraction*. What might it mean for Chaucer to be considering this issue—the ethics of representing other voices—in the very last poetic text in the *Canterbury Tales*?

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Notes:

^[1] See Borch 289.

^[2] See Cox 6. Peter Herman observes that Phebus in this act "becomes a tyrant" because he "punishes the Crow in order to deny the truth and make reality subject to his will" (Herman 324).

^[3] Not all read the Manciple's inclusion of his mother's voice here so positively; Peter Travis, for instance, calls her "the narrator's logorrheic mother" (Travis 317) and describes the end of the tale as "a mother's mind-numbing declamations to her son that he should learn to keep his mouth shut" (Travis 317). Warren Ginsberg's reading of her words is similarly dark.

^[4] In this, Chaucer encourages us to critique the Manciple as Catherine Cox does: "His use of the mother's voice gives an illusion of essential experience that purports to validate the maxims, but his appropriation constitutes an ideologically charged gesture of suppression" (Cox 9).



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